ABSTRACT

THE LITTLE DEATH ARTIST

by Aaron M. Fortkamp

This work of fiction depicts two families in sub/rural America, largely focusing on the teenage lifestyle and the problems faced by the modern-age single-parent family unit. The plot reveals the disparity between young love and the post-love state ushered in by divorce. Third-, first-, and second-person perspective are used, as well as the past, present, and future tenses, to the effect of providing a unique outlook and narrative voice for eight distinct characters.
THE LITTLE DEATH ARTIST

A Thesis

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Chapter One

Shawn

Shawn stuck his tongue into his lower lip, determined. He would walk next door. He’d already stood and said he would walk over there and introduce himself (to which Joey had laughed and said no he would not) and the standing had been the key, the standing was the decision already made. Anyway, it was better than bringing her over to this testosterone factory. But talking to a pretty girl ought to have warranted more consideration, given Shawn’s typical way of going about things. Instead, after a day’s worth of sneaking glances or outright staring from the safety of his (and Joey’s) bedroom window, he had simply realized that the spying wasn’t enough, that he wanted to meet her, and the decision had happened on its own.

He was distracted of late. With increasing frequency, his concern for his and his brothers’ proper development had been at the forefront of his mind. He was so preoccupied with the distant future that when a major event happened in the present, when his development into an adult did make a significant leap, any consideration he’d put into the matter felt like an afterthought. Like when he’d started smoking. Another huge decision, barely registered.

The younger the brother, Shawn believed, the more long-term damage there would be. Ty, seventeen now and already thirteen by the time of the divorce, was the most normal of the four, as if he’d sidestepped the thickest part of the mine field. Randall, a year younger than Ty, would say weird things now and then, and he stayed in his room a lot, but he was smart and could probably pull through to be relatively successful as an adult, if a hermit. Shawn had only been ten at the time, fourteen now, but he felt that recognizing the danger he was in could help him avoid the Oprah-levels of dysfunction the divorce might otherwise have caused. And then there was Joey. Poor Joey, the youngest by over a year. Doomed to be all kinds of fucked up.

Best not to bring her over here.

Shawn walked next door, up the hill and between the apple trees, his tongue fuzzy and full in his mouth. The moving truck sat empty in the driveway, and he thought he might have missed his window for a smooth introduction. But her father Peter answered the door and said that, well actually, he could use some help, moving furniture this way and that. “Not for a little while, though, I’m still deciding what goes where. Callie might need some help, though—hey, are you in high school yet?”

“I will be, this fall.”

“Good. Excellent. Callie will be a freshman herself, maybe you can help her get situated?”

“I think, yeah, I can definitely do that.”

Peter walked him up the stairs to Callie’s room, where she was organizing her bookshelves. He briefly knocked on her open door and then stepped out of the way to usher Shawn in. She turned, and yes she was, wow was she pretty. Better than he could’ve hoped, or dreamed, maybe he did dream about this, maybe this was all predetermined and he and Callie would—

“Who’s this?”

“Shawn. The neighbor, he’s fourteen too, I thought he might be able to help you settle in around here.”

“Help with what?”
Peter took a half-step backwards as if preparing a quick exit. “Well, he’ll be starting high school too.”

Then she spoke to Shawn directly. “But you’re not there yet?”
“No,” he said, offering an abbreviated wave. “Fourteen.”

Back to her father, she said, “How does that help?”

Peter was already facing the stairs and spoke over his shoulder. “I’ll just be down in the study, if you need me. Uh—keep your door open.” Quickly, he disappeared.

They were alone. She looked at Shawn, expressionless, as if waiting for him to say something, or do something, some momentous thing to mark the occasion of their first conversation.

“That’s a lot of books!” he nearly shouted, pointing at the pile on her bed.

“I’m sorry about my dad,” she said, not so much a response but as if it needed to be said before she could move on.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Shawn as if he understood. “I mean—hey, don’t let me stop you, if you were trying to get your room in order. Or maybe I can help.” He picked up a book from the pile on her bed and turned to the shelf behind him, which stood taller than he. “What is it, by author?”

“No,” she said quickly.

“No, just forget it. Did you want something, or why did you stop by?”

He returned the book to the bed, just so she could stop staring at it. She didn’t, though.

“Well I wanted to help you guys move, but everything’s—”

“Yeah, we got it all—”

“So maybe, I thought we could take a walk?”

Her eyes flicked up at him, then quickly away. “Kind of hot out.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, forget it.” He began backing towards the door, focusing on saving the situation with an intriguing goodbye.

“Oh, well—maybe you can help me, I guess,” she said. “But you can’t think I’m weird.”

“No.”

“Just remember, you promised. Do you promise?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, you promised. I’ve got twelve shelves. Six here, if you count the top, and then six over there.” She pointed to the other bookshelf in the far corner, next to the desk. “Like a calendar, you get it? I’m trying to organize them by month. By day, even, so this one—” She handed the book back to him: To Kill a Mockingbird. “This is a late August book, maybe around, I don’t know, the twentieth. Just put it on the second shelf down, that’s August, and towards the right somewhere.”

He did as he was told.

She handed him Catcher in the Rye. “Late April. No, wait, early May. Over there, fifth shelf down. No, one up from the bottom. Towards the left. More…more. Okay, there.”

“How do you know where they go? Maybe you could do some, and I could do some.”

“No, you can’t.”
“Just tell me how. Why is this one early May?”
“Have you read it?”
Shawn shook his head.
“Well, that’s why you can’t help.”
“If I read it, then I would know?” he asked. “Does it happen in May?”
“No it’s actually around Christmas, I guess you can’t help me. I guess I am weird, let’s just forget it.” Whatever the process was, it was uniquely hers. Something mysterious. Something deep, and fascinating.
She was not finding him deep or fascinating. She wanted him to leave, he could tell, she wanted him gone but she was too nice to kick him out. “You look stressed,” he said, lowering his voice and glancing at the door. “Okay I’m gonna tell you and you might not like it but you seem stressed, so I’m gonna tell you.” He clapped his hands and held them, leaned toward her suddenly, swallowing, the decision already made in the leaning and what the hell was he thinking, this was risking too much, his hands sweating into each other. He got close to her ear. She didn’t move away. He paused, just a moment, to remember the moment. “I go walking in the woods. Because that’s where I smoke.”
She leaned away from him, caught his eyes, as if to check if he was serious. “You smoke?” she said, mouthing the last word and holding up two fingers. Looking…not repulsed. Intrigued, even.
“Yeah. And it’s shady, so, not too hot. You wanna come?”
They took a walk. Shawn curled his hands into fists inside his jean pockets as they walked down the hill from her house. A path was cleared, starting behind the tool shed in Shawn’s yard. The designated Smoking Log couldn’t be seen from the houses up the hill, but from the log they could see through the brush both the back porch of Shawn’s house and the back door of Callie’s.
“Take this,” said Shawn.
“Where’d you get these?”
“Stole them. From my mom.” Which wasn’t true, nor could he immediately place why he’d said it.
Their skin hadn’t brushed on the exchange; in fact, he’d pinched the very tip, nearly the length of the cigarette between them so as not to create a situation. Hand-to-hand contact is a delicate, dangerous thing—he’d held hands with a girl before, he knew the sweet peril. Just the thought of it gave him a brief chill. And that girl he didn’t even like much. Not like this one, Callie in all her potential, dropped from the clouds and right next door like a response to a prayer. Maybe she was. Except he never prayed.
Callie put the cigarette between her lips and folded her arms. “Are you addicted yet?”
“No,” said Shawn. “I don’t think I believe in all that, that you can get addicted so quick. This is my sixth one and I’m still, you know.”
“You’ve only had five? Ever?”
The light of day had faded quickly. Out in the yard the visibility was still about ninety percent, but inside the trees the blinds were drawn. Still damn hot out, though. Shawn found the lighter in his pocket, shook it next to his ear as he’d seen his mother do.
“Six. With this one.”
He struck the lighter and squinted, then remembered his manners and swung the lighter through the gathering dark in front of Callie. She leaned in and stuck the cigarette in the flame, and Shawn could see her face clearly for a moment, saw how her eyes crossed and she focused on the task. Then he looked at her cigarette.

“Oh shit, don’t—”
He killed the flame and snatched the smoke from her lips.
“What?” said Callie.
“That’s the freaking filter, that’s backwards.” He touched the tip where the flame had melted it. “Well, that one’s ruined.” He threw it down.
“Oh. Well what the hell do I know about it.”
“No, no, it’s fine. I’ve got another one, here. You just gotta light the tobacco end or else it’s like burning plastic or something. You don’t want to breathe that in.”
“But the tobacco’s fine.”
“Well. Not fine. Here.”
Lips on the filter, she created a vacuum in her mouth and the flame ducked into the tobacco tip. She opened her mouth and the smoke trickled out, and when she saw it, blew it away as if putting out birthday candles. She smiled. “I’m smoking.”
“Yeah, kind of.” He took a hit, breathed it in deeply, to show its path into his lungs. He even opened his mouth a moment before he exhaled, to show the smoke had gone somewhere. A proper teacher.
She didn’t get it. “What ‘kind of’?”
“You have to inhale. It’s not just, like, sucking through a straw.”
“I have to swallow it?”
“Well, yeah. Kind of.”
“What ‘kind of’? Do I have to swallow or not?”
“It’s more of a breath than a swallow. Like, okay, suck it into your mouth, but it’s not—Okay, yeah, that was the same thing you did before.”
Callie stomped a foot. “But I breathed in!”
“You have to do it quicker than that.”
He made to demonstrate again, but then Callie was coughing, doubled over, bent in half.
“Yeah, that’s—you got it.” He patted her on the back. “There’s a log there, right behind you. You should sit, catch your breath.”
She sat down and snuck a glance at him, then let out a few coughs more. He sat down beside her.
“Everything’s . . . spinning.”
“Just—breathe slow. It’s fine.” He patted her back a couple more times, then left his hand there. She looked at him—maybe—he couldn’t tell, but her head moved and it scared the shit out of him and he snatched his arm back into his own personal space. His next thought: I really like her. It surprised him that it could be put into words so easily. He thought about how she’d stamped a foot in frustration, and for some reason that stuck. That was it. That was his evidence. I like her because of that, not the foot-stamping but whatever feeling inside her had made her react like that. I like her reactions to things.
The evening grew quiet around them, as if her coughing had scared away the noise. Lights were on in both their houses. He took a few more hits, then asked, “You okay now?”

“I’ll be fine. How’s number six?”

He shrugged, looked at the butt pinched between finger and thumb, contemplating, wanting her to see him thinking deep thoughts, wanting her to believe that something inside him was as unique and mysterious as whatever was going on inside her. He took one last hit and dropped his butt to the dry earth below, smothering it with his foot. “Just like all the other ones, I guess. Maybe you should just suck it into your mouth, like before.”

“No, I got it.” She took a smaller hit, inhaled the smoke, and spat it back out again, just a couple coughs chasing it. “You get used to it?”

“Yeah. Your next one, you’ll be fine. No problem.”

“I think I’m done,” she said, handing her cigarette to him. It still had a few hits left. He thought about finishing it off for her but didn’t know how she’d react to his lips visiting the territory hers had already claimed. He dropped it on the ground, stomped on it, and pulled from his pocket a bottle of cologne.

Vickie

The boys’ father didn’t call Friday. I’d reminded him last weekend, if he wanted to see them, he had to call. Twice I’d taken them over only to discover him absent. It happened once when Ty drove them over, too. Thus the call-first rule was established, but this made the third weekend in a row he hadn’t called. The first time I’d been glad but not surprised, as missing a weekend was not uncommon, and the second in a row I considered a stroke of good luck. But now this weekend I began to get a little upset with him. The boys needed a father, and he was their only option.

Saturday morning, having unexpected help on hand, I had the boys wash the cars. Ty pulled the minivan into the grass, close enough for the hose to reach, and I followed with the wagon. My back was a little sore from work that week, so I just sat nearby in a lawn chair while the boys worked, flipping through a magazine.

The boys talked sports as they worked, which I could follow to a point. They watched a lot of ESPN, and after their father left I started watching it with them. SportsCenter was actually quite interesting, the way they talked about the athletes more than the games themselves. Soap operas for boys, is how I thought of it. Ty was the only truly athletic one among them, and Randall had never played a sport in his life, but they all watched SportsCenter, and it had become a common language between us.

Still, I have my limits. I had tuned out the chatter, content to flip through the glossy magazine pages, when Randall pointed behind me and said, “Some dude to see you, Mom.”

I turned, and the dude to see me held out his hand. “Hi,” he said. “I’m your neighbor.”

He had a full head of hair, a little wavy, a little too long, but he was an academic, according to Shawn, a professor, therefore allowed to be a little unkempt—it was part of that smart-guy charm. Clean-shaven, though. Shorts a little too short, as if he were trying too hard to be a shorts-wearer. A little short-sleeved button-up in a green similar to his eyes.
“Oh!” I said, dropping the magazine and standing up. Fortunately I’d put shorts on over the one-piece. I pulled the unbuttoned shirt closed with my left hand and shook his with my right. “Mr. Carter, is it?”

“Caldwell, actually, but you can call me Peter.”

“Hi, Vickie Patterson, call me Vickie. Nice to meet you finally, I was waiting until you got settled in to come introduce myself. Excuse my appearance, somehow whenever the hose is out I can be sure I’ll end up soaked.”

Shawn, behind the minivan, shouted out in disgusted surprise and stood up from where he’d been crouching. “Mom!” he said in his tattletale voice.

“What, Shawn?”

Beside me, Mr. Caldwell waved hello. Shawn waved back, and said, “Nothing.”

“What is it?”

“Ty sprayed me.”

“I did not!” said Ty. “That was Joey.”

“It's true, it was me,” said Joey.

“Oh for heaven's sake, it's just water, Shawn,” I said.

“I know,” said Shawn. “I'm cool.”

“I disagree,” said Joey, raising a finger in polite protest.

“How about we go inside and talk, Mr. Caldwell,” I said. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Just, Peter's fine, and no, thank you.”

“Oh sure you do, how about some iced tea?”

Just inside the door, I had half an urge to grab a raincoat from the closet and cover up my great-grandmother outfit: old swimsuit (which sagged too much in the front), khaki shorts, unbuttoned pastel flannel with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, wide-brimmed straw hat that I could've taken off if not for wondering what a fiasco my hair looked like. The poor man, what a first impression I was making. I had him sit at the table as I got the tea.

“Your family is—well, lovely,” Peter said to me as I poured him a glass. “All teenagers?”

“Yep, thirteen to seventeen. Ty’s the oldest, about to be a senior.”

“That’s got to be a challenge.”

“Oh, I don’t know. What about yours? How old is she?” I sat down across from him at the table.

“Callie’s fourteen. Fifteen in September.”

“Shawn’s age.”

“So I hear.”

He clutched his tea in both hands, more intent on looking at it than drinking it. Shawn had said the mother didn’t live there, but he was still wearing his ring. “I guess those two are hitting it off pretty well?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “I suppose you’re right. They talk about books, I think?”

“They do?”

He started shaking his head resignedly. “I’m sorry, I probably sound a little scatterbrained. I’ve just been so preoccupied lately with moving, and I just got a new job, and my
divorce was just finalized about a month ago. I feel like I’m struggling to catch up.” He
continued avoiding my eyes as he spoke, and I found myself propping my elbows up on the
table, keeping my hands folded in front of my chest. The more he wasn’t looking up at me, the
more paranoid I became about how much the swimsuit sagged in the front.

“Oh, you’ll be fine. I’ve been on my own for a few years, now, and it’s hard at first, but I
got caught up eventually. It’s just a different routine, but you’ll get used to it.”

He looked at me as I spoke, but the moment it was his turn to speak he dropped his eyes
again. “Well that’s really good to hear. I hope that happens sooner than later, though. I seem to
keep screwing up, in the meantime. I have to start teaching on Monday and I still haven’t figured
out what to do with Callie.”

“She can’t just stay home?”

He looked at me. He started to speak while making eye contact, but then seemed to catch
himself, as if that was rude. “No, I’m afraid she can’t.”

“Well what about her mother?”

“Her mother’s the problem.” He kind of laughed to himself, still looking at the table, the
glass, whatever. “Sort of, I mean. Callie’s therapist still recommends we don’t leave her by
herself—”

“Callie’s—I’m sorry?”

“Callie’s therapist. She’s been going for a couple years now. He’s concerned about losing
her to depression, and her mother takes his word as law. As for me, I’d just as soon not treat her
for something she doesn’t have yet.”

I tried to keep a nonjudgmental tone, but come on, therapy for teenagers? Sure, I’d heard
of it happening on television, but who actually did such a thing? What fourteen-year-old wasn’t
depressed? “Can’t you just tell him that?” I asked.

“I’ve never actually met the guy. Her mother set it all up, and now that she’s on her own
she’s taken over payment for it completely, so I really have no say in it. And besides, he’s a
licensed therapist, he’s got to have some idea what he’s talking about, right?”

“But you don’t trust him.”

“No, I do. I just don’t trust him enough to completely rule out letting Callie stay home by
herself. Her mother insists I listen to the therapist, but I don’t know.” He swirled his tea,
watching the ice cubes spin when he stopped. “I just, don’t know what to do.”

“Look, Peter,” I said. “You’re her parent too, and if you think she’s just a normal teenage
girl and you want to give her a shot at responsibility—”

But he shook his head. “No, I do agree it would be better if she weren’t left alone. She’s
smarter than a normal teenager, maybe too smart for her own good.”

“Well how smart are we talking, here? Has she skipped a grade? Two?”

He smirked. “No, school is its own set of problems. She only reads what she wants to
read, and she’s too social—which is fine, actually, apart from the grades. During the school year
she’s got plenty to keep her stimulated. She makes friends easily, really cares about what they
think. And this year it ought to be even better, being at a new school, a bunch of new people to
figure out. It’s just, when she’s alone—”

In the pause, he seemed to remember he had an audience and looked up at me. “Are you
sure you want to hear all this? I mean, I just came over to say hello because I saw you outside—”
“Peter,” I said. “We’re neighbors now. We should be there for each other if we need it, right?”

For a moment longer he looked at me, and then decided to continue. In truth, the conversation was running a little long, but he sounded like a guy who wouldn’t let himself talk this out unless someone were there to listen. “When she’s alone she only has herself to think about, and when she thinks too much about herself she doesn’t like herself,” he said, his eyes widening. “It doesn’t matter who she’s with, so long as she’s got someone else to think about.” He shrugged sheepishly, then. “Except her parents, of course. Too boring, I suppose. Every summer she gets a little angrier, a little harder to deal with.”

“And her mother can’t watch her?”

“No, unfortunately. She’s got a nine-to-five at the hospital, which is how she can pay for the therapy now.”

I shook my head. Callie sounded like any ordinary little girl, to me. At the tail-end of puberty and not sure what to make of herself, and now she’d been over-analyzed, too, as if being an only child wasn’t enough of a magnifying glass.

“I guess she’ll just have to come over here, then.”

“What?” he said, looking up.

Behind me I heard the back door open, and Randall and Joey walked through the kitchen. “Hey,” I said to stop them. “Where’s Ty?”

“Went running,” said Joey.

“Well Randall, take my keys and move the cars back to the driveway, please.”

“No, Randall needs the practice. When you’re trying to get your license, I’ll make you do it. You can help him, though, if you want. Tell him if he’s straight or not.”

“Why don’t I just tell him right here?” said Joey. Randall smacked him in the back of the head and chased him out the front door.

Wonderful. Gay jokes and my grandma outfit. What a first impression. I rolled my eyes and turned back to Peter, saying, “They get their sense of humor from their father,” but it seemed as though he hadn’t heard. In fact he wasn’t listening now, he was looking directly at my chest. Not just absentmindedly anymore: his eyes followed them as I spun in my chair to face him.

I quickly pulled my shirt together. He must not have realized he was doing it until I covered them up, because he immediately turned quite red. I went from being offended to forgiving him in the span of a second. In fact, I smiled. Something felt warm inside me.

To save Peter the embarrassment, I stood up and got the iced tea pitcher. “Sorry about that. The interruption.”

“Oh. Yes.”

“So you think Callie would want to come over here?”

“I don’t think—I mean you really shouldn’t have to look after another teenager, with the full plate you’ve got.”

“I wouldn’t be, I work during the day,” I said, and his face fell. “Why, does she need supervision? Or just a social life? My boys are good boys, Peter, Ty is seventeen now and very responsible, and Randall is sixteen but acts even older than Ty, and Shawn, you've seen for yourself I'm sure, very mature for his age. Joey's a little busy-body, but he keeps out of trouble,
for the most part. I'm sure Callie would feel right at home here. She gets along well with Shawn, right?”

“Yes, but—”
“But not too well. Right?”
“Oh, no,” he said, “I mean I make sure she leaves her door open when he’s over, but it’s really just precautionary.”
“Has she had boyfriends yet?”
“Kissing boyfriends? I don’t think so. I’m sure Portia would have mentioned something about that to me.”

Given how little he seemed to know first-hand about his daughter, I reminded myself to ask Shawn for more specifics later on. And what kind of a name was Portia, anyway? It sounded like a sports car. “Your wife?”

“Ex-wife, now.”
“Of course.” He turned sideways in his chair, folded his hands and put his elbows on his knees. Maybe his ex-wife was still a sore subject, or else he was getting ready to run from the room before I could change my mind. But then he said, “I suppose there’s no good way to bring this up, but how much would you accept as payment?”

“Not a dime,” I said. This wasn’t a babysitting service. I was just doing him a favor.
“But, food, if she eats over here—”
“I’m sure you’d be okay with her walking back home for lunch, right? And I always buy more than we can eat, anyway. If she finds something in the fridge she wants, she’s more than welcome. Better than throwing it away.”

“There’s also utilities,” he said, actually counting with his fingers. “Using the bathroom, turning on a light, these things can add up and I don’t want to—”

“Peter,” I said. After the embarrassing scene earlier I’d been pinching my shirt closed, but now, for whatever reason—I let go. Adjusted my posture in the chair. Let my cleavage breathe. He turned his head sideways and looked in my direction.
I leaned over the table just a little. Just slightly. “Not a dime.”
He smiled.

Shawn

They sat down to dinner. An early crop of green beans, still small, but edible. Buttered in the pan. “Callie will be spending her days with us this summer,” said Vickie to her boys.
Shawn swallowed. Mashed potatoes and gravy. Slices of ham, pan-fried with brown sugar, the sweetness almost surprising to the lips, and Callie. Callie was coming here.
The kitchen curtains displayed impressionistic rooster prints, cockeyed and overlapping to a point where they bled into each other, and if you weren't looking for roosters, you wouldn't see one right away. Just the pattern. As the exterior light faded, Shawn could see his reflection fill out in the windows like an apparition. Ty and Randall sat across from him, backs to the glass, his mother to his right, Joey to his left at the head of the table, because he complained if he had to sit anywhere else. From there he could best see the living room television, which was muted, it being mealtime. “Who’s Callie?” Joey asked, watching ESPN over his mother’s shoulder.
“Shawn’s girlfriend,” said Randall.
“No,” said Shawn.
“Not yet,” said Ty, “but he’s trying.” Tryin, he said. The accent—their father’s—rang true with the jab. The rest of them had picked up the subtle venom, but not the voice.
“Oh, that neighbor girl?” asked Joey. “Yeah, good luck. I saw her, she’s way too hot for you.”
“It’s not like that!”
“Is this going to be a problem, Shawn?” asked Vickie, as if to remove the problem just by mentioning it. “I told her father it wouldn’t be a problem, but if you have some sort of crush on her we shouldn’t be having her over here.”
The maple just up the hill outside the kitchen disappeared as he watched. He found himself wondering when was the last time he climbed that tree. Used to be a daily thing, waiting for his dad to come home from work, wanting to be the first one to see the truck come rolling down the driveway. Second, third grade, maybe? Not since then, though, at least two years before his dad even left. Maybe that had had something to do with it. Shawn had stopped waiting for him to come, so he’d just stopped coming. “It’s not a problem,” he said.
“Are you sure?”
“Mom, no.”
“I knew it, listen to him. Can't handle the challenge?” said Joey. “Maybe I’ll go for it. How old is she?”

“No one is ‘going for it.’ Ty, you hear me? This is one girl who is off limits.”
“Wait, what?” said Ty, dropping his spoon on his plate. “Why me like that?”
“I can handle fourteen,” said Joey.
“I said Shawn, too,” said Vickie.
“Yeah but then you said me specifically. You don’t trust me?”
“No, it was because, I don’t know,” said Vickie. “You’re the one who dates girls.”
Shawn pushed the green beans back and forth on his plate with his fork, smearing their buttery drippings. Maybe meeting her first wasn’t enough, if she’d be around the rest of them now anyway. The cigarettes, he had that going for him, but how big of an appeal could that be? And anyway, Randall could supply them, too.
“I’m not gay, Mom.”
“I know, Randall.”
“Okay then,” said Randall.
“Which reminds me, Joey? Dishes tonight, Joey. Do you hear me?”
“I bet she’d really like me, though,” said Joey. “Yeah, I’m gonna go for it.”
“No,” said Shawn, too quickly. Everyone looked at him.
“See?” said Ty. “You douche, I knew it.”
“Shut up, it’s not like that.”
“I think I’ll try a banquet of flowers first,” said Joey. “That’ll get me in good. She seems like the type.”
“You don’t know anything about her,” said Shawn.
“So tell me, Romeo.”
“Yeah, how were you gonna do it?” asked Ty.
“I just said. No one is dating her,” said Vickie.
“You don’t have the money for flowers,” said Randall.
“I can pick them wild,” said Joey. “That’s even more romantic. Can I go, Mom?”
“What did I just say? Dishes.”
“Why?”
“Mom, can I go?” asked Randall.
“Not yet, I made dessert.”
The boys all looked over at her.
“Maybe posies,” said Joey. “Those grow wild, right?”
“You made dessert?” asked Ty.
“What did you make?” said Shawn.
“What’s a posy even look like?” asked Randall.
“Cheesecake. With strawberries on top, from the garden. It’s just the Jell-O kind, doesn’t take very long.”
“I can find out online,” said Joey. His mother was looking at him. “I don’t like cheesecake, Mom. Sorry.”
“Well I ain’t having any,” said Ty. “That stuff weighs me down at practice.”
“Randall?”
“When have you ever known me to eat dessert? Seriously, though, posies? What, a pocketful? Is she in kindergarten? Is she a retard?”
“Randall.”
“Sorry.”
“No, it’s fine. You can help with the dishes.”
Ty was laughing. “Maybe a ring of rosies, too—or no, a ring around the rosies. Whatever. Just, don’t forget that part.”
“What was that?” asked Joey.
“Don’t forget to sing it to her when you give her them. The flowers.”
Joey’s mouth opened, and he looked at Shawn, who shrugged. Ty cleared his throat.
“Well,” said Vickie, “now I remember why I don’t make dessert. Guess it’ll just be me and Shawn, then.”
It was completely dark out, now. The window only offered a reflection, but Shawn kept looking anyway, looking at himself, not seeing any desire to eat cheesecake. But he wouldn’t make his mother eat it alone. Vickie stood up.
“Hey,” Joey said to her, but calling everyone’s attention.
She paused, mid-step to the refrigerator. “What?”
“I’m not gay, either.”
“Well I know that, Joey.”
“But I’ve been sitting here talking this whole time about hitting on her and you haven’t told me not to.”
“Well I thought you heard me tell everybody.”
“You told Shawn right away not to date her. And Ty, too, you told both of them.”
“So?”
“She didn’t tell me,” said Randall.
“So, why didn’t you tell me?” said Joey.
“I thought I told all of you, but if you want me to tell you again, Joey—”
“No. I want to know why you didn’t tell me specifically like you told them.”
“She didn’t tell me, either,” Randall repeated to him.
“I don’t know, Joey, I just thought you’d heard me already.”
“Is it because I’m too young? You think I’m too young to date girls.”
“You are pretty young,” said Shawn.
“Shut up. You’re a whole year older, big deal.”
“Hey,” said Randall, smacking the table. “I’m not too young and she didn’t tell me, either. So get over it.”
“Well maybe,” Vickie said, “maybe it was in the back of my mind that you’re going into eighth grade and she’s going to be in high school—”
Joey stood up and took his plate to the sink, shaking his head.
“Joey—”
“It’s one year;” he said as he walked away.
“Oh, get back here, crybaby. Mom, he’s just trying to get outta dishes,” said Ty.
“Easy for you to say, she told you!” said Joey over his shoulder as he jogged up the stairs.
“Joey, I didn’t mean anything by it,” said Vickie, walking after him. “Shawn, would you cut the cheesecake for me? It’s on the bottom shelf, and the strawberries are just behind it in that tin bowl. Joey! Come here a second.”
When she was gone, Randall began stacking the plates. “Do you think she likes you?”
“I don’t know.” Shawn handed over his plate without looking. “She’s just, really cool. I just want to be friends.”
“Wow,” said Ty.
“What?”
“You really like her.”
“I don’t know.”
“What are you, gay?” said Randall. “Cut the cheesecake already.”

Vickie
There had been two men since Phil left me, both during that first year. But the boys were all right around that junior high age, rambunctious and full of energy, and that made it hard enough to put any effort toward meeting people on the weekends. And then Phil started his disappearing act. I could never be sure if the boys would be home on the weekend or not. The last time I had a date was a weekend when Phil backed out at the last second. I decided not to cancel my plans and took the boys to my parents’. One extra bedroom does not comfortably sleep four, and I felt bad enough about leaving them there for a night that I decided, no more. I wasn’t the one who left. If getting laid were that important to me, I would have left, but I didn’t. He did. So be it.
For the past three years I’d maintained that attitude. It had been hard enough to win attention when I’d sought it, and I told myself over and over again that it wasn’t worth it. I was only thirty-four when he left, and I hadn’t exactly been trying to keep my body in shape. Raising the boys had been exertion enough to keep me relatively thin, but nowhere near the figure that
would have made picking up guys easy. I’d had that figure once, I knew what it looked like. And
the funny thing was, once I stopped caring I began to creep closer and closer back to that body,
without even trying. It had crossed my mind in recent months that I was looking pretty good for
my age, but I didn’t let the feeling stick around.

And then came today’s incident at the kitchen table. The cleavage incident.

By the time I sat down on the back porch with my Saturday-night Sprite-and-vodka, I had
come to a conclusion. The boys were old enough now. I could start dating again. I would stop
regretting my marriage and its awkward ending (I was actually looking up marriage counselors
in the Yellow Pages when he broke the news he was leaving—why had I been trying so hard?
Why hadn’t I been the one to leave?). And no more revenge-dating: Yes, I’d had an interest in the
two men I’d briefly seen, but I hadn’t been ready to date. I’d forced myself to, to demonstrate to
myself—and to Phil—I was still desirable, but I hadn’t been ready.

It wasn’t as if Peter had knocked my socks off or anything. What he’d done for me today
was completely unintentional, but he’d tapped into something surprising and powerful inside me.
He’d awakened my pride. I hit my cigarette and closed my eyes, smiling into myself, savoring
the warmth.
Chapter Two

Callie

Here’s the best way to secure yourself some cigarettes:

Neither of your parents smoke, but most of your dad’s friends do. He lets them smoke inside, even though he can’t stand the smell. He calls it courtesy; you call it a lack of backbone. Wait for one to come over. Seat them at the kitchen table with the power of suggestion, pulling out the chairs. Don’t sit down with them; instead, busy yourself with getting them something to drink, Kool-Aid or milk, since Dad doesn’t keep beer in the house. If it’s dinner time, put a pot on the stove, boil some water. If it’s not, get something else ready. Keep an eye on the table top, and pay attention to the conversation without seeming like you’re paying attention.

The best pack to steal from is one with about fifteen cigarettes left. Keep your peripheral vision trained on the guest, and when he reaches for the pack, be ready right behind him with the ashtray, so you can glance inside to see how many he has. If it’s a new pack, or one that’s nearly empty, you’re out of luck; go to your room, write in your journal, read or do something else, because the theft attempt is a waste of time. If the pack is somewhere between half and three-quarters full, however, you are good to go.

Dad won’t notice, so don’t worry about him. Your mom’s attention might be drawn, though, by your uncharacteristic and sudden enthusiasm for domestic service, so if she’s home, wait until she disappears into the bedroom to avoid the smoke. If, however, she has already divorced your dad and left him to fend for himself, she won’t be around to notice anyway.

The next move is all about timing. Quickly set the ashtray down for your father’s friend before he tucks his pack away. Watch your power of suggestion go to work again; nine times out of ten he’ll set the cigarettes next to the ashtray, if the ashtray appears while his hands search for somewhere to put them. Let him smoke his cigarette, all the while getting dinner ready if it’s dinner time, getting a snack ready if it’s not. When he's done with his smoke, crack the door and act like the smoke bothers you, and once they notice you’re bothered, shoo them away. They will go. If it’s dinnertime, tell them to get out of your hair so you can finish dinner. If it’s not, tell them to take this snack and go in the living room, it’s getting hot in here, isn’t it?

Bring their drinks out in a moment. Steal one cigarette from the pack left on the table and hide it. Bring the pack and accessories out to the living room and set them there on the coffee table, suggesting that he never left them alone at all. He won’t even think about missing cigarettes; after all, he’s had his pack the whole time. If the friend is James, who has only recently moved back to the area himself, then he hasn’t seen you in about five years. He gets distracted every time you walk by anyway.

Pay attention to the conversation, but occasionally remind them you can’t hear over all the noise involved in the preparation of food. Bring them things, say What? Did you need something, I couldn’t hear.

Wait for the friend to wear out his welcome. The moment always comes. The types of friends Dad keeps are better met somewhere than invited over, but they do like to invite themselves. They never stay long. They like to drop by, to chat. That’s enough for them to feel social, and they’ll leave when Dad gives the hint, but they seem to enjoy working on their own removal from the premises.

“There’s no shame in it, buddy. Go out and get you some.”
Sex talk. Perfect. Dad will get there in just a minute. Before long the discomfort will feel palpable in the room, and the guest will inevitably smoke cigarette number two of the visit, despite having (you suspect) intentionally caused the discomfort himself. This is why Dad’s friends like him. He’s vulnerable, and this makes them feel strong.

“I’m serious, Pete. Heals all wounds. When Maggie left, I was down about it too, I was. But that first weekend I went straight to the bar. And you know what? I didn’t get the hottest chick in the place. I’m not a spring chicken any more, I know that. But damn hell, there’s always someone lonely enough to show you a good time, if you get me.”

Set the table, if it’s dinnertime. Wait patiently, if it’s not.

“No, I’m not saying it’s a permanent fix. But don’t give me that emotional bullshit, I’m not talking about making love. I’m talking about sex. Damn, Pete, thought after being married this long you’d know the difference.”

Sneak a glance into the living room to see if the guest has finished his second cigarette. Almost time, now.

“Because! Because I’m looking at you now and I see the loneliest guy on the planet. Callie’s gone on the weekends, isn’t she? Well damn hell! House to yourself, and a daughter besides, so you can always say in the morning, ‘Now get the hell out, I’d rather not have my daughter come home and find you in my bathrobe with the rubber still hanging out your snatch.’”

It’s time. Go save your father. Go save him.

Enter the room boldly to suggest no level of discomfort on your part; after all, you haven’t heard a word. Tell your father dinner is ready, if it is, or if it’s not, pick up the snack tray and hover around the coffee table (and the cigarettes), busying yourself with the important task of tidying up. Dad will have his opportunity to suggest the guest’s departure. They will stand, make their way to the door, and this is your second chance.

Take one, to be safe. Take two if you’re bold. If it’s James, take three.

Return the cigarettes and lighter to the guest at the door. They’ll talk for another fifteen minutes, with the guest either hanging out the door, or the both of them having stepped outside. The latter situation is optimal, as you can immediately retire to your room and add your freshly-acquired bounty to the stash. Otherwise, Dad might stay in the kitchen even after the guest leaves. But with some quick thinking, you can help yourself out.

“Really, Dad, it’s okay if you want to date. I’ll understand.”

To avoid that conversation, Dad will withdraw from the room—

“Actually, there is something we need to talk about, but it’s…certainly not that.”

Well. That can’t be good.

Shawn

Sunday afternoon, Shawn knocked on the Caldwells’ door. Peter answered and showed him to the living room. There was an ashtray on the coffee table with a few fresh butts stubbed out and resting in it, the smell still hanging thick in the air.

“Shawn.” Callie came up behind him. She had on hiking boots, pink socks, a tank top. Shorts of the shortest variety. Callie cleared her throat. Her father lingered, then started cleaning up the ashtray. “You were going to show me more of the woods today?”
“Yeah. Yeah, did you want to?”
“Let’s go.” She turned to head out the back door.
“Callie?” said Peter. “You’re wearing that? What about poison ivy?”
“I’m fine,” she said, already walking away.
“Don’t worry,” Shawn said for her. “We’ve got the path pretty well cleared.”
“Come on, Shawn,” said Callie without breaking stride.

The heat of the day fell down upon them as Shawn followed her to the forest. She stayed a few steps ahead of him, until he jogged to catch up to her as they made it to the trees. “Hey,” he said. “Did you know that sunshine gives you vitamin D?”

Callie paused. Her face altered as she looked at him, the abruptness she’d shown her father melting away. “Yeah,” she said, took a deep breath, let it out. “I mean, no, is that true?”

“Yes. I guess it’s in the UV rays, or something.”

“That’s cool.” She crossed her arms, waiting on him, then unhooked one and threw a thumb at the trail. “Did you want to . . . ?”

“Yes, let me just,” said Shawn, taking the lead. At the Smoking Log he stopped, pointed, shrugged. “I’ve only got one right now, but you could—I mean we could share it, if you wanted to.”

She didn’t seem to hear him. “So,” she said, “my dad just told me I’d be ‘hanging out’ with you and your brothers this summer.”

Her arms were still crossed, and she looked at him as if he’d personally let her down. Shawn took a step toward the log, but she started off down the path. He caught up again and said, “Yeah, my mom told me last night. I mean my brothers can be jerks but it’ll be cool. You don’t have to hang around them if you don’t want to.”

She nodded. They continued, wordless. This was not how he’d wanted to usher in this new time, this era of visitation rights: in a bad mood. Maybe he shouldn’t have come over. Maybe she just wanted to be alone today. Somewhere nearby an insect buzzed in waves; somewhere far a dog barked as if to itself. They came to the creek, just a trickle now. Their silence started to get to him, and soon he found himself talking. “It’s been too dry lately. This is deeper, usually. Sometimes after it rains you can come down here and skip rocks in it. Actually,” he said, turning and smiling at her, “we used to have these days where we’d come down here and tramp around in it in our boots, and get it all muddy and brown and it looked kind of like chocolate, and Ty would call it the Chocolate Factory and try to get Joey and me to drink some of it, but Randall would say it’s full of deer piss, so we didn’t.” He took a deep breath to shut himself up.

A ray of light punched through the trees. Her hair was caught in the light and glowed, her skin too, both seemed to collect the light and hold it, and a brand new solid thought came to him, not that he hadn’t noticed it before, but the sharpness of the vision turned the words into a concrete sentence in his mind: She’s beautiful.

Callie put a hand on her waist and shielded her eyes with the other. He considered breaking the news to her, telling her these thoughts he’d been having, these beliefs that seemed unwavering, lasting, safe. She’s beautiful. I like her.

“Shawn?”
No—no way. Saying the words out loud was impossible. But he still wanted her to know.
Maybe he could think it to her. He squinted at the shadow beneath her hand and thought as hard as he could: You’re beautiful and I like you.

“You’re staring at me.”

“Yeah? Oh, sorry—I just, spaced out for a second there.”

“Can I have that cigarette? I’m kind of stressed.”

He took out the Altoids case. “Goddamn it,” he said in disbelief, and showed her: Broken.

The very reason he kept them in a metal case, but here the filter was broken off. Maybe Joey had found it, or maybe—

“Well, I guess…” she said. She stuck a hand into her back pocket. Paused.

“What?”

“We could smoke it without the filter.”

“No, no. Bad idea. Too harsh. You’re not ready for that, not for your second cigarette ever.”

She bit her lip, still looking into the tin. “I guess you’re right. Fuck.” She pulled her hand out of her pocket again. *I like how she swears about things.* “What are you going to do with it, then?”

“Well maybe I could smoke it, and breathe the smoke at you.”

“Let your lungs filter it for me.”

“Sure.” His eyebrows raised. “Yeah, it could work.”

She smiled. “Um, I’ll pass on that. But thank you, though.” Shaking her head, she continued up the path. Then, stopped. “You know what, give it to me anyway.”

“Callie—”

“Shawn, *fuck.* Just give it to me.”

His mouth fell open. That was—wow. Maybe he didn’t like her swearing.

“You’re not my babysitter, okay? Can I have it, please?” She held out a palm.

“Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“Are you mad at your dad?”

Now Callie’s jaw dropped. She turned and walked away. Shawn again had to jog to catch up. He touched her arm and she stopped immediately. They were in a clearing. Callie looked up at the sun. “The UV rays don’t carry vitamin D. They don’t have any molecules. They don’t carry anything. They can’t.”

“But I heard—”

“The vitamin D is made in your skin. We make it inside us. It’s a reaction triggered by the UV rays. That’s what happens.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t need you babysitting me.”

“Good. I didn’t want to have to change your diaper.”

She smiled, looked down, shaking her head. “Fuck you.”

“You curse like my dad.” He offered the open Altoids tin.

She held the lighter up to the tobacco, hit it lightly. Exhaled. He did like her swearing, he decided in the resulting silence demanded by the novelty of filterless tobacco. It was a nice
silence. He felt himself staring again, but it didn’t count because she was doing something that
deserved it.

After proving she could handle it, she said, “If I tell you something, you promise not to
tell anybody?”

“About what?”
“Just promise.”
“Okay, I promise.”

She nodded. “I cut myself once, when I was twelve.”

Shawn didn’t understand the secrecy. He’d cut himself plenty of times, in the woods
especially, it happened all the time. “What happened?” he asked.

“My mom saw it before it healed. We were on vacation and we were swimming and the
band-aid fell off. I’ve been paying for that ever since.” She took another soft drag. “With therapy,
I mean. I have to go to therapy.” She smirked at the leaves on the ground.

“Like, cut yourself, on purpose?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve never done that.” Shawn was focused on the cigarette. The last cigarette. Just take
it, he thought, she’ll share it. He watched himself hold his hand out for the cigarette. Decision
made. Or no, he thought about that one first before he did it, but still, she gave it to him. I like
her because she’s not greedy.

“He knew it wasn’t just an accident?”

Callie smiled. “It was a square.”

He put the cigarette to his lips, his first without a filter, and the hit was far too big, the
smoke came too fast. Immediately his eyes watered, and though he tried to hold it in, a cough
came, violently. Smoke ejected from his nose, and it burned. Callie laughed and took the
cigarette back.

Shawn took a moment to regain his composure. Callie didn’t say any more. Somewhere,
the dog still barked, its situation clear to them both, a yard dog, tethered to his dog house by
some asshole adult who didn’t know how to take care of a pet, or how to love it. The dog called
for attention, barking perhaps just to hear its own echo. They both listened, saw each other
listening. Shrugged at the sadness of it, the shame.

Randall

As if Shawn was the only one who could look out a window. And he hadn’t even thought
to get the binoculars. My reaction wasn’t immediate infatuation, though; I merely thought she
looked familiar.

The night before she was to come over for the first time, I stayed up searching for her in
my collection. Or rather, much of the time I spent in my chair, lights off, looking through the
screen into the muggy night, thinking about her face. Finally at about two o’clock I convinced
myself that the only way to find her would be to look for her—so I began thinking about the
process of looking for her. I’d have to pull out the trunk and set it next to the bed and unlock it
and prop the lid against the wall quietly, and then pull out the stacks of magazines in the proper
order, setting each stack in its correct place on the bed, and then, finally, opening the plastic and
searching through each. The process confirmed, I spent another twenty minutes thinking about
reorganization of the collection, and how this seek-and-find procedure could be abbreviated or eliminated in the future. Perhaps Post-its could help.

Once the search had begun, it took less than ten minutes to find her. Miss April, 2002. Not the body, of course, or even the same hair color (Callie was a blonde), but the face was a match, what I’d been thinking of. This model’s career was obviously based on being a natural red-head; almost every other model I’d ever seen was clean-shaven. I thought about living beside her, the things a neighbor could see through her window, the things a Miss April might let me see. An unrealistic thought, I knew, but I granted myself the leeway; my study of the female form had little to do with behavior. I examined her body’s intimate intricacies, the texture on the nipples, the braille-like bumps, the minuscule ridges and folds at the tip, as if canyons to guide the river-flow of milk. I spent the next ten minutes browsing through the rest of that issue, seeing each of the familiar models in a new light, comparing them to the now living, breathing centerfold. The entire process, from trunk-out to trunk-returned-beneath-bed, took less than half an hour. Far less time than it had taken to think about doing it.

I woke at the usual time. I felt prepared to meet her, now.

I heard Ty stirring in his room. He’d been an early riser for about a week, preparing for football on Wednesday. Then, unexpectedly, I heard someone awake in Shawn and Joey’s room, and that made me smile. Shawn, certainly. Then Mom knocked on my door.

You’re awake, right?
Yeah.
Someone needs to be downstairs when Callie gets here.
Shawn will.
What? She cracked my door and peeked in.
I said I will. I’m just getting up now.
I got out of bed but didn’t leave my room; I wanted to be eating breakfast when Callie got arrived. Ordinarily I’d go down and eat breakfast and watch SportsCenter with Ty, or maybe play video games, but this morning I didn’t want to be engaged in another activity that required all or a large portion of my attention. No need to be rude. But to be doing nothing would suggest I had been waiting for her arrival. Which I was, of course. From my desk chair I heard the front door open and shut. It was Ty, going running. Then Shawn thudded downstairs. I almost always knew where everyone was in the house. Only Mom could still sneak up on me. Now, I stood up as well, feeling the urge to move, to join the migration.

Callie and her father exited their home and began crossing the yard. I put on shorts and a t-shirt and left my room, for Cocoa Puffs.

Shawn passed me on his way back upstairs, smelling like a bucket of cologne. The knock came as I poured my milk. My bowl in one hand, I opened the door. Callie’s father held out his hand.

Hi! Peter Caldwell, nice to meet you.
Randall, I said, crunching cereal as I spoke. We shook hands.
Is Shawn…? he asked, peering past me. I backed the door open wider for them to come inside, but he ushered Callie in front of him and put his hands briefly on her shoulders, as if presenting her for a buyer. She blushed, looked at the sky. Her father introduced me to her as if he’d known me for a long time—this is Randall—then tapped his watch.
Gotta run, Cal, love you, I’ll see you when I get home?

We watched him speed-walk back across the grass, through the apple trees, back home. I crunched on cereal, waiting for her to stop looking up the hill first, but she didn’t stop, so we both kept watching him. At his front door, he checked to see if it was locked. Then he got in his car. Then he got back out and went inside the house. Then came back out and got in his car. Then back out to check the front door again, and this is when he looked over and saw us watching. He waved, the way people wave to planes and helicopters. Then he finally drove away.

Still looking up the hill, even with his car out of sight, she said, He never calls me that. ‘Cal.’ That was— weird, I don’t know. She scratched her elbow.

It could have been worse, I said. He could have called you Betty. Or Steve. Or Miss April 2002, but that wouldn’t make much sense at all, now would it? Do you want some cereal?

I showed her into the kitchen.

Joey

Shawn is bugging me with all the noise he’s making, so I just get up. Cause that hot neighbor is coming over today. For some reason I don’t think she’s gonna be there when I get downstairs, but she is. I guess I figure if she’s gonna be here then Shawn’ll be down there, but he’s still in our room, so it’s not my fault I have to walk up next to her in my pajamas and eat cereal and act like I knew she was here the whole time when I really didn’t. It’s Shawn’s fault.

Randall is down here watching SportsCenter and he’s basically ignoring her. She’s sitting at the table and I wish she wasn’t, I wish she was over there watching TV like she should be. I can feel my hair sticking straight up and she’s probably looking at it but I don’t want to look at her, I just want to act like this doesn’t count and I’ll get to meet her again later. But then I do look at her and she looks at me and I go, “Hey.”

She goes, “Hey.”

I go, “Hey.”

She raises her eyebrows at me and I realize I already said that and it’s Shawn’s fault again.

Finally he comes down. He’s been cleaning the room since probably the sun was rising, like she’s ever gonna be caught dead in his room, but he was doing it anyway. So he comes down and I just wait for him to screw it up, like I know he’s gonna. He’s all dressed and he smells like a French whorehouse, that’s what Ty says, and he goes, “Hey,” and sits across from her like a dumbass.

She goes, “Hey.”

He goes, “Do you want anything to eat?”

“No, thanks.”

“We got cereal, we’ve got a lot of different types of cereal, and some bananas, too.”

“I’m okay, thanks.”

“You want some coffee?”

“No.”

“Good because I don’t know how to make it.” He grins at her and she grins at him back because he’s being so dumb.
Then Ty comes in from his running, all sweaty and getting a glass of water from the sink.
And right then Shawn blows a fuse, it’s like he has to get her away from Ty.
He goes, “You want to go outside?”
“No.”
“We don’t have to sit here watching SportsCenter if you don’t want to.”
“It’s okay, I don’t care.”
“No, it’s totally boring. I mean, not like there’s a whole lot of stuff to do here in the summer. We already washed the cars a couple days ago. But the lawn still needs mowed.”
“You want me to do your chores?”
Randall goes Ha! really loud without looking over at us.
Shawn goes, “No, what I meant was, we could go in the woods if you want. You want to do that?”
“No, I’m fine.”
“No,” Shawn goes, but this time like he’s serious, “I mean we could go in the woods.”
“Fuck, Shawn, at least buy her dinner first,” says Ty from the floor. He’s stretching out (he always stretches out after he works out, because he says that’s the only way to maintain and improve flexibility), but then he hops up and pulls out the blender. He always drinks a protein shake after he works out. I usually try to get him to let me have one even though they’re gross, which he never lets me because he pays for them with his own money, but today I don’t.
Sometimes he’ll let me have a little bit of his, though. But they are gross.
Shawn goes, “Shut up, I just wanted to show her something.”
Ty goes, “What?” He’s getting out the fruit and bananas and powder and milk and stuff.
“Those vines I used to swing on. When I was a kid.”
Ty goes, “What do you mean, ‘when?’” He gets pretty funny in front of girls. I don’t know how he does it, it’s like somebody flips a switch on him and turns him really cool. He goes, “How bout you just leave her alone, let her sit at the table like she wants to, and if she wants to go play in the woods she can tell you when she’s ready?”
Shawn goes, “How about you go put a shirt on?” That’s a lot of lip to be giving Ty. Most days Ty would put him in a headlock or hit him in the arm or something, but he doesn’t. I guess because Callie’s here. All he does is turn around and smile and start flexing, like some bodybuilder on TV.
I can’t help it, I start laughing cause it’s pretty funny. He’s grunting and groaning and stuff, and Shawn starts turning red. Callie starts laughing and Randall turns around and sees Shawn all red and what Ty’s doing and he starts laughing too. Then Ty goes, “Anybody got a Band-Aid cause I’m cut,” and I try not to snort but a little milk comes out my nose. I wipe it away quick, though.
Then Shawn just leaves, out the back door. If he thinks Callie’s gonna follow him he’s dead wrong cause she stays right where she is. Ty blends up his shake and pours it in a glass and he’s going out to the living room when he stops in front of Callie like he just noticed her there.
He goes, “Hey, Callie,” and he holds out his left hand backwards and she shakes his left hand with her right hand. “I’m Ty. Nice to meet ya.” And he smiles this long, big smile.
Randall

Did Shawn say he likes me? she asked. She sat down and I kept looking at the TV but I could smell her—not a perfume smell, but that girl smell, deodorant and makeup and whatever they put in their hair.

I grinned. Why? You can’t just tell?
Of course I can. But it’s different if he’s telling people.
Why?
I don’t know. Because that means he’s pretty sure about it. Or that he thinks he’s got some claim on me. She leaned back into the couch and sighed. The sigh beautiful people make when they think about how beautiful they are.

A commercial came on and I looked at her. Yes. Beautiful. I’d give her that.
He won’t admit it, actually, I said.
Well that’s good.

We were alone in the room. Her face mellowed out as she watched the commercials, and it struck me: Miss April, yet again. Not only did the features match, she had the same expressions. And the bodies weren’t actually that different, beyond cup size. Really it just came down to hair color.

Listen to me a second, I said. She looked at me, but the illusion did not disappear. He only likes you because you let him.
Well what am I supposed to do, be mean to him?
For starters, you could stop going in the woods with him.
She crossed her arms and turned her attention back on the television. We just go there so he can smoke. On that log you told him about.
So he can smoke?
Her eyes moved from the television to me, but not a muscle more. That’s what I said.
Because if it’s just him, that’s not a good reason for you to keep going with him. He can smoke by himself.
Yeah, good point, she said. Maybe I’ll stop going with him.
Just to be clear,—, I said. Shawn’s the only one smoking down there?
She weighed over the potential evidence I might have on her, a long pause before she answered. Yes, she said. Just him. Why? You think I smoke?
She must’ve thought she was better than she was. But I’d have been surprised if her parents didn’t already know. I shrugged as if I’d given her a fair chance and turned back toward the television.

And really, I didn’t even want to sell to her now, if she was just going to lie to my face like that. She could keep bumming off of Shawn, for all I cared.

Callie

You’re not sure what he wants, trying to pin you down like that. He must know something, but he’s stopped talking to you. Why would he care if you smoke or not? Does he know? How could he? Randall seems different than the others, and not just because he’s tall. With the rest of them it’s all about testosterone, but this one seems intelligent, even calculating.
Which demands a whole different treatment. Your interest is piqued, and you’d rather not be piqued in his presence. Not until you know how to act around him.

So you stand up. You tell Randall you’re leaving, going home.
He says, “I can’t see why you’ve stuck around this long.”
“You won’t tell on me, will you?”
“Won’t have to,” he says. “You’ll find a way to screw it up on your own.”

You go out the back door to look for Shawn in the back yard, but you don’t see him. Probably waiting for you in the woods, on the log. He may have told Randall, even though he says he hasn’t told anyone. And if Randall knows, how much can you trust Shawn—

You pause at your back door as a thought comes, and you look back at their house. From here you can see the upstairs row of bedroom windows. Last night you came out to smoke in the back yard, after your dad was in bed. Just because their lights were off doesn’t mean they were sleeping; they were watching. Or at least Randall was.

It’s your own fault. Of course they’d be looking, you’re the new girl, the new curiosity next door, and you should have expected the attention. Even at night, without you knowing. Creepy—your skin prickles, in fact, despite the heat—but also natural. And now you know about it. Being watched is always an advantage, as long as you know it’s happening.

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Randall

Joey came trotting down the stairs in a suit coat and tie, his wet hair slicked down, even combed. He picked up a controller as if nothing were strange about this.

Want to play Halo?
I stared at him for a moment. He felt my eyes and smiled. What the hell are you doing? I asked, and he immediately broke into thick laughter.
It’s for Shawn, he said, nearly sobbing. When him and Callie come back I’m going to hit on her.

Jesus, that’s pathetic, I said as he turned on the game. And what the hell is that smell? Huh? he asked, as if he’d could’ve possibly forgotten. Oh, I put some of Shawn’s socks in my pocket. He pulled them out; the room filled with the specific reek of Brut cologne and feet. For in case he’s not embarrassed enough with just me hitting on her.
Yeah. Good plan. Put those away.

Ty

It ain’t every time, but most times when I finish yanking it in the shower, I get filled with dark thoughts. Empty thoughts, like my brain is gone. Most times that’s the whole reason I do it, just so for a while I don’t feel like I want anything. Girls or anything. I just watch the drain, watch the water tumble down, and I think about where it goes, where it ends up. I think about the end of things. This is my dark place. Only time I ever feel sort of comfortable in my own skin, cause I ain’t even thinking about being there.

I stand under the shower head and close my eyes and let all that water hit me in the face. It should hurt for hot water to hit you square on the eyelids but I guess there aren’t enough nerves in the eyelids because it don’t hurt. It just feels like being underwater. I even look back and forth like I’ve seen with girls, when I go to their house and watch movies in the basement with em, they fall asleep and their little eyes look back and forth. I let the water cover my face and fall to
the shower floor like my chin is a faucet, except I can’t see it because my eyes are still looking inside my lids. I don’t know what I’m looking for there, but I don’t think the girls ever know what they’re looking for either.

After a while the skin on my face starts to feel grainy, like a different texture than it was before. My cheeks feel like some different shape, and my tongue tastes something different, even though my mouth is closed. Water’s like that, just does what it wants, like it’s trying to turn whatever it touches into more of itself. Stay in the water long enough, I might just become water. I like that thought.

Even if I don’t jerk off I take long showers, so it’s all the same to them whether I do or not, but I usually do jerk off. Masturbate, whatever. I like feeling empty. It’s inspirational.

The water gets cooler, and today I know my emptiness is over when I remember Callie is here. I can imagine jerking off to her. I coulda jerked to Callie today, I could probably do it now if I wanted. This is how I know I’m back in the world of wants. I turn off the water.

Glad I didn’t jerk off to her today, though. We only just met.

Shawn

He waited for her on the log. Ten minutes went by and she didn’t come, but he wasn’t ready to call it an abandonment just yet. He’d give it thirty, max. Maybe forty-five.

But soon he heard the screen door smack shut. He stood but couldn’t see, half-crouched and bobbed his head around trees and weeds and then, there she was. On the back porch, looking in his direction, but only looking. Then she went home, without looking in his direction again.

His disappointment came quickly, but by the time she went inside, he’d shrugged it off. If nothing else, at least she was no longer around Ty.

Shawn didn’t smoke, not wanting to waste a cigarette without her. But he wasn’t ready to go back inside yet, and the woods was at least cool enough to tolerate. He took the path to the Chocolate Factory. Instead of continuing the circuit on which he’d taken Callie, eventually returning to the back yard’s opposite corner, he jumped the creek and headed past the property line, deeper into the woods.

There were more memories here. He used to come back here for fun; anymore he only delved this deeply into the forest to remember the fun he used to have. This was a territory for exploring. He and his brothers knew it better than anyone. All of it was owned, but to other people the woods was at most a place to spend hunting season, and more often just something to look at. He’d never run into anyone out here. There were vines to swing on, little eddies for frogging, fields of umbrella-weeds. Occasionally the creek would split in two and rejoin later, leaving a sort of island in between. The creek had made these woods, and like a proper explorer he let it guide him. He’d been the first—and he barely remembered this now, but it happened—to explore beyond their property. His brothers had come with him later, but they never could appreciate it the way he did.

Up until the day of his first cigarette, the idea of smoking here had seemed blasphemous. Randall’s customers would bring over their porn mags after school, and once the trade was made, Randall would take them to the woods. Shawn listened to the transactions through the wall, each time growing more anxious. Not only were they blowing smoke into the leaves of poor, rooted trees that couldn’t walk away from the foul air, it was also dangerous: he hated the thought of
losing his sanctuary to a forest fire. One day about a month prior to Callie’s arrival, he decided to relieve his anxiety by cutting off brother and friend in the hallway, where he announced his intention to tag along.

Randall just looked at him. His friend said, “Why, you want one, too?”
No, not at all. But the way the friend started laughing, and the way Randall just waited, sizing him up, Shawn felt he needed to redeem himself.

They came to a downed log just a few yards inside the woods’ cover, and Randall said, “Here’s good, you can smoke here.”
“You sure they can’t see us?” said the friend, nodding up at the house before taking off his shirt.
“No, man,” said Randall. “This is the Smoking Log. This is where you smoke.”

Though their mom smoked every day, the smell that filled the air when the tobacco was lit unexpectedly reminded Shawn of his dad. He hadn’t thought about the different brands producing different smells before, even while his dad was still around. And certainly not after his parents only smoked in separate places.

The friend gestured to Shawn with his cigarette. “Well, big guy?” he asked. “Where’s yours?”
Shawn looked at Randall. Randall shrugged: “Don’t look at me, I don’t smoke.”
“Just give me one.”

Randall smirked and took out an Altoids tin. Shawn opened it and found one cigarette and a lighter inside. He took both out and handed the tin back, but Randall refused it. “No, you keep that. The first one’s free, but if you want more, you can hide them in there.”

Shawn never expected to want more. Now, though, he couldn’t think of anything more relaxing than coming down to the woods, sitting, watching nature, smoking, remembering back when his family all lived in the same house, when he didn’t know any better but to be happy.

Joey

Shawn comes back in while I’m digging through the stuff on the inside back porch, tossing frisbees and flat volleyballs and whiffle-ball bats all over, and Shawn goes, “What are you looking for?”
I go, “Don’t we have some binoculars back here?”
“I don’t know, why?”
I smile. “You gotta to see this.”
I take him up to Randall’s room. Ty’s in there cause from his room you can’t see. They’re both crowded around the window on the bed, and I go, “Feast your eyes on that.”

He pushes in between Ty and Randall up to the window. It’s Callie. She’s got on this yellow bikini and she’s laying on a towel in her backyard, and Shawn just goes, “Holy shit.”
I go, “Yeah, I’m about to put my swimsuit on and go say hi.”
Ty smacks me in the back of the head. “No, douche, she’ll go back inside.”
She’s got on these big sunglasses too, but they don’t make her look funny at all. I bet if I wore them I’d look funny, but not her. She looks good.

Shawn backs up from the window and starts to leave, and then Randall goes, “Hey, you can’t tell her we can see her.”
Shawn goes, “Dumbass, she knows we can see her.”
Randall goes, “Well you can’t tell Mom, either!” but Shawn keeps walking.
I go, “Why the hell would he tell Mom?”
“Because, didn’t you see him? He doesn’t want us looking at her.” He looks back out the window. Callie rolls over on her stomach, and we watch while she does. Then Randall goes, “She’s supposed to be here, so we can’t get her in trouble. Or else this might stop.”
Ty goes, “Good point.”
And then Randall goes, “All right, jerks. Everybody out. I got some studying to do.”
Ty goes, “Gross,” and he leaves. Randall yells after him, “That’s not what I meant!” but Ty doesn’t stop, even though he can’t see her from his room so there’s no reason to go in there.
I can see in my room, though, so I go there. But Shawn’s got the blinds closed, and we never have the blinds closed, but he looks at me like he’ll pop me in the mouth if I try to open em.
Sometimes I wonder about him.

Callie

Dad doesn’t remark on the fact you’re home before he is. He makes tomato soup and grilled cheese for dinner. It’s the third time you’ve had this since you moved here. It’s fine, you expected this, and he seems embarrassed about it or preoccupied enough not to incite conversation during the meal. That—a silent trust, that if something is important enough to be said, it will be—would be just fine with you. If it lasts.
Towards the end, he finally says, “Did everything go well today, with the neighbors?”
“Yeah,” you say. “Fine.”
He clears the table, and you go to your room quickly to avoid helping clean up. It’s out of habit, a childish holdover from when there were two. But now there is only one. Still, you’ve already left, and if he wants your help he should call you back down. He doesn’t. You wait, not even picking up a book, and the waiting is awful. You’re either selfish or foolish for expecting him to come get you, and neither feels good. Finally you return to the kitchen unbidden.
“Thanks,” he says as you pick up a towel.
“You could ask, you know.”
“Okay.” He puts the frying pan in the water. “So, no problems today? You get along with them?”
You thought you’d answered this already, but it seems to be the only question he has.
“Yeah,” you say. “I mean there were the regular getting-to-know-you things. It was a little awkward, I guess. But it’s fine.”
“Things will be better tomorrow?”
“Yeah. Things will be much better tomorrow.”
Chapter Three

Ty

I go running Tuesday morning after Mom leaves. Jogging up to the road, I see Callie walking to our house, and I wave at her. She smiles and waves like she’s happy to see me. I smile back before I can help it. If my head was empty I wouldn’t be doin that.

She’s Shawn’s girl, anyway.

I run.

I only dated one girl younger than me before, a grade younger than me, and it turned out awful, and if I ain’t careful it’ll happen again. I gotta be careful. I can’t think about her. And she’s Shawn’s anyway, she’s his age, I can’t even think about it. Girl that young don’t know what she wants.

I run faster.

When I get back she’s still in the living room with everyone else. I kinda hoped she’d go back home soon as her dad left, but she didn’t. I go right upstairs and put a shirt on.

I come back downstairs for my protein shake and Joey’s trying to get her to play video games. “It’s easy,” he says. “These little buttons here—”

“Which ones?” she says.

“These ones here, you just have to push those a bunch of times.”

“Oh I couldn’t do that,” she says.

Shawn says, “You can’t push a button?” but he says it like he’s mad.

She says, “No, it looks hard!”

Randall says, “You don’t have to. We could do something else. Hey, you know what we haven’t done in a while? Play in the sprinkler.” He looks right at Shawn, and I feel bad cause I started it yesterday. Fuckin with him like that. I put the stuff in the blender and turn it on.

But it would be nice to see her in the sprinkler. Maybe if they do it, that would be fine. I wouldn’t have to do it, I could just watch from my window.

“Ty,” Joey says when I turn off the blender. “Hey, Ty.”

“What?”

“Tell her.”

“Tell her what?”

Shawn’s looking at me like I better not tell her.

“Tell her you’ll come out, too.”

I say, “Sorry, man. I gotta take a shower.”

“A sprinkler’s like a shower!” Joey says.

Randall says, “Oh, forget it. She probably doesn’t want to anyway. It’s just so hot out I thought she might want to cool off, but forget it. She doesn’t want to.”

And then she says real slow, “I didn’t say that.” And she smiles.

“What’s the matter with you?” Shawn says, almost shouting at her. The whole room pauses. Everybody looks at him, and at Callie, and it’s like the two of them are on stage. In the spotlight. He turns a little red, and he says, “Whatever, forget it,” before stomping out just like yesterday.

Today, though, she looks like something’s bugging her. Like she’s trying to figure out what’s the matter with her, just cause he said it. She’s still smiling like she was, but now it just
looks fake, like she’s in a beauty pageant. And maybe it always looked like that, and I just didn’t notice until Shawn said something.

He really likes her, and she knows it. Maybe this is just her way of flirting back, but it might damn near kill Shawn, and we’re not helping him. She tries to get out of the spotlight by coming over to me in the kitchen. “Hey, can I have a smoothie, too?” she says. All ditzy-like. She smells fantastic.

Watching Shawn walk away, though, makes it easier not to think about it. “Help yourself,” I say, and I go upstairs.

**Callie**

The bikini maneuver has backfired. After Ty leaves, the other two just look at you, like you’d go find Shawn if you knew what was good for you. Foolish or selfish, and neither feels good. It’s like you’re the only person you know capable of fixing anything, and you resent being forced into that role here too, but there’s nothing you can do about that now.

So you go to the woods. Shawn is on the Smoking Log; a steady trail of smoke rises around him. He hears you on the path and turns around, a leaf still flaming in his hand, to which his eyes quickly return. He has a pile gathered at his feet, a big one, leaves and sticks and still more leaves, all awaiting death by fire.

You smell the cologne even before sitting down. Burning leaves and all.

He doesn’t speak to you, so you don’t say anything back. You smoke two cigarettes apiece, the last of his stash, and let the day pass. After the second smoke you find yourself starting to relax, to relish the silence and really listen to the activity in the forest. The birds, mostly. Occasionally a hot wind creeps in from the other side of the brush and stirs the nearby weeds. The sky is cloudy today, and between the clouds and the trees you’re having trouble finding any blue above you. The moments you see it are as rewarding as finding a shooting star.

Before long, though, the silence starts having an opposite effect. It’s that gut feeling when someone’s disappointed in you, that hollowness where you feel like something’s missing that ought to be there, and you only notice because someone’s pointed it out to you. Your mom can give you this feeling. And your dad, much less often than he probably should, but he can. Usually it’s for disappointing your mom. Or it used to be, at least.

Now Shawn has proven his capacity to hollow you out as well. Fine. You decide to fix this. You know exactly what to do, and you hadn’t intended to give this much away so soon, but, fine. You don’t want to feel hollow today, not anymore.

From your back pocket, you pull out two crumpled cigarettes and a lighter.

**Shawn**

He watched her light both cigarettes at once. She handed one to him, and he took it, but once in his fingers it felt an unwanted presence. Before today, putting his lips in the same place hers had touched would’ve been monumental, a huge step in their growing closeness, something to smile to himself about in the night.

But the way she did it. She pulled them out and lit them and it was so smooth. And she hadn’t even coughed or complained the other day about that broken, filterless cigarette either.
First that whole bikini stunt yesterday. Now this. He tried to remind himself. *She’s beautiful and I like her.* But right now he wouldn’t even call her beautiful, and he couldn’t say he liked her because he didn’t know who she was. Was she smart and deep, a quiet thinker with a secret way to organize her bookshelves? Someone whose want for acceptance made her do silly things sometimes? Or was she retaliatory, genuinely cruel? Was she trying to show him she’d lied about her smoking inexperience, openly mocking him for his gullibility? Look at her smoking there in greedy puffs like a bingo grandma, she even had her own cigarettes—who was this girl?

Earlier this morning, he’d come up with a way to fix everything: he would admit to her he’d lied about stealing the cigarettes from his mother. Not only would it allow him to get that off his chest, but it would also show her she didn’t have put on a show, either. Now, though, it seemed the bikini stunt hadn’t been that simple. Maybe she had been punishing them then, the way it felt she was punishing him now. A forbidden fruit sort of thing. Or worse, maybe it wasn’t forbidden at all.

No, stop, no—his imagination, just inventing things, now. He told himself to trust his instincts, and his instincts said this could all, hopefully, be explained. He still liked her. Or, he would, once he figured out who she really was. Once they could both put an end to the show. Then everything would be fine.

**Callie**

To your surprise, giving him the cigarette doesn’t work. Not only does he continue his silence, but now he’s looking at you. Inspecting you. Inspecting the cigarette, then turning those eyes in your direction, and the hollowness grows.

Eventually you just break the silence yourself: “Are you gonna fucking smoke that? Or just waste it?”

He blinks. Still, he doesn’t say anything, and it’s seriously upsetting you, seriously pissing you off, the anger hot and building, filling the hollowness, in your muscles, in your shoulders, calling your arm to lash out and relieve your tension. It’s the first you’ve felt like hitting someone since the time you slapped your mother.

Which started everything, didn’t it. She’d said, “What is wrong with you?” and as an answer to that question you smacked her in the face. The result was nothing less than horrible. She resented you and didn’t speak to you for days. It was just the way she’d said it, not as if she were looking for an answer, but like she already knew the answer and had been waiting for years for you to catch on, too. But even so. You slapped your own mother and immediately afterwards promised yourself never to do so again, you felt so awful. Whether or not the promise applied to other people, you hadn’t decided.

“Fuck, Shawn, what? What is your problem? Are you jealous? I’m not allowed to talk to your brothers, is that it?”

He holds up the cigarette. The filter tip is still pristine, the other end slowly burning.

“Where’d you get this?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” you say. “I stole it, just like you.”

He takes a hit of the cigarette at last, and you think everything will be okay. For just a moment, you let yourself think one hit, one exhale, means everything is back to normal and you
can calm down. But as soon as you look away, he stands up. He’s leaving you there without a word. His own version of a slap in the face. Foolish after all, aren’t you.

You follow him up the trail, shaking your head in frustration. You’ll talk to him when he lets you catch up, but you won’t yell for him, won’t beg for that moment to happen. He marches up through the yard to his house, stopping at the porch steps. He turns and sees you and pauses, mouth open, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he goes to the maple tree, grabs the lower branches, and starts climbing. Not as if to escape from you, though. As if you should climb, too.

It’s most perfect thing he could’ve asked you to do.

The bark is rough and beautiful to the touch, and the higher you climb, the closer you feel to fine. Like that urge to find the sky back on the Smoking Log, except now you’re climbing up into it. The higher you go the less significant you feel, and the less guilty. The wind is stronger than you realized, and several branches are dried to cracking under your added weight, but this feels right, too. The higher the fall, the less you would care if you did.

At the height you stop climbing, the fall would likely kill you, and you couldn’t care less. Shawn is opposite the trunk from you, and eye level. Up here you don’t care at all what he thinks of you. Up here you’re a part of the earth, servant to the limbs and the breeze, your body just a body, as prone to flight or physics as any dropped thing. Him, too, the both of you at a height where it doesn’t matter who you were or will be, only who you are.

“I stole the cigarettes. My dad’s got friends that smoke and I just take them.”

He nods. “Anything else?”

“What, that I lied about?”

“You did lie? On purpose?”

“I guess ‘misrepresented’ would be more accurate. But call it what you want.”

“Pretending,” he says.

A breeze kicks up and rattles the dry leaves around you. You listen to the noise, and so does he. “Fine,” you say. “Pretending. I’m sorry for pretending.”

Shawn

At the top of the tree, Shawn thought about pretending. He stood on one branch, reclined against another, and finally began to understand his dad.

Randall had gotten into trouble a lot at the beginning of junior high, not long after their dad left. The teachers knew about the problems at home and told their mother that although they sympathized, if she didn’t do something he’d get suspended. Instead of speaking just to Randall, Vickie sat them all down for a talk in the living room.

She said she understood that things were going to be difficult for a while. They’d never been in this situation before, and they were going to have to figure out a way to deal with it. “It’s like when Ty was born. Before that, I was just a woman, just a girl really. But suddenly I was supposed to be a mom. And then Randall came and I was supposed to be a mother of two, but I still felt like just a girl. And then Shawn and then Joey, and I felt like every couple years I had to pretend to know how to handle all these new things. I know it’s not easy for you guys right now, and it’s not fair to expect you all of a sudden to know how to have parents that are separated, when all your lives you’ve had both parents, all in one place. But you’ll get it. You’ll feel like
you’re pretending for a while, but one day you’ll be able to step back and take a look at yourself and you’ll realize you’ve figured it out.”

“When?” said Randall.
“I don’t know.”
“What about now?” said Ty. “You feel like a mom now?”
She thought about it, and said yes, she did.
“Well how long did that take?” asked Randall.
She thought some more. “It was Joey, actually, that made me notice it first,” she said, and since Joey was sitting next to her on the couch she wrapped an arm around him. “It was your first day of kindergarten, and I was dropping you off. All these other mothers were dropping their kids off, too, and let me tell you, almost all of them were crying! But I wasn’t crying. And at first I thought, ‘Why aren’t I crying? I’m going to miss my little boy just as much as any of them.’ But at the same time I knew that Joey was going to be fine, that I’d see him later, and that if I cried then he might start crying and make it harder for both of us. I felt like I knew what I was doing. Yeah—I felt like a mother. I’d pretended to be one for so long that I finally became one.”

Shawn wanted to tell Callie this story, but he wasn’t sure why. He didn’t want her to pretend. He wanted her to be herself.
His dad had left because he just wanted to be himself; he’d told Shawn something to that effect more than once, and Shawn agreed, being yourself was good. But his dad had left the family to do it. He’d never made the transition that Shawn’s mom had. He’d never realized he was a dad. He’d been pretending the whole time, and look where it got him. Ty and Randall and Joey, they didn’t understand. They hated their dad, now. But that wasn’t fair. He had to leave. Sometimes pretending doesn’t work. That was it.
“Callie,” he said. She opened her eyes.

**Callie**

He breaks into your reverie, your enjoyment of the day. “You need to stop lying to yourself,” he says.
You close your eyes again.
“I mean—” he says, but stops. The wind tosses your hair up and around, gets it caught in the small branches, the dry, miniscule twigs that break off when you turn your head. You don’t want any advice right now, but he speaks up again. “My dad had to leave because he was lying to himself. He had to leave us. That’s what lying to yourself will get you.”

You open your eyes again. What happened to ‘pretending’? You’re more amused than anything. This kid, thinking he’s got everything figured out. In the realm of the tree, only the tree knows, so it’s best to just listen to the tree. Or at least shut up if you can’t say anything intelligent. “My mom left, too. Was she lying to herself?”

“I don’t know,” he says. His tone, it’s bothering you. All philosophical, wise, like he’s the tree or something. “But it wouldn’t surprise me if she was.”

“Let me tell you why your dad left,” you say, taking on a tone all your own. “Because he decided you weren’t worth sticking around for. You or your brothers, and especially your mom.
You’re not worth his time. And if all he had to do was lie to himself and make you think he loved you, you should have been begging him to lie.”

“You think your mom doesn’t love you?”

“I think your dad hates you.”

His face looks like your mother’s when you slapped her, and that’s twice he’s made you think about that today. You’ve been in the tree too long; the calm is wearing off, and that hollow-gut feeling finds you once more.

“My dad doesn’t hate me,” he says, as if to reassure himself. “He just had to leave because—okay, I don’t know if he hates us, but just listen. My mom told us about how when Ty was born she had to pretend to be a mom, because she didn’t know how to be. She wanted to be a mom, and I mean technically she was a mom already, but she didn’t know how to be.”

“Sounds like my dad,” you say, letting go of the argument quickly. You blame the tree.

“Yeah, but he’s trying, isn’t he? He wants to be your dad, I can tell. That was the problem with my dad, he was pretending to be a dad but he never wanted to be a dad. So eventually it just caught up to him, and he couldn’t do it anymore, he couldn’t pretend anymore. That’s why, Callie. That’s why you have to stop lying. You’re pretending to be someone you don’t want to be.”

“How do you know who I want to be?” you say.

“I don’t know. But I don’t think you know either.”

The argument is back. “Don’t tell me—” you say, but then the branch you’re standing on cracks and gives way to a startling void beneath you.

Ty

First I think it’s cause Callie’s back out in her bikini. But he’s yelling louder than he should be, loud enough she can probably hear him even if his window’s closed. And there’s something else. This ain’t normal Joey yelling. Something’s wrong. I start getting dressed.

Callie

Shawn reaches for one of your hands and squeezes its grasp tighter around the branch. Your feet scramble to find another stronghold, and as soon as they do your wits come back to you. The feeling in your gut. You can place it, now. It feels like falling.

Shawn’s face is pale, eyes round, breath held. He’s squeezing your hand so tightly onto the branch that your fingers hurt from the pressure, but that’s the only thing you can feel. The rest of you is numb in the aftermath.

Then, as if to make up for the moment of silence, an abundance of sound. The wind picks up and rattles the leaves, Shawn finds his breath and peppers you with pleas, oh my god oh my god are you okay I almost lost you I almost lost—and your feet scrape around the tree trunk looking for higher purchase, and your own voice joins the fray, I’m fine it’s okay I got it you can let go—

But even with all this localized noise, some background sound of urgency finds your ears. It’s shouting. Somebody’s shouting.

Ty
Finally I understand what Joey’s saying and I skip the shirt and go

Joey
I’m yelling until I hear someone yell back and then I run

Shawn
He heard the shouts as he saw their recognition reflected in her eyes. She didn’t seem to notice her forehead, the split in the skin, swelling, just starting to leak blood.
Finally she said it calmly. “Let go. I’ve got it.”
He’d never been so close to...to what, to losing so much, and now this terrific shouting, it robbed him of the chance to give the near-tragic moment its due reflection. Before he understood what had just happened, the next disaster was upon him. Still confused, still terrified, he followed Callie to the ground, the two swinging their way branch to branch, Joey’s voice now silent in the yard but echoing in his head. Hey anybody. Fire. Fire.
Three steps down the trail the Smoking Log came into view. His whole pile had gone up, flames flaring waist-high, the wind spreading it to the south.
They looked at each other. This was their fault.
The blood rolled down her nose like a tear and Callie’s eyes grew wide now and scared what do we do Shawn what do we do and then Ty was there beside them, shirtless still and a wet head then Joey right beside him Shawn you fucking dumbass and Ty grabbed Joey’s arm and pulled him back up the path we need water right now come on. Then, they were gone, it was just Callie and Shawn again, and Shawn jumped into the fire.
He went blind to it. No thoughts, his confusion had taken care of those, only impulses left that told him Stomp it out, stomp it out, there’s only you and this fire and only you can stop it. Everything depends on you and you can’t lose what, can’t lose so much can’t ever come close again. Callie is scared. She’s depending on you. So go, do it, now. And in he went.
“Shawn!”
Inside the fire, time perceptibly slowed.
He didn’t feel the heat but for the summer day’s heat, which he noticed was a little hotter than it should be, here in the cool shade of the forest, but still, only summer. He always sweated like this in the summer, especially this summer, in this summer’s heat. This was normal and he had a job to do, just like mowing the lawn, and he got hot then, too, didn’t he? “Shawn, get out of there!” shouted Callie, as if she didn’t know he had to stay in there, which of course he did have to stay in there, stomping and shuffling and killing this damn fire that was his, all his fault, and so he looked at her, to explain to her calmly—for you, for you—and then Randall was there beside her. Looking at her.
“Jesus, what happened to your face?”
Shawn watched her turn to Randall, watched her blink at him, and Shawn got mad. Shawn wanted those blinks and Randall stole them, who’d have thought Randall? but Randall was stealing his blinks. Then Shawn forgot about being mad, he forgot about the blinks and he forgot about Randall and Callie and divorces and trees, and everything else. Except for his feet, which were on fire.
“Shawn!”
This heat he felt. This was not the weather.
The socks burned where he’d sprayed them and so did the shoes, he’d forgotten he’d sprayed his shoes but he had and now the spots he’d sprayed danced with flames as if invited there to play.

Randall, now: “Shawn, get the fuck out of there!” and so he gave up on fixing everything but suddenly he remembered his anger, not the object of his anger but just the anger, and there was the log in front of him. That smoking log. That log, smoking. Just burning away, mocking him and his uselessness. So before jumping back to safety he sent a final frustrated kick in the log’s direction. Except his foot missed the log, and he lost his balance. His foot flew upward, arms flailing, his body twisted a half-rotation and he landed on his face, right in the heart of it.

And then Randall was above him and shoving his hands beneath Shawn’s armpits, and now look there’s Joey yelling I’m coming I’m coming and he’s got a bucket full of water. Shawn could see him there, looking at him through the flames. There’s Joey, wavy-like, and Shawn knew he brought the water because he could feel the coolness on him already. Liquid coolness, seeping down his thigh. The water not even here yet.

Randall hauled him to his knees and dragged him out of the fire. And this was when the cologne, from the broken bottle in Shawn’s pocket, ignited with a whoosh.

Joey dumped the bucket on the fire.

On his feet now, he stumbled out of Randall’s grip and away, and the cool spot on his leg no longer felt cool, in fact quite the opposite, so hot that the rest of his body felt cold, even his feet had given up the heat, as if his leg had called for its attention, had intentionally misbehaved, and now the punishment.

Shawn danced off down the path with his shoes and his thigh on fire.

“Joey, over here!” yelled Randall, but Joey’s bucket was empty, and Shawn kept spinning away from them downhill. He twirled without knowing why. Spun round and round, a new dance, a dizzy dance taking him further and further away, the trees around him flying through his field of vision and confusing him, the fire that stayed with him, even growled as he spun, all of it mystifying. He couldn’t run from the flames, and spinning wasn’t working but he couldn’t remember how not to. So he gave up and let his body do what it wanted, and his body wanted to spin down the hill and follow gravity’s pull. Randall stayed near, slapping at the fire on his leg, and maybe he could slap it if Shawn would stop spinning but he couldn’t. And his shoes were still on fire, and his socks too.

Then she tackled him. First he thought it was Ty but it wasn’t. She laid him out, as they would say on SportsCenter. Crushed him, they would say. Smeared him, punished him, buried him in the ground. Wrapped him up and took him down, broke him in half, killed him, as they say. As they would say.

And then, the water. Shawn had never felt anything colder. His ribs clenched tight. He couldn’t draw a breath. Things went black.
Chapter Four

Randall

Callie stood, brushing away leaves, having rolled to avoid the shower. Shawn lay where she’d planted him, soaked now. Eyes closed, breathing like a small dog on a hot day, the bottom of his right shoe still smoking. Ty turned the bucket over above it, but the last drops missed, so he bent down and pulled the shoe off.

Shawn opened his eyes and screamed. Like, a noise I couldn’t have imagined before I heard it, but one hard to forget after.

I smacked Ty in the back of the head, and he turned around like a mosquito had bit him. Ow, fucker!

Get the car ready, I said. Now. I didn’t care what he did, I just didn’t want to hear Shawn make that noise again. I said, Joey—

What do you mean get the car ready?
For transport? I said over Shawn’s moan. To the hospital? Cause he needs a fucking doctor? Joey, we need like rags and bandages and stuff.

I don’t know where they are.
Find them. Callie—
They’re under the sink, said Ty.
Where?
How many under-the-sinks we got?
Callie—
Joey asked me, Can I just get the car ready and Ty can—
Yes! I bent down to pick up Shawn. His eyes were vacant. He looked right at me, but I didn’t feel any recognition. In about three minutes, I said, I’ll have him up by the driveway. When I get there—I pulled Shawn by his arms up to seated—we’re leaving. You better be ready.

Vickie

At 2:05 that afternoon I checked the clock, something I try to avoid at work. I had to pee, badly, my poor little bladder full to bursting—my fault, too, for thinking I could skip the bathroom on lunch break. The next twenty-five minutes were worse for my knowledge. If I’d just avoided the clock and waited for the tone to sound over the intercom, as I knew I should have, I would have been better off. Instead I kept thinking to myself, Surely it’s been twenty-five minutes by now.

My back hurts at work ordinarily, but a full bladder only worsens the problem: I can’t even lean forward on the packing station, which doesn’t help my back much, but it does help. It’s the standing that’s the problem, just standing, not walking any more than a half-step to the left to pull a tote from the cart, packing the parts in a box on the station, and then a half-step right to set the box on the rollers. Also when I have to pee I start to pay attention to things I ordinarily let filter right out of my mind, perhaps hoping to distract myself. Two similar looking toothed-metal parts, only really differing in size, but differently named: a gear and a gear shaft, respectively. So much better not to notice these things. The longer it takes to pack, the slower time goes.

The tone sounded for the 2:30 break and I made a break for the bathroom, sitting down and relieving myself with force, as if trying to unearth something buried beneath me. When
finally empty, I remained sitting—how often do I actually sit, after all, especially on a bathroom break?—and rested my back. Cutting into my cigarette time, sure, but I wanted to savor the relief. I couldn’t, though. I felt as though I had missed something. Something important, that my bladder had distracted me from noticing.

Probably just screwed up an order, was all. I pushed it to the back of my mind.
The stall was out of paper. I sat a little longer, to drip-dry.

Ty

This is all I know about burns:
First degree is just red skin. Probably all the hair scorched off, but mostly just redness, and swelling, and it’ll sting like a bitch.

Second degree goes down one layer. That’s why they call it that. It eats up one layer and starts on a second layer. Blisters, too, that’s a dead giveaway.

In the car, Callie calls her dad. He says we shoulda called 9-1-1. As if we had time to wait around on a damn ambulance.

Third degree burn goes all the way. All the skin. Whatever’s below that gets burned, too. Muscle, bones, anything, that’s all third. Don’t know where I learned this all, or why I remember it, but Shawn’s got all of em. On his thigh—nobody wants to touch it, but Callie’s dad asks for a description, so Randall peels back the jeans and Shawn screams a little bit in a way I don’t want to think about. Kind of gurgley. But it’s third degree under there, it’s gotta be. Ain’t to the bone yet or nothing—that would be a trick, with all that muscle there—but I can see muscle. Or whatever it is I’m seeing, I know it ain’t skin.

I put my eyes on the road. Try not to think about it.

His leg ain’t bleeding, though, deep as it looks. Like in movies when they get shot and scorch the wound. I know that word. Cauterize. Looked it up after I saw Boondock Saints. But goddamn, I never expected this smell, though. Like campfire marshmallow, kind of sweet underneath, probably that cologne he’s always got on except burnt now and I ain’t looking at him again cause when I hit bumps his teeth grind and his eyes get wide and then roll back more than eyes ought to.

Callie’s dad is looking it up on the computer where he is and it turns out we been doing everything wrong. Don’t put ice on it, he says. Damp cloths only. And don’t remove burnt clothing, even though he’s the one who just told us to. He says you can’t feel third degree cause there’s no nerves that far beneath the skin, and so if Shawn’s screaming that means it might not be third degree. So maybe that’s good, he says. It don’t sound good, though. Can’t do a thing about it, anyway, so I tune out and drive. I drive like I’m alone, like I do at night, the hell with lines, I’m cutting angles just right so I can keep my speed up. At night it’s easy cause I see the headlights coming but now it’s day, and I don’t care.

An ambulance woulda brought paramedics with it. They woulda known what to do, and done it on the spot. All of us there, and not a one of us thought of that. I didn’t think of that. And then I screwed up the first aid. I filled the ice bag and grabbed cotton balls and dry towels. I only know how to treat football stuff. You ice everything in football.

“Ty!”
Randall and Joey screaming at me, both of em. We’re getting into town and there’s a line of cars but I’m in the left lane honking and going around em.

“Redlight redlight red—”

I can see the hospital, that’s what I was looking at but Callie’s even screaming now and I slam the brakes and we start to skid sideways, two lanes on both sides and most everybody stops but this big-ass Ford keeps coming and I can’t do nothing cause we’re sliding diagonal and I’m jerking the wheel into the skid already. The truck swerves and misses us, the minivan’s back end bumps the traffic light pole on the opposite side, and this is how we stop. Horns and middle fingers start up all around us, and Joey’s pounding the window and flipping people off and yelling He’s dying! My brother’s dying! till Randall yanks his shirt cause it ain’t helping things.

Callie’s on top of Shawn, now, sort of hovering like a cat over a bathtub, somehow holding herself up so she ain’t touching him and it’s a good thing Randall buckled him in. But she’s bleeding on the forehead. There’s blood on the windshield.

Oh, fuck.

“Go, Ty!” Randall yells.

But she’s bleeding and I did it and I gotta see if she’s—

“Ty, for Christ’s fucking sake!” she yells at me. Shawn groans a noise like his heart’s giving up. Callie looks down at him, then she yells at me again. “Go!”

I do that. When we start pulling him out of the seat I finally notice I never put on a shirt. His stickiness on my belly.

Vickie

It hit home when I parked next to my own car, Ty’s minivan, in the hospital parking lot. Then the voice that had called my name over the intercom made sense. It echoed in my mind still: Vickie? Questioning, almost pleading. Vickie, wherever could you be?

Peter had called. His daughter had a cell phone, he said. For emergencies.

That phrase hung in the air for a moment.

“I’m going to the hospital,” I said.

“I’ll see you there.”

Joey

The walls are green like mint. Shawn’s sleeping in the bed because of some drugs they gave him. Mom’s beside him holding his hand and she keeps looking at him every couple seconds just in case he wakes up, even though he won’t. The TV’s on and thank god they get ESPN. Ty’s got on this funny nurse shirt to wear called a scrub because he forgot his shirt. Randall’s on the windowsill next to the little fan and the pitcher of water, and he keeps looking at the cars coming and going in the parking lot.

Callie and her dad were here but Mom told them to go home. Callie didn’t even need stitches but Mom kept saying how sorry she was anyway. Then right when they leave Ty comes back, he says he went on a walk, don’t worry about it. I don’t know why he’d want to walk around in that shirt.

They’ve got a tube up his nose for oxygen, the one going to his arm is for fluids. The doctor comes in and looks at some things and says he’s gonna come back to check in a couple
hours to decide whether or not to do skin grafts. That means taking some skin from his good thigh and putting it on his bad one. Mom keeps apologizing every time she asks a question, and it’s bugging me, and I start noticing all the apologies. When Ty walks by Randall he steps on his foot and goes Sorry, and Randall goes Sorry when he almost knocks the fan off, and the doctor says Sorry when he walks between me and the TV.

And when he was here, Callie’s dad kept apologizing, too. Like it’s his fault. Everybody wants it to be their fault. But it’s Shawn’s fault and not anybody else’s.

Callie didn’t want to leave. She wants it to be her fault too. She got a butterfly bandage on her forehead and it’s kind of bruised like she got in a fight. Which is funny because the rest of her looks perfect.

Someone knocks on the door and it opens, and then Dad walks in.

When he walks in I think, **What the fuck is he doing here**. He takes off his hat which he almost never does, almost like he’s sorry too. But his eyes say he’s not. It’s like he’s thinking about potato chips and bacon or something, not Shawn. If he was sorry he’d be looking right at Shawn but he’s looking all over the place like he’s got better things to look at.

He doesn’t think it’s his fault at all. That means it is his fault. I don’t know how but it is.

_**Ty**_

“Randall, Joey,” Dad says. Nods at em. He don’t nod at me though, which gives it away that I called him. Mom knew I did, but she still looks at me like the rest of em do.

Randall waves without looking at him, and Joey nods back to him before going back to watching SportsCenter. Dad gives Shawn the once-over, creasing his hat in his hands.

“Vick, how ya doing?”

Like he don’t even care, and it’s somebody else’s kid. Somebody he barely knows, the way he’s acting. The little fan keeps clicking when it comes back around, blowing on the water pitcher nobody’s touching and making it sweat, blowing the little plastic flower into spirals in the vase. Curtains are too heavy to move much.

Mom don’t say anything. Just blinks and shrugs and nods at the bed.

“He’s pretty fucked,” says Joey.

“He is not,” Randall says over his shoulder. “Just that one spot on his thigh. They wouldn’t have even knocked him out if he wasn’t in shock.”

“No,” Mom finally says. She clears her throat. “No he wasn’t in shock, he was at risk of shock, so they gave him a small sedative and it calmed him down and now he’s asleep. Not ‘sedated,’ not ‘knocked out.’ Just asleep.”

Joey says, “But they’ll have to knock him out again to do the skin graft.”

“No,” Mom says again. “Local anesthetic, the doctor said. And that’s if they need to do the graft, which isn’t certain yet, they’re waiting for something, I don’t know what.”

Joey looks around like he’s not wrong yet. Randall says, “Local means they just numb the spot. They don’t knock him out.”

“Oh,” says Joey, and he looks back at the television. “Well why don’t they just say that.”

“Can I talk to him?” Dad says.

“No,” says Mom, “he’s sleeping.”

“I just want to say hi.”
Mom says, “He needs his rest,” like that’s the end of the argument.

I’m sorry I called him now. Gonna ask more than I can even tell him. All I really know is how I screwed up. How I didn’t yell at Shawn earlier for smoking. How I fucked up Callie’s face by driving like a moron. She says I didn’t, that she did it herself earlier, but I don’t remember seeing her face like that.

“Will you sit down?” Joey says to Dad. “You’re making me nervous.” Dad puts his hat back on and squints and he wants to say something, but then he remembers where he is and takes his hat off again. You can read him like that. Everything that goes on under his ball cap is right there on his face.

Randall taps the window. “Viper. Must be nice, to be an M.D.” Joey gets up to look.

Mom and Dad are staring at each other.

I clear my throat, loud enough so he knows it’s on purpose. He turns and looks me up and down and it’s like we just ran into each other at K-mart. “Nice shirt, bub,” he says. “What did you lose a bet?”

He pulls a toothpick out his front pocket and sticks it in his cheek, grinning at me. He ain’t shaved in a while, might be growing a beard and I hate him right now even for that. I tilt my head at the door and walk out. He follows me to the hall and I try to keep walking, maybe to the cafeteria, maybe he’ll buy me something to eat and I can stuff my mouth with food so I don’t gotta answer his questions but he sits down on a bench and crosses his legs. He waits, and I go back to him but I don’t sit down. He’s staring at the painting across from him and he asks, “How’d this all go down?”

He ain’t looking at me, so I don’t look at him. The bench is stained like real wood but it’s too perfect. Perfect like the plastic plant next to it. Carpet has a pattern, might be perfect too if I knew more about patterns. “We were at the house. Joey started yelling about a fire, so we ran in the woods.” Every sentence makes me shrug and shake my head, like I’m making it up on the spot. “Then me and Joey went and got water and by the time we get back he’s on fire.”

“You told me that much on the phone,” he says. The toothpick switches sides in his mouth, and he grins like he already knows and he’s just testing me. “Now, what’s the real story? Don’t make me beat it out of you.” The smile grows wider.

He always gets me like this. Makes me tell him things. Stuff he don’t deserve to know, but I tell him anyway, every time. “Shawn and Callie, they—”

“That new neighbor girl?”

“Right, yeah. They were probably smoking in the woods.”

“They started it.”

“Yeah.”

“How’d he get lit up like that?”

“Randall says he jumped in.” My head is shaking quicker now, cause I know he’s going to ask me why, and I don’t have a clue.

But he don’t ask that. He says, “Well—she’s a looker, is she? You never told me that.”

“She’s Shawn’s age!” I say, but his big grin is back. Laughing at me. I can feel my cheeks turn hot. The carpet has a pattern on it. Plastic plant next to a plastic bench, and my fuck-head father sits on that, his eyes all crinkled and his toothpick dancing all around and I think how easy
it would be to smash my palm flat into his face, and where would that goddamn toothpick end up? In his throat? Stabbed up in his mouth?

I know I can read his face, but he can probably read mine, too. “You got something to say to me, boy?” His eyes uncrinkle and the toothpick slows, but he don’t look away from me, and I keep staring right back at him.

I blink first. Can’t help it. He squints his eyes again, but his grin stays dangerous.

The door to Shawn’s room opens, and we both look. Joey comes out. He walks up and he’s talking before he’s even beside us. “You still have that math book I left at your house?”

“Yep. Still on the kitchen table.”

“Well they won’t give me my report card until I give it back. So, gonna need that.”

Dad nods once. Joey waits. We’re standing in front of him and waiting, but he won’t say he’s gonna bring that book back, or fix any of our problems. Not until we ask. Not even then, but still he wants us to ask him.

Finally he pats his pocket and stands up. “Gonna grab me a smoke,” he says, tucking one into his lips and pulling out the toothpick in the same motion. He starts to walk away, but then turns back. “Guess your mother won’t want me smoking round you boys no more, will she?”

Joey looks at me.

“Why don’t you just quit,” I say, “instead of making her tell you that?”

I know exactly what’s going on in that thick head of his. I know he wants to pop me one for talking back. But he ain’t hit us since we were little kids, and anyhow Joey’s out here now, so his look fades quick. Then he laughs, and it rings out loud in this dead hallway. “Shawn’ll be fine,” he says. “You’ll see. He’ll come out of this stronger than he’s ever been. You can tell her I said that.”

Which means his night at the hospital is over.
Chapter Five

Randall

Mom asked me to switch rooms, so we could put Shawn into his own room when he came home. I told her sure, no problem. She put down money on the table for pizza, then slid her purse strap over her arm. Her sunglasses were still on top of her head, though it was starting to get dark out. She was heading back to the hospital.

Because, she said, continuing the conversation though the issue had been settled. Her hand sifted through her purse, seeking keys. I mean, if I had to get better, I’d probably want a room by myself.

You wouldn’t want Joey as a roommate?

She pursed her lips and pulled them to the side, disapproving.

Why didn’t you just ask Joey to move out of Shawn’s room? I asked.

Randall—

Or Ty. He’s the oldest, though. I guess he ‘deserves’ his room, right?

When did I say anything like—

Did you ask me because you knew I’d say yes?

Baby, she said, pulling out her keys. Don’t make this any harder on me than it already is. She came up to where I was seated at the table and ran a hand through my hair. Her hand carried with it the lingering scent of cigarettes.

I’m not, I said. I reached up and took her sunglasses off her head, handing them to her. I just thought you might not feel as bad if I argued with you about it for a little bit.

She smiled as she put the glasses in her purse. When did you get so smart?

I always have been, Mom.

I said it because she wanted to hear it. But when she left I took care of some things that had been bothering me. We’d screwed up, taking Shawn to the hospital. Or rather, I let him down. I was the one who took the lead, and I screwed it up. They said at the hospital the biggest immediate danger for a burn victim was shock. I hadn’t known that, and I knew I didn’t have any reason for knowing that, but it didn’t lessen my sense of blame. It was the simplest stuff that could’ve helped. Keep him warm. Put his feet up. Keep blood moving to his heart and vital organs.

I put a blanket in the back of the minivan. When he got out of the hospital, I wanted to be ready for anything. I made a mental note to put one in Mom’s car, too.

When someone called me smart, I wanted to believe it.

Ty

Randall’s busy changing rooms, with Joey there watching over his shoulder, telling him where he can put his shit. Mom’s back at the hospital. I dig into my box springs and pull out my notebook. My project. Usually I write in it after a shower, but that’s not the only time. This night seems good, for instance. It’s windy and my window’s open and Randall and Joey are off in their own world, so they ain’t gonna bother me. Won’t bother me. They will leave me solitary. Yeah. I feel like I could write something good tonight, something important.

The first page reads, “100 Suicide Notes.” Beneath that is the table of contents. Most of em are about water. I gotta stop writing after showers, probably. But football is starting up now,
and my dumb brother jumped into a fire, and I got some more ideas. I add two chapter titles: Knock Me Down and Light Me Up. If I finish these tonight, that’ll be twenty-two chapters. Might need to change the title, if I end up writing more than a hundred. Tonight it feels like I could.

They ain’t supposed to be taken literally. I make sure all the authors of the notes are clearly somebody else and not me. But still you can’t call something a suicide note and then expect people to understand that it ain’t you, so I can’t show this to anybody till it’s done. But it does make me feel better to write em.

“Dear Mom,
“Your have never loved me. You’ve never loved any of us, and now you have left us, and asked us to take care of ourselves. That’s bullshit, Mom.”

That right away oughta tell people this ain’t me. Isn’t me. Because my mom is still right here. But anyway, some people are idiots like that, and they’ll believe whatever they want to believe.

“I have decided I do not want this life anymore. You picked a life for me and I don’t want it. That’s why at the football game (which you have already been to, and it’s all already happened, if you are reading this) I am not going to do what my coaches say anymore. On the red-right-slant where I am supposed to go ten yards downfield I’m only going to go seven, which means I will have to jump really high to catch it, and the safety or linebacker covering me will have a fantastic running start. And he’s going to try to hurt me. I know because of what I will have said about his mother. He will put his helmet in my back, Mom. When you read this, I want you to know: you did this.”

Also, I don’t play receiver. So this couldn’t even happen to me.

“But I will catch that ball, Mom. I will catch it even if it kills me—which it should.”

I do play safety on defense, though. Last year at practice a freshman receiver did something like this, the pass was high and I had four steps to lay a hit on him. They teach us to do this, actually. The coaches. They’re crazy bastards and they tell us to hurt our own teammates, because that way they’ll remember not to leave their damn selves open for it next time.

I didn’t want to, though. The last second I tried to hold up, when I knew it was really going to happen, he was really up in the air and waiting to get broken in half, so I tried to stop myself. I never meant to hit him with my helmet. I just tried to glance off him to the right. But his body went to the right, too, and I hit him square. My helmet, right in the spine, I even saw my helmet mark on his bare back where the practice jersey didn’t reach, when he was laying there on the ground. Waiting on the ambulance. They told us not to move him cause of his spine.

Can’t put ice on that. I really hate football. But nobody knows that. I guess that’s safe to put in.

“I really hate football, too. I wish you had never made me play all those years. Say goodbye to my sisters for me. If you ever get the chance to come around and visit like you are supposed to, I mean. You asshole.

“Love, Jason.”

He wasn’t paralyzed, that kid I hit. They put him in a neck brace and a back brace and he had to stay in bed for a few months, but he’s better now. Kind of. He can walk around again.

All my coaches said, Good hit, Ty, good hit.

I wonder what made Shawn jump in that fire.
Callie

She pulls you out into the hallway and asks you, “Do you have any tampons? I forgot to restock my purse and I just hate those vending machine ones.” Try not to be mortified. Don’t get a look on your face. Just calmly open your purse and check, and be glad it wasn’t another question about what happened.

Whether you have one or not, don’t give it to her. If she’s on her period and forgetting tampons, she needs rest. Send her home. The recovery is going well, the graft is setting, she doesn’t need to be here. She’ll thank you later, if you ever get around to talking about all this, in approximately six hundred years, which, you imagine, will be the earliest you will want to.

“Are you sure? Maybe—no, I can just run down to the store and come right back.”

“Vickie?” Should you have used her first name? She hasn’t cleared it with you. Yes, don’t worry about it, the situation demands it. “Go home and take a nap. We’ll be okay.”

She goes, too spent to say more than a promise to return soon. A couple hours, if that, her or Ty or maybe all of them, as it’s supposed to be the last night in the hospital. But for now it’s just you and Shawn. He should take a nap, too. Turn off the television. Get a book out, then sit down and stay quiet, and he’ll probably fall asleep on his own, but if not, tell him to.

“Shawn, what the hell were you thinking?”

Wrong move.

He’s uncomfortable now. He’s squirming in the bed and you tell him not to move so much. You tell him to forget about it, it’s not important, you can talk about it later. He needs rest.

“No,” he says, “it’s cool. We should probably talk about it. I guess.”

“Does your mom know we were smoking?”

“I don’t know. They gave her the stuff I was wearing when I came in here, so she’s got the Altoids case. She’ll figure it out.”

Smile. Tell him why you’re smiling, it might help him relax. “Oh. Well if that’s all—”

“But you know what?” he says. “It’s fine. I don’t care anymore. I kind of hope I get in trouble, I almost started a forest fire.”

“One of us did.”

“No, no, it was probably me. I might just tell Mom, even if she doesn’t figure it out.”

“What about me?”

“No! I’d just say it was me, don’t worry about that.”

He’s pretty bent on confessing. But you’d much rather avoid that conversation with your dad—Were you smoking too, Callie? Are you aware of the dangers of tobacco, Callie? They don’t have any evidence, anyway, but you already know what he’ll say if you ask him to lie. Or even just to pretend.

“Hey Callie? I’m… I’m sorry,” he says, like he had to work up the courage to say it. “I didn’t think any of this would happen. That cologne, I mean, how was I supposed to know that would happen?”

“You jumped into the fire, Shawn.”

“I know I did. I know.”

He looks like he’s about to cry. Go now. Leave him alone a moment. Just go down to the bathroom. Say you’re heading to the cafeteria and maybe even go there. Go get a fruit cup or a
candy bar or just walk laps, but go somewhere, don’t make the kid embarrass himself like that in front of you.

Instead you take his hand and give it a small squeeze.

There. Now you’ve done it. His eyes start to water. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“Does it hurt?”

He nods, as if the thought just occurred to him. “Yeah, it just sneaks up on me sometimes.”

“I can get the nurse. Do you need more pills?”

“No, no, I’m fine. Thanks, though.”

“Shawn. Take medicine if it hurts.”

He looks grateful for your permission. “Yeah, okay. You can go get her.”

You get the nurse and she comes back and checks on Shawn and leaves again. Shawn sets his hand palm-up in front of you, but he doesn’t look. You don’t look either. A minute later the nurse comes back with pills in a tiny cup. Shawn takes them. She leaves. He smiles at you. You smile back, approvingly. Yes, medicine is good. He keeps smiling.

“What?” you ask.

“I could use a smoke.”

“Shut up, Shawn.”

“Callie, I’ve got to tell you something.”

His open-palm invitation is still in front of you, and you know what he’s going to say. Don’t take his hand. You shouldn’t have held his hand earlier.

“Promise not to get mad?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. You promised.”

He’s going to say he jumped into that fire for you, making this yet another thing that’s your fault. You allowed him, even encouraged him to like you. Him and his brothers. Just because you could. Just because you wanted the attention. And look what happened.

“I don’t steal my cigarettes. I buy them from Randall.” He glances at you sideways, like you ought to be furious. “I’m sorry for lying. I wanted you to think I was cool.”

“It’s okay. Really.”

“Do you think I’m cool?”

He’s gushing, a bit. How long does it take for those drugs to kick in? Still, don’t encourage him. Just nod or something. Back away, pick up your book. He’ll be asleep soon, and you can get out of this safely.

You take his hand.

“Yes,” you say. “Now shut up.”

**Shawn**

On his third day in the hospital, Shawn started wondering why he hadn’t thought of this before. Not just for the fringe benefits, either. Yeah, he got to eat in bed. Watch television all he wanted. Everyone was always smiling at him, Callie was caring for him like a fallen husband back from the war. But also, his family was acting like a family again. Getting beyond the dysfunction. His brothers weren’t picking on him just to pick on him; if they did criticize, it felt...
honest, necessary. And he felt they were being more honest with each other. The morning of his discharge, they finally got tired of SportsCenter and flipped to some daytime soap. Prompted by two characters on television, Joey asked the room at large, “When chicks hug, don’t their boobs knock together?”

Shawn found this remarkable. The question, to him, didn’t seem to be spoken just for the opportunity to say “boobs,” nor was it phrased as a boastful, faux-experienced sort of way: “Did you see their boobs knock together?” Instead, it was a genuine request for information.

Usually, if one of them slipped up and spoke this honestly, it was expected that the other three brothers would chide him into submission—a sign that his shields were down. But instead of attacking Joey with sarcasm, Randall said, “Well they’re not made of rocks, Joey, it’s flesh and blood and, you know, fat in there. There’s some give.”

And then again, when Callie spoke (“It’s not a problem. It’s like pillows—haven’t you ever hugged your mom?”) and Joey turned red (either because he’d forgotten Callie was in the room or was thinking about his mom’s boobs)—and when Vickie too replied in what could have been construed as an embarrassing fashion for Joey (“They’re just part of the body…Boobs are people, too, you know?”), and everyone laughed—Shawn was certain that no one was laughing at Joey. Joey even laughed, too. A healthy exchange of information, resulting in healthy laughter, and no one had to bleed for it to happen.

But the absolute best part was this: His dad had stopped by, and though Shawn didn’t remember it, the thought made him glow with belly-warmth, his whole family being in one room, together. Television on, playful bickering about sports, punitive jabs for opinions worthy of jest, but only in jest. No venom, no accusations, no yelling. In his mind he saw it like a scene on stage. There he is, asleep in bed, and there his dad and mom, sitting on either side of him, talking softly across his stomach about the schedule of care when Shawn comes home (alternating days off work, certainly, and maybe even his dad would have to sleep on the couch for a while, until Shawn got better). And over there, his three brothers in chairs lined up like a movie theater row. “Fuck the Yankees,” says Ty, and “Fuck the Red Sox,” says Randall, and Joey completes the thought with a resounding “Fuck em both!” And they all laugh and make merry. The parents hushing them through smiles, not even mentioning the swearing.

Shawn didn’t question the effectiveness of his self-immolative solution until the moment his mother pushed him in the wheelchair out the hospital’s front doors. Until they all piled into the minivan to go home, he failed to consider that maybe it was just the hospital atmosphere itself dulling the blades of their everyday verbal battles. He hadn’t imagined going a day ever again without seeing Callie, until she told him (and not just him, told everyone at once in that damn minivan) that she’d be gone for the weekend to see her mother. And when that reminded Vickie to tell the boys that their father wanted them to come for their weekend visit as well—except for Shawn, whom he didn’t think he could care for adequately given the current state of his apartment—Shawn could only watch as everything that had been so right in the hospital turned so wrong.

But in the hospital, everything was right. With his family. With Callie, too. Maybe, he thought, he shouldn’t have gotten better so quickly. Maybe it would be better for everyone if he could find a way back. And right there in the minivan, before they even made it home—that’s what he decided to do.
Chapter Six

Joey

Ty parks by the damn dumpster even though I tell him not to. It smells like piss when we get out of the minivan, and I want to tell him I told you so but I don’t, because that’s probably why he parked there in the first place. The heat makes it worse.

We go up the metal stairs. We have our overnight bags and Randall has his guitar and I have the Xbox because Dad’s got a way better TV than us. But we can’t play until he goes to bed because he doesn’t like to watch us play that. The stairs are rusty and creak as we walk up them and I never feel safe until we get inside because this neighborhood is weird. Everybody’s outside in the summer but it’s not the good kind of outside. They’re not having fun or anything, they just sit in lawn chairs on their balconies and smoke cigarettes and they don’t even play music, except for one person who always plays really loud rap music somewhere but it’s never close enough to hear the words, just the bass. Everybody stares like we’re doing something really interesting, even though we’re just walking up the damn stairs. I hate it.

Dad answers the door and he’s got the lights all turned off and a blanket over the window so nobody can look in. It’s hard to see how dirty everything is because of the blanket but I know it is. He’s not a very good housekeeper, my dad. But today it’s pretty bad. We haven’t been here in a while.

He’s got sleeping bags for us. There’s only one extra bed which we’re supposed to take turns on but Ty’s got football tomorrow so he’s got dibs. Which means Randall and I get to fight over the couch. At least Shawn’s not here and I have a better chance at getting the couch.

Dad’s got a big smile on because it’s Friday and he doesn’t have to work tomorrow, which means he can drink right after work. We march into the living room where the couch and the TV and the coffee table are and I feel like we’re acting like ants, and it bugs me. So I drop my stuff on the couch and head to the kitchen to look for my math book on the table like he said it was. But it’s not there. The table, I mean. Actually I can’t remember him ever having a kitchen table.

“Got a couple pizzas coming.” I can’t see him where I am but I can hear him. Dad goes, “Got a movie, too. It’s that Mel Gibson war movie, what’s it called.”

Ty goes, “Pizza?”

Randall goes, “The Patriot?”

My math book isn’t anywhere. I come back to the living room.

“No, the other one. World War II, I think.”

Ty goes, “We had pizza like every night this week.”

“Oh, Windtalkers,” Randall goes. “That one’s not very good.”

Dad looks a little disappointed. “Bet you it wasn’t the good kind. Christy’s? Huh? You guys love that kind, they’re on the way right now.”

Randall has the wrong movie. I know it because it’s not Mel Gibson in that one. “That’s Nicholas Cage. You got it wrong.”

“Oh, shit, you’re right.”

“It was Christy’s. That’s the only place that delivers to our house. Remember?”

“Yeah I remember, smartass, I just thought you guys would’ve had frozen or something,” Dad picks up the remote. The TV’s on mute. Or actually when I look again, it’s on pause. He got
a DVR. He hasn’t had us over in like two months and instead he got himself a damn DVR. He plops down in his easy chair. The only things on the end table after he’s got the remote are a beer can, an ash tray, and some folded-up magazine ad he’s using like a coaster. He goes, “Well they’re on their way, anyway. You don’t have to eat it, if you don’t want to.”

Ty goes, “I was just saying.”

Randall leans over to me and goes, “Passion of the Christ?” I start laughing. Randall’s kind of funny sometimes.

“Just go look at the damn case, it’s right there.” He’s not smiling anymore.

“Dad.” He looks at me sideways. “When did you get that?”

“What?”

“The DVR.”

“The what?”

“On TV. The thing that makes it pause.”

Randall and Ty notice it too, now, and they look at each other.

“Huh?” He looks at the remote. “I don’t know. One day I just hit the pause button and it did that. I didn’t know it could do that before.”

Ty goes, “It never did that before. Did you get new cable?”

He’s got his dart board hung up over by the kitchen, where a table is supposed to be. It’s a really nice board, he’s all proud of it because it’s cherrywood. I see two darts but I can’t see the other one. The trash can lid is popping up because there’s so much trash in there. It probably smells but all I can smell is ashtray. There’s no damn kitchen table here, I don’t know why I keep looking.

Randall picks up the DVD from the floor. “We Were Soldiers? Oh, that looked even worse than Windtalkers.” He shakes his head like he’s ashamed. “How bout we just go see a movie?”

Dad goes, “No. Can’t. Money’s been a little tight lately, so we’re staying here tonight.”

I go, “What, you got a girlfriend?” I thought Randall would laugh but he doesn’t.

Ty goes, “Money’s tight but you get new cable?”

Dad finishes his beer before he answers. Then he takes his time crushing the can. Randall missed his chance to laugh, because now we can’t make jokes for a while. I don’t know why Ty’s in a bad mood but he must be. First the pizza thing, now he points out Dad’s a cheap-ass. Like he’s trying to make this whole trip miserable just because he is.

You gotta know what you’re doing to hang out with Dad on weekends. You gotta keep him happy. Either way he’ll be drinking, but when he’s not happy he drinks a lot more. He never really yells at us since he moved out, but if he’s not happy he’ll say some mean shit. Stuff you never heard of before. Like this one time I broke his lighter and he called me a cockless scab-eater, which was kind of amazing because I only ever tried it that once and I was so little that I barely even remember doing it. And anyway I was by myself in my room. Well Shawn was there but he was asleep, and I know there’s no way Dad knew about it but it still cut me right in the gut and I felt just like I was a cockless dumbass. Even though I did have a cock.

“I didn’t get new cable.” Dad folds his fingers together and leans forward, and he’s talking kind of slow. “Actually I called in to try and cancel it. And the lady said that she could
save me some money and put me on this new package. It’s digital but I’m paying less than I was before.”

Randall goes, “You were going to cancel your cable? What the hell would you have done all day?”

I almost say something but I change my mind. I almost said ‘his girlfriend’ but then I didn’t want to say that.

“I wasn’t really, just a buddy of mine said if you call to cancel they’ll give you a better deal, and I think it worked out pretty well, don’t you? Look, look at this.” Dad starts pausing and unpauseing the TV, and then he re winds it and pauses it again, and then he plays it in slow motion. Which is funny because it’s a commercial he’s playing slow. A syrup commercial. It goes slow anyway.

Ty leans back on the couch. I sit down on the floor because I don’t want to take my stuff off the couch because I’m trying to claim it. Randall takes the remote from Dad and shows him how to record shows he wants to watch, because that’s what DVR means and Dad didn’t even know that. Dad gets in a little better mood about this. Then Randall show him the hi-def channels and that’s when the pizza comes.

We eat and watch TV but we don’t watch the movie. After I’m done I remember my math book. Dad pauses it so he can hear me ask, even though he didn’t really have to because I know he heard me anyway. He goes, “Yeah it’s in there.” Unpause.

“No it’s not.”
Pause. “Did you look?”
Yeah.”

“Well look again.” Unpause.
I get up and look again and come back. “There’s still no kitchen table there.”
Pause. “Not ‘kitchen table’ like a regular kitchen table, I said—here, just let me.” He gets up and there’s this countertop that’s not by the sink but on the other side of the refrigerator, and he leans around and grabs the book and holds it up like a prize. Then he bops me on the head with it, right on the top where it doesn’t have to be a hard bop to hurt, and then he drops it in my lap. “Open your eyes next time.”

“There’s no way I could’ve seen it there.”

“Well don’t leave it here in the first place next time.” He sits down. I’m rubbing my head, and he’s still smiling, still in a good mood. “Ya dumbass.”

I’m not a dumbass, though.

Unpause.

Vickie

Shawn was in bed in Randall’s room. I kept checking on him, giving him his pills at the right times, changing his bandages once, talking to him whenever he would talk back, but mostly he wanted to be left alone. I kept knocking. He did this to himself; he wasn’t allowed the luxury of isolation. Not if I just wanted to make sure he’s still alive.

“I’m thinking of having Peter over tonight,” I said, peeking my head in.

“Callie’s dad?”
“Yeah, is that okay?”

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He shrugged and looked back at his magazine. “Doesn’t matter to me. Wait, you’re not eating in here, are you?”
“No.”
“Whatever, then.” He looked a little pale. I walked in and reached for his forehead, but he leaned away from me. “God, Mom, every ten minutes? I’m still fine, okay?”
“Oh forgive me, your highness, for wanting to check on the health of my son who just got out of the hospital. A thousand apologies. It won’t happen again.”
“I’m sorry, okay? All this attention is just freaking me out, kind of.”
“Okay, fine,” I said. “I’ll back off a little bit.”
“And you don’t have to keep giving me the pills, either. I’ve been brushing my own teeth twice a day for a long, long time. I think I can remember to take the pills.”
“Well you have to take the antibiotics three times a day, and those Vicodin—”
“I know,” he said. “I’ve been taking them, I know how often. It’s written right on them, okay? I can read.”
“Okay!” I said. “But I’m still checking up on you whenever I want.”
“Mom—”
“That’s the deal, take it or leave it.”
“Fine, okay. You can come and check on me. Just don’t baby me.”
I thought about saying he deserved all the babying I could dish out, but I didn’t. I turned to walk out, and just before the door shut, Shawn said, “Don’t tell him any embarrassing stories about me.”
I pretended not to hear.

Shawn

Eight pills were already tucked beneath the mattress. Shawn closed his eyes, put the comic book back on the floor beside him, and with effort lay his head softly on the pillow.
This was harder than he thought it would be. Maybe he could take the pain pills while Callie was gone. The antibiotics would prevent infection, and he needed the infection to get back to the hospital, but did he really need the pain?
Yes. Callie had to tell him to take the pain pills. The more pain he was in, the sooner she had to come back.
And why would Mr. Caldwell be coming over if it wasn’t to see him, he wondered.

Joey

Randall’s back in the master bedroom practicing guitar and I haven’t moved from the couch and I’m pretty sure now I’ve got dibs on it. Dad keeps asking if Ty wants a beer, and the more Ty says no the more he asks.
The baseball game ends and Dad starts flipping through the channels, looking for another one. Or a fishing show or wrestling or a war movie, even though there’s the one he rented right there on the floor. He goes, “So,” and I know he’s talking to Ty because he doesn’t talk to me like that. “What’s going on at the homestead? Anything new?”
“Well Shawn caught on fire, did you hear?”
“Still with the smart-guy act, huh. I meant with you guys, what’s new with you guys. What’s new with football. That new coach shaking things up on you?”

Ty shrugs. “Shaking things up.”

They’re talking to each other but they both keep looking at the TV. Randall’s guitar is quiet in the back room, which means he’s probably stealing cigarettes. “Like what, no more option?”

“Nope. West Coast.”

“What?” Dad sits up straight and looks over at Ty.

This is the first I’ve heard about this, too. Dad said it like he was kinda joking, but now he’s serious. Ty’s built for the option, Dad always says, and it’s all he’s been learning the past three years anyway. I don’t really know what West Coast is but I don’t ask.

Dad crumbles up his empty can in his hands. “Aw, not that Bill Walsh bullshit. You gotta be kidding me. You’re not built for that!”

“Yeah, I know. There’s this sophomore kid who grew like five inches last year and he’s got a good arm. Taller than me now, by a lot.” It’s more passing than running. That’s what West Coast is. Ty’s a better runner than a passer, because he’s short and hard to tackle.

I go, “Everybody’s taller than you.”

Dad flips the beer can in my direction to shut me up. “Don’t tell me you ain’t gonna start.”

“At safety, yeah.”

“What, he said already? The new kid’s starting, over a senior?”

“No, we’re just conditioning, we ain’t even supposed to be using balls yet. But it don’t look good.”

I can’t believe Ty hasn’t said shit to me about this. Randall comes in and puts his guitar case on the couch. Probably got like forty cigarettes in there. I’d tell him what Ty just said if he didn’t hear but he probably doesn’t even care. Instead I go, “You’re not gonna let him take your spot, are you?” Both Dad and Ty look at me like I interrupted them, like they forgot I was here.

“I’m not gonna let him, but it ain’t my call.”

Dad goes, “I could—I could maybe come down to practice one of these days, just have a word or two with this new coach—”

“No. Forget it, I can handle it.”

And I start to wonder why Ty would even tell him if he didn’t want Dad to do anything about it. I can’t believe he never told me, either, but you damn sure don’t tell Dad something to upset him unless you want to get him upset.

“It’s your turn to lead this team, bud. You’re due.”

“Maybe I’m not.”

“Don’t talk like that. Let me help you.”

The only reason I can think of is that he just wanted to tell Dad he wasn’t going to be quarterback, which is the proudest thing that Dad ever had. It’s all he ever wants to talk about. He’s been teaching Ty quarterback stuff his whole life.

Ty goes, “You come down to practice, and I quit the team right there. On the spot.”

Ty’s trying to break his heart.
Dad never was a quarterback but he always wanted to be. He was too short when he started playing and he got tall eventually but they kept him at fullback because that’s what he always played. Which Ty says they never even made him the tailback, which means he was slow. But he really wanted to be quarterback, and he says they just never let him try out because they needed him at fullback, but Ty says he was too dumb to be quarterback, or else he just had a crappy arm. But I remember when we used to throw in the backyard and how I never thought anybody in the world could throw that hard. That was when I was little, though.

Randall nudges me and goes, “Hey, Dad set up his old TV in his bedroom. I bet we can go play Xbox on that.” But I don’t want to. If Ty’s trying to break his heart I want to see what happens.

Except Dad’s not been drinking a whole lot tonight, and he’s not taking the bait. He just throws up his hands like it doesn’t matter to him one bit. He goes, “Fine.” He goes, “We can talk about something else.” Which is probably good for Ty, because he’s long past the days where he only gets bopped on the head. I’ve seen Dad punch people before. Or at least he told us about punching people, and I believe him. I can see him doing it in my head. He even hit his best friend once. And they were best friends again about a month later, Dad says, and his buddies have hit him plenty of times, too. But we aren’t his damn buddies, and Ty doesn’t want the damn beer, and I don’t want to get bopped on the head for no damn reason, and Randall steals his damn cigarettes, and Shawn—well Shawn’s the only one not smart enough to hate him yet.

What about Shawn.

Then I get it. Ty’s trying to break his heart because he knows Shawn getting burned is Dad’s fault. He figured out how. I don’t know how it’s Dad’s fault yet but he must have figured it out.

They’re quiet for a minute.
“How’s that guitar coming along, Randall?”
“It’s going. I get tabs off the internet so I can usually learn—”
“Joey, you playing football this fall?”
“No, but it’s not my fault. Mom says it’s too expensive to play tackle this year because we gotta rent all the equipment and I can play when I’m in high school and it’s free.” I listen to how dumb I sound explaining it like that, when all Ty would’ve said was no. I sound like a chickenshit saying all that.

“Can’t fault her for that.” He’s not even looking at me, he’s looking at Ty, and then he’s talking to Ty like me and Randall disappeared. “How is your mother, really? I didn’t get a chance to talk to her at the hospital.”

I’m not a chickenshit, though. I’m not afraid of him and I don’t think he’d hit me since he doesn’t let me have beer yet but I’m not afraid even if he would. And if he’s gotta get his heart broken I wanna help break it.

Ty goes, “She’s just fine.”
“Is she seeing anybody?”

Then I get an idea, and it’s a good one. Randall puts his hand on my arm like he’s trying to hold me back from something, because I’ve already scooted out to the edge of the couch but I’m going to say it anyway because I just figured out what exactly I should say.
“Yeah she is.” The words come flying out of my mouth, and I’m so excited I can’t even feel them fly. “She’s fucking the neighbor.”
Chapter Seven

Vickie

I just wanted to have a drink with him. I thought he might have had a rough week, too. His first week teaching on top of the whole parenting mess. And I thought it would be more polite to ask in person. That’s why I knocked on the door. That’s all. Maybe dinner, if he was hungry.

He answered and turned red when he saw me. He had on those shorts again, this time accompanied by an old stained t-shirt. “I’m sorry, you caught me doing laundry,” he said, motioning with the basket of folded towels under his arm. “But come in, come in. How’s Shawn, is everything okay?”

He showed me to a seat on the couch, which I couldn’t refuse due to how insistent he was, but I tried explaining myself even as I sat. “Oh, he’s doing fine. I didn’t mean to startle you, I just wanted to see if you’d come over and eat some food—I don’t know how to cook for just two anymore.”

Peter set an ashtray in front of me on the coffee table. I was wearing my floral-print summer dress. Slightly low cut. Not too immodest. “Can I offer you something to drink?” he asked. “I don’t have any iced tea—”

“Vodka?”

He paused for the first time since I’d arrived. “No, actually. I don’t keep any alcohol in the house.”

Single parent? I thought. You will. “Well I’ve got some at my house. Which is another reason you should come over. We’ve had a long week, and—”

“No.” He looked surprised as he said it. “No, I can’t, I’ve got too much work to do.”

“Oh, come on, you need to relax a little after the week we’ve had. The chicken’s already thawing in the sink, I just have to bread it and fry it.”

“I’m behind.” He resumed folding laundry as I sat there, and I began to feel awkward. He wasn’t making eye contact with me anymore. “I’ve got two classes I haven’t taught before and I have to make lesson plans, and I haven’t worked on my novel in—a while, and I just can’t.”

“Peter. You’re washing tablecloths.”

He looked at what his hands held, examined it indecisively for a moment, and then said: “They needed it.”

I leaned forward, put my elbows on my knees, and watched his eyes. He kept them on my face, or on the laundry. “You have to eat sometime,” I said.

“Yeah, I’ve got some leftovers.”

My shoulders, almost on their own, rolled back just a inch. But instead of drawing more attention to cleavage area as I leaned forward, the effect was more akin to literally sticking my neck out. And he wasn’t looking, anyway. I sat back on the couch and sighed. “So you’re writing a novel? Can you tell me about it?”

“I don’t think I should. Wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise, right?”

“I can read it?”

Of course, that wasn’t at all what he meant. His attempt at humor, and it quickly passed. “No,” he said. “It’s not even close to done. Thanks, though. How’s Shawn?”

I checked my watch. “He’s…still just fine.”
Randall

Ty said immediately, No she’s not.
I didn’t think Mom was seeing the neighbor—let alone banging him—but as soon as Joey said what he said my mind began looking for any truth to the claim. Then I echoed Ty’s sentiments, but it didn’t work. I’d paused just a moment too long, and that was enough. Dad stopped talking almost completely, even after he said he believed us and made Joey take the trash out for being a liar. The seed was planted. He stayed up far later than usual, smoking cigarette after cigarette by light of the television. Long after Ty went to bed, and Joey and I had both fallen asleep on the couch sitting up.

The next morning, I woke up at the usual time. Ty was walking out the door when I opened my eyes. He paused when he saw me awake, and he gave me a long stare before finally closing the door, like he’d just spilled his milk on purpose, or something. Or he was planning to.

Dad came out a minute later and started making some eggs and toast. I was hungry and got up to help him along. When he saw me he reached into the refrigerator and tossed me a package of bacon.

I thought you were tight on money, I said.
It was on sale. Your mother didn’t raise no fool.

My mother?
Yeah, I said it. He grinned.
I smiled back and opened the package. Dad wasn’t your classic alcoholic, the drink-every-day-and-beat-on-loved-ones variety, but he’d been drinking on weekends for as long as I’d known him, and he knew how to beat a hangover. Meaning, he was tolerable if not pleasant in the mornings. But still, I should’ve realized he was buttering me up.

You can tell me, you know, he said, eyes on the frying pan full of eggs. I’m not going to be mad.

Tell you?
About your mother. And the neighbor fella. Callie’s dad?
I shook my head. No, no, no—it’s not happening.
You sure? Maybe you just missed it, staying up in that room all the time.
Shaking, shaking, vigorously shaking. Even if I had, I said, Ty would’ve known about it, right?

Maybe he did. Maybe he just didn’t want me to know. You saw how fast he jumped in to call Joey a liar.

No, I said again. It was all I could say. What I couldn’t say was, You’re the one that left. You don’t get to care about this anymore.

He knew she’d dated right after they split, but he also knew she stopped. For years, she hadn’t seen anybody else (at least not that I knew of), and I believed he was beginning to enjoy the notion that she’d never find anybody better than him. It’s not like he was seeing anybody either, as if there were some agreement between them to be each other’s last love. But they had completely different reasons, and Mom had every right to date, and he had no right to complain. Which even he knew, but having no right never stopped him from doing anything.

So you’re sure. Dad looked at me for the first time, just with his eyes, pulling them up from the eggs.
Yes.
Well it doesn’t matter anyways. Grab a plate, these are done.

Callie
Eventually, at Starbucks, you crack. For hours between fitting rooms and clothing racks your mother has been bugging you to tell her all about the hospital, and Shawn, and anything else new because your father’s been so stingy with information lately. You can’t help it, in the end. You’ve been thinking about it all day. This might have been her strategy, actually, taking you out of the house, away from the piano. You’ve missed that piano. Used to be when your mind was too busy to follow a book, you could go zone out in front of some sheet music you’d already memorized, just playing the same song, a sonata usually, over and over, not really hearing it, not really feeling the keys or the pedals beneath your socked feet. One of the first shots fired in the divorce war, however, was the canceling of the piano lessons. Mom did it, when Dad found out he wasn’t going to get tenure. Like, immediately, and obviously to induce we-can’t-afford-it guilt and let him know exactly what she thought about his failure. Which it was, his failure, you’re still not sure who deserves more blame for the piano maneuver. In any case, with the symbolism attached to it you didn’t think you’d miss that piano so much, but you do. Dad says once he’s got the money he’ll get it moved for you. In no way do you expect that condition to ever be met, or if it is, for your mother to allow that to happen.

In any case, right now you’re miserable, and her constant pin-pricks eventually spring a leak. “He’s not doing well, okay? I tried to tell Dad but he wouldn’t listen. They need me there.”
“Oh, you can’t blame your father for this one,” she says. “I took the decision out of his hands.”

For what? Because she had a gift card for the Gap? “But I need to be there!”
“No, you don’t. I need you here. Believe it or not, I miss my little girl.” She tries to run a hand through your hair.
You pull away so swiftly you almost spill your coffee. “I’m not the one who left.”
Her face tightens. “Yes, you are,” she says.

You know her position on the matter. She doesn’t look at it as a decision—more like the relationship ended itself. While you do blame them both for the marriage’s problems, she was the one to call it quits. Remorselessly, really; she’s never looked back. And maybe you’re giving Dad too much credit for his behavior after the split—he let her have the house without argument, even still wears his wedding ring, whereas it’s hard to get her to admit she ever cared about him. In her opinion, though, the real dissolution of the family came when you decided to go live with him. But it’s an old argument and you’re not going to get into it again here in the fluorescent lights and air conditioning. You sip your coffee.

“You care about this boy so much anyway? Do you like him?”
You sigh and roll your eyes as a response.
“That’s not a ‘no,’” she says.
“Well he likes me I guess, but it doesn’t matter anymore—”
“Doesn’t matter anymore?”
“I mean yes, okay, there was some getting-to-know-you sort of cutesy-flirty stuff. Okay? Yes, he liked me. But it’s beyond that now.”

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“Where is it, then?”
You don’t know. You’re about to fabricate a guess, but everything you come up with sounds stupid in your head. Your mother clucks. You say, “They don’t have a father, you know.”
Her eyes widen, briefly. “What happened to him?”
“He left.” And then you can’t resist yourself. “Sound familiar?”
She throws her hands up in the air. “Oh, Callie, can you just imagine—What would Dr. Werner say about all this?” Uninvited, the good doctor’s voice fills your mind. You’re displacing, Callie. You’re trying to fix the neighbor’s family in the stead of fixing your own.
You hate that phrase. In the stead. He uses it all the time. Just, instead. Fucking say it, it’s a word. In stead.
“It’s nothing like that, Mother,” you say, because she hates it when you call her that, the two-syllable moniker, Moth-er. “It’s a family full of boys and they have each other, so it’s not like they’re all alone or anything. But that doesn’t mean they don’t need help.”
“What are you going to do?” She pulls her keys out of her purse. She’s thinking about the next store whose stock you’ll be sifting through. “Bake them cookies? Darn their socks? Clean their bathroom?”
“If I have to.”

Shawn
The graft site and the donor site were competing for the title of Most Itchiest, his ankles, similarly, for Most Painful. Like a sunburn that just wouldn’t go away. He had twelve pills stored, now, and spent most of his time trying to distract himself with trivialities, or thinking thoughts bigger than the relatively small concern of his own comfort. His health, bartered for the return of his family, and for Callie, his pain—no forget the pain forget it.
He tried to convince himself the hardest part was being alone. It wasn’t, but he did miss Callie. His brothers, too. Better to have them around, good for cheap entertainment, easy distractions. In the meantime, his best distraction was looking out the window. Sort of how this whole thing began. Callie’s bedroom was far less interesting without her in it, not that he ever tried to see anything anyway; it was like a whole football field between them, maybe more. But even without her home, the window’s view offered enough to keep his mind occupied. That first afternoon he’d noticed a cardinal that made a hangout of the natural gas tank. Red and blazing, it stood on the hood covering the nozzle and cheeped, yelling at the world, claiming territory that no one else probably even wanted. It came and went, but Shawn watched the performance whenever it was available.
He should’ve flushed the pills but the growing collection signified his achievement. Problem was, some had gotten sticky from holding them in his mouth, which he had to do when his mother was in the room. After he won the right to take them on his own, he began lying about it, saying he’d already taken them and tucking them under his mattress, in case she counted those left in the bottle. The lying bothered him. He wished there was a better way, but he couldn’t think of one. He had to get sick again. They needed him to. So they could finally see…what. How much they needed each other. How much they’d lost.
If they’d been in that tree like he had, they’d already know. There wasn’t time for fighting, for taking each other for granted. Not even Dad. Who could say when the next branch would break?

At night, he had the stars. A clear-skied weekend—he found the galaxies the best means of forgetting himself. Wasn’t it strange, he thought, that there seemed to be stars in every direction? And knowing how far, far, fucking far away the stars were, even in the black spots of the night sky, there were probably more stars he just couldn’t see. If every planet and star in the universe were visible, would there be any black? He was at first comforted by the thought, how in-the-middle-of-things the earth seemed to be, but after a while he decided no, he’d rather see some black he could believe in, black that represented a direct line between himself and the edge. That was the more comforting thought. The emptiness was black because it was empty. Simple. Nothing to figure out. Looking into the truth of the void allowed his busy mind to rest.

Before long he would find himself thinking about Callie. That was another simple thing, the way he felt about her, how much he liked her. So simple, it must be love. Come to think of it, he couldn’t remember ever feeling differently. True like infinity. He’d always loved her, just hadn’t known it until he met her, until she uncovered it for him. Which sounded complicated, actually, but when he turned off his mind and simply felt, it was the easiest thing to understand.

Ty

I lace up my cleats left first, then right. Wear a sweat band on my right arm, my throwing arm, and I put that on before the trainer tapes up my left wrist. Got the same mouthpiece I had since freshman year.

I run laps to get warmed up, get some alone time, too, before every practice, even before games. My teammates make fun of me, but I don’t care. I can get em back later.

We run through tires. Run the hill. We time our sprints like they do in college and the pros. Not much long distance running, which is another reason I do laps on my own, why I run at home. Football ain’t about stamina, it’s about energy in bursts, but I work on my stamina anyway just cause I like to.

Darryl’s the new sophomore quarterback. Too big for himself, is what people say, but every time I see him he gets less awkward. Still lots of zits but his smile is big and he thinks everybody likes him, because that’s all anybody ever tells him. He was born to be a quarterback, and he will be.

Run the tires. Run the hill. We line up at the water pipe, PVC with drilled holes, and slurp like animals at a trough.

I can hit any target I want to from fifty yards or closer but the problem is I never pick the right spot. The ball goes right where I want it to. The receivers just aren’t where I throw it. Maybe I can’t see in a straight line. Darryl never throws the ball where I think he should, but the receivers always catch it. I even tried watching him, learning from him, but my arm won’t let me throw it where he would. Feels just wrong to throw it there, even if it’s right.

We’re not allowed to practice with balls during conditioning but the coach says they can’t stop us if we bring our own balls and warm up before they get there. And so what if he tells us what warm-up drills to run? Coaches don’t give a damn about rules, they’re winners and winners do whatever they want. Every coach I’ve ever met, anyway.
Darryl don’t have his license yet but he got pulled over drunk and got away with it. Rumor is the cop knew his dad. Just made the other kid drive home. Only cause he’s gonna be a star quarterback, maybe more than just high school. I know damn well I woulda got sent straight to jail for that.

We warm up with balls and I play more safety than QB, cause I know I got that position locked down. Ain’t in pads or nothing, but I knock people over anyway. I know the right way to push somebody so he falls over. Usually freshmen. And the freshmen know I do it, too, but they just keep running their routes like they’re supposed to and tell themselves one day it’ll be them. One day they’ll be the seniors and yell at freshmen the way we do and knock em over for no good reason, and justice will be served.

When practice is over I hustle to my car and go home. My home, not Dad’s. Shawn is asleep when I get there. He’s kind of sweating so I turn the fan on, but it wakes him up and he says he’s got a chill so I turn it off again. He don’t look real good. I tell him that, and he just smirks. I ask if he took his pills yet and he says he did.

“When?” I say. “I just now woke you up.”

“I took them at about eight. I woke up and took them and fell back asleep.”

“It’s almost three. You gotta take em again?”

“Yeah, thanks,” he says, sitting up. He looks like shit, but he takes the pills and he sticks em in his cheek and drinks the water and I know they’re still in his cheek. He’s no good at swallowing pills, and I know that. He has to take em one at a time, and hold his nose and stuff, he can’t just pop em and swallow. I even see em in his cheek, still.

He ain’t taking his pills. Maybe this whole time.

He looks out the window and I don’t know what to say next. I can’t call him out on it cause then he’ll feel like he got caught and he won’t tell me nothing, but I gotta know. He knows something I don’t, and it’s what I been trying to get at for a while now. Why most people are wrong. Living like they do. Most people wouldn’t jump into a damn fire, and most people take their pills when they’re sick. Shawn ain’t even worried about it, he’s got his own thing going on, and it’s what I been writing about for a while cept he ain’t just writing, he’s doing.

I’m this close to being impressed with my little brother. This close. But I gotta know more.

Meanwhile, Shawn’s closing his eyes, trying to give me the hint to split. That’s fine, I’ll ask him later. Gotta figure out what I’m gonna say first anyway. “Well I gotta head back to Dad’s,” I say, and then remember something. “Hey, Mom’s not banging the neighbor guy, is she?”

“What? No!” He turns and glares at me like I just peed in his shoes. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing, relax! Joey just said last night she was—”

“Well she’s not!” he almost yells at me, and I shush him so Mom don’t hear, but he keeps going, talking with his teeth clenched. “Joey’s full of shit, you know that!”

“All right, calm your horses. Jesus.”

“I’m calm. It’s fine. It’s just not true. I’ll see you later, bye.”

He shuts his eyes again. This is why I ain’t impressed with him yet. Cause even though it seems like he knows something most people don’t, he’s still got a lot to learn.
“Hey,” I say. He just shakes his head. I smile. “You know, Mom ain’t exactly a virgin anymore—”

“Oh shut the fuck—”

“How you think you got here, immaculate reception?”

“Shut up!” he says, throwing a pillow at me.

Mom yells up the stairs, asking what’s going on, so I get on outta there. It ain’t till I’m driving back to Dad’s that I think, maybe that’s why he figured something out that I can’t. Cause he don’t spend all his time thinking about sex. Which makes a lot of sense, cause if I never had to think about it, I’d probably figure out a lot more stuff, too.

Callie

Your mother is Dr. Werner’s contact, to whom he recommends future “courses of action,” from whom he collects stray bits of information you refuse to give him. The better she thinks you’re doing, the better things go with him. Remember that. Give her your happy face.

You see a movie together. She asks you to pick, so you do. A romantic comedy. Romance is mentally healthy. Laughing is healthy, too, so laugh at the funny parts, and awww at the romance. At the ice cream place afterwards, try your hand at gossip, about how the lead actress probably has an eating disorder, how the lead actor’s British accent was near flawless, despite his being from Detroit. That latter fact is not tabloid-based, but your own invention, which as it turns out is just as good. She nods and believes, and it’s not like she’ll do the research herself before passing on the rumor. It becomes fun for you, too, in this way.

Having an unhealthy obsession with the lives of celebrities is healthy. Your mother will love telling the doctor about this. Lying could turn out to be the key to getting out of therapy. What luck. Keep at it. This actor is gay, did she know? And this one’s pregnant, and this one is just getting out of rehab, and she’s never heard of this one so you can go the full nine with him. Starred in a porn film in college. Just had a sex tape released. Has herpes.

“Really, Callie, if you keep following these gossip stories you’re never going to have a boyfriend your entire life!”

You pause in your story-telling. You had no intention of getting personal with this. “Fine by me,” you say.

She smiles that adult way. What a cute opinion, it says. “You don’t want someone to treat you special? Give you gifts? Take care of you?”

“Most guys treat me specially anyway, and I don’t have to date them.”

“What about when you get older? What about…”

“What about what?”

She gives you a brief, you-asked-for-it look. “What about sex?”

Oh, god. “No.”

“What, Callie? I’m serious! You’re just going to sleep with any guy who gives you a present? Because that’s why people get herpes—”

“No!” You can feel your cheeks getting hot.

“So no boyfriend, and you’re never going to have sex, either?”

“Young should I? It’s nothing but trouble anyway. Diseases? Pregnancy? Jealousy? Who needs all that drama?”

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“No, dear,” your mother says, licking the whipped cream from her spoon. “The drama comes from the people having sex, not the sex itself. You’re turning red, are you sure you—”

“I’m not turning red,” you say, but you know you are.

She looks at you just a beat longer, then continues. “No, the sex is usually the best part of relationships. It’s the people that screw everything up. And yes—always always always use protection, don’t get me wrong about this, do you hear me?”

“God, Mom, yes.” Redder and redder. She points her finger at your nose.

“Good. That’s important. But the sex itself is…well…just wonderful! I mean, with your father—”

“Stop.”

“No, Callie, I want to say this. We’ve broached the subject, so we may as well continue.” She sighs and leans forward. Whatever’s coming, you’re prepared to plug your ears. “There’s something about intercourse with the person you love. When you’re both happy, it can remind you just how much you love one another, and even when you’re going through a rough patch the sex can…help you get through it. It can heal things, Callie.”

Stare at the table. Don’t look at her. Your head might explode if you do.

She continues. “Now, I don’t want to pry, but I’m sure by now you’re probably kissed a boy or two—”

“No.”

“—and I’m not asking you to tell me if you did—”

“No.”

“Okay. Fine. But when you do, you’ll feel a little preview of what it’s like. There’s the physical part, which is fine. Skin touching skin—”

“Stop, please?” You’re done with this conversation, but she snaps her fingers an inch from your face.

“Hey,” she says. “Be an adult for a second. I have something to say to you.”

So rarely do you get accused of childish behavior. Even Dr. Werner encourages you to act like a child, so seldom does your behavior reflect your age. Or at least, so seldom does anyone point it out to you. But for a moment you step into your mother’s shoes, and yes, you are acting childish. So you sit up straight, involuntarily, and look her in the eyes. “Fine,” you say. “Go ahead.”

“Okay then.” She sits up straight as well. This is how adults sit. “The physical part is fine, but it’s just biology at work. Nerve endings in certain spots, yes, the action is designed to feel good. But when you’re with someone you care about, it’s so much more. It fills you with warmth. It patches up your soul, and the goodness spreads from your toes to your nose to your fingertips. When I was your age, I remember kissing boys I liked, and it felt so big at the time. Even just holding hands with them in the movie theater was wonderful. But sex—it’s nothing to be afraid of, Callie. When the time comes. Okay?”

You’ve somewhat tuned out. Not very adult of you, but you’re thinking back to the hospital room, when you held Shawn’s hand. How he brightened. How he smiled as he cried. How he had forgotten the pain. You must have triggered that “warmth” in him but—

“The problems your father and I had,” she says, “wouldn’t have been solved by sex, but what I want to tell you is this: We weren’t having sex anymore. Not for months.”
You blink. You’re paying attention again. In truth, this wasn’t an aspect of their relationship you were aware of. It hadn’t occurred to you that your parents would be getting it on just a few yards from where you slept, and as suddenly as this realization is forced upon you, it’s taken away again. They were fucking, and not so long ago. But then they stopped fucking, and apparently they should have been.

You must look surprised, the way she continues. “I know. We weren’t even kissing anymore. It was a symptom of the deeper problems between us.” She reaches across the table, now, and your hands are in your lap, but she turns hers skyward and waits. When she’s got you by both—you think about holding Shawn’s hand again—she says, “I had to leave, baby. I had to go. It was over. There was nothing I could do.”

Nod and squeeze. Speed through this moment. It’s not even your moment, it’s her moment, so give her what she wants and get out. A tear trickles down her cheek as she smiles. She must be feeling the warmth. Right now, this very moment, some phantom conductive warmth, palm-to-palm.

“I love, I love, I love,” she says softly, still smiling, wet eyes locked with yours, an echo of a song from days long past, a bedtime song, she tucks you in switches on the nightlight Dad would sing along from the hallway you remember all of this, “my Calendar Girl.”

The memory is there but nothing else. No sensation attached. Maybe it’s something you’ll never feel. Maybe you’ll never care enough about anyone to feel it, even if other people care that way about you. Except—you do care. You know you do, you have that capacity inside you. You just can’t tell its temperature.

Something might be wrong with you. Ice-queen. Frigid bitch, that’s you, isn’t it.

Your phone rings. You pull away, flash a quick required smile, and answer.

“Hi, Dad!”

Peter

She sounded so happy on the phone that I felt like an idiot for calling to check on her. Somewhere in the process of the divorce and Callie’s moving in with me, I forgot that she and her mother got along well as often as they bickered, if not more often. I’d begun to assume, foolishly, that she had been trying to write off her mother, as I’d been trying to myself. But that was wrong. She sounded as if she were having a great time.

Well, if she could have a good time, then so could I.

I marched to Vickie’s with a package of Chips A-hoy, determined to forge a friendship based on mutual interests alone. Parenting, living in rural suburbia, divorce, all fodder for interesting conversation and perhaps simultaneous intellectual growth. She could drink if she wanted. I wasn’t going to.

She opened the door as though she’d been expecting me, and she handed me a plate full of food the moment I walked in. “Glad you’re here,” she said, and then immediately, “now could you run this up to Shawn? He’s been feeling a little nauseous but he’s supposed to eat with those pills. I keep telling him not to take that medicine on an empty stomach.”

Shawn’s room was the only one upstairs with the light on. I tapped lightly on the door, which gave and opened at my knuckle’s suggestion. His eyes were closed. A tupperware tub sat next to the bed, and the room smelled sickish, like bile. I moved to set the plate on the bedside.
table next to him, and his eyes opened. Seeing me, he moved to make himself presentable, covering his bandaged legs with the blanket and scooting back against the pillows into a more seated position. “Mr. Caldwell,” he said, clearing his throat. “Didn’t expect to see you here. Up here, I mean. Mom said you might be coming yesterday but today, I didn’t expect—”

“I’m just dropping off your supper,” I said. “Don’t mind me. Go back to sleep, you know, if it makes you feel better.”

“I’m fine,” he said. But he didn’t look it.

Vickie had fixed me a plate by the time I got back to the kitchen. She’d made a salad and some pasta, far superior to the box macaroni I’d have had otherwise. We ate largely in silence, and I had trouble starting conversation myself, which I felt she was waiting on. A compliment seemed a good way to start, but I looked around and couldn’t see much worthy of praise. The table was beaten and dented from years of use and abuse, the curtains kitschy with ugly printed roosters, the light fixture filled with bugs. I’d already said the food was excellent, which got us nowhere.

At last I looked at her. “That’s a beautiful dress, Vickie,” I said through a mouthful, spontaneously, the moment it came to me.

She paused, mid-mastication, then swallowed. “Well thank you.”

Further silence followed. I thought about forcing out some more compliments, but I didn’t want to come off as disingenuous, and the one genuine thing I admired about her seemed too deep for the moment: her ability to talk to her children.

Her salad finished, she stood up and went to the refrigerator. There, she opened the freezer door and emerged with a bottle of vodka. “You reminded me,” she said, tilting the bottle back and forth, looking at it as if it was speaking. “Change your mind about this, too?”

“No, actually. I’m not a big drinker, these days.”

“Well, Peter, you must have some vices. Do you eat cheesecake?”

I smiled. “I love cheesecake. Yes, I will have some cheesecake. That sounds terrific.”

Vickie started laughing. “You know, that is the best news I’ve heard all week. Nobody in this house will touch it. I don’t know what possessed me to make one, I don’t even like it.”

A moment later, I had cheesecake and strawberries on a plate. Vickie, after running upstairs to check on Shawn, poured herself a drink. We headed out the back door to sit on the porch so she could smoke. She lit a citronella candle to keep the bugs away, but otherwise the porch stayed dark, so we could see the stars, she said. “Really I enjoy smoking outdoors more, anyway. I broke the habit of smoking indoors long ago.”

“Have you given any thought to giving it up altogether?”

But she was already nodding solemnly. “I’ve barely touched them all week, especially not around the boys. But, just, I think if I can cut back to just smoking at work, and at home on the weekends, when the boys are at their father’s—that’s probably all I can do right now.”

“It helps?” I asked, but I wasn’t sure what I meant by that.

“It helps me.”

We hadn’t directly spoken about what started the fire beyond a quick brainstorming session in the hallway at the hospital. Smoking had come up, then, among other possibilities less deserving of blame—each of us had an injured child at the time. But tonight Vickie’s language
was suggesting what I’d already assumed: she believed the recklessness of her child had started the blaze, just as I believed the cause to be the recklessness of mine.

I picked up her pack of cigarettes, almost unconsciously, just to look at the pack, study it, try to understand this disgusting habit. But the moment it was in my hand, I didn’t want her to see me doing that, as if studying her species in its native environment. So I flipped the lid back on the box, pulled out a cigarette, and stuck it between my lips.

Vickie froze, her filter inches from her lips, looking at me as if I’d just removed my head from my neck.

Seeing that look, my first impulse was to apologize. I was being presumptuous and stealing from her; I knew cigarettes weren’t cheap. Beyond that, I was acting foolish, and I felt the urge to simply apologize for acting out of character. But instead of the first impulse, I went with the second: “Will you hand me the lighter?”

There are moments in life where you simply can’t believe that you’ve done what you’ve just done. This was one of those moments for me. Cigarette smoke to me was more repellent than that sick smell up in Shawn’s room. And more than just the foul odor, it was smoke. It had texture, consistency, far from the impalpable air to which our lungs are accustomed. I could never figure out the appeal. I’ve never known anyone who wasn’t bothered when campfire smoke hit them in the face, or when dinner burned on the stove. To voluntarily take it in, forgoing oxygen for such a poison that could make your eyes water, seemed ludicrous.

But if Callie could do it—if Callie wanted to do it—

Vickie held the fire up in front of me.

Vickie

He smoked a cigarette for me. I didn’t let on that I knew, but it was obvious he’d never been in the habit. The way he held it between two fingers, his other fingers tucked into a fist like a peace sign. His light hits, at first just tasting the smoke in his mouth as if it were a lollipop. Then he inhaled, swallowed to keep from coughing, and exhaled slowly, obviously willing himself to continue through sheer determination.

Again, I offered him a drink. He declined. But he liked my dress, and he wanted to understand me enough to try out nicotine, and it occurred to me that maybe—just maybe—this man wanted to push past biological attraction. Perhaps (and this would be a first) he wanted to be my friend. Not just as a consolation prize, but a genuine friendship. Golden and true.

How interesting.

Peter

I felt the nausea almost immediately, but I waited as long as I could after putting my cigarette out in the ashtray to excuse myself and go home. Vickie looked surprised, until I said I would come back tomorrow but just had too much work left to finish tonight. With that promise, she smiled in a genuine fashion, and I felt comfortable leaving. And I did, I wanted to come back. It often took me a while to get into good conversational rhythm, but once I got there I felt I could be very interesting, and I had the same inclination about her.
The walk home helped, but once inside another wave hit me, and I threw up the salad and cheesecake into the toilet. All I could smell was the smoke exuding from me still. I vowed, from that moment on, to make my visiting friends smoke outdoors.

James had told me. He called me the day after his first visit since coming back to town. We hadn’t even moved yet; in fact I was busy packing when he called. “Can’t prove it, Pete, but you might want keep an eye on that one. I could swear I had a couple more gigs coming in than I did going out.” So I’d been watching, waiting, smelling. Especially since the move. Everything seemed normal until James’s visit to the new house, and of course I never saw her taking his cigarettes, but she did seem to be paying them more attention than she ought to have been.

Not that I needed to tell Vickie this. Her children all had much easier access, no matter how closely she thought she guarded her pack, and it seemed to me we’d come to a silent agreement. It could’ve been either one, and probably both, so she could deal with Shawn how she wanted, and I would deal with Callie. Eventually.

I took a long shower, enjoying the natural feel of water on my skin, and the clean scent of the bar soap. Only afterwards did I remember my vow to return next door in the morning. I decided to make crêpes.
Chapter Eight

Ty

Dad’s awake when I get up Sunday morning. Making us breakfast again, same thing we had yesterday, but I didn’t eat it yesterday so it’s new to me. He don’t say a thing about football, or Mom, and he keeps looking at us like he’s gonna miss us.

Finally it’s time to roll. Randall with his guitar, Joey’s got the X-box, and I got my bag, all of us lined up at the front door, about two seconds from getting out of there. And that’s when Dad decides to say, “Thought I’d drop by today, if you don’t think your mother’ll mind.”

Randall and Joey both look at me, cause it’s me he’s talking to. “What for?”

“What the hell you think, for? Shawn. I just wanna check up on my boy, is all. That okay with you, Mr. Head-of-the-House?”

I know what he wants to check on. And since there ain’t nothing to see there, and since Shawn probably does want to see him, and since I don’t feel like fighting him about it, I tell him sure. Why not. Come on over.

He says, “Let me just grab my keys, I’ll follow you.”

I don’t even bother looking at em. Just walk on by and out the door.

Callie

Your Sunday appointment with Dr. Werner. You hope it will be your last. But you always hope this.

He has you over to his home, because he makes an exception to see you on Sundays. It’s been two weeks since your last visit. His wife brings out lemonade to the padded deck chairs, and for once you feel like talking about your family because you don’t want to talk about Shawn.

“She told me to have sex,” you say when he asks about your mother. He wears a tie and a collar because he goes to church before your visits. You talked your mother out of going to church this morning, ultimately convincing her you needed the sleep more than the salvation. His goatee is neatly trimmed, and his bald head shines in the sun, which he can get away with because he’s black. His wife is white, and gorgeous.

He refuses surprise, perhaps because that’s how they train shrinks, but you suspect it might also be due to his knowing your mother. He wears sunglasses, which somewhat ruins his “black Freud” look. Calm as ever, he asks, “Why did she say you should have sex?”

“Because it heals.”

“She thinks you need to be healed?”

One of these days you’ll beat him. Keep him out of your head. Whether or not he knows he’s been kept out is immaterial. In fact he’ll probably have to think he’s cracked you once again, but the difference will be when you walk out of his house and down to your mother’s car, it’ll be all you can do to keep from laughing. Which would be the opposite of how sessions usually end.

“Evidently, yes,” you say.

“Did she say that?”

“She sends me to you, doesn’t she?”

He nods. You wish you could see his eyes. “How,” he asks, “does she say sex heals?”

“I don’t know. It’s a warmth thing. Like, it makes this warmth inside you that fixes things. She was talking about Dad and how they stopped having sex and so they couldn’t heal.”
“I see,” he says, even though you didn’t explain it quite right. “And have you started
dating someone since we last spoke?”
“No.”
“Who does your mother want you to have sex with, then?”
“I don’t know. My dad?”
“Callie.” He stops you there. A shame, though; that could’ve been interesting.
“Well who else is there?”
He switches his pen to the other hand, sips his lemonade, replaces it on the deck table.
“Your mother mentioned you have some new neighbors.”
“I barely know them.”
“She seems to think you enjoy their company quite a bit, in the stead of your own family.
Especially the boy who was burned.”
“Maybe that’s it, then,” you say. “Maybe she wants me to fuck the whole family.”
He pauses. The first swear word of the session, he always pauses. He told you to express
yourself but he always marks the occasion of the first swear word with a pause, and you wonder
if there’s supposed to be a message in that, or if he can’t help it, church-goer that he is. “To heal
them?” he asks at last. “Is the whole family hurting? Is the boy in serious condition?”
“He’s at home already.”
“Do you think it’s possible, then, that she wasn’t telling you to have sex right now?
Maybe sometime in the future, when you have a stable relationship?”
You didn’t mean to imply their pain was gone; the family is still hurting. You believe that
and almost say it, but the Pattersons were the one thing you didn’t want to talk about with him
today. Somehow you ended up here anyway. This must mean he’s winning. Try to steer it back
around to your own family. You should be on the offensive, not on your guard.
“My mother never gives me the impression she thinks too much about my future.”
“She brings you to me. If not for giving you a happier future, why else would she bring
you here?”
“Because she doesn’t want to deal with me.”
“I don’t think—”
“She wants a normal fucking daughter and not a freak. Which I’m not, but just because I
don’t care about the stupid trivial shit she cares about doesn’t mean I have mental problems.”
“I know.”
“And just because I hit her once doesn’t mean I have anger issues. It was one fucking
time. It was an accident, and I apologized for it.”
“Mm-hm.”
He’s waiting for you. Sometimes you go on these long soliloquies and you wish he would
say something, but he’s told you before he won’t interrupt you when you’re talking something
out. “It was just because I was a dumb kid, and I was upset because she’d just suggested I needed
therapy, right? And my dad seemed to agree I should go, and then she wouldn’t leave me alone in
my room to just cool off. Sometimes you have to let somebody cool off. But she wouldn’t get out
of my room and my dad was standing by the piano so I couldn’t play that and it was raining
outside so I couldn’t even go out there just to find somewhere to be away from them, and then I
turned around and there she was again, right in my face again and she said—and I—”
Still he waits. And then you understand: it’s not the “talking out” he wants. He’s letting you spin your wheels on an old subject. A decoy. Eventually he’ll get back the Pattersons, and then he’ll pounce.

“It was an accident. That’s it,” you say.

“Do you think this talking about sex—do you think this means she doesn’t see you as a ‘dumb kid’ anymore?”

“No,” you say. “I said I was a dumb kid. If she’d known I was just a dumb kid she would’ve tried out a little parenting on her own instead of pawning me off to you.”

“So she does see you as a mature person?”

“No,” you say. “I don’t know,” you say.

“Callie?”

“I don’t know!”

“I heard you,” he says. You sit for a moment, staring at each other. Then he asks, “What happened to your forehead?”

You tap your fingers on the patio table. “Got drunk and fell down some stairs.”

He sighs. This is the moment. You feel it coming. The moment when he decides to tear you apart. You’re about to tell him all about the Pattersons, because he knows that’s exactly where you don’t want to go.

It’ll be a long walk back to the car, once again.

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Randall

We all rode with Ty back to our house, with Dad following us. I turned on the radio and Ty clicked it off at once.

You just, told him to come over, I said absently.

Leave it alone, said Ty.

Come on over, have a visit. Like he’s an old friend or something.

He’ll stay for ten minutes. Get uncomfortable. Mom’ll make him feel stupid or something, and then he’ll leave. Don’t worry about it. Leave it alone.

Joey, in the back seat, made a sort of harumph like an old man.

You too, dickwad, Ty said to him.

I didn’t say anything!

Shawn’ll want to see him anyway.

Yeah, said Joey, but Shawn would’ve never had to know about it.

Well it’s too fucking late now, said Ty. We pulled down the driveway with Dad close behind.

Ty was the first through the door, and when he stopped dead in his tracks I nearly ran right over him. Mr. Caldwell was there in the kitchen. He was wearing one of Mom’s aprons, standing with a frying pan in his hand. Mom sat at the table. About the only thing worse would have been to catch them humping right there on the floor.

I saw what Ty saw, but I nudged him forward. If he had the same first thought as me, then he wanted to keep Dad out of there, somehow get him to turn straight around and head back to the truck and leave. But I pushed him ahead, because if we acted like something was up, then Dad would’ve had cause to be suspicious too. Not that he wouldn’t be anyway, in a minute.
Joey was all grins the moment he saw the Mr. Caldwell. He walked straight to the table and sat down, folded his hands in front of him and waited for either food or an explosion. Ty went straight upstairs, and after a half-moment of decision, I sat down at the table with Joey. Mom was looking at us funny. Her cheeks were warm and it seemed a minute ago things had been great in here, but her expression said none of that. It said, Did I hear another car come down the driveway?

Dad was a couple steps behind us. For some reason he knocked before entering, though didn’t wait for an answer. He sort of stooped over at first like it was a treehouse, poking his head in as far as it would go, but when he got all the way inside the house he rose to his full height and took off his hat.

Vick, he said. How ya doing.

Ty

“Dad’s here,” I say to Shawn. “He’s here to see you.”

Shawn covers his legs up quick when I stick my head in the door. He was looking at his bandages but he don’t want me to see em. The sheet settles down and he winces. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think I can come down. Can you tell him to come up here?”

“Yeah, why not.”

“Mom, too.”

I look at him for a minute. He’s up to something. “You take your pills yet today?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Why?”

“When?”

“Why?” he asks again.

“Looks like you’re still hurting, there.”

“It’s fine,” he says. “Pain comes and goes no matter what.”

“When did you take them?”

“Bout an hour ago.”

“You swallow them this time?”

He stares at me. Then he says, “Just get Mom and Dad, please.” He lies down and turns his head away from me, looks out the window.

Downstairs Dad is still standing up, but he’s a lot closer to Callie’s dad in the kitchen, and he’s saying, “Well if it’s just a fancy name for little pancakes, why don’t you just call them little pancakes?”

When I get close enough, I see that Callie’s dad is making crêpes. Which was kind of Dad’s thing, a while ago. Especially on Sundays. He’d put jam in the middle of em and they were probably the best thing he knew how to make. But he called them crêpes when he made them. He knows what they’re called.

Dad’s taller than Callie’s dad by about four inches. With the hat he looks even taller, and he knows it. Callie’s dad has to look up at him when he talks to him. “It’s just their name,” he says. “They’re French. That’s their name in French.”

“You trying to be fancy?”
“Phil,” Mom says. Dad looks at her sitting at the table. He’s got a kind of goofy look on his face, to show he’s just fucking with the guy. Playing dumber than he is and making Mr. Caldwell feel dumb for being smart. Mom’s trying not to make a big deal about it, but he’s being an asshole.

“Hey, Shawn wants to see you,” I say to Dad. “He’s in Randall’s room, though. You remember where that is?”

Dad stops smiling. “Yeah, I think I do.”

“Mom too. He wants to see both of you. Hook me up with a little pancake, please?” I say, grabbing a plate and holding it out to Mr. Caldwell.

“They’re pretty good,” Joey says, his mouth full.

Vickie

I was surprised how little I really cared that he was there. Were it just an ordinary day and he’d stopped by, I would’ve treated him as I would any guest. Caught up on what’s new in his life, offered him coffee, then wished him well on his way out the door. But he was intimidated by Peter’s presence and decided to bank on his past familiarity with our house and home, and push his luck. I was on verge of asking him, politely, to leave and come back another time. Translation: behave yourself or go away.

He tried his old tricks. Goofing off, picking on anyone he could get away with picking on, in general being the largest presence in the room. Twenty years ago this display would’ve made me laugh, made me scold him for his behavior, but secretly want to rip the pants off him. Not anymore. Now I just felt sorry for him, and in feeling this, I felt I had grown. I was ready to move on.

But then Shawn called for us. He asked us to draw two chairs up close beside the bed, just, he said, to sit with him for a while. He looked in evident pain, and as he wasn’t the best actor I knew it was a performance. Just a half-hour earlier he’d claimed to be well enough to come downstairs and eat with Peter and me, but for his lack of a recent shower, which probably left him a bit smelly (it did). He hammed it up for a few minutes, exhaustedly reaching for his glass of water near the bed, so slowly, so painfully slow, that eventually his father took the glass for him and held it up to his lips.

“Thank you, Father,” he said, as if talking on his deathbed to a priest. He closed his eyes, slow-slow-slowly laid his head back on the pillow, and after a deep breath, he began. “I want you to know: I’m worried about you two.

“You don’t seem happy anymore. I know, I know, that’s just how divorce goes. You’ve both told me, plenty of times. But the point of a divorce ought to be being happier in the end, right? And I don’t think you are.”

Phil clenched his teeth and closed his arms across his chest.

“And Mom—Mother,” said Shawn. “You worry too much, about this family, about your job. You shouldn’t have to be so responsible for us. If your job sucks, you should quit, you know? It’s not right.” He swallowed drily and closed his eyes.

“Shawn, baby, I’m doing fine. Really. The job, it’s not a problem.”

“What about your back?”
“Well that’s another good reason to stay. This job has excellent health benefits. I could go to a chiropractor, practically for free if I thought I needed to. And another thing—actually I was just talking to Peter about this,” I said—Phil peeked up at me at the mention—“my job has an education incentive. They would give me money to take college classes.”

Phil interrupted. “What would you want to do that for?”

I cleared my throat, trying to keep my tone even and calm. “Peter says, and I happen to agree, that it’s not fair my advancement should be so limited, in this company. A business degree might really open the doors for upper management, and that would bring in a lot more money. Even just an associate’s would—”

“But the union!” said Phil, uncrossing his arms and leaning towards me, as if about to pull me back from the edge of sanity. “You were just talking about the health benefits. And they can’t ever fire you so long as you’re union, but managers they can fire whenever they damn well please. You know that. What’re you talking about going and doing something as dumb as—”

“That’s just it. Okay? It’s not dumb if I have a degree. If I apply for management now they might give me a shot, but if it doesn’t go well they could cut me loose. Right?”

“Right!” said Phil. Shawn looked back and forth between us. I hadn’t had an argument in front of one of them in such a long time, and I didn’t like remembering that feeling.

“But with a degree and some experience under my belt, even if they fired me I could apply for management other places. And probably get it.”

“What other places? And what time do you have to get a degree, huh?”

“It would just be one class at a time, at night. If you haven’t noticed, the boys aren’t so little anymore. They can take care of themselves, for the most part.”

“Oh,” said Phil, motioning with both hands towards Shawn, up and down the length of the bed, “they’re doing a real bang-up job at that.”

My faux-invalid son cleared his throat. We looked at him. “I gotta agree with Dad on that one, Mom,” he said. “We’re not as old as you think we are.”

“You don’t want your mom to get a better job, sweetie?” I said. It was cruel, to flip it around on him like that. I regretted it a little.

“No I do, I do,” he said. “But, I mean…”

“What, baby?”

He opened his eyes fully, looked at both of us for a moment individually, and then spoke. “I’m not getting better, Mom.”

It was as though he were asking me to call him out. To embarrass him in front of his father for playing sick. I didn’t want to.

And then he peeled back the sheets. His graft, the bandage—it looked horrible. Blood-orange outline, the gauze pus-filled, looking wet to the touch. The pain on his face now looked all too real.


“You trusted me to take my pills and I didn’t. I forgot.”

“No I reminded you, I did, I know I asked you every time and you said you did, the antibiotics must not have worked—”

“I didn’t take them,” he said, his eyes growing wild. “I faked it. Right under your nose, too.”
He reached between the bed and the wall and pulled out a handful of multicolored pills. I had to pause. I had to backtrack in my mind, to see if this could actually be true. It felt like my heart backtracked with me.

Phil finally spoke up. “Goddamn it Shawn, what the hell’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” Shawn said as I stood, “nothing, I just needed you. I needed you, where were you I needed you here and you weren’t here just please, just please, you need to be here—”

The door slammed behind me. I hadn’t meant to close it so hard. I hurried down the stairs to call the doctor but still I heard Phil, behind me, behind the door, I heard him clear as day: “You take those goddamn pills right now, boy. You take them. Right now. And you take them when people tell you to, you got that? Every. Time.”

Joey

He tells me to call him Peter so I do. I kind of want to call him Susie or Barbara, the way he looks in that apron. But I like the way he’s getting under Dad’s skin so I don’t make fun of him, in case he won’t understand I’m just fooling around. And anyway the crêpes are good.

Some yelling starts upstairs. We all hear it. Ty looks down at the table, like he knows it’s his fault, which is fine cause he shouldn’t have let Dad ever come in the first place. And then Mom comes running down and grabs the phone. We all look around wondering what the hell? Except Ty. It’s like Ty knows.

Peter asks what’s wrong, finally, and Mom goes, “Shawn’s—hello? Fuck, it’s a machine—Shawn needs to see a doctor.”

“Why?” goes Peter but Mom says hello to the phone again and plugs her other ear. Dad comes down next and his face is red.

Randall goes, “What’d you do?” but Dad’s looking at Peter, who puts down the pan and the oven mitt and starts to take off the apron.


Peter stands there. He’s not looking at Dad, he’s looking at Mom to tell him to go. Maybe it is time for him to go but not if Dad tells him first. Mom heads out to the back porch to talk to the doctor, and then Randall goes, “Wait a minute, what happened?”

“I don’t know. Your brother’s leg, it’s bleeding again. He must’ve been fucking with it or something, and he wasn’t taking his pills.”

Randall jumps up from the table to go upstairs. I follow him.

We go in and Shawn’s got his fists in his eyes, like the way babies cry, and there are tears on his cheeks but he’s not sobbing, he’s just rubbing his eyes. Randall goes, “What the fuck?”

“Yeah,” I go, “what the fuck?”

“Let me see that leg.” Shawn doesn’t move, so Randall just lifts the blankets himself. The bandage is kind of loose, and it’s all red again, but I thought that’s what bandages were for. Anyway, Shawn finally moves. He picks the edge off real easily, like he’s done it seventy-five times, and then he goes, “It’s just not healing. It’s not my fault.”

Then he takes a corner of the skin and pulls it back like he just did the bandage, and I feel the crêpes come back up in my throat.

Randall goes, “Well it is your fault if you didn’t take your pills.”
His leg smells like some kind of cheese, I can’t say what kind.

And then I have to leave the room for just a minute, but I can still hear Randall, who starts yelling at him. I mean it sounds like talking, but it’s really yelling at him because hospitals and medicine cost money and it’s not like we have any more time to waste on him for being dumb. It’s tough to hear exactly what he’s saying from the bathroom, but then I get back and Shawn’s finally stopped acting like a smart ass and he’s listening to Randall, like, really listening.

Randall goes, “You think this is going to help?”

Shawn shrugs.

“She’s not going to like you any more for this.”

“I know.”

“How you supposed to take her in the woods if you’re stuck in bed? Huh?”

I go, “Yeah, didn’t you think about that?”

Randall tells me to shut up. So I do. I need a drink of water anyway.

Then he says to Shawn, “Take your pills. This is the last time I’m going to tell you.”

Shawn already has some in his hand, and he pops them in his mouth and swallows them down with water. I want some of his water but you can’t take a cripple’s water. So I just yell at him, too. “Yeah, take your fucking pills, you dumbass.”

Randall decks me in the arm. And it hurts. I didn’t know he could punch that hard. Ty’s punches don’t hurt that hard. I didn’t know he was that strong, or his hands were that big, or something. I’m rubbing my arm and Randall’s glaring at me and I see out of the corner of my eye Shawn put his hand up to his mouth again. When I look at him directly, he’s taking a drink of water.

I go, “What was that?”

He shrugs.

“Did you just take more?”

“No.” He’s lying, though. I saw his hand go back to his mouth, and now he’s trying to sneak his closed fist under the covers.

Real quick I snatch his hand and pry open the fingers. He’s still got six pills in his palm, all of them sticky-looking, like they were already in his mouth. Randall just shakes his head and walks out, too pissed to say anything.

“You faked it. Right in front of us.”

Again he goes, “No.” But this time I don’t think he’s lying.

Randall believes him, too. “So what, then? You didn’t take them all? Is that all, now?”

He sighs and looks at me.

I go, “Take them all, Shawn. I’ll tell Dad if you don’t.”

Shawn just keeps looking at me. I don’t know why he’s looking at me so long. Finally he goes, “Just got to take the antibiotics, now.”

He pops a couple more pills in his mouth.

Shawn

His father said every time, and that was fine. There’s more than one way to get to the hospital.

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Peter

Their father again suggested I leave, but Ty said, “No, wait. Say goodbye to Mom first.” We both looked at him. “No need to be rude,” he said.

His father offered him a stern glare, then looked back at me. Vickie returned from the back porch and hung up the phone mid-stride. I wanted to ask her if I could do anything, but she brushed directly between her ex-husband and me, muttering her recently collected instructions to herself. She had to clean and re-bandage the wound, along with other directions I didn’t catch, but she was gone again before I could say anything.

The three of us were alone again. I looked into their father’s eyes beneath the bill of the cap. “Well,” he said. “Make me a pancake, then, if you’re gonna just stand there.”

I turned the burner on.

Vickie

I sent Joey and Randall away, and then pulled the sheet back. The rubbing alcohol made his eyes water. I affixed the bandage as I spoke. “Now we have to go see the doctor tomorrow. I was hoping we could put it off until the check-up Thursday, but now I’ve got to take off another day, Shawn. I’ll be lucky if they don’t fire me, even the union doesn’t let you just stop coming to work. And that’s not exactly what I meant by what I said earlier.”

“What did you mean?” he asked. “Isn’t Dad right?”

“Well of course he’s partially right. And if he were still in this family he’d have more of a say about this, but he’s not.”

“Then how come we still have to go see him on the weekends?”

“Shawn, he’s your father.”

“But he’s not in the family.”

“No, Shawn, he gave up the right to decide what I should or should not do with my life.”

“But I still have to do what he says.”

I clipped the last piece of tape and took a long look into his deep, wet eyes. “Yes, Shawn. Baby, you’ve got to take those pills. The doctor says it sounds like the graft is being rejected, but there’s still a chance it could take if you take those antibiotics. And if it hurts so much,” I said, using a thumb to wipe a tear from his eye, “then you take the pain pills, too. I need you to get better. We all hate to see you like this.”

He was reaching for the pill bottles. His hand knocked them over, though, instead of picking them up. I helped him, poor thing. I gave him the appropriate dosage, one Vicodin, one antibiotic, and checked my watch to mark the time.

When he swallowed, I said, “Now open your mouth.”

“Aw, Mom, I already told you I was…why would I try it again?”

“Do it,” I said. His eyes rolled—slowly, I saw the red—but he complied. When I was satisfied, I stood up and said I’d be back in a minute. It would be a small miracle if Peter hadn’t run away screaming.

Callie

Your mother drops you off and there’s a note on the kitchen counter in handwriting so illegible it must be your father’s. Next door, it says. Come if hungry. Maybe, though, Mom’s car
went unnoticed, meaning your presence here too is unnoticed, and you can exist for a moment unsupervised.  

The therapist will be the end of you. He brought up the cutting again. Hitting your mother, again. This relentless self-analysis is ludicrous. You can’t change the past. You can never un-cut yourself.  

You can, however, cut anew.  

Perhaps as a direct result of Dr. Werner’s constant pressing, you rarely allow yourself to think about it. About what might have compelled you to slit your own skin. You couldn’t explain it when you did it, so the secret was easily kept. The second everyone found out about it, it lost its appeal. It never had the time to germinate into an actual thing. Still, he talks about it—your parents do too, actually—as if it’s a genuine part of you.  

The obvious effects: It brings pain. It brings blood. Dr. Werner says it’s a method some teenagers use to demonstrate authority over something, even if that something is the person’s own body, and the authority is obviously there without the masochism. He thinks your personality doesn’t match that of the prototypical “cutter,” since he does believe you feel some authority over your life. And your parents aren’t abusive or anything, so the cutting remains an elusive mystery. Sessions tend to seek out your parents’ flaws, at least flaws as you perceive them, in order to disprove them. To find that happy-joy ending in which you were wrong the whole time. Or as he’d put it, to discover the mutual love and respect that would rid you of the urge to cut. You feel like these seek-and-find quests are more useful in continuing your patronage of his services than anything else. He knows who pays the bills.  

But he does open you up, doesn’t he. Opens you up like a wound, and then sends you out into a world full of salt. Frankly, you’re getting tired of it being just a metaphor.  

You open your closet. The wood panelling inside—the only such panelling left in the house—is flimsy, when pried loose. You find your cigarettes and a lighter, and the other forbidden item, which finds its way beneath your fingertips: the offending pocketknife.  

They tell you and tell you not to do it, but they never tell you why it’s so bad.  

Shawn  

He began to feel floaty. In his head. His body was not so floaty and waves of nausea made him aware of his digestive tract, but they left so swiftly that he didn’t vomit. Though he did lean over and pull the bedpan out just in case, an act which left his floating head upside down for a few minutes. Only after another nausea wave came and went did he notice it was right-side up again.  

Ty came in and sat. Shawn rolled his head away from his brother.  

He saw his cardinal friend alight outside on the natural gas tank, familiar territory. The cheep, cheep seemed to him a lot closer to words than it had previously. To humor himself, he took a few minutes to try and decode it. To converse with the bird. Except, conversing would imply speaking, on his part. He opened dry lips, whispered almost inaudibly: Meep. Tss…tseep. Tseep tseep.  

Not bad. Wonder what it means.  

“What was that?”
Shawn rolled his head away from the window. Ty was here. That’s right. He felt upside-down again. No wait, hold on. That’s not what upside-down meant. Sideways, that was it.

Ty said, “Are you taking the pills, now?”
“For the love, of fucking, god.” Shawn hiccuped, and upon opening his eyes, noticed the world was righted. He looked at Ty. “Did you tell on me?”
“No.”
“That’s right.” He looked at his water cup. Empty. They had been surprised, hadn’t they. He really wanted some water. “That’s right.”
“What’s wrong with you?” asked Ty.
“Nothing,” he said, almost lucidly. “Well, this—”
Beneath the sheet, he dug a thumb into the graft. But the new bandage was in his way. Then his thumbnail caught the edge of the tape, and the bandage began to pull free, just as the last one had.

Ty grabbed his wrist through the sheet. “Don’t touch that.”
Shawn protested, in his mind. Then closed his eyes.
Ty asked, “What’s Peter doing here?”
“Yeah.”
“Good.”
“I guess,” said Ty. “You’re feeling good.”
“Yeah. Feeling good.”
“Kinda high?”
Shawn said, “Hmm.” It was an excellent question, so many meanings leading to so many potential answers. What exactly did he mean by high, exactly? He was on the second floor, that was higher than the first floor. In the bed he was higher than the ground. On the drugs, he was higher than—

Oh shit. Yeah, that’s what Ty meant. He should’ve answered no, no he wasn’t high. Giving himself away, left and right. He noticed his eyes were closed, and opened them quickly. Ty stood right above him, right next to the bed.

“What are you trying to do here, acting like this?” Ty asked.

Then Shawn remembered yesterday when Ty had come over and stood where he stood right now. That’s why he asked what Peter was doing here. It was an important question, much more important than he’d realized a moment ago. “Oh,” said Shawn. “Oh! No, it’s not like that.” They weren’t seeing each other. Callie was supposed to come over when she got back from her mom’s. They wouldn’t be having a date and invite Callie over, would they?

“Not like what?” said Ty, leaning over a bit. “Why’d you—why did you stay in that fire so long?”

The fire? No, that didn’t have anything to do—

“Didn’t it hurt? And not taking your pills, that makes it hurt, don’t it?”

“Okay. Slow down,” said Shawn. One question at a time. He still had to explain the innocence of Peter’s visit. “Callie will be here. You’ll see.”

“No, I want to see now. Right now. Why does Callie need to be here? Is this for her?”
First of all, and Ty knew this: Dad wouldn’t be here if they were having a date. Or Callie, neither one could be here. Shawn shouldn’t even be here, not that he could help it, but he was, and so this was not a date. They were not dating. End of story.

Wait—is what for Callie?

“You just trying to look hard? Like you can take it, you trying to impress her?”

“No, not—”

“Trying to get laid?”

“No!” God, was Ty ever going a mile a minute. He couldn’t even remember the first thing—oh right, Peter being here. That was first. “Listen, okay?”

“I’m all ears. Tell me.”

“Okay.” Shawn took a deep breath. It took a long time, a long time to fill up his big, big head, and almost as long to let it out again. “Now, Dad’s here. Right?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Can’t do it with Dad here. Right?”

“But Callie’s coming.”

“Yes!” There! He got it! That wasn’t so hard.

“Oh,” said Ty, like he understood. Finally. “Kinda screwed up the plan, did he. Well I been there, but listen, I gotta tell you something. Forget about it. Let it go. It ain’t worth it, I’m telling you.” He said it serious, and cold. “You’re too young. Just wait. That’s all I gotta say.”


“Goddamn, Shawn, how fucking high are you?”

Indeed. A great question, and it didn’t take Shawn long to determine: pretty fucking high. And why? Because Dad said to take the pills every. time. and Shawn was only doing what he was told. Or, no. That wasn’t fair. But it was a convenient excuse. Maybe that would make Ty get off his back, if he told Ty about it, how it became a sort of accidental back-up plan. But Jesus, would this ever be a task. “Okay, so Dad?”

But Ty didn’t even let him begin. “No,” he said, the coldness back in his voice. “Forget Dad. Forget him.”

Shawn shook his head. He wouldn’t. Somebody had to remember—

“You should. He forgot you.” Ty was nodding when Shawn looked at him, and he kept nodding slowly, as if every nod would pound the truth in deeper. “I asked him over here to visit you, and is he? No. Only time he came up here’s when you said you wanted him specifically. He don’t care about you. He won’t even come say bye when he leaves, you watch.”

“Yeah he will,” said Shawn, but the way Ty was talking now, it sounded like he understood a lot more than Shawn did. He needed Ty to leave, or at least stop talking so he could think. He needed someone who understood him. He needed a friend. The red bird, where was he? Or better yet… Slowly he rolled his head to the window and looked across the yard. “Callie?” he said, just to feel for a moment like she were here. She wasn’t, though.

Ty’s hands thudded into the mattress on each side of Shawn’s head, and Shawn had no choice but to look straight up at him. Ty’s voice was now as angry as it was cold. “No, forget Callie too. You gotta stop that shit, you’re too young. You just gotta trust me on this, it ain’t worth it. Forget her, forget sex, there’s too much other stuff to figure out, I’d take it back myself if I could, I never woulda fucking done it. Because you lose so much, it takes so much away from
you. Why’d you jump in the fire, Shawn, you gotta think about it and tell me because I lost it, I lost that part of me and I been trying to get it back but I’m always too damn distracted so you gotta tell me Shawn, you know I can keep a secret and you ain’t even gonna remember tomorrow you told me so just tell me. Fucking tell me.” It scared the hell out of him, Ty acting like this, all this cold anger. He tried to look away, but Ty took him by the neck, by the head, where the neck meets the head and Ty’s thumbs by his ears squeezing him shaking him, “Why’d you stop taking those pills fucking tell me.” Then a pause. Ty gazed down at him like a confused dog. Holding Shawn’s head like it weren’t attached, like water for drinking. A tear dropped from Ty’s cheek and hit him in the lip, and Shawn realized the cold anger was a sadness, his brother’s sadness pouring out, as pure as he might ever see, and it was too much for him. So he checked out, then. Retreated within himself. Needed maybe a friend, some small help to come.

Ty, somewhat calmer: “Why the hell’d you jump in that fire?” His hands on Shawn’s head loosened, and Shawn immediately looked away. Outside, on the natural gas tank, the red bird hopped this way and that, cocking his head. “Say something,” said Ty.

“Tseep!” said Shawn.

“I’m about two seconds from punching you in the face.”

“Tseep tseep tseep!”

Ty left. The cardinal flew away, too, and for a moment Shawn was as sad as he could be. But then, on the sill of the window not a foot from his face, the cardinal landed and spoke, briefly, before flying off once more. Three loud cheeps that echoed in Shawn’s ears and widened his eyes and he understood. Cry for help. Plea for attention. The cheeps, translated, rang out in all caps: LOOK AT ME, they said. LOOK. AT. ME.
Chapter Nine

Peter

It was self-defense. A mechanism I’d been using for years, one used so effectively and so
often that in high school and on through college it had won me friends of a sort I wouldn’t have
predicted. I did homework for football players, was how it started. I never expected it to turn into
anything lasting, I was just tired of being stuffed into the proverbial locker. Then in college my
three suitemates smoked pot and drank in the dorm room and they never made any direct threats
but I felt my personal safety would be compromised should I ever cause them to be found out.
They knew where I slept. So I drank with them, but told them my asthma wouldn’t allow me to
smoke.

After a year of cleaning the dorm room and keeping bottles and bongs hidden, my
roommates took a liking to me, and even after we’d moved out of the dorms, they would still call
and invite me out to bars with them. That, being a social activity, was not surprising. At the bar,
it’s “the more the merrier.” What did surprise me was the fervor with which my old football-
playing high school classmates encouraged me to come hang out with them when I came back to
town. I think it surprised them too, how indebted they felt to me for whatever reason. Maybe
because high school was the crowning achievement of their lives, and I helped them get that
diploma still hanging on the living room wall at their parents’ house. More often then not it was
Hey Pete, want to go grab a drink with me (rather than with us). And when I’d show up (why did
I always show up?), their behavior suggested that they were afraid of me. They were always
buying rounds, making sure I was having a good time, as if their whole conception of their
brilliant high school careers could be shattered by my not acknowledging their greatness. I admit,
after a time these visits began to make me feel somewhat powerful and great.

The coping strategy disappeared for a while, when I was living on my own during the last
years of my undergraduate degree. But as it turned out, it was always right there under the
surface. In grad school I expected to feel completely comfortable around like minds, but this
time it was not the muscles or the mayhem that scared me: it was the intelligence. I did whatever
I could to be liked. This group of people, however, couldn’t be won over in the same fashion. I
had parties during which I couldn’t bring myself to sit down, always refilling peanut bowls,
glasses of wine. It didn’t make me any more popular—or feel less intimidated—but even at other
people’s parties I couldn’t stop and relax, if only because it allowed me to step away from their
collective gaze. And then I met Portia, who soon became the sole beneficiary of my servitude.
Which, of course, she enjoyed. After a while, my subconscious realized she wouldn’t be leaving
me or beating me up or otherwise intimidating me if I took a break once in a while, and the
defensive aspect of performing menial tasks disappeared. Now if I cleaned the house, it was only
for the satisfaction of having my house clean.

When I found myself there at the Pattersons’ sink, doing dishes, back turned on everyone,
I told myself that it was just because I find pleasure in tackling chores, getting things done. But
really it was the self-defense mechanism kicking in again. Because Phil, the father, wanted to rip
out my throat, and I knew it.
Randall

Dad was sitting at the table. He asked if we had any beer. I told him I didn’t know. He’d eaten about seven crêpes and Peter had had to mix up another batch. When Mom got back from tending to Shawn, Peter was at the sink, cleaning up. It was Sunday, and ESPN was showing horse racing, worst of all sports, but we were watching it anyway so we didn’t have to talk. Mom picked up a towel to start drying, but Peter told her to go sit, go sit, don’t worry about it. Dad asked her if we had any beer. She said no.

How about a cigarette, then? he said.
I’m trying to cut back, she said, shrugging. Thanks, though.

Peter was washing really slowly, I thought. Mom kept glancing at him but it’s hard to talk to someone who’s facing away from you. Dad was tapping his fingers on the table. And I was just fine. This was the bed they had all made, and now I wanted them to lie in it. But then Joey kicked me under the table, so I rolled my eyes at him, got up and went to the game closet.

Well, partner, I heard Dad say behind me. That was a real nice lunch. Sure Vick here appreciates you helping out like that. Don’t you Vick? Real nice of you, come back again sometime.

You weren’t leaving yet, were you, Peter?
Um, said Peter. Well I mean, Callie ought to be getting home soon, I guess.
I dropped the game onto the table and sat down. Trivial Pursuit. Dad stared at it like kryptonite. Mom sort of smiled to herself, then glanced at me, then said, Oh, come on, Peter, stay for one game?
Dad said, Teams?
I pointed around the table and counted. Ty was still upstairs, which made it an odd number. Nah, there’s only five people.
Not if he leaves.
But he’s not leaving, said Joey. Mom just invited him to stay. Right?
If he wants, yes, he can stay, said Mom.
Dad and Peter stared at each other. Peter had no expression on his face. It was like he was waiting for Dad to do whatever, and he’d react after that.
What Dad did was stand up, walk over to the television and turn it off, like he was staying to play and wanted it quieter. But Peter was still at the table when he got back, and Dad didn’t even slow down. He picked up his hat off the table and said, Ah, fuck it, you guys can play. I’m outta here.

And he was. Didn’t even say goodbye to Shawn, the bastard.

Shawn

Listen: Dad’s truck, Shawn knew. Pulling up the driveway and leaving—just the same as it had sounded each day four years ago in the early-morning dark. Some visit. Only sat with Shawn for ten minutes. Even without taking the pills. Even with taking the pills, all the pills, nothing worked, just left and that’s it.

Forget him, like Ty said. Forget him, anyway.
He leaned over and vomited into the pan. And again. And again.
There were no pills in it. All dissolved. Deep breaths and thoughts, staring down. Eyes watered dripped on down there like Ty cheep. Cheep. Cheep. Cheep.

Peter

As soon as Phil was gone, I felt as though a great weight lifted from my chest. Personal safety issues aside (yes, I gladly would have left if Vickie had asked me to go), leaving because he asked me would’ve been tantamount to concession of the territory. Staying hadn’t been an overtly aggressive action, but leaving would have made two distinct statements: I had been making an attempt to supplant him; and furthermore the attempt had failed, and the family was still his. Despite my hyperawareness of my physical vulnerability, I had to make sure he knew: Vickie controlled the family. Not him. I felt like a good friend, for once, and not just a friend by default.

Of course, once the territorial dynamics ceased, I was more than ready to leave and let them deal with this situation without the added pressure of having company. And, Callie was probably home by now.

Ty appeared in the living room just as I was about to make my exit. We all watched him approach, sit down, take a large breath and exhale. He saw us watching him and looked at us one by one. “What?” he said.

No one replied. I decided to break the silence myself. “Well, Vickie,” I said, “I’m a little too worn out for game-playing, so I’ll be heading home, I think.”

“Peter, can I just say—” she began, but I waved her down with both hands.

“I’ll be back in a minute, just wanted to say a quick goodbye-and-get-well to Shawn. I mean, if you think he’s up for it.” And when she didn’t object, I quickly walked through the living room to complete the first step of my departure.

I knocked and eased the bedroom door open. He was on his knees trying to open the window. Still knocking as I entered, I said, “Shawn?”

He looked at me over his shoulder. His pupils were dilated, eyes red. His white underpants hugged his buttocks, and when he sat down on the bed again I saw his bandages pulled free from his left thigh. He looked at me like a vampire caught in a flashlight, but didn’t say anything.

“Shawn? You okay, there?” I walked up to the bed slowly. The muscles in his neck and arms were taut, and I felt I was dealing with a wild animal. Deliberately, I reached towards the flapping gauze pad and reaffixed it on his leg. Then I covered his legs with the sheet again.

“Time for me to go,” I said quickly. “I hope you liked your crêpes.”

His muscles relaxed; his whole posture slumped. He sniffed, and his wide eyes looked interminably sad. Then he pointed down at the pan beside him.

“Well,” I nodded and smiled, “they were probably better the first time.”

“Callie,” he said, then waited as if it were a question.

“Yes, she should be home now. I’m sure she’ll come right over here the moment I set foot in the house.”

This seemed to satisfy him. He closed his eyes and lay back down on his pillow.

“So,” I continued, “I’ll be going, then. Just wanted to say goodbye.”
I backed my way to the door. His eyes opened. He looked in my direction, but I didn’t get the impression he was actually looking at me.

Vickie

I ducked into the bedroom to fetch my cigarettes and tease my hair at the vanity just a little, before Peter came back downstairs. Someone had turned the TV on again when I returned to the living room, but they were all still sitting at the table. Randall said to me, “So it’s true?”

Joey put his head down on his hands.

“Is what true?” I asked, but then Peter appeared on the stairs behind me.

“I think it’s safe to say he’s taken his pills, now,” he said, looking back from where he’d come for just a moment before turning to me. “Poor kid’s pretty out of it.”

“Oh—well I’ll check on him in a minute.” I walked with Peter outside, not looking at anyone as I passed. I put a cigarette between my lips, and thought briefly about offering him one, but then felt the joke would be lost on him and wouldn’t lighten the mood whatsoever. We walked up to the border between our properties, then stopped. I lit my cigarette, exhaled, and said, “I just want to say thank you for staying—”

“No no,” he said, trying to shush my speech with both hands.

“—but it really was unnecessary.”

“Oh,” he said. He put his hands in his pockets.

“My husband—Phil, I mean, he really is all talk. He’s been in a few bar fights, sure, but he never started them, and he never abused me or the children. And he’s always paid his child support. Really he’s a model ex-husband. Doesn’t ever bother me about visitation rights or anything. Well, except this weekend, but usually I have my boys home all I want—”

“I wasn’t staying because of him,” he said, and I paused. I found myself searching his eyes, trying to decide what he meant by that. He blushed. “Not entirely, I mean.”

“No,” he said, his eyes on the grass between us, zipping back and forth. “I just thought…I deserved to be there. Right?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, unsure what he meant.

“I’d offered to cook for you and Shawn, and that offer had been accepted, and that’s all I was doing.”

“What else would you have been doing?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said. But then I understood, or was beginning to. He didn’t want to look suspicious. Which either meant he had intentions and wanted to keep them secret, or he had no intentions and wanted to make that perfectly clear. Neither option made me feel very wanted. I extended my hand for him to shake, a gesture that I hoped would return the sentiment.

They say men and women can’t be friends, that relationships between them only exist in various stages of courtship. Despite his lack of a response to my subtle flirtations, I should’ve kept that in mind. He obviously couldn’t think of me solely in terms of friendship; I just wished he’d made that clear to me first, before making it clear to my ex-husband.
Shawn

Throwing up had helped. His head felt attached to his neck once again, and what’s more, if he lay still he found he could touch an astounding clarity. He thought about infinity, believed he could see it when he closed his eyes, saw all the planets and stars in the galaxy sashaying out of his line of sight and granting his vision passage, to what lay behind, beyond. That truth, that simplicity.

How many Vicodin had he taken? Four? And the antibiotics, too. He couldn’t remember the number. Despite the sudden lucidity, he couldn’t see into the past, it seemed. Unconsciously he shook his head in frustration, and the planets and stars shook as well and tumbled back into the path between here and infinity. He opened his eyes, his unstable head finally coming to rest in the direction of the window.

Callie was in her room.

The longer his head was still, the better his vision became. He felt himself zooming the distance between their two windows, his body flapping in the wind behind his engine-driving eyes, and there she was, there she stood, looking right back at him.

He smelled a cigarette. Heard voices, from not so far away.

But Callie probably couldn’t see him as clearly, could she, since it was quite a ways and he had the advantage of pharmaceuticals. He rocked on his shoulders, inched himself closer to the window screen, the glass of which he had managed to open just after Callie’s dad had said goodbye. Pressing his face up against it, he saw Mr. Caldwell walking home. The cigarette smoke, Shawn supposed, must have come from his mom. His dad was already gone, after all.

Mr. Caldwell had said goodbye. His dad had not.

Propping himself up on an elbow, he pressed a hand into the mesh next to his face. A wave, except still, motionless. Silent.

Look at me.

The added pressure caused a corner of the screen to pop loose. Shawn rocked forward into the screen’s give, then fell back onto the bed, heart racing.

Callie

You didn’t do it. But you’re not surprised. Shawn’s anti-pretending campaign kept coming up in your mind as you sat on your bed, carving designs into your journal pages, trying to decide what permanent mark you’d prefer to be left with. Just the way Dr. Werner says “cutter,” like it’s a cult of lower human beings, makes it something you don’t want to be. So pretending to be one doesn’t make any sense, according to Shawn’s logic, even if it would only be to help you find out exactly why you don’t want to be one. Shawn better be proud of you, if you ever decide to tell him.

Now you hear your father treading up the stairs and your knife is still out, on the bed, almost glinting with cartoonish danger. You fold it up and, as he knocks, slip it in your pocket. He enters the room and stands there, but looks like he wants to leave. He asks about your weekend, your mother, your session. You answer “fine” until he stops asking questions.

Then he tells you about Shawn. This is why he came in here, to tell you this. Didn’t take his pills, who knows why. The graft isn’t taking. And now he’s loopy. They have to go back to
the hospital tomorrow. It’s only been a couple days, but it feels like ages since you’ve talked to Shawn. Whatever he did, he did it for you. You know this. You’ve seen the lengths he’ll go to.

Dad excuses himself to “go lie down.” It’s five o’clock, long from even an encroaching darkness, but he says it like he’s seen enough of this day. When he’s gone you realize your journal is still out on the bed. Pages slashed. He didn’t mention it.

Across the yard, the window has been opened since the last time you looked, and now without the glare you can see into the room reasonably well. Shawn is there, right there; you can see the majority of his torso on the bed, his damaged legs behind the wall and out of sight. You should go over there, but—you know what? Give it a minute. He’s not going anywhere. Whatever’s wrong with him right now isn’t directly your fault. And anyway, when you do find out what he’s up to, you’ll feel as guilty for it as if it were your fault, so for once, for a moment, give yourself a break. Read a book. Write something, maybe. Or better yet, just sit still and feel what it’s like to feel fine.

Vickie

I heard them arguing before I got in the door, and the moment I set foot inside, they fell silent. I walked to the table, opened my palms to the heavens, looking at each one of them, then let my hands fall to slap my thighs.

Defensively, Ty said, “What?”

“Nothing,” I said. “That was really fun, guys. Thanks for springing that one on me.”

“We were supposed to call first?” said Randall. “Make sure your fuck-buddy wasn’t here?”

“Randall,” I said. “Don’t you dare talk like that to me. And Peter is just our neighbor.”

“Yeah, just a neighbor you have to walk home.”

“I had to apologize for you three.”

“For us?” said Randall. His face was turning red.

“You invited him over here, didn’t you?”

“No we didn’t!” said Joey, and Ty nodded his agreement.

“Oh what the fuck ever,” said Randall.

“Randall!”

“No! I’m tired of being the only one with half an ounce of common sense around here!”

He was fuming. I couldn’t remember him ever being this angry, not since he was little. This was a temper tantrum, this was. “You!” he pointed at Ty. “You did so invite him over here, and he never would’ve accepted if you”—his finger swung to Joey—“hadn’t practically dared him.”

“I did not!”

“Joey!” I said. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Ty said for him. “He just broke the news to us about your boyfriend, there.”

I ran my fingers through my hair, ready to pull out strands. “There is nothing going on between us. Okay?”

“Yeah?” said Randall. “Then why are you so mad right now?”

“I’m not mad!” I yelled, knowing how ridiculous that sounded. “But if I did want to start seeing someone, I’d expect you not to go run and tell your father about it. Is that too much to ask?”
“No!” yelled Randall. “Why do you think I’m so pissed at these dumbasses?”
“Shut up,” said Ty quietly.
“I’m not a dumbass!” said Joey. “Ty’s the one that asked him to come over.”
“Ty!” I said. I felt like I could strangle all three of them. I hadn’t been this mad about the whole thing, even when their father was still here, but for some reason the more we argued now, the madder I got.

Ty said, “It ain’t my fault,” in answer to my exclamation, but looking at Randall. “He said he wanted to see Shawn. What was I supposed to do, tell him no?”
“Yes!” said Randall, as if this were his exact point.

That was it, I thought. Shawn wasn’t here. Nobody yelled at Shawn, because that was like abusing a kitten. He always ended up the voice of reason, whenever we got into a heated debate. He was the mediator. And he wasn’t here.

So we just kept getting madder.

Shawn

He felt more nausea hit him due to the near-fall out the window, and he let it come. Even if nothing was left to expel, just the dry heaving helped him regain self-awareness.

Downstairs, they were yelling. As soon as Mr. Caldwell was gone—no, Shawn decided, he should be called Peter now—they’d started yelling. Screaming, swearing. He pulled back from the pan and sat up, the tears blurring his vision. Why are you arguing? he wanted to say to them, and they’d look at each other and shrug. You’re arguing, he would say, because Peter left. When Peter’s here everything is fine. And one by one, it would dawn on them, yes, Peter, yes. A man who cared enough to say goodbye. They didn’t need their father, they needed a father. Peter was a father. Peter was the key. The more Shawn thought about it, the more it made sense. He had been too selfish before, not even allowing himself to consider his mom and Peter due to the inevitable weirdness it would cause for him and Callie. But even now, his love for her remained unquestioned, and if they had to put up with a little weirdness to have Peter where he belonged, then so be it. He had to get Peter to come back. Before the fighting got out of hand.

As far as manipulative scheming goes, Shawn had to acknowledge: he’d been failing at every opportunity. Taking extra medicine hadn’t helped anything; it had only led to vomiting, and Peter had seen the vomit but didn’t seem to care about that. But the bandages. Peter had taken the time to fix the bandages. That was it, wasn’t it? That could work. He pulled back the sheet, took a look at the bandage, worked up one corner, and after a quick deep breath ripped it right off. Good, well done. Didn’t even hurt. The skin beneath had swollen a little more since he’d last looked, the yellow beneath shining through like sunshine. The edge of the graft was leaking in several places, along with individual drops coming through the scored holes of the graft itself like perspiration. It was infected. This was an infection. The graft was not taking. His plan—his original plan—was working. Stop getting better, fix the family. So, he hadn’t been completely failing, even if he hadn’t known exactly which pieces of the puzzle needed put together.

But damn it was gross to look at. He pulled the sheet back up over his legs. Then, almost gleefully, he stuck the bandage to the screen like a white flag. But it didn’t stay, the adhesive
already worn off from removal, reapplication, and a slathering of blood and pus. He tried again, pushed even harder.

The screen came completely loose and fell, along with his bandage—his white flag, his call for help—two-and-a-half stories down to the ground, where it clattered and came to rest in front of the basement window. Shawn peered out after it, pulled his head back in just before vertigo. His bandage, his proof he needed help, was gone, and now with a perceptible rush the clarity from vomiting was rapidly wearing off. He closed his eyes and looked for infinity and it was there but spinning everything was spinning and he opened his eyes again because that wasn’t helping. The drugs were still in him the pain meds even after vomiting still there somehow and his throat should be hurting but it didn’t hurt. After the vomiting it really should be hurting. But it didn’t hurt. Nothing hurt.

Downstairs, the fighting continued. How long had they been at it, now? Would they ever stop? Not until Peter came back. Peter was the key, and he had to return at all costs, but Shawn’s white flag was gone.

So again, he pulled back the sheet.

**Joey**

Mom leaves the room and goes to her bedroom, and she slams the door. We start to yell louder. We’re swearing and banging on the table and pointing at each other and it feels good. We haven’t argued like this in a long time, I don’t remember when. It’s like doing something you’re not supposed to, but it’s okay because it’s just us now, Dad’s gone and Peter’s gone it’s just family. Nobody has to know.

Randall says he’s tired of cleaning up our messes, especially around Dad. Ty says nobody asked him to. I go, “Yeah, stop treating us like babies.”

I smell cigarettes and even though Mom’s got her door closed I know she’s smoking in there, which she hasn’t done in a long time.

Randall smells it too, because then he goes, “You see what you did?” He’s talking to Ty. Mostly he stopped yelling at me because Ty’s the one who keeps yelling back.

“I didn’t do anything!”

“Yes, you did. You invited him over here. It’s your fucking fault.”

Ty goes, “Oh who fucking cares? What difference does it make? Are you afraid of him? Does he get under your skin? Does he put any pressure on you at all?”

Randall goes, “He doesn’t like me at all. He ignores me completely. I hate the fucking bastard, okay?”

He doesn’t like me at all either. I think of that but I don’t say it, because it’s the first time I thought of it.

“Oh excuse me,” Ty goes. “Excuse me for being the fucking golden child, just cause I’m the oldest. I’m so sorry he ain’t always on your ass and telling you how to live your life. I’m so sorry you get to fly under the radar and just hang out in your room all day and play bongos and beat off to your fucking titty magazines.”

Randall’s mouth drops open. He stands up from the table. Ty stands up too. Randall starts pacing back and forth in the kitchen. Then softly he goes, “I don’t beat off.”
Ty comes over to the other side of the table and stands there. I scoot my chair back a little and give them room. “Well lookie here, Joey, we found us an even bigger liar than you.” He sounds like Dad, which kind of makes me nervous. I don’t even say anything back. That’s how nervous it makes me, hearing him like that.

Randall stops pacing. He goes, “I don’t lie.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m not the one whacking it in the shower all the time. I’m not the depressed crazy one who has to touch himself to feel better. That’s disgusting. It’s pathetic.”

Ty goes, “Don’t fucking call me crazy.”

Randall opens his hands like a book and starts talking in a high voice. “Dear Crazy Depressed Fake Suicide Journal. Today my name is Susie and I want to pretend I’m gonna cut my wrists.” He licks a finger and pretends to turn the page. I don’t know what he’s talking about but Ty’s turning all kinds of colors in his face and he’s starting to sweat. “Dear Journal. My name is Ty, I mean, uh, not that, some less crazy name than Ty—”

That’s when Ty punches him in the mouth.

Callie

You come back from the bathroom and look out the window again on the way to your bed and Shawn’s hanging out the damn window. Waving to you, it seems. You suppose it is time to get over there. To face his legs, his pain, the damage you’ve caused and the damage unknown. But, you have to get ready first. You’re still wearing what you wore home from your Mom’s, and that just won’t do.

You start to close your blinds to change and in the process notice Shawn’s not only waving but waving something. He’s on his knees on the bed, the rest of him leaning out the window, and he’s flapping something back and forth through the air. It’s like he’s on a desert island, trying to get the attention of the rescue helicopter, or leaning out a burning skyscraper.

You skip changing to shorts, but you do put on your favorite tank top, trying to hurry now, to find out what’s wrong. It feels like something even more wrong than what your Dad told you. When you open your blinds again, Shawn’s still there. It occurs to you maybe he’s yelling something, so you open your window, but all you hear are the birds. At least, at first. Shawn at least isn’t yelling at you, you’d hear that pretty clearly. But then you do hear something, some faraway sound of human aggression, and you do believe it is yelling. Yes. Coming from his house, even, but it’s definitely not him.

Time to go. You pause by your father’s bedroom, about to knock and tell him you’re leaving, when you remember that the knife is still in your pocket. Sighing, you turn a pivot and head directly back upstairs. But before you get a chance to stash the paraphernalia back in its hiding spot, something catches your eye as you pass your window. Something next door, just peripherally glimpsed, that immediately makes your stomach turn over. You didn’t see it clearly, but it sure looked like something—or someone—just dropped from the bedroom window.

And sure enough, when you look again, Shawn’s not in that bedroom anymore.

Joey
A chair gets knocked over and they wrestle into the living room before Mom comes out of her bedroom with a cigarette in her hand and she’s yelling at them but they don’t quit. Randall’s putting up a better fight than I thought he would but then I remember how he punched me in the arm and how he’s stronger than I thought he was and I’m rooting for him. I want Randall to win.

But then they knock the coffee table over and Ty gets on top and pins Randall’s arms under his knees and he gets another good punch in before Mom slaps Ty in the ear. Her other hand with the cigarette is in the air but she gets a good swing in with her open palm and whaps him right in the ear and he sort of yells and falls off of Randall. And then finally they quit.

Mom is still yelling. What the hell is the matter with them, and stuff. She stands between them until they get up off the floor and go sit on opposite sides of the room, Randall on the couch, Ty on one of the chairs in front of the TV. Mom yells at me to come in here and sit down, too, and I start to, but I’m going slow, I’m moving like a zombie because I can either sit in the other chair next to Ty, or sit on the couch next to Randall.

I go sit next to Randall. That’s what I do because I was rooting for him. And when Mom starts yelling at us I yell whatever he says too, because Randall is right.

Callie

What happens next is you freak out. He was there but then he was gone. There’s some sheet and a bit of blanket hanging out the window and they kind of flap in the wind, and you can’t see what’s below the window because there’s a big gas tank in their yard that blocks your view. It was probably just a pillow, right, but Shawn’s not there. You keep looking, and your breathing is getting deeper and more rapid the longer nothing happens, and next door they just keep yelling. There’s just this red bird that keeps landing on the gas tank and fussing and hopping and flying away again. You want to run over there and check and make sure he didn’t really fall, but he’s not coming back to the window and he’s not coming out from behind the tank and you’re about to go, you want to go, but instead you fall to your knees.

Because of your knife. The knife is in your pocket and nobody understands that it doesn’t mean anything to you but you still have to hide it because they would think something if they found it. And it would be simple enough to get rid of the knife, but just the thought of being caught in awkward circumstances has caught you, locked you in place. What if he did fall. What if he is hurt and they find you with him and you’ve got a knife, or even if you don’t have it it’s you and him and no one’s ever understood you or given you a chance and you know, you know it doesn’t make any sense not to go check on him but it’s never made any sense to you what your parents have done when they found out something they weren’t supposed to, they’ve never listened to you, they’ve never believed you, they’ve never trusted you about anything and now Shawn might really be hurt and you can’t do anything, you’re on your knees, crying at the window.


Then your dad knocks on the door and you realize you’re screaming it, Shawn! Shawn! and he says to you what and you rush him, you grab onto him hard and you’re sobbing and you know partially you’re letting go because he has to believe you right now, he just has to, but also
it feels good and safe and you’re sorry, you tell him so, you’re sorry about everything and you’ll trust him from now on if he trusts you but he’s got to trust you now.

“What is it, Callie?”
You tell him. “Shawn fell. I think Shawn fell from the window.”

Peter
We didn’t get there in time. I didn’t get there in time.

Shawn
Waving his makeshift flag through the air, he saw his bird friend return to the gas tank.
At first it hurt a lot, when he tore off the skin graft. Or, he thought it did, but it only took a minute to think about his pain pills, all the pills he’d taken and how the pain shouldn’t be there, and just like that, it wasn’t. And then he saw his bird friend and his bird friend wanted to talk, as if he knew a little something about the comings and goings of pain and he wanted to tell Shawn how that all worked, if only Shawn would listen. So Shawn took a quick break from calling for Peter’s return to wave to the cardinal on the natural gas tank.
He changed hands, though. To wave with his free hand, to say hello politely. But when he did, his support hand also held the infection-wet piece of slippery skin, pressed between the base of his palm and the plastic, weather-proof sill. It supported him just long enough to extend his other hand. But then the support hand slid out from under him, right out the window, and he followed it face-first. His only reaction to the fall was to angle his head slightly, away from the danger, away from the ground, perfectly positioning his neck to break on impact.

Peter
We could hear them yelling inside the house. I told Callie to go around to the front door and tell them to call for help, which is to say, to tell them what had happened, but they were yelling and she was already scared and crying and holding onto herself and I don’t blame her for not going, I really don’t.
The CPR didn’t work—I didn’t know how long he’d been down there, Callie could only guess between fifteen minutes and a half an hour, she’d been hysterical—and I tried, I did, for as long as my arms could take it. I must’ve been in some sort of traumatic denial myself. For probably twenty minutes I tried to get his heart beating, his lungs to take a breath, despite the obvious truth of the situation. No amount of resuscitation was going fix his neck. This kid, this poor boy, was never, never coming back.
He was much lighter than I thought he’d be, his skinny white legs poking out of tight white briefs. We walked around to the yelling at the front of the house and I kicked at the screen door and they all stopped. Vickie pushed the screen door open and held it to get a good look, and the other boys crowded in behind her. She was smoking, and her bleary eyes said, What is this? What is this, now?
And then just behind me Callie spoke.
“I saw him fall but I didn’t know it was him, I didn’t know, it was supposed to be a pillow, I didn’t know it was him, I didn’t know.”
The boy in my arms was dead. His head dangled loose over my arm. I tried to support it but it didn’t do any good.
Chapter Ten
Ty, Randall, and Joey

We all know how to build a fire. Our father taught us, before he left. We take turns breaking up the smaller twigs and pulling larger logs from the same stack beneath the back porch we helped our father build years ago. It hasn’t grown since he left. In fact, this can’t be more than the second or third time we’ve taken from its store; we can’t remember. Though most things seem to shrink in stature, the older we grow, the woodpile has never looked bigger.

Callie is here. Her father is inside, drinking with our mom. Our brother died yesterday. The viewing is tomorrow, the funeral the day after that.

We don’t talk much. If we move we tend to the fire. We have marshmallows and chocolate. We have hotdogs and buns and ketchup, all laid out on a blanket that becomes harder to see as the light fades. If she asked, we’d get Callie some food, but she doesn’t ask.

We all have the same thoughts in our head. Regrets over childish behavior, petty aggression, stupid kid stuff. We all know when we go back to school we’ll be the brothers of the dead kid, and this will forever change how we are treated. The anger and sadness come and go in appearances too brief to make use of them. Most of all, we just miss Shawn. It’s the only feeling we can hold onto.

When the fire’s about as big as we can stand, when we’ve eaten all the marshmallows we can stomach, we run out of ways to keep busy. The urge to move still comes, but without any tasks to accomplish, there’s a lot of sighing, sitting down, standing up. Except for Callie, who hasn’t moved. She just sits, or rather reclines on one elbow, poking a stick into the campfire.

We hear them come out from the house onto the back porch. Finally we pause and sit, aware we’re being watched. As if at their own separate campsite, our mom cackles through the dark with a laughter that feels wrong in our spines, but we know she’s drinking. She’s been drinking all day. She even had a drink before going to the funeral parlor, and we suspect she brought a flask along in her purse because of her vodka breath all day. And now she’s drunk enough to tell Peter stories about him, the funny stories that have followed Shawn for years to family reunions and his friends’ birthday parties. We know she’s telling Peter about how Shawn got lost in the woods once when he was four and when Mom finally found him he’d lost his pants. She never found out why he took his pants off, nor did we ever find the pants, but in their place he had spread dirt and clay from the creek all over his legs, and he said in his most reassuring voice, “It’s okay, Mommy. I got mud pants.”

We know the other stories she’s telling, too, but we don’t want to think about them. They haven’t even turned the porch light on, as if to remain anonymous. We can see her cigarette ember glow when she hits it.

And then when they finally go back inside, Callie pulls something from her back pocket. It’s an Altoids tin. She stole it, she says, from Shawn’s pocket at the hospital, as if the lack of this evidence would keep them safe from blame for the fire. She laughs, says it doesn’t matter now, does it. We know what’s inside, but we all look with anticipation anyway as she cracks the top and opens it slowly, like a treasure chest.

“I want us all to smoke one,” she says.

But we don’t smoke, we tell her.

“I don’t care. It’s not for you, it’s for Shawn.”
Still, we hesitate and look at each other.

“Do it for me then. It’ll make me feel better, like we’re doing something for him.” Before we can protest any more, she hands us each one. She pulls her stick from its bed in the fire, blows out the flames, the left-behind embers offering just enough momentary light to show us her face, orange, red, gone. She presses it up to her own cigarette, and then passes it around.

We sit around the campfire, smoking. In a moment we hear our mother again. But she’s not outside, now. It’s coming from the bedroom window, and it’s not laughter.

Nobody coughs.

Peter

It’s why I don’t touch alcohol anymore. I lose myself.

Immediately after they got back from the funeral home Vickie changed into a nightgown and a robe. Callie and I had been asked to watch the house while they were gone, to answer the phone and let in relatives (our job for tomorrow as well), even though she’d asked that no relatives come tonight. None did. She took the boys with her, all of them, and the moment she got back she went to the bedroom and changed. I did the same, excusing myself to change, but really just wanting a short break. As soon as I came back in the door, she had a drink poured for me. I stared at it just a moment. She didn’t ask me, she just held it out to me. Her face wasn’t even pleading, just waiting. To see if I would take it. To see if I would be there for her or not, and if not, the hell with me.

I took the drink.

Her robe had a pocket and that’s where she stored her cigarettes. She’d been smoking indoors since yesterday, but tonight she kept heading outdoors, whether out of habit or to look at the kids as they sat around the campfire making s’mores, some idyllic fantasy to keep occupied the mind, ultimately futile. But then, every action felt conspicuous for its futility. Eat now, eat later, eat never, what was the difference. We performed the expected rituals and the common tasks, neither having any greater or lesser meaning. Callie transformed herself into a maid most of the time, doing dishes, emptying ashtrays, keeping things tidy around here, and no one really cared. I was here, too, as much as I could stand. I answered the phone, giving out times of the viewings and the funeral. I told myself it had to be done, but I wasn’t convinced. Sometimes I would go home and sit, but that too felt like a creation, a performance, and it didn’t last long.

The hell with me.

We drank, and after three vodkas on the rocks I began to notice myself in a different way. Similar, but different. My behavior still felt conspicuous, but I’d stopped criticizing it. Instead I just found it curious. How interesting, that out of all my meaningless behaviors, this one decided to show up again. It was like I’d been walking down an unfamiliar path but ended up in such a familiar place.

She was telling stories rapid-fire, as fast as she could, and she had so many, not just about Shawn but about all of them. She cracked the ice cube tray, took one out, tossed it at me and laughed. I caught it against my chest and returned it, plunking her in the behind. She chortled and scooted her butt forward at the impact—but then I felt bad for laughing with anything but polite, assumed nostalgia, and grew quiet. She did, too.
We switched to whiskey when the vodka ran out, but there wasn’t much left. Then the rum, which she didn’t enjoy straight, so we got out mixers. Orange juice, other juices—she got out the milk and laughed when it curdled and told me to drink it anyway, and I didn’t hesitate. I spat it back out into the sink, gagging but smiling. We made a mess and didn’t care. We laughed and forgot to stop.

She kissed me and her breath was hot with liquor and cigarette smoke, and I didn’t care, and we didn’t stop.

Suddenly the experience turned completely out-of-body. In a minute we were in the bedroom and I couldn’t even remember getting there. I had her breasts in my face, nipples finding and fitting into the recesses of my eye sockets. I ran a finger inside her, pulled it out, spread the wetness around. I didn’t hesitate. My body was reduced to desires, my mind banished somewhere outside myself, able to assess my behavior but not affect it. But then, my mind wouldn’t have opted to change my behavior, because the assessment again recognized the futility, and even in the soft wet darkness I didn’t expect this to solve everything, change anything, or last beyond the moment. The moment was all I wanted, because it meant that I was alive, and that’s what must be done when the only other option is to feel dead.

I didn’t regret the sex. I regretted that I had to lose myself to get there.

Callie

Your knife is in your pocket. You’d carve a hole in your chest, make a gift of your derelict heart, if it would even begin to mend all the damage you’ve caused. Short of that, all you can give them is everything you have.
Chapter Eleven

Callie

Lots of people come for Ty. Randall's friends stay away for whatever reason, and Joey isn’t even in high school yet, so his friends, like Shawn’s, can’t drive and probably wouldn’t want to go to a funeral anyway, no matter who it is—let alone convince their parents to take them there. One kid you meet claims to be Shawn’s best friend, though you’ve never heard his name before, and says two other kids who sit at the same lunch table are in the crowd, too.

But Ty’s friends, though. They just keep arriving, and they make appearances on both days, the viewing and the funeral. All kinds of football people, cheerleaders included, as if sports alone has granted them that friendship level necessary to be there when a sibling dies. Their parents come, too, which makes a little more sense to you. Vickie was there on the sidelines with them for years, watching their sons smash into hers and vice versa, expecting, waiting on one of them to go down, waiting on that sorrow, praying it would be someone else’s and all she would have to do is comfort. Never be comforted. They come in droves, Ty's friends, they’ve been preparing for this for years.

They bring food but no one brings desserts. Casseroles, but no desserts. You do your job and show them the correct food tables, and the insulated dishes stack up three or four high behind the one currently in use. The dessert table just ends up holding more casseroles. Someone brings a cooler of pop and someone else brings one of beer, which are both placed on the back porch. After the viewing, Randall and Joey start a campfire when the light begins to fade, and the well-wishers from the day gradually arrive, becoming guests for the evening. People gather around and talk about sports, mostly; that’s the common ground. No one has any experience with anything relevant—burn stories, teenagers succumbing to senseless deaths—or if they do they aren’t mentioning it.

Vickie stays in the kitchen and so do you. Ty keeps close to his dad, going wherever he goes, coming into the kitchen if his dad needs anything, so his dad doesn’t have to. Mostly all he needs is beer, though, so you don’t see much of Ty throughout that first evening.

They play a marathon of Disney movies in the living room. You can see it from the table, where your task is rotating emptied dishes and trading out spoons. Relatives from a distance begin showing up later in the first evening, fewer of them bringing food than the local crowd because they’ve had a longer trip, and that time is credited to their grieving process. You catch a few names, but no one’s introduced directly to you, a fact for which you’re thankful. All of them grab a plateful and filter out into the backyard, drifting over to the fire and away again after patting the closest brother on the back and saying a couple kind words.

Vickie tells you at the beginning, “I won’t be eating. They’ll be bringing a lot of food, but I won’t be eating, so don’t ask me to.”

“I won’t.”

“Do you want to help?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t ask me to eat.” There’s only one thing that keeps running through your mind when you look her in the eyes, and it’s not about food. “If you want to help, you’ll let me stay busy. Don’t tell me to take a rest, don’t tell me to take it easy, don’t offer me anything to drink.”

“Okay.”
“The way you can help the most is—to make sure I’m not doing anything pointlessly. If you see me at the sink and I’ve been washing the same pan for twenty minutes, don’t say anything to me, please, just hold out a towel so I’ll give it to you to dry, or put another dish in the sink so I notice. So I see what I’m doing.”

“Okay.”

It should have been a pillow.

“If people need to know where the bathroom is, you can show them, and point to the card basket for the people that bring cards, and show them where anything else is they ask for. And the trash bags. I’ll try to keep an eye on them, but if I get distracted they may get full and you can replace them.”

“Okay.”

I swear Vickie it should have been a pillow and if it was a pillow none of this would’ve happened and the longer I held still the longer it could’ve been a pillow so I held still.

“Just please, Callie, just let me keep working, okay?”

You nod. You are whatever she needs you to be. She takes her keys from her purse and collects the boys, inspects their suits, and takes them off to the viewing.

When she’s gone, you’re alone in the house for about thirty seconds, gathering your bearings. But as soon as you think about the fact that you’re alone, you call Dad and he comes over and you sit on the back porch with the cordless phone in case anyone calls, and you wait for the cars to arrive.

For the most part he keeps quiet, which is good. Once he offers to get you a glass of water, which you decline, so he goes to fetch one for himself. He comes back and sits down next to you and says, “You don’t have to do this.”

“I offered.”

“So did I, but you don’t have to.”

Birds tussle in the garden to your left, medium-sized black and shiny birds, and sometimes the odd bluejay, come down just to say he’d been there in the middle of it, if only for a minute. “Yes I do,” you say.

The cars come and Dad guides them through the yard and around trees and motions for them to park there, not there but up there. This is his job. He holds their casseroles for them as they get out precariously, still in their viewing clothes. He watches them tiptoe gingerly on high heels through the grass and down the hill, no one wearing black except the people who want onlookers to know they’ve seen a dead boy today. Not a whole lot of people want this.

The first one to arrive is the boys’ father. He’s in jeans and he ignores the frantic parking motions of your father’s arms, putting his truck in the drive right where it must have always gone. You hope he wore something else to the funeral home.

He steps inside the house, takes off his hat and looks around, glancing at you only briefly. The viewing’s supposed to last for another hour yet, but you ask anyway, “Is it over?”

“Nah, just, couldn’t take that whole scene very long, you know.”

“You’re their father.”

Now he looks at you. “Guilty,” he says with a half-smile. “You’re the neighbor girl.”

“Callie, yes.” You offer your hand, and he shakes it, and when you get it back you feel an immediate craving for moisturizer. He continues to stand just inside the door on the tile.
“You were there.”
You nod. The words *I found him* don’t want to come out of your throat, so your mouth hangs open for a minute, and then you say, “My dad, too.”
“For the fire?” he says, squinting.
“Oh! No, that was just me, I thought—”
“You come to the hospital, too, did you?”
“When I got a ride. I can’t drive yet.”
He grins again, tucks his hat back on top of his head. “Yeah you look young, but you can’t tell with girls nowadays. If you’da said you was eighteen, or twenty, even, I’da said, yep, okay.”
You smile politely as if this is a compliment. He hops over the carpet to the kitchen tile and strolls to the refrigerator, opens it. “Kind of lonely in here, but…yep, there she is,” he says, pulling a beer from somewhere in the back.
“Yeah, Vickie cleaned it out as much as she could yesterday—”
“You always call her that?”
“Vickie? Yeah.”
“Not Mrs. Patterson?”
You shake your head, a little ashamed, then ashamed of being ashamed.
“Your old man too? Calls her Vickie? Course he does, don’t answer that.” He pops the top on the beer can, then rummages around the cabinets and drawers until he locates an ashtray. He pulls a cigarette from his breast pocket, then looks around and, abstaining from lighting up indoors, picks up the ashtray once more. Out the front window you see your dad squat down next to the large tires on Mr. Patterson’s truck, taking in their gravity.
“What’d you think I meant?” he says suddenly. “When I said you was there and you said your dad was too.”
“I just thought,” you say, feeling like you should measure your words carefully but not finding the capacity, “that you were talking about how we came over, when he fell from the window. And how we tried to help.”
“What, you try to put his neck back together?”
You actually take a step back. “No! We tried—I mean my dad tried everything he could.”
“CPR?”
“Yes.”
“That was your dad.”
“Yes.”
The cigarette is suddenly between his lips. Out the window Dad has his ears perked and he’s staring at the house. He takes a step closer, looks from window to window. Another raised voice and he’ll be in here, which a part of you wants, and a part of you knows should not happen.
But Mr. Patterson has already turned to the back door. He pauses, sniffs something back up into his nose, and then says over his shoulder, “Nobody told me that.”
When he’s gone, you go out to see your father.
All night, Vickie floats around the kitchen, talking more than you thought she would. She never once gets lost in a dish, and she keeps the trash cans from overflowing. She talks to relatives about how so-and-so couldn’t be here, and she talks to other parents about how their
families are passing the summer, or trades the latest gossip on coaches, teachers, the school board. She never stops talking, as if the talking itself provides energy. This is her plan. This is her plan in action.

Only once does someone leave her alone for too long. Someone waiting on the bathroom dashes away from her as he sees the facilities come available, and the former bathroom occupant does not stop to take up her rightful place in the conversation, she just nods and keeps moving, and Vickie stands there, one hand on the back of a chair, looking into the living room at the Disney movie. For the first time all night, no one is talking, the only noise coming from the TV, and it’s a musical number of some simplicity, designed to keep younger audiences rapt but for a more mature audience it’s as good as white noise. You look at her and you can tell she’s losing her focus, letting her mind go, letting the distractions go, and just thinking.

Her other hand drifts up to her side, where it rests as she lets out a slow sigh. Eyebrows creep closer to each other. Eyes focused on nothing.

You don’t know how to break her from this. You can’t just hand her a dish if she’s not washing dishes; you can’t do anything too obvious that would add embarrassment on top of the sorrow, the anger, whatever emotion is trying to break through that’s been held at bay all evening. There is a sense now palpable that blame is floating thickly above the heads of all in attendance, and the next person to say something even slightly out of tune might summon that blame to come crashing down upon them.

You edge just a little closer, tending to the food dishes on the table, knocking the tongs around the rim of the salad bowl. She doesn’t notice. The bowl itself is of the glass-imitating-crystal sort, angular and attractive, and you pick it up, raise it to the light fixture centered in the ceiling, examining the intricacies. Then, from this height, you let go, let it fall, the shattered pieces scattering, the plastic tongs chattering along the tile.

Vickie turns abruptly. The dish towel falls from her shoulder. First a look of concern, then a pause, and then—when she sees you unhurt and simply standing there, looking right back at her—a brief look of thanks. Together you set to work cleaning up the salad.

Peter

The biggest trucks had solo occupants with farmer-style ball caps. These attendees parked and nodded and didn’t bother to go in the house. Phil must have told them he would be outside, out back, because they all just walked around.

Before the last guests even arrived, people started to leave, and needed help leaving, and I did the best I could but more of them ignored my directions than heeded them. Soon I just ducked behind a truck and snuck home. I couldn’t imagine doing this again tomorrow, and as I lay back on the couch and elevated my tired legs I considered that most of tomorrow’s visitors would have already come today, and they could figure out parking on their own. Maybe I could just stay home and grade some papers in my underwear, or something. The thought was appealing, even relaxing.

I woke to a knock at the door. First thinking Callie had forgotten her key, not that I would’ve locked it, I stumbled quickly to the door and lurched it open.

“Vickie.”
She stood there just a moment, as if debating whether or not it mattered if I invited her in. In three steps she was past me, and I followed her to the living room where she sat on the couch. Déjà vu struck me. This was what happened on her first visit, only now in fast-forward and without dialogue. I felt I should’ve had something prepared to offer her ten minutes ago. She stared vaguely in the direction of the television, and said softly as if perturbed, “Fuck me.” I sat next to her. “What’s the matter?”

The question left a bad aftertaste in my mouth, which only got worse when she turned to look at me. Then, sarcastically, she replied: “Please fuck me?”

Then her hand was on my crotch, somehow, rubbing determinedly up and down, and I stood up. A moment later I sat back down again, speechless. She waited.

“I thought,” I said, then stopped. “Last night was just, we were drunk, it was an accident. Right? I didn’t even spend the night—”

“Accident or not, it’s what I want. Can you give it to me, or should I just leave?” She unbuttoned her shirt once, twice, and held the third.

“This, I don’t know, I mean I can but this isn’t the healthiest way to start a sexual relationship.”

She paused just once more to glance at me incredulously, then began to remove the rest of her clothing. Evidently I’d given consent enough. “First, ‘relationship’ is the last word that applies to us, okay? Second, I don’t want to be hung over for my son’s funeral, so even if my stomach could stand it, that’s out. And I’ve already cleaned the kitchen enough to eat off the floor, and despite the fact that Callie’s already cleaned the whole damn house I’d keep cleaning if I didn’t have relatives occupying every square inch. So I can’t do that anymore, and I need something. I need something right now.”

“Callie, is she—”

“Still at the campfire, don’t worry. I sent her outside a while ago, and she’s not leaving until somebody makes her. We’re all alone. Take off your fucking clothes.”

My brain tripped over words like “complications” and “coping strategy,” “dysfunctional” and “hollow gesture.” But she seemed more than aware of herself, and of what she was doing, and then my brain noticed her mouth on my penis. My phallus. My shaft. Coitus, my brain said, fucking, we’re about to coitus, we’re on the verge of fuck.

The light above the stove was the only one burning, but even that was enough light to see a body I didn’t remember from the night before. Her breasts hung lower than I’d realized and slightly flatter, her tummy just a bit more prominent—or maybe the only picture of her body I’d been able to hang onto from last night was of her lying down. But there was a mole I didn’t remember, her pubic hair, billowy and full, and veins evident even in this light. How did I miss all this? What kind of erotic adventure had I invented?

Even the desire itself felt different. Similar in its strength, but with my eyes now open I found that the flaws were the attraction. The intimacy was heightened, to the point where by comparison last night’s encounter felt damn near anonymous. A small thought crept in, now and then, a discomfort brought on by her insistence against the word “relationship.” She had to see it was undeniable. Recurring sexual encounters by definition were a relationship, even on the second go. I knew she wanted distraction. I knew I was functioning as nothing more than a
medicine to be taken and forgotten by morning. It just made me a little uneasy to deny the obvious. But only a little.

We started on the couch and finished on the bed, where she left me to clean up. She came back from the bathroom and stood with a hand on her hip, naked. The exhaustion in my body now complete, I was moments from sleep, and she, backlit in the doorway, asked, “You’re coming tomorrow, right?”

I mumbled assent, to whatever she meant by that.

She collected her clothes in the living room and came back with them all under one arm, the other hand finding her hip once again. “Because I want you there. Callie, too.”

“Yeah, yes. Absolutely.” She meant the funeral.

Back to the living room again, where she got dressed. I managed to put on a pair of boxers before she came back fully clothed. “Because I might need you. Okay? So be there.”

“I’ll be there.”


She left. Need me for what, I wondered.

Joey

He watches us all night from over by the porch where his buddies are, but Randall just ignores him and so do I. My aunt and uncle, from my Dad’s side, they stop by his group and say our names and Randall doesn’t look but I know he hears them, too. But even his own sister, she just asks about us and then she leaves him alone. My uncle stays a little bit longer but then he leaves Dad alone too, and then it’s just him and his buddies. Twice he comes over to the fire and kneels down and pokes at it. He goes, “Nice fire, boys,” like we’re supposed to say thank you, but Randall just nods and keeps staring at the logs burning, and so do I, until he leaves us alone again. Ty is up on the porch by the cooler, talking about football and stuff with his friends. They’re sneaking beers, which Ty is grabbing for them because he’s like Dad’s bartender, he just goes to the cooler and grabs one and hands it to Dad through the porch railing so Dad doesn’t even have to walk upstairs to get drunk. And so nobody says anything when Ty grabs beers because it’s probably for Dad. Not that anybody would, anyway. I could probably get one if I wanted to, but I don’t because of my little cousins all around. And anyway Randall’s not drinking either. I don’t know if Ty is but Randall’s not. Maybe Ty is, I can’t tell.

When Callie comes out and sits down by us, we both look at her until she notices. She goes, “Vickie told me to come outside.”

Randall nods.

She goes, “It’s all done. Everybody’s done eating, the food’s all put away and the dishes are all done.”

My cousin is playing Gameboy on the other side of the fire, with his younger brother and sister watching over his shoulder. I see him glance up at Callie, and he looks her up and down quick. He’s eleven.

Randall goes, “You don’t have to do all this. We can do it. Mom could’ve just asked us.”

She didn’t, though. She asked Callie. I go, “Thank you, Callie,” and she looks at me kind of surprised.
And Randall goes, “Yeah, thanks. Thank you.” He looks at me like I was right and that’s what he should’ve said.

“You’re welcome.” She’s tired, I can tell. But if there were more work to do she’d still be working.

Then we’re all quiet again until my uncle comes to get my cousins because there’s not enough room in the house for everybody and they have to drive into town to sleep at a motel. Actually, I just realize, nobody on Dad’s side is staying here tonight. It’s all Mom’s side.

Then everybody else starts to leave, except Dad and his friends, standing like guards at the back porch steps. I have to pee but I don’t want to do it in the woods where I did before because Callie’s down here now, so I walk all the way around the house and go in the front door. And anyway Dad’s been going in the woods, too, so I don’t want to do that anymore.

I have to step over people on the living room floor, and I head upstairs thinking that’ll be the best bathroom to use because people downstairs might need that one, but somebody’s in there, dammit. I think maybe it’s Mom because maybe she had the same idea as me but it turns out it’s just my other uncle, who’s not really my uncle but he’s my mom’s uncle and we just call him uncle. He winks at me like he always does, and when I finally get in the bathroom by myself I start wondering where Mom is. She wouldn’t just go to bed and leave people to find their own places to sleep.

I go back to the fire and now all of Ty’s friends have left and he’s down at the fire too. I sit on the opposite side of where I was because I want to see if Mom comes back from Callie’s house. Because Callie’s dad is gone, too. But when I sit down I realize it’s too dark to see anything real good way up there, and the lights are off in most of the house anyway.

Then Dad’s buddies leave, and I hope he just leaves too but he doesn’t. He comes down and kneels by the fire. He probably is about to leave, so he’s probably trying to say goodbye, but instead he picks up a log because the fire’s low. Randall grabs his arm and goes, “Don’t, we’re trying to let it die down.”

He stands up right away, like Randall’s hand was hot or something, but he doesn’t say anything. He puts the log back on the pile and he starts looking at Callie. She doesn’t look at him but he looks at her until she stands up and goes, “I’m kind of cold, so, I’m just going to go put on some long pants.”

Dad goes, “Probably tired too, aren’t you?” Now she looks at him. “I mean you been working in the kitchen all night, you’re probably bushed.”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Which means he doesn’t want her to come back, and I guess she gets that, too, because she walks away like she just got in trouble. I think about telling her to say hi to Mom for me but I can’t say that with him here.

Then Dad sits down on the stump where my cousin was and it’s just me and Ty and Randall, and the only one missing is Shawn. I didn’t really think about it like that until Dad sat down and that’s another reason he should go away for making me think that. But he starts talking instead. He goes, “No father should have to bury his son.”

Ty goes, “No mother should have to, either,” but he says it quiet and Dad ignores it and keeps talking.
“I want you boys to promise me I’ll never have to do this again.”
No brother should have to bury his brother, I’m thinking. Nobody should have to bury anybody.
He goes, “Now somebody dropped the ball, somewhere along the line, because nobody told me it was that girl there with her uptight daddy who found Shawn like they did.”
By this he means Ty because Ty called him and told him, but I was there and Randall’s the one that made Ty call, else Ty wouldn’t have done it.
Ty goes, “I said they tried CPR on him—”
“Yeah but you didn’t say who, and you let me think it was the ambulance people or something. You left out the nouns, boy.”
“I didn’t—”
“You did, but I ain’t blaming you, cause I’m starting to see what’s going on here. That little girl, she got you all under some kinda spell. And Shawn was, too.” Dad drinks the rest of his beer and throws the can in the fire. “None of this happens if she never shows up here. And the more she’s here the worse things get. Now, I’m gonna get going, but I want you to know you can talk to me. You guys don’t never seem to talk to me no more, and I ain’t blaming you for that either, but this girl—this girl and that snotty cocksucker she calls a dad, they’re—”
“Oh,” goes Randall, like somebody just answered his question. He’s holding his hands up to the fire, and that’s all he says.
Dad goes, “Oh, what? You want to say something? Oh what, boy?” but Randall doesn’t move. And me, I’m just trying to keep looking at the fire. I’m trying but I can kind of see Dad step away and kick the firewood pile we made. Then I can tell he’s walking back towards Randall, and I know most times he gets mad we don’t really have to worry, but tonight I’m not sure, and I still don’t look just in case me looking will make it happen.
At first I think it’s Shawn when I hear somebody go, “Okay, okay. Time to get moving, time to go home.” I mean like, I really think it’s Shawn, like he’s right there and for one second it doesn’t feel weird to me at all because this is what he’s supposed to be saying, and then the next second I remember and so I look up because my heart is so big and pounding and it’s Ty. He’s got Dad by the arm and he goes, “You gotta bury one son tomorrow, you trying to make it two?”
And to Randall, Dad goes, “Yeah, I gotta bury a son tomorrow. A son.” And I can feel myself rocking back and forth because my heart’s beating so big.
Ty gets him walking up the hill, but he’s still muttering to himself, and it takes until he’s in his truck and gone and for Ty to sit back down again before my heart slows down, before it feels like it fits inside my chest again. And then right when Ty sits down, for some reason I wonder if Callie’s seen my mom naked yet.
But then I look up to Mom’s bedroom window, and she’s right there, looking at us.

Callie

Vickie passes you on your way back to your house. She just nods, keeps walking, like you’re crossing paths on a sidewalk somewhere normal.
You go in the back door, making no attempt to hide your presence in the house. Down the hall Dad shuts his door hastily. After a minute it creaks open again, and he calls out to you. You
figure loudly entering through the back door where only you would was courtesy enough, so you
don’t answer, just head upstairs. Soon enough, he’s at your door.

“You okay, kiddo?”
“I’m fine. Not as good as you, probably, but I’m fine.”
He opens the door wider. “What does that mean?”
“You know…if you’d have acted like this a little more often with Mom, she might still be here.”

You watch him mentally pause, as if trying to put off admitting it just a moment longer.

“Acted like what? What are you talking about?”

“Yeah, Mom told me,” you say with arrogance, somewhat enjoying the way it irks him
not to know how much you know. “Which at first I have to admit was a little weird to think
about, but after a while it started to make sense, I guess. Up until these past couple days, when
you suddenly can’t keep it in your pants, and now I just don’t know what the hell to think.”

Ultimately, it seems, he decides you know everything and just sighs, not with relief as
you half-expected—it stresses him out, keeping secrets, even Christmas presents—but more out
of concession. “We’re two consenting adults, Callie. I thought it might be best if you didn’t have
to think about it right now, so—”

“Oh great job on keeping that one under wraps.”
“She’s hurting, Callie. I’m just trying to help.”
“How romantic.”
“Your mom and I—”

“Stop, okay? I already got this from Mom, I don’t need to hear it again. Just promise me
you know what you’re doing, because that family is in enough pain.”

Again, his face reveals all. He’s about to do that adult thing and just lie and say he knows
exactly what he’s doing. But he’s no better at lies than he is secrets, and he seems out of energy
tonight. His mouth opens and closes, and he think for a second. Then he says, “I don’t know
about the family. I can’t speak about the whole family, but I’m trying to be there for Vickie, and
if she’s healing, then maybe they are, too.”

It’s the same word your mom used. Healing. Sex is healing, apparently, and now more
than ever you expect you’ll never experience anything like what they’re talking about. That
interior warmth—how could that ever come about inside a person on the eve of putting her son
in his final resting place?

But just because you don’t understand doesn’t mean it’s not true.
Chapter Twelve

Randall

When I woke up it was like any other day, and then it wasn’t. I remembered putting everything back in my room just how it used to be, and now I realized why: for those precious few seconds when I opened my eyes, when it was just another summer day and nothing at all in the world was wrong. I hated myself a little, for tricking myself like that. But then I was awake, and aware, and the guilt felt appropriate.

I knocked on Joey’s door to make sure he was awake. My great-aunt came to the door, and I apologized, but her hearing aid wasn’t in and so she said, What? and I had to mouth it slowly: Sor-ry. My great-uncle poked his head out from Ty’s room at the sound of his wife’s voice. No one had wanted to sleep in my bed, in my room. Where he’d fallen. Or at least, Mom didn’t offer it to anybody.

I stepped over some younger cousins in sleeping bags on the living room floor. Ty and Joey were eating cereal, watching SportsCenter. My uncle sat on the couch, fully dressed with his hands folded. He nodded at me, his mustache perfectly trimmed.

The church wasn’t full, which kind of bothered me. When Ty was a freshman he’d gone to a funeral for this guy from our school. The guy was a junior and had died in a boating accident just after school started, and Ty said everyone came to the funeral, the entire high school. He had been a pretty friendly guy, and they’d allowed all the students to walk down to the funeral if they wanted to, which they held at a church within walking distance probably for just that reason. Standing room only, Ty said. You would’ve gone too, if you were in high school.

No I wouldn’t have.

Shawn’s funeral wasn’t at the church we used to go to, back when we still went. It was Lutheran, though. We’d gone there once before, I remembered, for a Christmas service. Like this was only a place for special occasions. The preacher stood up there and talked about Shawn like he knew him, but after a few minutes I closed my eyes and took out Shawn’s name whenever he said it, and it sounded like he could’ve been talking about anybody.

We were all pallbearers. We bore the pall. I put Joey on the front right side because he’s left handed, and Ty behind him, with Dad across from Ty and behind me. My dad’s brother-in-law and my mom’s brother brought up the rear. Joey was all right when we took him from the church to the hearse, but at the graveyard right when we started towards the grave he started shaking a little, and before we were within earshot of anyone, I said, Hey, Joey. Joey.

He looked. He knew he was shaking. I said, Boobs, Joey, and just nodded. Boobs.

And he nodded and smiled, and one tear dropped from his eye before I looked away from him because I didn’t want to start shaking, too.

But that was it, for the hard part. The heat took away the focus from what was in front of us. You should never have to bury a brother, and you should never have to sweat in your best suit. The drops streamed down me on the inside of my shirt, tickling all the way. I stood next to my dad and thought about how I’d gotten taller than him since he’d moved away, how I was the only one of us taller than him now. Shawn had had a shot at it, but Ty would never be, nor Joey, unless some miracle growth spurt happened. I reminded myself to remember this in the future. That I was bigger than him, bigger than my father, and no one else would ever be.
I couldn’t look at the casket, really. So I kept looking at other people. My great-aunt and uncle looked like they always did, but then again at their age they were probably used to funerals. My aunt, my dad’s sister, was half-crying and half-making sure her kids were behaving. Callie had on a sort of determined face, like she was slightly angry, or trying to figure out a math problem. Not many people had thought to bring sunglasses, but my mom and Ty had both come prepared. My dad beside me was not exactly in my line of sight, but I kept sneaking glances at him. I wanted to know. I wanted to know exactly who he was, and what seeing his son in a coffin was changing inside him.

He wasn’t looking at Shawn, though, and he wasn’t looking at me, either. He was looking at Peter, and at Mom, and how Mom kept grabbing onto Peter’s arm. And Peter looked so uncomfortable whenever she did, like he’d just stepped on a baby and had no idea what to do next.

Peter

God help me. Every time she touched me or even stepped into my personal space, I thought she was about to ask me to run off somewhere and do it. Even right there at the gravesite, with him in a box not three feet away, she’d run a hand down my forearm and there’d be tears in her eyes and my daughter was right next to me but still, still I got excited, and everything below my neck hoped for her to just speak the invitation. Please. Fuck me, please. And I would have.

Vickie

The day Phil had dropped by unexpectedly, the day of the little pancakes, the day—I had had a significant thought about him. That I no longer cared. He was still an asshole, but not my problem anymore. And so I didn’t have to care about what had happened between us. Standing there, wrapped in the weight of that oppressive graveyard heat, I could remember the thought just fine—but I could no longer summon the sentiment. And he made it so easy. Just touch Peter and watch him turn red. Watch him fume. I couldn’t resist. It was a distraction, and catharsis, and probably weak of me but so was the sex and I just didn’t care because the whole matter was isolated to the three of us and therefore safe, it wasn’t hurting anyone but Phil and it was making me feel better. Superficially, maybe. But that was how I got through it, using Peter, needing Peter as I’d believed I might, even if I hadn’t known how.

Ty

I always expected to go my whole life and never see a real dead body. I mean funerals are one thing, I been to those. But then my little brother jumped out a window, and my neighbor brought him to the door like a package, his neck broke like a twig, head flopping around like it ain’t naturally supposed to be there. They fixed it for the funeral and I could just imagine them shoving some steel rod up his spine to make it stay still. I felt like I was gonna vomit all day, thinking about it.

Tommy’s dad is a big fat guy, kind of sweaty. He’s meeting me at the practice field behind the high school cause it’s the closest place between both our houses. The sprinklers are running in the field and the moon is out and sometimes when the water catches the moon just
right it glows like a ghost. And then finally his headlights swing into the parking lot. Tommy said at the funeral that his dad would do it, sure, no problem. The headlights move through the sprinklers when he pulls in beside me and I wish he’d kill them but he don’t. Even turns on his dome light when he reaches his fat arm over the seat of his old Pontiac, and I see him clear as day grabbing the brown paper bag. Nobody’s around though, I know, I been looking. Least nobody in a car, but damn it anybody could see you fat man, just turn off your lights. I say it to myself at least ten times while he’s trying to get the bag, with his fat flannel shirt and his sweaty arm, I know it’s sweaty it’s always sweaty, turn off your lights, turn em off goddamn it.

The lights go off, inside and out, and he opens his car door, which of course makes the dome light come back on. He’s a big man all over, not just fat but tall, so when he walks it’s got a waddle to it but it’s graceful, like he’s been doing it ever since he was a teenager when he probably wasn’t so fat. He rolls over to my car from ten paces like a bowling ball, and I wonder why he didn’t park closer.

He sits down in my minivan’s front seat and the shocks bottom out. I didn’t think about it before, but I never expected him to actually get in, maybe just hand it to me through the window or something. But now I can smell him. Even if he ain’t sweating now it smells like he was earlier, sweating into that shirt and he never changed it. “So, yeah. Damn shame about your brother. Just wanted to say it, so. Yeah.”

Tommy ain’t near as tall as his dad, and it’s like he regrets that because he eats a shitload and he’s getting fatter but not taller. He’s a linebacker now but he eats like he wants to be a defensive tackle, cause he does. His dad’s real supportive of him turning out exactly like his old man, who was on the line, who did drink all through high school and thinks Tommy and all his friends should be big drinkers, too.

“Got the rum you wanted, but unless you’re gonna shoot it straight, that’s kind of a pussy drink. Even if you shoot it, actually. So, yeah, I got you a present, here, this one…it’s whiskey. Not the name brand stuff but trust me it’s just as good, so. That’s a present. For your brother, so, yeah, it’ll put some hair on your chest. It’s what the Irish do, so yeah, it’s worked out for them. Go on, there. You’ll feel better.”

I always told myself before I didn’t need to do all the dumb shit my friends were doing, that I was better than this. But I ain’t.

Joey

She has on a tight dress and Randall says boobs and after that it’s all I can think about. For the whole funeral.

That night when I fall asleep I have this dream like I haven’t had before. I’m wearing all my clothes but there’s this girl I haven’t ever seen before in my life and we’re sitting in some kind of jungle area, there’s benches or something but they have palm leaves on them and we’re sitting on them. She’s on the same bench as me but we’re a couple feet apart and I’m angled towards her and she’s angled towards me and she’s butt naked. For a minute it’s like everything’s normal in the dream and we’re just looking at each other, or she’s looking at me every now and then but I’m staring at her, but it still feels normal, like if she was wearing clothes and I was staring at her.
But then she looks at me and keeps looking at me, and I feel something coming. I can see her tits and her nipples and they’re very nice, and I look between her legs and I know there’s something down there I can’t see because her legs are sort of closed, but it’s fucking amazing whatever it is. There’s hair but then there’s something underneath, like sort of moving maybe under the hair, or it’s not moving but I can tell whatever’s under there is alive, or it would be if I touched it, and it’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted and I’m afraid to look at it. And then it turns out I’m naked after all.

Then she reaches a hand out and touches my wrist, and I think my mind’s going to explode. And when she takes my hand by the wrist and she puts it on her knee, my mind does explode. It feels like electric in my brain and in my pants and then I wake up to the dark.

In my room there used to be Shawn and then for a couple days there was Randall but most of when it was Randall we were at Dad’s, so for a week now I’ve been alone in the dark and I never got used to it. Randall says it was better we moved Shawn out of here before he died because if we had to do it now it would’ve been harder. I guess he’s right, but it doesn’t change how alone I am now.

I wish Randall didn’t go. He moved back to his old room the day after Shawn died, and I helped him. I wish I hadn’t done that. He said if we didn’t that room would just end up a tomb nobody ever went in, and this is still our house and we still have to live here and we can’t live here if there’s a tomb in it. I guess he’s right but even that first night with no Randall I was trying to go to sleep alone, and I couldn’t sleep. And now I’m awake again. I used to talk to Shawn if I couldn’t sleep. He never did like it much, but if I kept at it, he’d finally answer.

In the dark I go, “Shawn,” just like I used to.
I go, “Shawn.” I can smell him, still. Those socks. Just like he’s still over there, somewhere in all that quiet. I say his name and I wait. “Shawn.”

And he goes, “Go to bed.”
I go, “I’m in bed.”
“Then go to sleep.”
“I want to go tee-peeing.” I remember now. This is how I find out he loves her. “Let’s do the neighbor’s house. That hot girl.”

Shawn sits up, kind of. Puts himself on his elbows. “Are you serious?”
“Yeah, why not? She’s new here, she’ll never see it coming.” He’s freaking out about it. I know something’s up. I know something. “Shawn.” I go, “Shawn.” He’s thinking about it, I can tell. “Shawn.”

“What?”
“We’ll need an alibi. We’ll need to go stay at somebody else’s house and then sneak back and do it.”

“Will you—”
“Gary told me they sell thirty-packs for four dollars at Dollar General.”
“You’ve got four dollars?”
“Please. I’ve got enough to get,” and then I have to do some math in my head. “A hundred and fifty rolls! Think about that! We’d be legends, using that much, it’d be like there was an avalanche or something! Holy shit we’re doing it.”
“We are not toilet-papering the neighbors’ house! You don’t even know her, only I know her! She’s going to know it was me! They’ve only been here a couple days and she only knows me! We’ll get caught, we’re not doing it.”
“We should.”
“We’re not, shut up, go to sleep.” He turns over on his side, away from me.
“Well how else is she gonna know we like her?”
This time Shawn sits all the way up. He goes, “You’re kidding me. You’ve never even met her. And anyway, she’s my age.”
“So what? I’ve dated older women before. Older than you, even.”
“No you haven’t.”
“Well they wanted to, but I wasn’t ready to settle down yet.”
“Liar. Go to sleep.” He sounds mad. Not like angry-mad, but hurt. He sounds hurt, and I start to feel bad for teasing him like that because now I know that he loves her.
“Shawn? I was just kidding. I don’t really like her. You can have her.”
“Oh thank you. Go to sleep.”
And now there’s nothing but dark and I’m awake and I can say Shawn all I want to but he’s not here. I can say Randall too but it’s just me and this room feels big and I’m all alone and I’ve got wet pants and I know that even though it didn’t look like her, it was Callie in my dream.
Chapter Thirteen

Randall

It was done. The coffin was in a hole and covered in dirt. My relatives had dispersed, my room was my room again, and it was time to begin whatever a normal life would now be. He died on Sunday, we buried him on Wednesday, Thursday my suit was back in the bag in my closet, my remaining brothers in front of the television, Mom in her room. She was taking the rest of the week off, but that was all. She meant to start back up again on Monday, which seemed too soon and I tried to talk her out of it. But we needed the money, she told me, and anyway staying busy would probably help her get by. In the meantime she asked us to please just give her a day or two to herself, to grieve on her own, in her own way.

By Thursday the bruise on my cheek was almost gone from when Ty punched me, but I could still feel it when I touched it.

We sat in front of the television, watching whatever came on.

Callie came by on Thursday morning. I was the only one awake, or at least the only one who’d come out of his room, and she told me to tell everyone that she was being sent to her mother’s for a couple days. Against her will, she emphasized, and she’d be back as soon as she could, probably Sunday. I told her I’d pass it on.

Sometimes Mom would emerge from her room to refill her glass. She walked by and didn’t look at us, really, beyond a quick glance. I criticized her in my head a couple times, we’re still here, etc., but then once I noticed her walking back to her room and I hadn’t seen her come out. She’d had to have passed within a foot of me and I hadn’t noticed, so I forgave her completely for spacing out. But at the same time I knew something had to be done, and who was going to do it?

Not Ty. When we had to take Shawn to the hospital, he’d dropped the ball, and since Shawn had died he’d barely spoken to us. His friends called and he never wanted to talk to them so eventually we stopped answering. I’d been the one to publicize his psycho little suicide journal and embarrass him, and so I knew I’d have to fix that somehow. But the fucker had punched me and I hadn’t forgiven him yet.

One thing seemed like it would solve everything. I had to get a job. To help out with our money problems, and to get me out of the house, but most of all to establish, hopefully, a pattern of responsible behavior that would trickle down to everyone else. And like Mom said, it would probably be better having something to do.

The main problem with this was my current lack of a driver’s license. That would have to be taken care of first. I’d put it off because I didn’t need it for anything until now. But now I needed it and I would get it. I’d even done all of my hours already, even if they were on back roads, and once or twice on the side streets around my Dad’s apartment. I didn’t like driving on the highway much, but at this point I didn’t care. Something needed to be done and I was going to do it.

Peter

I took the rest of the week off work, and without my asking, so did Portia. She insisted Callie come stay with her, saying that the depressing environment wasn’t good for her, and I couldn’t disagree. She’d set up a special appointment Friday evening for Callie with the therapist
as well, something else I wouldn’t have thought of. I told myself I was distracted due to the heaviness of the week’s events, that I needed a couple more days off to get my mind right and get prepared to enter back into the real world. But the moment Callie was gone Thursday morning, I found myself waiting on a knock at the front door. I kept the volume of the television down, didn’t close the door when I showered or used the bathroom, afraid I’d miss it.

It scared me a little, the way my mind was fixated on it. Even at the beginning of my marriage, I hadn’t wanted it this badly—and certainly not at the end. Just one more time, I assured myself, and it would be out of my system.

**Vickie**

Phil called that Friday. We’d been ignoring the phone, but he called three times in a row and eventually Joey answered it and brought me the cordless. It was about noon and I was still hung over, but considering having a sandwich and a cocktail to start the day.

“Don’t hang up,” he said.

My throat was dry, my head throbbing. I weighed the benefits of Advil against the pitfalls of getting out of bed. “What,” I said.

“I need to see em.”

“Not this weekend. Maybe next weekend.”

“See I thought you were gonna say that, and I—”

“Not this weekend.”

“Vick—”

“No.”

He sighed. He sounded tired, but I knew I was more tired and had no sympathy. He said, “Just one day.”

“Phil, please, just let them stay home and let them grieve on their own terms. And next weekend’s just a maybe, remember I said that. May-be.”

“It ain’t really up to you, Vick.”

“Don’t do this.”

“I don’t even need em to spend the night, I just gotta get em back on my side. They hate me right now.”

“They’ve hated you for four years. Just because you’re noticing it now doesn’t mean—”

“Shawn didn’t. God knows if I thought Shawn hated me when he died…Just imagine if any one of them hated you and then died, and you never got a chance to make it up to em.”

“No one’s going to die this weekend, Phil. You can wait.”

“Dammit Vick, I’m not an idiot. I don’t expect to win em over in just one weekend, but I have something I think’ll really help em. And if they know I just want to help, then maybe they’ll like me again.”

I wanted to point out that maybe helping them for selfish reasons wasn’t the best way to go about it, but we were going nowhere. “What do you want to do?” I asked.

“Take em putt-putting. Just like we did first time they came over here, I took all four of em putt-putting and I want to do it again. It’s a good idea, dammit, just let me do it.”

I sighed a long sigh to let him know I still protested, but already I was thinking of the benefits of being alone in the house. “Fine,” I said. “When?”
“Just a couple hours on Saturday. Okay?”
“Okay. They won’t like it, but I’ll tell them.”
“Not about what we’re doing. I want it to be a surprise.”
I didn’t promise not to. “Is that all?”
“Just one more thing.”
“What.”
A long pause. Then: “Child support,” and he just let it hang in the air, letting me work out for myself the import of the phrase, in this context.
“Are you—are you fucking kidding me?”
“Vick, it has to be discussed.”
“This is particularly fucking morbid and sick and wrong for you to bring up right now. I just…” And then I started to smile, first out of disbelief, then anger, then at the thought of revenge, which would come in the form of describing the glory of Peter’s cock in specific detail.
Phil said, “I wanna pay you back for the fucking funeral.”
What? I thought.
In my silence, he continued. “I know what you were gonna do, you were gonna pay for it all by yourself and use that as another reason to hate me. Well you got enough of those. You never once mentioned to me how much it all cost but I have a pretty good idea, I talked to the funeral director guy.”
“You don’t have any money, Phil.”
“So what? Poor people die all the time and they still get buried. We’ll set it up so you pay for your half now and I pay for my half in installments, or something. They can do that, right?”
“I don’t know. Maybe.”
“That’s why I gotta talk to you about child support, because, okay fuck it you’re right I am poor, I don’t have much and I know that. But the dollars I pay you right now is based on four kids, and if I wanna pay for my share of the goddamn funeral I’m gonna need a break. We gotta change the amount.”
“How about,” I said, “we just keep it the same and it’ll work itself out over time?”
“No,” he said. “I’m paying for my son’s funeral, not his ghost. He don’t live there no more. We gotta do it like this.”
My headache pulsed with eyelid-closing strength. I stood up to get the ibuprofen. “God, okay, fine, can we please get off the phone now?”
“One more thing.”
“No, no more things. What time Saturday?”
“Two o’clock. I can pick em up, it’s closer to your place than mine. And one more thing.”
“What.”
“You don’t have to date that guy just cause I can’t stand him.”
I laughed, exasperated. He was trying to take the fun out of it. It might’ve worked, too, if he hadn’t kept talking.
“You can do better. You still clean up real nice, you can do better.”
“Goodbye, Phil.”
I hung up the phone and sat back down on the bed. From the living room I heard a car dealership commercial on the television, and I knew whomever I’d find watching television now,
it wouldn’t be Shawn. It would never be Shawn. I lit a cigarette and looked for my empty glass near the bed.

Ty

Mom says we gotta go see Dad tomorrow. When I had a couple beers on the porch, I could smell em on myself in the morning. I don’t want to be hungover or smell like alcohol around Dad. He’d probably fucking love it, so I won’t do it.

Only tried a sip of that whiskey so far, and it’s some awful shit. Stupid Tommy’s dad calling the rum a pussy drink kinda ruined it for me, and I ain’t even cracked that bottle yet.

Tomorrow night, though. Saturday. I swear to god, Saturday night I’m gonna drink myself retarded.

Callie

“Your mother tells me you’ve had a tragedy this week.”

Mom called it a “quick session” and promised you wouldn’t have to go again on Sunday, so you agreed. Now you intend to get it over with as fast as possible. Put it all out there, fast and hard and hit him with it and then wait for him to crack your head wide open and then hopefully it’ll be done. As if this past week isn’t enough, you’re about to start your period and you’ve never had cramps this bad before. There’s metal in there, it feels, like a cable that cranks a notch tighter every now and then, and it kills.

“Yes, my neighbor died and I found him. The one we talked about last time, you said there was potential in that relationship but you wouldn’t tell me what kind? Well, now he’s dead, so tell me what to do. What do I do.”

“Let’s just slow down a second,” he says, writing. “First I want to say I’m terribly sorry for what you’ve been through this week. Second, it sounds like you’re starting to think about our conversations in between sessions. Have you? Has it been helping?”

As if you could prevent yourself from thinking about your therapy. It’s changed everything you do, from the way you brush your teeth to the way you read a sentence in a book, always looking for signs of how fucked up you are. Usually Dr. Werner’s voice in your head is antagonistic, something you want to disprove—like, maybe if you brush right-handed tonight he can’t say you’re not allowing yourself to be open to new experiences. This week though, after Shawn’s death, you’ve been accepting the internal criticism, even encouraging it, hoping to hear something that will help. But no, it’s not helping yet.

“It will,” he says. “Give it a little more time, and today’s conversation added to it, it will.”

“Good, because I’m lost.” You try to say it seriously, but fail. It sounds so wrong, so false, as though you don’t even believe it.

“Tell me about finding him.”

“He—” you begin quickly, then sigh, then continue. “He was up in his room and I could see him there. And then next time I looked out my window I wasn’t really looking at his window but I thought I saw something drop, and it turned out to be him, but my first thought wasn’t, Go see if he’s all right. It was What are they gonna think if they find you there with him and he’s hurt. Because I had my knife in my pocket.”

He pauses in his writing. Waits. Asks nothing, but you answer anyway.
“Because it was just there, I don’t know. I was mad at my mom and at you and my dad and I was thinking about doing it again. But I wasn’t depressed or having low self esteem or anything, I was just mad, and it was already going away and I didn’t even do it but I still had the knife in my pocket and so I got scared and I couldn’t help him and now he’s dead. He’s dead and I didn’t help—”

Something inside you twists, and you cringe. Tears form in the corners of your eyes, as if forced out by the pressure in your middle. “First and foremost Callie,” he says, not realizing you’re in actual pain, “you have to accept the fact that it was not your fault. Do you hear me? It’s not your fault.” You nod but your teeth are gritted together and you can’t speak. He scoots the tissue box closer to you and continues. “I’m very glad to hear you didn’t cut yourself again, but please listen to me now and get rid of the knife. You don’t need it. It can only make things worse, that’s all it has the power to do.”

You whisper, “I need to go to the bathroom, please.”
“In just a minute,” he says, which marks the end of your being cooperative, or nice, because dammit this hurts. “But first I need to hear that you understand, it’s not your fault—”
“You said that!”
“—and you aren’t responsible for making things right again. That’s impossible, Callie. Nothing will bring him back, not your guilt, not cutting yourself, not anything.”
“I’m going to the fucking bathroom,” you say, grabbing your purse as you run inside the house, hoping he doesn’t see you clutch your stomach. The last thing you need is that old man considering your reproductive system.

After fifteen minutes his wife knocks. You’d hoped to kill the remainder of the session in here, but she’s a sweet woman and you believe you can trust her not to talk to him about this. She locates some Midol and promises to lie for you, as long as you promise to see a doctor.

Outside again, he’s all apologies. “I didn’t realize you were sick, Callie. You should feel free to tell me so, if you are.”
“Okay. I’m sorry.”
“If you have to vomit again—”
“Right, let’s just, move on.”
“Okay.” A fresh glass of lemonade sits next to the water spot from your first. You really do like his wife. “Tell me about your dad,” he says.

Inside, you smirk. You had planned on telling him all about this today, expecting some Oedipal explanation of why it was upsetting you. (Yeah. Freud. You looked him up the second Mom told you you’d be coming here. Well—after you’d screamed and cried and run up to your room. And slapped your mother. Then you found Freud.) He’d say your father’s attention going to other women instead of you poses some sort of perverted threat to your self-worth, but that it’s perfectly natural to be upset about it. Whatever. You were prepared to endure that, but now you’re not in the mood. You say, “He doesn’t know what to do with himself. He came with me, you know. Mom probably told you. I was scared, and he knocked, so I brought him. So he did the CPR and it didn’t work and now he’s just going with the flow. Kind of…floating along. He should probably be talking to you, too.”
“Maybe so. You think he’s feeling some of the same things you’re feeling?”
“Probably.”

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“Do you feel let down, because he’s as lost as you are?”
“I don’t know. Should I?”
Dr. Werner uncrosses his legs, switches and crosses them again. “Well, you could unconsciously be expecting him to show you how to get through this hard time in your life. That’s what our parents are for, right? To provide us with a behavioral model which we can accept or reject based on how successful we believe it to be?”
“Yeah, but this?” you say. “How is anyone supposed to know what to do about this?”
“True. But you are doing something, yes? You’re trying to be there for them.”
“Yes.”
“To help them heal.”
You look at him. You say, “I suppose so.”
“Good.”
“We should? Help them heal.”
“If you think you can. Like I said, you aren’t responsible for this. You can’t fix this. And what you can do isn’t guaranteed to make them feel better. But sometimes just letting someone know you’re there for them can help them. And doing something about your own grief, in the stead of just letting it fester inside you, can be beneficial for you as well.”
“We should help them heal.”
“In whatever way you can, yes.”
You get what he’s saying, but the phrase sticks. In whatever way you can.
Afterwards, without your asking, your mother takes you directly to Urgent Care. You decide you like Mrs. Werner a little less than you thought you did.

Vickie
Two reasons to force myself out of bed, Saturday morning. First, Phil might stop in, though I didn’t expect him to risk coming inside, after my recent venomous outburst. The second reason was Peter. I put on lipstick.
Alcohol works, but sex works better, and it doesn’t take as long.
Ten minutes after they left, Peter knocked on my door. “Hi,” he said. “Are the boys here?”
“As if you didn’t know,” I said, pulling him inside by his dick. Hard before I even touched it.

Peter
Friday night the phone rang and I nearly jumped out of my shoes trying to answer it. But it was only Callie’s doctor, asking if I could accompany my daughter to next week’s session.
“Absolutely,” I said. “Anytime. Anything I can do, yes, I’ll be there.”
“Well,” he said, sounding somewhat surprised. “Okay then. That was easy.”
“Why wouldn’t it be?” I asked. Something clicked in my mind, and I tried to decode what he’d just said. The thought process felt different, as if I’d only been giving the world half my attention lately. He was accusing me of something, and the anger that resulted brought me out of the fog. “All you had to do was ask. I love my daughter, Doctor, you’ve never asked me before.”
“Yes, I have,” he said, annoyingly calm. “You’ve always been too busy in the past. With your job. Isn’t that right?”

Portia. My anger refocused but didn’t lessen in intensity. When I hung up the phone, I felt myself moving slowly, deliberately. I stared at the wall and felt myself staring. If this doctor thought I was a bad father, it was only because Portia had filled his head with the idea. I’d been there, hadn’t I?

Then I remembered how scared I’d been when Callie decided to live with me. It had struck me that everything I knew about my daughter was just relayed information from my ex-wife. Of course, I had generated my own impressions of Callie’s behavior that didn’t necessarily agree with Portia’s assessments, but the simple facts of Callie’s life, who her teachers were, what she was reading now, what she wanted for her birthday—these all came from Portia. I got a nightly update before turning off my reading light.

Callie had been in therapy for two years now; could this really have been going on the whole time? A request for my presence denied by my wife, on my behalf? How long had she been preventing me from getting to know my daughter?

This divorce could have been in the works for years. Perhaps from the moment she realized she preferred Callie’s company…not just over mine, but without my involvement whatsoever. At last, I pulled my anger back and focused it on myself. I hadn’t been a good father. I still wasn’t. Admission is always the first step to rehabilitation. Once I’d repeated it enough in my head to believe it—and not just believe it, but keep it close—I finally felt ready. To get my priorities in line. To fix the situation. To be a good father. The first distraction I needed to eliminate was the most recent, and the most pressing. Whatever Vickie needed, I would tell her, I would be more than willing to do. Except this.

It was just sex. Cathartic for her, perhaps. But not for me. Or anyway, I didn’t need it, and I didn’t have the attention to spare for something I knew ahead of time wouldn’t result in anything. She had made that much clear.

One more time, I told myself, with even more determination. One more time and that’s it. And when I saw that truck full of boys pull out of their driveway, I walked over and knocked on her door.
Chapter Fourteen
Joey

Ty and me have to sit looking at each other. That’s just how the truck is in the back, but he’s not looking at me and I’m not looking at him, either. Dad has a baseball game on the radio. I know none of us wanted to come today, but nobody said anything. Ty should have but he didn’t. Dad won’t tell us where we’re going, either, but soon as I’m about to ask him again, we get there. He gets out and Randall gets out and they pull up the seat so we can get out, and Dad goes, “Remember this place?”

I go, “Yeah,” but only because my bus goes by here on the way to school. I know what he means, though. That last time we all came here.

Randall goes, “Yeah, Dad, we remember.”

Ty goes, “No, Steph still works here,” which is one of his ex-girlfriends. I wonder when I’ll get to make fun of him again. I wonder if we’re just going to stay like this forever, where we don’t ever make fun of each other at all and we don’t even complain about hanging out with Dad. It really sucks, and I know why we’re doing it but it still sucks. I figure Randall will start, when we start again.

Dad goes, “I mean, you guys remember last time we came here?” He’s paying the girl at the counter and Ty and Randall are picking out their putters, but I go get the blue ball first because I remember Shawn never let me have the blue ball. But then I don’t want it after all and put it back.

Randall goes, “Yeah, Dad, we remember.”

We go to the first hole. Dad goes, “Did anybody get a scorecard? Randall?”

Ty goes, “Really? We’re keeping score?”

“Yeah! How else we gonna know who wins?”

Ty and Randall look at each other. I put my ball down. I’m gonna go first. My ball is orange. I don’t even like orange but I’m giving Shawn the blue ball. Randall goes, “Do you remember last time we came?”

Dad goes, “Course I do. Why’d you think I brought you here?”

And Ty goes, “Last time you said we weren’t ever gonna keep score again.”

“What?”

I hit my ball. It’s got to hit off the bricks to get around the pit but I hit it too hard and it bounces off the back bricks and comes back into the pit. I go and get it and bring it back. That’s called a Mulligan. Nobody’s looking at me anyway. I should’ve got the blue ball, maybe Shawn would help me if it was his ball I was hitting.

Dad kind of laughs. “You guys were fighting over who was winning? Was that it?”

Randall goes, “Not exactly, no.”

I pretend I haven’t hit it yet and I pick up my ball and go get the blue one. When I get back Randall’s about to hit but I don’t care. He can go first.

He hits and then he goes, “Shawn started crying. You said we weren’t going to keep score anymore if he was gonna act like that. But,” Randall starts to walk towards where his ball stopped but he doesn’t walk on the grass, he walks on the bricks like a balance beam, “he just ended up crying harder and so you said, ‘Screw it! We’ll never keep score again! Are you happy now?’”
Except he didn’t say screw it. He said fuck it.
Dad goes, “No I didn’t. I still have the scorecard. I didn’t say that.”
Ty goes, “You kept that scorecard?”
The grass on the holes is blue. I don’t remember the grass being blue. There’s a big
giraffe on the second hole and I remember that but I don’t remember the grass being blue.
Randall hits his ball in and goes, “Two.”
Ty goes, “We don’t have a scorecard,” and so Dad goes and gets one. I hit my ball where
Randall hit his, and it works and I get a two, too.
We keep playing. We hit under the giraffe’s legs, and then we go up some stairs and hit
across a bridge. I go, “Hey Randall, was this grass always blue?”
Ty goes, “Yeah, it was blue.”
I go, “Hey Randall.”
We hit into a cave and out the other side. Then we hit into some tubes. Ty gets a hole-in-
one and Randall doesn’t say anything and neither do I, but Dad goes, “All right. Nice job.”
And Ty goes, “Thanks.”
Dad hits and gets close to the tube-holes but not in. And then he hits it into the wrong
one. Ty just got a hole-in-one and Dad hits it into a different hole.
Then we’re going downhill again.
Dad goes, “So Randall, if I said we weren’t gonna keep score, why do I still have that
scorecard, huh?”
There’s another giraffe over here. I don’t know why they have giraffes but they do.
Randall goes, “You kept keeping score, you just gave Shawn an eight for the holes he
didn’t play because he was crying.”
Ty nods. I don’t think this grass was blue. I go, “Hey Randall.”
I go, “Hey Randall,” but he’s hitting and he waves at me to be quiet.
Dad buys us some snacks at the stand before we start the last nine holes. I get a snow
cone because it’s blue like Shawn’s ball. Dad gets some nachos so we sit for a minute while he
eats them. Ty adds up the scores and says he’s winning and then me and then Randall and then
Dad is in last. Dad goes, “You remember who won last time?”
Ty goes, “I did.”
But Randall goes, “No, I won.”
Dad eats a nacho and he smiles and says, “See there? You don’t remember everything.”
Then Ty goes, “Oh yeah, that’s right, you won. That’s right.”
Dad goes, “Are you sure?”
And Randall sighs and he goes, “I won, Ty was second, Joey was third, you were fourth.
Shawn got last because he had eights on the last four holes. He was winning before that but you
gave him eights, so he got last.”
“Oh come on.” Dad stands up and we go to hole number ten. He tries to laugh again but
he’s got nachos in his throat and he coughs. Then for some reason he lights up a cigarette, like
coughing reminded him to. “You’re making me sound like the devil, here.”
“I’m just telling you what happened.”
There’s a hippopotamus in the water next to us. I go, “Hey Randall.”
“It was blue, Joey.”
I go, “Dammit.” I really thought it was green.

We keep playing. There was one other group playing but they only played nine and now it’s just us. We’re on the back side of the mountain and there’s a waterfall, and there’s a woods next to us, and nobody’s talking except saying their score.

Ty misses a short putt and goes, “Fuck.”

Dad keeps playing bad on purpose. He hits it into the water when it’s really easy not to hit it into the water, and I go over and scrape it out of the stream with my putter and give it back to him. He takes the ball and goes, “Now hold on. If Shawn was winning then how come he was crying?”

“He was winning, I’m telling you. You made him last.”

Ty goes, “You still got that scorecard but you can’t remember him crying?”

Dad thinks about it for a minute and then goes, “No. I don’t remember that. I remember us having a pretty good time. That’s why I brought you out here today.”

And Ty goes, “Oh,” but Randall just shakes his head.

Nobody’s hitting, so I put my ball down. We’re heading back toward the mountain and this one goes straight uphill. I hate these ones. My ball always comes back down.

“I wanted you boys to remember hanging out with Shawn and having a good time. I thought it might help, you know. That’s how I remember it and it helps me.”

I hit my ball up the hill and it stays up there. Ty is staring at my ball. Randall puts his ball down and he’s about to hit it. I want to tell him to hit it. Hurry up and hit it and stop talking so much.

But he doesn’t hit it. He looks up at Dad again, and then he starts rubbing his eyes.

Just hit it. Shawn, make him shut up and hit it.

“He started crying because you cursed at him.”

Dad goes, “I did not.” And then he goes, “What’d I say?”

Randall shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t remember.”

I remember.

Ty’s still staring up at where my ball stopped. Dad’s waiting on an answer and I already went, and Randall won’t hit. So we just stand there. In my head I go, Shawn. Shawn.

Vickie

It was always a passing thing, ever since I had Ty, to have that momentary déjà vu of breast-feeding. Phil’s mouth on my nipples, his roving tongue, would occasionally bring a fleeting familiar sensation, but as his mouth had established its own recognizable fingerprint before any of the children, the occasions were rare. There were two men before Peter in the years since the divorce. The first brought on specific déjà vu of when Joey was a baby, to my surprise. It was only the once, with him, and I never gave him the chance to duplicate it. The second man I slept with on more than one occasion. He was the experimental sort, tried different things, and his mouth had the capacity to conjure up images of any of the boys at my breast. But it was always such a passing thing. Gone as soon as I recognized it.

That first night with Peter, I don’t remember much. Maybe he sucked on my nipples, maybe he didn’t. The second time he definitely did not, because when it happened the third time I was taken aback. What is this? I thought. What is happening?
His lips wrapped around my nipple and then curled inward, tugging at them without suction, and the first sensation it gave me came and went quickly, but I recognized it instantly, reminiscent of a sensitivity I was more than familiar with: the sudden impulse to feed due to the call of a crying infant, almost like an itch but more just an urgency that could only be cured by a baby’s mouth. This came first and disappeared just as quickly. But then, as Peter’s lips kept up their magic: the déjà vu, which did not pass. It was Shawn. It felt exactly like Shawn.

The sex I’d intended to empty me, to blank out my mind, and though now my mind was far from blank, it proved to be even better because I knew it wasn’t dangerous, I knew there wouldn’t be any consequences, I didn’t have to wonder if my grief was driving me insane with obsession because I knew exactly what was causing the sensation and subsequent association. It wasn’t me doing it, it was him, without him even knowing it, and finally my grief felt safe, my horrible sorrow something temporary that I could summon and dismiss at will. It was secret, it was mine, and I held his head to my chest and felt Shawn at my breast and allowed entry to the images of holding him in my lap on the couch watching television, Ty and Randall prone on the carpet in front of me watching Sesame Street and Ty in elastic-waistband jeans and Randall in nothing but a diaper and today’s episode was brought to you by the letter L and the number 5 and Shawn’s asleep in my lap propped up on a pillow but asleep with his mouth still wrapped around me little sleeping infant kisses his lips of their own accord intermittently squeezing and rolling my nipple into his mouth

And finally I couldn’t bear the sadness another moment. I shoved Peter down to the bed. I shoved the sadness away and looked at what was in front of me, the man looking my body up and down, and I thought about the tears on my cheeks and wiped my face but didn’t think that would be enough to keep the secret. So before he could look me in the eyes I dropped my face into a pillow and propped myself up for him to enter me from behind.

I felt like two different people, there on the bed. Two different urges, the lower half of me craving the friction, the heat, the pounding satisfaction, while the upper half of me was still in recovery, choking back saliva and snot and wondering how I’d stumbled upon this miracle source of temporary but extreme grief. And slowly the lower half of me began to consume the upper half, creeping up through me like a spill into a paper towel, and soon enough the shock was gone, the last thought being next time I’ll do better, meaning I wouldn’t be surprised by the déjà vu and I could go straight from that to the sex, I wouldn’t even cry, I could keep it locked inside and savor it and then put it away, I had control, I felt certain of it.

After that, no more thoughts. I came like dynamite.

He lay down next to me afterwards. I beckoned his mouth towards my chest, and he placed a kiss here and there, but the feeling didn’t return. Just as well. I was ready for him to leave anyway. Until next time.

He dressed wordlessly, until even his shoes were on. Then he said, “I could stay.”
“You should go.”
“Right. I should go. Or even just a little longer, not that long.”
“No, you should go.”
“I should go. Right.”
He started out the door, but I called after him. His eyes said he thought perhaps I was
asking him to stay after all, and for the first time I felt somewhat cruel. But I shook the feeling
off quickly. Sex without a relationship. This is every man’s dream, and he can get over himself.
“I thought you should know. I’ve had a tubal ligation. So, I can’t get pregnant. In case
you were concerned.”

His face dropped, and then he looked at me, finally without that post-sex haze in his eyes.
“I really wasn’t. Concerned.”

“How responsible of you. It hadn’t even crossed your mind?”
He shook his head. “No, because I’ve been meaning to tell you. Or, today I was going to
make sure—this is the last time this can happen.”

“What?” I sat up in bed. “No, no it’s not, Peter. This is not the last time. Do you hear
me?”

“It’s not up for debate. This isn’t healthy for you, whether you realize it or not, and it’s
not healthy for me. I’m going.”
And he did. That bastard turned and left.
I grabbed the nearest clothes and ran after him.

Ty

“I never said that,” says Dad.
“Fine, whatever,” says Randall.
“You don’t believe me.”
“I’m just telling you what I remember.”

They been talking all day. Not me, though. This is like Randall’s trick, what he always
does. He’ll be so quiet that we forget he’s even there. But today something’s different. He’s
talking to Dad a bunch, which is good because then I don’t have to. But he ain’t even saying
what we’re all thinking.

Hole number sixteen. Last hole Dad got a hole-in-one so he’s up first. It’s got a ramp
right in the middle of it to hop over a little green-water stream. Joey’s walking in the stream.
He’s got on flip-flops so it’s all right. He’s been acting weird today too, but I just don’t have the
energy to yell at him.

Dad and Randall keep arguing about who said what. I’m getting tired of it.

I see this bird up in the air and I don’t know what it is. Straight in front of the hole. Just
sitting on an air current, riding it and holding still right in the middle of the nothing like a seagull
except it’s brown and there’s no seagulls around here.

I got two bottles for tonight. Mom does it in her room by herself. So will I. Dad does it at
home by himself. The difference between us is…

What is the difference. It’s bugging the hell out of me. I haven’t done it yet cause I don’t
know what the difference is, and I gotta know there’s a difference.

Randall nudges me. “It’s your turn,” he says. I put my ball down and look up the fake
grass at the ramp, and my eyes keep moving on up to that bird. What the hell kind of bird is that,
floating out over the woods, there. I swear everything is bugging the hell out of me today. I read
the paper this morning and it bugged the hell out of me. The weather section. I put it down on the
table and just stared at it, I wanted to crumble it up in a ball and piss on it, which is stupid.
because it’s just weather, it ain’t like it has any choice in the matter, but it just bugged me so bad and what is that goddamn bird.

Joey

Shawn is making me invisible. I asked him to help me but I meant with the putt-putting, but now he’s helping me in some other way. It’s like I can do anything I want and nobody says anything. If I have a bad shot I just go get the ball and bring it back and nobody says anything about it. If I had to piss I would piss in this creek but I’m walking in it and I don’t want to walk in a piss creek.

Dad goes, “Why would I call my own son that?”

Randall goes, “You’ve called me that.”

“I have not.”

“Fine. Can we just finish this? Ty, hit your fucking shot.”

And then Ty winds up and cracks it. It’s a putter so you’d think it wouldn’t make a crack like that but it does, and the ball goes off the ramp and just keeps going on up into the sky. Nobody says anything. I can’t even believe it, right off. He puts his hand flat over his eyes and squints, and then I try to find the ball too but I can’t find it, I see a bird but I can’t see the ball.

Then I hear a crack again because the ball hit a tree in the woods somewhere.

Ty goes, “You know it’s gonna rain tomorrow? And all this week?”

Dad looks at me and goes, “Run up to the front and grab another ball.”

But Ty goes, “No, don’t. I’m done.”

“What’s the matter with you?”

“You called me that before, too. He ain’t making it up.”

Randall doesn’t say anything. He’s just watching now.

And Dad goes, “Christ, I don’t remember ever saying that before in my life.”

Ty goes, “There’s a lot of your life you don’t remember. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

And he starts walking. He doesn’t have a ball anymore so it makes sense.

“We got two holes left after this one! I paid for eighteen, not sixteen.”

Ty stops. He goes to a bench and sits down. He goes, “Fine. Finish up.”

“You’re not gonna play?”

“Just put me down for an eight.”

I pull my club back over my head. Everybody stops talking and I don’t feel invisible anymore, but I might be, so I swing anyway. My ball doesn’t make the ramp, though. It goes off to the side and hits off the bricks and pops straight up in the air. It drifts backwards a little bit, and then comes down next to Dad on the sidewalk, and then bounces back up high in the air again. Then it lands in the water next to a giraffe.

Then I feel bad because it was Shawn’s blue ball and I know why I’m not invisible anymore. Dad takes me by the back of the neck and pushes me toward the exit, and he goes, “Fine, we’re leaving.”

We walk over the last two holes and I track wet steps on the grass. We drop off our stuff at the front. A bald guy with a collared shirt and sunglasses is standing there with his arms crossed, staring at us like if we weren’t leaving he’d kick us out. He’s got a name tag on too, so I ask him about it because he would know better than any of us.
“Hey, was this grass always blue like this?”
And he goes, “Um, no. We replaced it a couple years ago. Used to be regular old green, but we thought the blue looked better. Looks sharp, doesn’t it?”
I look back at the rest of them and I can’t help it, I’m smiling. We go to the truck, and when we’re pulling out of the parking lot, Dad goes, “Used to be green. Did you hear that?”
Randall just shakes his head.

Vickie

He actually ran away from me, like he was afraid of me, like I was some powerful force about to destroy him and not just a piece of ass, willfully had.
It wasn’t exactly a run, but he wasn’t stopping. I had to run, though, to catch up to him by the apple trees. “Don’t do this to me now,” I said, and he stopped.
“Do what?”
“Don’t fuck this up by trying to be my friend now. You had that chance, now let me do what I want to do, please. This is helping me, I promise.”
“You’re kidding me,” he said, turning around to face me. “How could this possibly be helping you?”
“I can’t explain it, but it is, you just have to believe me.”
He shook his head slowly, but I knew I had him thinking about it now. I knew he didn’t really want it to stop.
“I could go back to drinking,” I said. “Is that healthy? Would you rather I do that?”
His head kept shaking, but he looked away. “After all this,” he said, “you don’t even consider us friends?”
“Friends don’t fuck, Peter.”
“What if I’d rather be friends?”
“I’m taking that option off the table, here.”
We stood, looking at each other.
“Okay, fine,” I said. “Take a day or two and think it over if you have to.”
I turned and started walking home. “What did I do?” he said after me.
I paused and looked back at him. “I don’t even remember anymore.”
At first he seems to accept it, but then he sees something in my eyes. “Just tell me.”
“Okay, fine. How about this: Next time you want to be friends with a woman, try caring more about what she thinks than what her ex-husband thinks, okay?”
“You’re kidding.”
“Nope.” I started walking again.
“If I cared about that, I wouldn’t be fucking you,” he said.
“Yes you would,” I said, and left him standing there.

Randall

The last thing he said to us as we got out of the truck at our house was, Do you remember what I told you? About that neighbor girl?
Ty said, Do you? and slammed the door.
I stood there and looked at Dad, and he looked back and dared me to say something. But I didn’t say a thing. I didn’t think Ty was handling it right. He was saying whatever he felt like, and it did seem to be the only thing Dad listened to, but it felt selfish to me. You can’t just let your emotions out like that. You have to keep control. I felt like I was in control, but only of myself. Everybody else was still running on emotion.

I would figure it out, somehow. I was being too nice, and that might have to change. It still had to start with a job.

When I walked inside, Mom wasn’t in her room, but on the couch. Joey had seated himself in the chair across the room from her, and he looked at me when I came in. Ty was nowhere to be found. The television was on, and she didn’t even look at me when I sat down beside her. I waited for a commercial, in case she really was watching something. She had a glass, of orange juice and something. I took the remote, muted the TV. Mom? I said. You doing okay?

I’m fine, baby, she said as she smiled at me. How was the golfing?

I looked at Joey. He shrugged.

It was fine. Are you sure you’re all right?

Yes. I’m fine. Why?

I pointed at her, waving my finger up and down, indicating her appearance.

Finally she looked at herself. She couldn’t see the black smears of mascara on her cheeks, or the way her hair suggested she’d just woken up. But she could see the dress. The one she wore to the funeral.

She paused for a moment and then laughed. Well this is what happens when you get dressed in the dark.

I pointed at her face. You put on make-up?

Yes, you know, she said. She rubbed under her eyes and looked at her fingers, then picked up her glass. Thought I might try to look nice today.

Oh. Okay.

Do I look nice?

You look great, Mom.

Joey said, What’re you watching?

She raised her eyebrows. He pointed at the TV, where she looked and then squinted. You know, I have no idea. And she laughed again.

Mom—hey, Mom, I said, restraining myself from snapping my fingers in front of her. I’m going to get a job. Okay?

You need your license to do that, baby, unless you want to mow lawns.

That’s what I’m saying. I’m going to schedule the test this week, and when I get my license I’ll get a job, and that way you don’t have to go back to work right away.

Joey said, Really?

Yeah.

Mom said, Are you sure you’re ready? Maybe Ty should take you out for a little practice before you take the test.

I know what I’m doing, I said. I just don’t like the highways much, but I know how to drive.
Joey said, Really?
Yes, I said, a little too loudly. He raised his hands, the I-meant-no-harm pose, and turned back to the TV.
Well okay, Mom said, but I’m still going back to work on Monday. It’ll be good for me.
Yeah you keep saying that, but—I mean look at yourself.
Oh come on, Randall, you have to trust me! Look, I’ll go fix myself up right now, and we’ll pick some tomatoes from the garden and we’ll have a nice supper.
Tomatoes aren’t ripe yet, said Joey.
Well, whatever is ready, we’ll get that. Okay? Trust me Randall, I’m fine.
She leaned over and hugged me, and then let go with one hand and beckoned Joey closer. He knelt in front of her, and she hugged us both. Then, pulling back, she made a noise like she’d just finished a big glass of water, like she was refreshed and healthy, and went to her room.
When she was gone, we looked at each other a moment. Then Joey threw his arms open wide and with a sentimental look on his face leaned over to hug me. I shoved him away and went upstairs.

Joey

Mom’s acting like some kind of crazy-ass, but at least she’s out of her room. Ty’s still pretty sour, and Randall is too, and I just want to get back to making fun of each other. I know he’s gone and he’s not coming back and that’s why they’re so grumpy but they just have to realize that he’s not gone. That’s what I did. You just have to think about him, you can even talk to him if you want to. They’ll see.

Everything is fine.

Callie

It’s Saturday, and they’re still not answering the phone. This is disturbing. You haven’t seen or spoken to anyone since the night of the funeral except Randall, and even that was just for a moment. You have to do something. You sit down at the piano, play just the opening five chords of Moonlight Sonata. After that you can only stare at the keys. A small molten thing boils inside you.

Somehow this turns into the biggest fit in recent memory. For two hours you scream and curse from inside a locked bathroom, insisting that your mother take you home (she disputes the term). You know this will come back to bite you when Dr. Werner hears about it, but you can’t care about that right now. Mom argues that maybe it’s better for them that you’re here, that sometimes families need time alone together. You shout back that she has no idea what they need, but you know she might be right. They might be healing without you. But that seems far too easy to be true. Keep it up. Continue the fight. They need you.

Finally she says, “Fine. Just—give me one more decent meal. Then I’ll take you. Okay?”
To which you can only agree. Unfortunately it’s already eight o’clock, and she hasn’t started cooking yet. She offers to make lasagna, a three-hour process. Tell her spaghetti will be just fine.
When she finally drops you off it’s after eleven. You’d called ahead, and your dad is waiting up for you, but there’s no time to talk to him now. Find the phone. You place the call next door, and while it rings he tells you how Dr. Werner invited him to come with you next week.

“What for?”
“I don’t know, I guess we’ll find out.”
“They’re not answering,” you say. “Are they home?”
“Yeah,” he says quickly. “I mean I think so. Where else would they be?”
It’s starting to rain. Grab your coat.
The door is open, and through the screen you can see no one in the living room, but the television is on. Call out “Hello?” and just walk in, it’s fine, you’re welcome here. For a moment an ominous feeling settles in, visions of the worst kind (they’re all dead and you’ll find them, you’ll find all of them dead) but then someone pounds on the window from the back porch.

“Callie?” Randall says.
They’re sitting in the dark. Vickie is smoking and Randall is sitting with her. “Randall,” Vickie announces importantly as you sit down, “is about to get his license. Isn’t that wonderful?”
“She’s drunk,” Randall says.
“I’m drunk,” she says, smiling. “I agree.” She puts out her cigarette and lights another.
“How was your mom’s?” asks Randall.
“It was fine,” you say, looking at Vickie. Her head rolls from one side to the other. Randall looks at his mother. “I mean, she’s really drunk,” he says. “You can smoke if you want to, she won’t remember.”
You hesitate, but then, why not? Go ahead. Take one from Vickie’s pack. Randall wouldn’t say it if it weren’t true. Her head moves, and you put it back quickly, but her eyes aren’t focused on you. They aren’t focused on anything, really. “Is this…has she been like this the whole time?”
“I don’t know. She’s been drinking, but mostly in her room. Tonight feels like a bad one. But she said this was the last time, so.”
“Almost outta my system,” says Vickie.
“She’s going back to work on Monday.”
“Back to workin Monday.” She burps. You take the cigarette once more. She doesn’t say anything, even when you light it.
“So how was your mom’s?” Randall asks again.
“Fucking nightmare. The whole time I kept saying I wanted to come back and help you guys, and she wouldn’t do it, so tonight I just threw a fit.”
“You threw a fit? Like a little kid?”
“Yeah,” you say. Randall seems to be doing all right, himself. Otherwise you might not have told him. “Pretty much.”
He laughs. “Well I appreciate it but like I said before, you don’t have to act like a servant around here. We did chores long before you showed up and we can keep on doing them.”
“Really. Everything? I mean I can do laundry, can you do laundry?”
“We can figure it out, if we have to. But she said this is the last time.”
The smoke from your cigarette drifts towards him. Vickie burps again and sits up abruptly, stamps out her cigarette in the ashtray, and then leans back in her chair once more. Randall waves a hand in front of his face, and you offer to put your cigarette out, too.

“No, go ahead,” he says. “Probably your first one in a couple days, right? By all means. I’ve been sitting next to her all night, it doesn’t bother me.”

“You would, huh, wouldn’t you,” says Vickie with emphasis, her eyes closed. You wait, but she doesn’t say anything else.

“Where is everybody else?”

“Upstairs, in their rooms. We had kind of a long day, hanging out with Dad, so they might be asleep. You know he’s not a very big fan of you?”

“Your dad? Why?”

“He says we shouldn’t hang out with you anymore.” He’s smiling, teasing you—maybe even flirting?—but like what your mom said earlier about leaving them alone, it’s got a simple sort of truth to it. To their dad, you’re the grim reaper, the harbinger of death, setter of flames and finder of dead sons. Except again, you can’t accept it. Even if it were true, you have to be involved in helping them. You just...have to.

You put out the cigarette and excuse yourself to head upstairs. “Okay,” says Randall, “but don’t wake them up, if they’re asleep. Please.”

Upstairs, you feel even more like you don’t belong, like three days away has rendered you a stranger in this house and you’re invading quiet privacy. Just, make it quick. Joey’s light is off. That’s good, check on him tomorrow. Ty’s light is on, so you knock, but when he opens the door he stands there glassy-eyed. You’re just about his height, and both of you are standing still on opposite sides of the threshold, so the effect is somewhat like a mirror. He doesn’t speak.

“Sorry,” you say at last. “Were you asleep?”

“No,” he says, taking a deep breath. “Maybe. Drinking.”
Which upon the exhale becomes obvious. “Why?”

“Don’t tell me I can’t drink it.”

“I’m not, I just wanted to say hi.”

“I ain’t telling nobody I’m drinking so don’t tell nobody.”

“I won’t,” you say.

He nods and shuts the door. The look in his eyes, you realize, was the same as his mother’s downstairs.

They’re not healing on their own—not all of them, anyway. They do need you.

Then in the quiet you hear a voice from Joey’s room. He’s talking to himself. With soft steps you approach and place an ear to the door.

“It is not,” he says.

“It is not.

“No they were green, the guy said so.

“Yes huh. I asked. You should have been watching.

“Green.

“Yeah. I got the blue one but then I hit it in the water.

“Shawn.

“Shawn, will you make me invisible again? If it’s hard you don’t have to but it was fun.
“Shawn.
“Shawn.
“Okay maybe tomorrow, that’s fine.”
Take your ear from the door. Stop listening, you’ve heard enough. You should have been here. Now things are worse and you may never forgive your mother for this, or your father for agreeing to it.

Back downstairs, Vickie says as you sit next to her, “Callie! Hi!” Randall has moved, and it takes you a moment to find him. He’s standing over by the railing, further from the lights coming from the living room windows, and you can’t make out his expression. “You know your fa-ther, Callie. Ho-ho-ho, he can be a sonofabitch. Do you know that?”
Sighing, you remove another cigarette from her pack.
“Callie!” she says. “I didn’t know you smoke!” And then she winks. Her own cigarette drops from her fingers and she sets about picking it up.
“Randall?” you ask into the night.
“Just leave her alone,” he says. “Don’t worry about it. I’m taking care of her. You know she’s been screwing your dad, right? Nevermind, you were there, you heard it.”
“But not tonight!” says Vickie.
You nod. “Yeah. I’m sorry.”
“It’s not good for her, I don’t think. She keeps saying these angry, incoherent things about him. I think we need to keep him away from her.”
“I said I was sorry.”
“I heard you.”
You don’t know what to say. You have to do something. Set your cigarette on the edge of the ashtray and stand up. Walk over to him—lean against the railing beside him. Close your eyes, summon some courage. Do something.
You put your hand on his, where it rests on the railing.
He looks at you. There is no warmth, not that you can feel. You care so much, though. It’s all you can think about, this family, these boys, but it must not be enough because there is no warmth inside you from the touch. “It’ll be okay,” you say. The words feel trite. You take back your hand.
“I know,” he says.
Go home. There’s nothing to be done about it tonight.
From the couch, Dad stands up as you enter, but just walk by and say you’re going to bed. In your room, you open your backpack and take out the plastic bag the doctor gave you. Everything gets dumped out on the bed. You pick out the small circular container—pink, of course—and set it aside. Your birth control, to help control your cramps.
When you went to Urgent Care, the doctor said, “Are you sexually active?”
“No.”
She said, “Are you planning on becoming sexually active?”
You paused. She waited, not removing her gaze from the clipboard.
“Maybe,” you said.
And that’s how you ended up with all this neat stuff.
Chapter Fifteen

Ty

It’s raining when Randall comes down. Stopped at about five in the morning but it started again. I had trouble sleeping, is why I know. Woke up at four with a monster headache, but it was okay. I asked for it.

Mom looked like hell earlier, when she got up at seven. I was watching SportsCenter and she sat on the couch with me for a little bit. When I smelled it on her I was worried she could smell it on me too. So when she took a shower I ran and brushed my teeth again and changed clothes. But she didn’t say anything about it. Before she left, I told her to take an umbrella, and she stopped and said I love you and smiled. I just nodded. She nodded, too. It’s like we got the same secret, now. Even if she don’t know it.

Randall asks, “Are you going running?” and I’m kind of surprised he would even ask, but I just tell him no. He looks out the window at the rain and I know that’s why he thinks I’m not running, and it bugs me because that’s not why.

When Joey comes down and eats, I know Callie won’t be long. I had a dream about her, that she came to my room and stood outside the door and promised to keep my secret. I asked her what the bird was and she said it was a bald eagle, and it made so much sense even though soon as I woke up I knew that wasn’t the bird I saw. Then we talked for a while longer, I don’t remember about what, but it was so real that when I woke up with my headache and I went to go to the bathroom, when I first opened my door I expected her to be standing right there. I know she’ll be here soon but I don’t want her to be here. It’s dangerous for her, being around me. Even in my dreams.

Then Randall says, “What are you doing?” and I see that Joey’s about to play Xbox. It’s the first time anybody’s turned it on since Shawn died. Randall sounds kind of mad, like it was Shawn’s thing or something, but really Shawn only ever played when we needed a fourth. Maybe that’s what’s bothering him, that we don’t have a fourth anymore.

“What?” says Joey. “It was starting over again and we’ve already watched it like three times now.”

“What if I wanted to watch something else?”

“What if I wanted to play Xbox? Get over it.” That’s what he says, but then he looks at Randall like he’s sorry.

Then Callie knocks on the door. I get up and go upstairs.

Callie

Dad says, “Are you ready for this?”

He’s going back to work. You’re going back to the Pattersons’, even though he forgot to ask if it was okay. Which, you feel like pointing out, was pretty absent-minded considering the level of intimacy he’s recently been experiencing with Vickie.

“For what?”

“For being back over there,” he says.

“It’s better I’m there than not there.”

“For whose sake? I’m asking if you are ready.”
“Does it matter? What’s the other option? Can I stay home?” You ask it facetiously, but his face grows calm.

“If you promise not to tell your mother, then sure. If you don’t think you’re ready to be next door, then yes. Stay home.”

“But you’re gonna take all the knives with you, right?” you say, because he’s making you uncomfortable. “Here, let me get the scissors, too.”

He waits as you stand up and walk towards the kitchen. No rebuttal, he just waits. You make it to the drawer, slowly open it, and set the scissors on the counter.

“I’m ready,” you say. “It’s fine. Go to work.”

Next door, Ty disappears before you even walk inside, and you’re still folding up your umbrella when Randall goes upstairs, too. Joey stays where he is, on the floor playing video games, but even he scoots a couple inches away from you as you sit on the couch. It seems their dad’s message to avoid you has been taken to heart. That’s probably for the best.

Might prove a little tougher to heal them, though. If they’re afraid to be alone with you. Joey didn’t run. Maybe you should start with him.

The other two come back downstairs. Randall says, “We’re going for a drive.”

Joey puts down the controller. “Where? I want to come.”

“Yeah,” you say, “me too.”

“No,” says Randall. “No, I’m practicing and it’s raining and I don’t want you in the car.”

“Oh come on, we’ll be quiet.”

You nod in agreement.

“No, I don’t care. You’re not coming. That’s final.” He takes the keys from Ty, but doesn’t walk out the door, as if waiting on a reply to his ultimatum so he can argue longer.

You look at Joey there by himself on the carpet. The two of them, leaving. Just you and Joey left. Talking to himself at night. Talking to his dead brother.


“He always does,” Joey says. Randall looks at him, eyes narrowing slightly, and they head out. Your heart jumps as the door closes. Joey un-pauses the game.

Take a deep breath. You can do this. This will work.

Ty

“You should go a little faster here. They dock you if you go too slow.”

“It’s raining,” he says. He’s so fucking scared of driving.

“I know,” I say, “but it’s pretty straight here. Go faster, it’s fine.”

He steps on the gas and the car jumps forward.

“Okay,” I say. “That’s—good, I guess, but you don’t need to floor it.”

“I’m sorry, it’s been a while.”

If it wasn’t raining when we came out to the car I’d say he was sweating all over the place. Maybe it’s both. “You don’t gotta get your license, if you ain’t ready now. You can renew the permit, you just gotta take that test again.”

“I need it if I want to get a job.”

“You want a job?”
“No, I need a job.” He brakes down to twenty as we go around a curve. I look behind us, but nobody’s there. Not yet, anyway, he’s driving like he’s a hundred years old.

“For what?”

“Because. Mom shouldn’t be working now, she needs more time off.”

“No, fuck that,” I say, shaking my head to show how stupid that is. “I can get a job. I should be the one to get a job.”

“You can’t, you don’t have time.”

“I would if I quit football.”

“What?” He’s sitting at a stop sign, looking left and right and left and right. Then he lets off the brake a little, but slams it back down again. He looks for cars one more time, left and right. “No,” he says when finally gets going. “You’re not quitting football.”

“Why not? I don’t even like it.”

“Yes you do.”

“No, I used to.”

“You will again.”

“No, I don’t have to play. It don’t matter anymore, it’s no big deal.”

“Yeah, it does matter.”

“To who? Dad?”

“No,” he says. He’s too close to the edge of the road, so he swerves a little and pumps his brakes. Somebody’s behind us now. “Well, yeah, but it matters to Mom, too. She’s been rooting for you since you were like nine. You’re the reason she started watching SportsCenter with us. It’s a part of our life now and you’re the only one keeping that part alive. God knows I’m not coordinated enough for anything, and Joey, he’s all talk. I mean he always says he’s going to play but he never practices. And I guarantee he wouldn’t play anything if you stopped.”

The dude behind us honks as we come up on a straight stretch, then passes us. “Man,” I say when the car is a safe distance in front of us, “you gotta go a little faster. Just trust me.”

He swallows, but he starts to pick up the pace.

“And where you taking us, anyway? We gotta do the highway, you need some practice there.”

“No. I’m fine.”

“They take you there for the test. Everybody I talked to, they do a few stop signs, a stop light, and they go out to that three-way intersection. But they always bring you back on the highway.”

“Fine. When I have to go there, I’ll do it then.”

“The more you do it the less scary it is,” I say.

“It’s not scary, it’s stupid. It’s the most dangerous place to drive a car, especially in the rain, and if I can avoid it by taking back roads, that’s what I’m going to do.”

“You’re gonna play it safe.”

“Safe is better than dead.”

“That why you didn’t let em come with us?” Even as I’m saying it I get a vision, just flashes into my mind. Callie’s forehead, split open and fresh. “Less people get hurt if you crash us into a ditch?”

“No. I don’t know. Something like that.”
“You ain’t listening to Dad, are you? Bout Callie?”
“Shit, if I’d thought of that I would have made her come.”

**Callie**

“I want to play.”
He looks at you. “Good,” he says. “Finally. Somebody.”
He offers you a controller. You sit next to him on the carpet, close enough to touch.

**Ty**

And then it hits me: He’s right. Safe is better. Here I been wondering what Shawn figured out, but Randall figured out something too. He don’t care what other people would do, either, he does his own thing, just like Shawn. Maybe his way’s even better, cause it’s easier. Stays in his room, beats off all day and nobody cares. It don’t affect no one. We go places and he stays quiet and so nobody ever gets hurt by what he says. He don’t date girls and so he can’t hurt em with his ignorance, can’t scare em half to death when they miss their period and come up to you all crying but you just ignore it, you don’t even talk to her again till she traps you at school and says she got an abortion, are you happy? And you say where? but she can’t say where she got it and you find out from her friend that she didn’t get one, she just got her period again and never was pregnant at all. But still. She wasn’t that crazy before I got to her.

Shawn acted different outside. Randall acts different but keeps it inside. Shawn found out by doing things, Randall finds out by thinking about things, and I kinda been acting like Randall anyway by writing about it. That’s keeping it inside. Even though what I really wish I knew is what Shawn knows. I bet he found out so much when he died. But what good is knowing everything if you’re dead?

“Hey,” I say.
“I am, I am,” he says, and he speeds up.
“No. How much of it did you read?”
He blinks, and his mouth opens but he knows damn well what I’m talking about.
“No much,” he says finally. “Just a couple pages.”
“You can tell me, I ain’t mad. I just wanna know.”
He shrugs.
“I’m sorry I hit you.”
“Oh come on, I don’t even—”
“Stop sign hey, hey stop stop stop—” I throw my hands up on the dash, bracing myself before he even slams the brakes and the tires lock and we skid about ten yards on the slick pavement. But there’s no one around, and it’s all right. “It’s all right,” I say.
“Yeah.”
We both take a few breaths. I give him a second, but then I ask again, “Seriously, how much?”
“About half, I think.”
“You wanna read more?”
“Um, sure. Do you want me to?”
“Only if you want to.” I don’t think he wants to.
“Okay,” he says.
“It ain’t any good.”
“Well never mind, then.”
“But you ain’t even read the whole thing yet!”
“Well don’t tell me that and expect me to read it!” he says. “Let me decide if it’s any good on my own.”
“It ain’t done yet either.”
“Do you want me to read it or not?”
“Not if you don’t want to.”
“Okay, fine, I want to read it.”
A car pulls up behind us. I motion for him to start moving.
“Only if you want to,” I say.

Callie

He kills you, several times. You figure out how to shoot the gun, but locomotion is impossible. You keep trying, you’re getting sick from the rapid movements but you keep trying, and he kills you again. You laugh and just let your hand go on its own, on over to his leg, where it touches and squeezes and pushes off. He looks at you.
Just keep looking back at him. Just keep eye contact.
He turns back to the screen. You hear yourself saying, “Do you think I’m pretty?”
The game pauses. He says, “Well yeah, but Shawn thinks you’re really pretty.”
“Shawn?”
“Yeah.”
You drop the controller and attack him, kissing him.
In the history of you there has been only one other kissing encounter, when you were twelve and that boy on the basketball team asked you to come sit on the bleachers with him after school, and he did basically this. He sort of jumped toward you and wrapped his arms around you and pushed his face into yours and at first you just waited for it to stop. But he was heavy and his body kept leaning over further and further until he was lying on top of you. His tongue pressed into your mouth and his hand slipped under your shirt and you bit his tongue. Enough.
You don’t know if you said it out loud, but you said it. That’s enough. He called you a tease and walked away adjusting his crotch, scratching his neck. But you remember the moment clear as glass.
So you just keep leaning. Eventually you’re on top of him, and then you remember the hips, the way the hips have to grind.
He says, “Ow,” and you stop.
“I’m sorry.”
“It’s not—I mean, I just don’t think Shawn would—”
“Oh, goddamn it,” you say, pushing off of him, and he immediately hops to his feet.
“Just give me a minute,” he says and runs down the hall to the bathroom. The game is on pause and the rain has let up, and in the silence you can hear him. He’s talking in the bathroom. Keep at it. He needs you. Be strong, you can do this.
He comes back and sits down and you notice, as he sits, the situation in his pants. “So,” you say, “you do think I’m pretty.”
“Oh, yes. But first I need to tell you—”
“Listen to me. I’m here. I’m Callie and I’m real and I’m right here.”
“I know,” he says. “I’m here, too. I’m Shawn.”

Randall

I pulled down the driveway and backed the minivan into its spot. I’ve always been a pretty good parker. Aside from the stop sign I forgot about, I did just fine. I felt more than ready to take the driving test. Good, I said as I put it in park. I did pretty good, right?
Sure, said Ty. Listen, I gotta borrow some reading material.
Um, okay. I started to get out of the car.
He grabbed my arm. No, I mean, the secret kind.
I looked at him. I knew what he meant, and that he didn’t want to ask in front of Callie. At first I thought, No way. No, those magazines were my collection, my body of research on the body of the female. Those were to be studied over, not sweated on. Or worse. I knew how long a shower he could take.

But then I decided I didn’t care anymore. Just like that, it didn’t matter, and I knew it was tied in with my getting a job, with taking some responsibility in this family instead of just drifting along, with my overall new sense of self. Not that I believed the study of women to be over, but I was limiting myself with so narrow a course. Those magazines weren’t helpful for behavioral studies. It was time to move on from the study of just the bodies—I needed a real live girlfriend. It was another good reason to get a job.
Okay, I said.
Really?
Yeah. It’s fine.
Good. Thanks, he said. I mean, they’re fine, right? They’re clean?
Impeccable. Most of them are still in the same bags they came in, and that’s the condition I’ll expect them back, please.
Good, yeah, that’s all I had to hear. He looked at me. Blinked.
I do not jerk off! I said.
Look, it’s okay, everybody does it—
Not me!
Why not?
Because it’s gross, that’s why! It’s sick! My face felt hot, the inside of the car, even. Heat all around, and he just kept staring at me.
Eventually, slowly, he stated the obvious. You never done it before, have you.
No! I said that!
Oh, my, god, I didn’t think you were serious.
I’m getting out of the car, I said.
You just got all those magazines! Listen, don’t be ashamed, it’s—
I slammed the door. The rain had almost stopped, but still I jogged to the house. His door opened behind me and I heard,—conditioner instead of shampoo, because that shit can fucking sting if it gets inside, you gotta be careful, you hear me? Hey!

I stopped at the door, my hand on the knob. Shut up. Shut up, we’re about to go inside, I said. He knew what I meant.

Okay, okay just listen me. It ain’t something to take lightly.
Oh really? I said. That’s all anybody ever does. You don’t think I know that?
It’s dangerous. Okay? It’s like, an escape from reality. It can get pretty addicting.
Says you, the guy who drinks in his room all night.
His face went blank. I flinched. I couldn’t help it, I saw his fist curl up. And when he didn’t hit me—goddamn did I feel like a pussy. It was pathetic.

He asked, Did you go through my room again?
No, you just—

He kept his voice low. I took my hand off the doorknob. That is fucking stupid and you know it, I said.

I don’t care. It’s my decision.
Why? I said through my teeth.
Because I gotta do something. Because things ain’t adding up lately. Like, I don’t know, why should he have to die and I’m still alive, huh?
You’re drinking to make Shawn feel better? What’s the matter with you?
No! He took a deep breath, composed himself, and lowered his voice again. Look. I was trying to talk to Shawn about this, too, before he died. I’m going fucking insane, okay? Life ain’t supposed to be all perfect, that ain’t normal. It’s like you gotta control it. How fucked up you are, or everything gets fucked up on its own. All my life, if I try to make everything perfect then sooner or later something comes along and screws it up and I ain’t ready for it and I can’t handle it. Okay? This way I just stay in my room and I fuck stuff up as much as I want and it don’t hurt anybody.

Yeah, that sounds familiar. Should I start calling you Dad now, or should I wait until you walk out on us?

He punched me.
Good. I didn’t flinch. Good.

Ty

Goddamn it. Goddamn everything.

It starts raining harder. I tell him I’m sorry. But I’m so mad at myself, and I say it too soft and I don’t think he hears it. He just works his jaw out and stares at me. I push past him and open the door.

He follows me in and I’m still so mad that I don’t notice right away, but no one’s here. I walk to the kitchen and open the cabinets for no reason, and then I walk back to the living room, and Randall’s looking all around, out the back porch windows, and then he looks at me. The living room is empty, but it takes us both shutting up for a minute for that to hit me as strange.
Callie

“I am serious.”
“You’re not Shawn. Shawn is gone. I can’t even believe I have to tell you this.”
“But it’s okay,” he says, almost earnestly, staring up at you from the living room carpet.
“I figured it out. We can have him back.”
“Shawn is in a coffin underground. We were both there, you saw—”
“I’m not talking about that. About his body, come on. His body died, sure—”
“All of him died, Joey.”
“Well, okay, but just listen. If I call to him, like up in my head, I can hear him—no, I mean I can’t hear him, I see that look you’re giving me and I can’t hear him, no. But I can feel him, just like he was right here beside me, answering me. It works. I don’t know how but it works. It feels like he’s not even gone.”
“Joey. Joey.”
Try contact again. Try for the warmth, give him the warmth that should heal him. Place a hand to his face, brush his hair back. He responds, closes his eyes. You lean in and kiss him.
“And there’s more,” he says.
You sigh and sit back again.
“It’s even kind of better now. These things have been happening. I can go to sleep easy again, I’m not lonely anymore, and then when we were putt-putting it was like he was helping me, and now you’re kissing me and I know it’s all got something to do with him.”
“No, Joey,” you say. “It was for you.”
“But I can be him if you want.”
“Joey.”
“Isn’t that what you want?”
Calmly stand up. Calmly, walk to the door, don’t think about it until you’re outside, but you’re not ready. You’re not strong enough. Not for this.
Now run.

Joey

I follow her over to her house. Shawn would want me to, I think. When I get to the apple trees I see the minivan pull into the driveway and I duck and hide. Then I go into her house.
I haven’t been in here before. It’s darker than I thought it would be, but it is kind of rainy and grey outside. I go, “Callie?” until I hear her. She’s on the couch but I can’t see her because she’s got her face down and she’s crying.
I go, “Don’t cry. Please, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it.”
“Yes you did.”
“No, I’m sorry, I thought you would understand. Hey. Hey Callie.”
I don’t know what else to do so I sit down next to her and start rubbing her back while she cries. And for a second I think she’s crying harder, but then she’s crying softer and I feel like I made the right decision.
She sits up. Her face is all puffy and she’s got snot in her nose. I keep rubbing her back. Then for some reason she takes off her shirt. Her bra is pink, but then I already knew that because of the straps. Or the straps could have been different colors from the bra but they’re not. They’re the same.

I go, “I had a dream about you.”
“Who did? Shawn did, or you did?”
I smile. “I did, me, Joey, me. I had the dream.”

And she smiles back. She takes off the bra, and it is better than the dream because it doesn’t go away it stays. I can blink and it stays. I could probably touch and it would stay, but I’m not sure if I should do that.

She takes my hand and puts it on her boob. Pushes it up against her boob.

My breath goes in and my head kind of lights up, like my brain is made of sparklers, and then that dream feeling comes back to me where there’s something golden inside me and it just keeps getting better and brighter and more golden, and she keeps pushing my hand but then with her hand, her other hand she’s going for her pants and it’s the only thing I ever wanted in my life and I don’t even know what it looks like in real life but I’m about to see and then, and then I feel this wetness.

I feel this wetness in my pants and I look down and I can see it, too. It’s like I peed myself a little bit. She’s looking too, and I get embarrassed because Jesus Christ what the hell is wrong with me, but she’s not mad or grossed out or upset. She looks pretty happy, actually. Or relieved. Like all she ever wanted was for me to hold her tit and piss on her couch.

I just gotta go with it. Act like nothing happened. I go, “You feel better?”
“Do you?” She lets go of my hand and crosses her arms over her chest.
“Do you want to try again?” and I don’t know what she means but I tell her that I most certainly do and she goes, “Okay. We can try again, it’s okay.”

She goes, “Do you want to try again?” and I don’t know what she means but I tell her that I’m not going to listen to him, if he’s not going to let me touch her boobs again and maybe something more in her pants. Her vagina. I want to touch her vagina and he’s not going to stop me.

Callie

It works.
Randall

They weren’t in the living room. They weren’t in any other room, for that matter. All I could think of was maybe they went down to the woods, but it was raining, and if she wanted to smoke she could’ve just stayed on the damn porch.

Ty came downstairs. They’re not here, he said. Think they went to her house?
Why would they do that? I asked.
Maybe she forgot something.
He had to go with her?
Maybe it was heavy. Or maybe they wanted to make out, I don’t know.
I shook my head, but I stepped out the front door anyway to look next door, and he followed. And sure enough, they were walking back this way. But then Joey saw us and stopped in his tracks like a deer.

I shouted, Hey! I walked off the front concrete in their direction.
Next thing I knew he was sprinting down the hill towards the forest, and without hesitation he dove face-first onto the ground.

Ty said, What the fuck…
He slid for about five yards and got up with a face full of mud, laughing his stupid little ass off.

I sat down. Right there in the wet grass. I couldn’t help it. Like my jaw was trying to drop, but it just carried the rest of me down with it.
Chapter Sixteen

Callie

The trick is to make them comfort you. Then they want to make you feel better, and they’ll do it. They’ll do whatever you invite them to do, and that’s how. That’s how you have to heal them, by making them think they’re healing you.

You decide not to dive face first, but you slide down the hill, sort of like a baseball player. By the time you stop, Joey is already running up the hill to go again.

Joey

The mud is all over us. We made a mudslide right down the steepest part of the hill, and we’re covered in it (I’ve got mud pants) but at least it covered up my wet spot. Which is like what happened after I dreamed about her. I’m starting to think this is what’s supposed to happen. I mean I knew about spooging and stuff but I didn’t think it would be this wet.

She’s covered in mud too and when she says she’s getting cold and she’s going to change clothes, I start to go inside with her.

But she goes, “No, wait.”

So I wait.

“Probably not a good idea for you to come inside with me right now.”

I don’t know why but I nod, and then I know why. Same reason I slid down the hill, so Randall and Ty don’t know we were being sexual. I go, “Oh, okay,” even though I already nodded. “You meant it though, right?”

“What?”

“You want to try again. You just, you said so, and I want to try again, so I was really hoping you meant that when you said it.”

She smiles. “Yeah. Of course, yeah, I meant it. Next time we get the chance.”

Next time we get left alone, she means. We can’t go be alone, it has to be an accident, or else they’ll know. I get it, and she knows I get it and goes inside by herself to change.

Except now I kind of want them to know about it. All except the wet pants.

Callie

You’re in the bathroom, looking at yourself in the mirror, seeing what Joey saw. It works, but maybe it works too well. Out there it was like he never even had a brother. Is that what you want? What do you want? Do you want them to forget about Shawn? Is forgetting the only way to heal?

His kisses were wet, sloppy somehow, he didn’t even put his tongue in your mouth but his lips were like faucets. Even after playing in the rain you feel as though the saliva is still dried on your face, around your mouth. And he ejaculated. Semen. That was semen in his pants, right next to you on the couch, you could’ve touched it. That’s how they track down rapists, you’ve seen the TV shows. That’s what you’re inviting them to release inside you. That’s what those condoms are supposed to catch, what that odd-smelling petroleum jelly is supposed to kill.

The pamphlets have the basic, anatomically correct cartoons of male and female anatomy. These oddly, uniformly beige, nude individuals strutting their stuff. Flaccid penis, erect penis, testes, scrotum, you’ve seen these drawings before. The female you could imagine to be a real
person, imagine her moving, imagine the shape of her breasts changing as you see them from
different angles. You can associate that drawing with yourself, your reflection. But the diagram
of the male may as well be a Ken doll for all the familiarity it’s providing. Stare all you want, it’s
not helping.

Should you consider it a net gain he’s not talking to his dead brother anymore?

You place a hand over your breast, where his hand was, then take it down. That was all it
took. Maybe you should have started with Ty.

Randall

I decided not to be mad about it. If I meant to be someone who didn’t flinch, I had to be
someone who didn’t hold grudges, either.

Miss September ’05. Miss December ’05. April through June of ’04. That would probably
be enough. These things had a high replay value. He shouldn’t need more than that.

I closed the lid to my trunk, thinking not about the magazines I’d picked for him but the
things I’d avoided looking at inside it. The lunch box with the cigarettes in it, which I was done
selling or bartering, and didn’t know exactly what to do with now. Maybe give them to Callie.

The May issue, 2002. He could have any of the rest, really, but that one I would keep.

Joey played Halo the majority of the afternoon, and we sat and watched, not saying
much. I waited for Ty to ask for the magazines, or to slip me his manuscript, but he stayed as
quiet as the rest of us. Joey occasionally tried to recruit players, even Callie, but we denied him,
content to just listen to the rain and the sound of aliens dying.

Mom’s car pulled down the driveway, and Callie stood up and went to the kitchen. What
do you guys want to eat for supper? she asked, but no one answered. She clattered through the
cabinets until Mom walked in the door.

Hey Vickie, she said. I was going t—oh good, you brought groceries. I was going to say, I
wanted to make you something for supper so you didn’t have to eat leftovers.

Mom looked at the paper bag she carried.

They ain’t groceries, Callie, said Ty.

Oh. She shifted her weight, leaned up against the counter. Well what about—

Callie, Mom said. Go home, eat with your father, he’s probably lonely.

I could just call him, have him come over here when he gets home. He could pick
something up.

No, thank you. See you tomorrow.

When she was gone, I went into the kitchen. Mom put two bottles in the freezer, two
more in the cupboard over the refrigerator. So? I said. How’d it go?

Fine. Just as planned, Randall. It went fine.

Just plain old fine? Or four bottles fine?

She sighed. Really, it was fine. They had some sympathy cards waiting for me, and they
offered more time off, which I politely declined. And the morning was a little difficult, yes, but
only because I’ve been gone a couple weeks, and it’s not the easiest job in the world.

I raised my eyebrows at her.

But, she said. But, that’s a good thing, because by the afternoon, or by the end of the day
anyway, I felt pretty normal.
I pointed at the cabinet.
They were having a sale, she said softly. And anyway, not that I feel like it’s any of your business, but I’m not drinking because I’m going to work. Work is not the problem! I’m drinking so that I don’t feel so sad and lonely at home, okay? Her words took on a sarcastic tilt, and she noticed, composed herself, and sighed. It won’t last forever. It can’t last forever.

How drunk do you have to be to put up with being here?
Not like last night. Just a couple drinks to help me sleep. I have to sleep, baby.
I’d expected her to say something about the way I put that, but she didn’t.
I said, I’m still getting a job.
Whatever you have to do. She got herself a glass and posed her next question to all of us.
I was just going to order a pizza, is that okay?

Joey said, Aw, but Callie even said she’d cook for us! She’d do it, too. We could still call her.

Ty said, Pizza sounds great, Mom.
The table was still pushed up against the wall, and since the funeral gatherings had collected coats, bags, umbrellas, dishes, and newspapers. I got the feeling Mom didn’t want, or wasn’t ready, to see us all around the table without him.

When the pizza came, Joey turned off the game and we ate in the living room. Nobody spoke. Afterwards, to her credit, Mom waited until the end of SportsCenter before taking her drink to her room. She was trying. That was all we could ask of her.

Peter

Sometimes when I washed my hands I would think I was washing the dead boy off of them, still. At night I would wash them and then wash my face and brush my teeth and think maybe, finally, the residue of that irreverent kiss would at last disappear. The proof is in the toothpaste mint, the antibacterial pineapple-and-lime scented soap. Dead boys do not taste of these things. They do not smell like this. That much I knew personally.

Did she think about that? Kissing me, did she remember how I’d breathed life into him, only to receive it back, automatic and sour, so much stale air?

Callie came downstairs after a while. I’d forgotten to even check if she was home yet. I am a bad father, I thought. I was on the couch. She looked at me in my pajamas and said drily, “What do you want to eat?”

“You’re cooking?”

“If you’ll eat it.” She pulled a pot out, clanked it down onto the stove top. “Unless you were just going to go to bed.”

I lied and said I had no such intention. It was seven o’clock. I’d already brushed.
She put on spaghetti, took some garlic bread from the freezer and put it into the oven.
“I’m coming to the grocery with you next time. If I’m going to be cooking, then I’m going to pick what I cook.”

“This is going to be a regular thing?”

“Well they won’t let me cook over there, so I guess this is my only option, isn’t it.”
I turned on the television for her, found an animal show on Discovery Channel, something about camels. She took a familiar tone in directing me: Drain the pasta. Set the table. Cut the garlic bread. She sounded like her mother.

Finally we sat down, the food steaming before us. I said, “Callie, this all smells amazing, really. Thank you for cooking.”

“Vickie is mad at you.”

She stared at me, hands in her lap. As though all this preparation was just for scenery during the discussion, and she had no intention of eating it.

I picked up the parmesan cheese shaker. “What do you want me to say?”

“Say you’re going to fix it.”

“It’s not that simple, Callie.”

“Make it that simple, Dad. They are counting on us, and you’re avoiding her.”

“Yes. What I’m doing is for the best.”

“That’s not what you said before. Before, you said—okay, fine. Whatever, fuck it, I guess I’ll just help them all by myself.”

“Callie.” Quickly she began filling her plate. I recognized her intention. “Callie, stop. Please, stay here and eat with me.”

“Do the dishes when you get done, okay?”

“I know I’m contradicting myself, but—I think I need some time, I think we need some time to heal, too.” She paused to glare at me, but only briefly. I said, “We threw all of our efforts at making them feel better, and we didn’t stop and take the time to consider the fact that we’d found a boy dead in the grass, Callie, we came upon a dead body and those things don’t just fade from the mind, Callie. Callie.”

Her door slammed. Go after her, or stay; I weighed the options. Then I remembered the upcoming therapy session, and so I turned a little in my chair to watch nomads cross the Sahara. Munching on garlic bread.

**Ty**

Mom’s down in her room, and it’s like we got the same secret but I don’t want it to be exactly the same. What is the difference. It’s bugging the hell out of me.

Somebody knocks on my door. I don’t open it, but Randall says anyway, “Hey. Did you still need something to read?”

I put the shit back in my desk drawer.

We go to his room. I wait for him to say something about earlier, but he just walks in, sits on his bed, and pulls four or five magazines out from under his pillow. “It’s a pretty good variety,” he says, “black chicks, white chicks, Asians, I don’t really know what you’re into.”

I don’t know what to say but “Thanks,” and I take one and sit on his bed and flip through it, like it’s a Sports Illustrated or something and not full of naked chicks. “You know what I don’t get is why you have all these magazines if you never use em.”

“I just like women,” he says. “I love their bodies, I love all their curves, their hair, the way they smile. You know. But I respect them, too.”

“I respect em,” I say, but it was just a gut reaction so I take half a second to think about it. “Well, I try to. I mean I always wanted to, but they were just so...”
“Easy?” he asks, like he’s heard of such a thing but never seen it.
“Sometimes. Yeah, they can be easy sometimes.” I feel like I should know more things about him. I don’t even know if he’s kissed a girl. Or if he respects girls so much then how come he never has one. “Hey,” I say. “Didn’t we used to talk a lot?”
He squints at me like I’m trying to set him up. I say, “Come on, I’m serious. We’re the oldest, we were here first, we used to do everything together. Mom and Dad used to buy us the exact same Christmas presents so we wouldn’t get jealous.”
“They still do.”
I smile. “Yeah, sort of. They really gotta get over that.”
Randall shakes his head. “Well, to answer your question—well no, I’m not exactly sure.”
He says it funny, like he almost decided to tell the truth but chickened out. “What,” I ask, “what are you thinking about?”
“Do you remember the day we stood back-to-back in the kitchen and Shawn said I was taller than you?”
I say, “Yeah,” and he looks at me like that’s it, that’s the whole explanation. “You stopped talking to me cause you were taller than me?”
“No! But I thought it bothered you, so I left you alone for a couple days, and this was right after the divorce and you were getting a bunch of new friends in high school and playing sports, and I was still in eighth grade and so I never saw you during school anymore either. And just, I didn’t know it at the time but looking back on it, it’s pretty obvious. We just had different things to worry about. Less stuff to talk about. We grew apart.”
From outside the door, Joey says, “Oh my god, are you guys breaking up?”
Randall jumps up and opens the door. Joey’s got his hand cupped to his ear like it’s still on the door. He says, “Sh, sh, shh—I think they’re about to kiss and make up.” Randall shuts the door again.
Joey says, “I want some magazines, too!”
Randall opens the door again. “Shut the fuck up, idiot!” he says and pulls him inside.
I still got a magazine in my hands, and Joey’s eyes get wide when he sees it. “Oh, man!” he says and he grabs it.
Randall says, “Be careful with that.”
“Let me have one.”
“No.”
He flips to the centerfold. It’s just a Playboy, so it ain’t real graphic or anything, but when he gets it open he just stares at it like he’s seeing God. “Please,” he says. “I need this.”
“No.”
“Why, what’s the big deal? Why do you need all of them?”
“I study them. I need the variety.”
“What study them, they aren’t math problems oh my god look at this chick.”
I lean in and he shows me. “Fuck me,” I say.
“Yeah, she’s got to have back problems.”
Randall snatches the magazine back. “It’s called research. I’m gonna be prepared, so that when I get the real thing I won’t act like a fool. I’ll know how to treat her.”
“Well good luck with that,” I say, “but it don’t matter if you ain’t even jerking off.”
They both look at me like I just spoke German.

“I mean, it’s great to train your head and all, but you gotta train your balls, too. It’s practice, like a sport. You gotta be in the right, you know, physical condition. Trust me, it’s embarrassing if you lose your wad before you mean to.” It’s like I’m teaching a class. Randall’s even looking around like he needs a pen to take notes or something. “I’m serious, it happened to me once,” I say, and I can’t really believe I’m about to tell them this cause it’s goddamn embarrassing, but at the same time it’s good. They should know about this stuff. I should tell em the stuff I know. “The first time a girl touched my dick—didn’t even take my pants off, she just reached in there—it took like five seconds and then I gave her a handful of mayonnaise.”

Randall gets all pale like he’s about to barf. Joey says, “Ha! You douchebag.”

“Shut up, Joey,” Randall says. He looks really concerned, though.

I say, “Jesus, man, take a breath, I’m just trying to help. Look, you don’t have to beat off all the time to figure it out, it’s like riding a bike. You just gotta figure out how to keep your balance, or else you might fall off any time. You can’t leave it up to gravity.”

“Yeah,” Joey says, “like ‘riding’ a bike.”

“We know what it means, Joey,” says Randall.

And then—the very second I think about it I stand up from the bed. “Wait—wet dreams? You’re having all kinds of wet dreams, aren’t you, looking at this stuff all the time and not doing anything about it. Are you? Because you shoulda told me, man, I just sat on your bed.”

“No,” he says. He glances over at Joey. “Not anymore. Not for like six months.”

Joey’s laughing into his hands. I didn’t mean to hang Randall out to dry like that, I just thought of it and had to ask. “It ain’t a big deal. It’s just another reason to take care of business on your own, you know?”

He nods, but it’s like he’s in trouble, like he got caught doing something he ain’t supposed to. I feel bad for him, but damn. He’s gotta know this stuff.

“Okay, fine,” says Joey. “If I tell you will you let me have a magazine?”

Randall says, “Tell me what?”

“I had one, too. I need a magazine.”

Randall says, smiling, “About what?”

Joey grabs the magazine back from him. “None of your goddamn business,” he says, and he walks out.

I start to walk out too, but then Randall says, “How come you told Shawn all this stuff and not me?”

“I never told Shawn this stuff.”

“You said you talked to him. About how life gets fucked up if you don’t control it, and he was trying to get Callie, so I thought—”

“No, god, I didn’t think he was gonna do anything with her. She’s way out of his league.”

“She was,” says Randall.

When I get what he’s saying, I hate him a little for saying it. But he reminded me, I said it myself what the difference is between me and Mom. She gets drunk to forget the pain. I’m doing it cause I wanna understand it. I ain’t trying to forget a thing.
In my room I pull the whiskey out and think about Shawn that last day, how I told him to forget about sex which was a stupid thing to say cause that’s impossible. I shoulda been saying how to control it cause you can’t just forget about it.

I uncap the whiskey and take a sniff. Goddamn. The shit’s like gasoline.

He didn’t even know what he was learning, he was too caught up in Callie, thinking about sex, I shoulda helped him, I shoulda asked him what the hell he thought he was doing way earlier than I did, because he didn’t know, he was like some kinda pain prodigy, doing it all by instinct, making his own damn life a wreck and not even learning a thing from it. Everybody I write about has a point, and he didn’t have a point, and that’s the fucking thing I can’t figure out because he must’ve been doing it for a reason, he must’ve understood something that I don’t understand but why did he deserve to understand it when I don’t, I shoulda told him to go ahead and fuck her because then he’d still be around and I’d be the one to find out first.

God I wish I knew what he knows. But there’s no way I can, cause now he knows what it’s like to go all the way. All I can do is learn in little bits at a time. Night by night. And the worse I feel in the morning, the more I’ll know I learned. Saying it all out loud to Randall earlier, it made more sense than it ever did before.

Randall

In the dark, when the house finally got quiet, I kept thinking about it. Finally I threw back the covers and took off my boxers, and I lay there. It was dark out and starting to rain again, but I sat up and closed the blinds anyway. I took a deep breath and reached down and grabbed onto it. My self. My penis, my own hand grabbing onto my own penis and it already wasn’t working, I didn’t understand, how was I supposed to be able to do this to myself? How was anyone okay with having sex, with themselves?

Any minute it felt like someone would burst in the door and take a picture of me and laugh and point and say, Ha-ha! Pervert!

I was miserable. Hard—most nights when I had been in bed for more than a couple minutes I got hard like that—but miserable. Beyond that I was pissed off, not only by what I was doing but by the fact that all of this study, all of this preparation could prove to be completely worthless. That this might be the only way to avoid that embarrassment I’d spent so long trying to guarantee would never happen.

I thought about my friends at school, their jerk-off jokes, spitting into their hand and waggling a taut fist in front of themselves. I put my hand up to my face and spat.

Thirty seconds later, I had nearly lost all skin. The saliva dried and stuck, skin to skin, and I felt my face get hot with embarrassment.

Fuck, I said into the darkness.

In the room next door, Ty began stomping and banging around loudly enough to let the whole house know he was still awake. Fine, I thought, and pulled my boxers back on. This was not a practice I wanted to master with a family member fully conscious and ten feet away.

Ty

The mattress gotta put it up and in the way, so I don’t go. That way I don’t go out the fuckin window.
I go, “Shawn. Don’t look.”
Chapter Seventeen

Ty

Callie answers the phone. We tell her not to but she does anyway.
“IT’s your coach,” she says and gives it to me.
Coach says, “I know it’s my first year here and I don’t know you all that well yet, but I
wanted to say sorry about your brother.”
“Thanks.”
“Also I know you haven’t been to conditioning in over a week, and I understand, but I
was just calling to tell you we’re starting ball drills tomorrow.”
“Okay.”
“So, we’d really love to see you there, if you think you can.”
“Thanks.”
“No thanks necessary. Truth be told, we need you this year in a bad way, and the sooner I
get my senior quarterback in the backfield, the better.”
He don’t say ‘starting.’ He says ‘senior.’
“Okay.”
“Well you sound kind of busy there, so give my best to your family and all, and like I told
your dad, if that other brother of yours still wants to play, we’d be more than glad to have him.”
“I got two other brothers.”
“Oh. Well. Your dad said you only had the one left.”
“One ain’t in high school yet,” I say. “That’s probably what he meant.”
“Yeah. That’s probably it.”
“Don’t talk to my dad.”
“I’m sorry?”
“My dad’s a fucking dickwad who don’t know what he’s talking about. So don’t talk to
him. If you gotta talk to a parent, talk to my mom.”
“Well.” Coach clears his throat, and then it sounds like he taking a drink of water. “All
the same. We’d love to see you tomorrow, okay?”
“Thanks.”
I hang up. My head is pounding. The whiskey works.

Callie

Ty looks like he got hit by a truck. You’ve never seen him like this. He comes downstairs
at ten and eats cereal on the couch without a word. Then the phone call from the coach, and
immediately back upstairs.
Randall is in a foul mood, too. Only Joey is acting at all normally, testing Randall’s
patience with perverted jabs, selectively quoting television commercials back to him
immediately with emphasis on double entendres, in general just being a butthole. Finally Randall
gets up, goes in the basement, comes back with some oversized plastic flower pots and a couple
laundry baskets. He pauses like he’s about to tell you what he’s doing, but then just grabs the car
keys off the hook and walks out.
You walk to the kitchen window and see him setting up the five-point parking array. Then
you feel a hand on your back. “We’re all by ourselves,” Joey says.
You’re two seconds from laughing in his face at the presumption, but his hand starts to knead and press and despite yourself, the massaging feels good. Not warmth, but like, medically, clinically relieving. For just a second, your eyes close, and upon opening them you see, briefly, the look of excited surprise on Joey’s face. Yes, Joey, it’s working. For now.

You say, “What, you want to get naked on the couch or something? Come on.”

“We could go to my room.”

“Are you serious? No. A little higher. A little—yeah, there.”

He works you, pressing. Occasionally straying from your desired spot, but not for long.

“I really like you. I like kissing you, I like touching you.”

“I like you, too,” you say, convincing yourself it’s not a complete lie. And when exactly did you start caring about lying? Used to be your best weapon—oh, right. Shawn. “But Ty is—”

“Ah come on, you saw him. Or don’t you know what a hangover looks like. He’s not coming out of that room for a long time, not until he gets so hungry he has to, and Randall, I mean we can hear when he turns the car off. And I can tell when Ty opens his door. And if Ty even says anything, which he might not, I can say I’ll tell Mom he’s raiding her liquor.”

“Of course he would say—and we absolutely cannot go to your room.”

“Well just sit on the couch with me, here.” He takes your hand and tugs, but you stay. He says, “Callie. Please. I need you.”

You wait, to see if his eyes speak the same. He looks right at you, and you search for the need, search for the parts of him still broken.

What do you see?

You’re not sure, but you don’t think he’s lying, so you move to the couch with him, giving him the benefit of the doubt. And anyway, the better you get at this, the easier it will be with the others.

He kisses you, and you kiss him back. His hand moves up your shirt, first tracing your spine and then moving around to the front. You’re not sure what to do about this. His fingertips knead at the padding in your bra the way they did your back a moment ago, and you get the feeling he’s cracking a safe, looking for a way inside. You smile, and the kissing gets difficult, but the more you try to hold in the smile, the faster it turns into a pent-up laugh. And then you think about it even more literally, like a safe with a keypad, like he’s literally punching in numbers, and fortunately his tongue hasn’t yet tried to conquer your mouth because you have to grit your teeth together not to laugh.

He pulls back. “What?”

You can’t help it. Just a small laugh, punctuated but small.

He turns bright red. “Okay, fine, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m no good at this—”

“No Joey you were doing fine, just—”

“—and I’m sorry I’m not slutty enough to go around kissing people all the time.”

The laughter disappears inside you. You glare at him, scoot back from him. “You think I go around kissing people all the time?”

“No,” he says, but that lie is easy to see.

“You think I’m slutty?”

“Well it didn’t take you very long to be all over Shawn, did it?”

“I never kissed Shawn!”
He looks up and to the right, as if consulting some higher power. Then, “That’s not what he says.”

“Goddamn it you can’t talk to Shawn, will you stop it!” You smack his leg. He grabs your wrist before you can take it back. “He says he licked your pussy, too. Are you calling my brother a liar?”

You use your other hand to smack him in the face, and you stand up and run. But your first step is toward the stairs instead of the front door, and before you know it you’re face to face with Ty in his room. His hair is wet, his shirt is off, and the look on his face says he’s concerned about you.

Joey

Goddamn it, Shawn. You fucking liar.

Callie

Step closer. Once, twice. He steps back. Step one more. He puts his hands on your shoulders as if to keep you in place. “What is it,” he says. “What happened?”

You can’t tell him. Don’t ruin this chance. Make something up. “It’s just everything. It’s just my whole life, it’s all fucked up, can I talk to you? Are you busy?”

“Yeah. Yeah we can talk, I guess.”

“Let’s just sit down. Over here. On the bed here.”

He sits. You sit next to him, touching thighs. He scoots away. Don’t press it, don’t be desperate. Make him want…make him want to help you. “This is just the worst possible time for everything to happen. My dad and I are fighting and then my mom thinks I’m absolutely crazy and sometimes I’m not sure she’s wrong, because I feel it, I feel crazy in my head, at night, and every morning, and everything I do it’s like I can see what a not-crazy person would do but I do the opposite—”

Tears. That’s fine. Let out some tears. He says, “Hey. I understand it, I know. You ain’t crazy.”

“I go to a shrink. Did you know that? I go to a shrink and he makes me talk about my problems and I’ve tried everything I can to make him think I’m not crazy, I’ve tried lying to him and I’ve even tried being completely honest with him about every, every single thing, about Shawn and all of it and my cutting, oh, did you know that? I’m that crazy girl who cuts herself, look. Look.”

You’re pulling up the leg of your shorts as he says, “Hey. Listen, I know.” But you think of a better way you stand up you just, poof—unbutton and yank. Shorts gone.

You’re half naked, now.

He’s looking at you. But you told him to, didn’t you? Just keep crying, he can’t do anything but what you want if you’re crying. The shorts drop past your knees to your feet, and you step out with one foot, then kick them to the closed door. The lighting in the room suddenly seems brighter, on your thighs, forget it it’s just like wearing bikini bottoms and this is a private showing anyway.

“There, you see that? You see that scar?”

“The square?” He looks up at you now as if you could quench his thirst.
“Yeah. That was a knife. A knife! I don’t even know why I did it!”

“Callie, that’s—” he says, but then seems to catch himself, to feel that greedy look on his face. “Maybe you ought to put those back on, this probably—”

“Oh I don’t fucking care,” you say, sitting back down next to him. Your bare legs relay the cool smoothness of his comforter, and the embarrassment creeps up slowly. But now is not the time. Stay strong; you’re close. “I don’t care what anybody thinks, they all think I’m crazy anyway.”

“No, nobody here—”

“And if they just knew the way I was crazy it wouldn’t be so bad, but I’m not crazy the way everybody thinks I am! Yeah I cut myself once but I don’t even know why I did it, and all those questions he asks me make me sound like I’m some other kind of crazy, and…”

He waits, but you’re running out of words. Then he says, “Listen. I know. It ain’t any kind of crazy. I feel the same way. The exact same. People look at me and they see a popular guy and they judge me for it, they think I’m crazy to care what other people think, and about sports and how I look, and I mean not everybody thinks that but people at school like Randall, the smart people, I see the way they look at me and they think I’m fucking nuts to live the way I do.”

You scoot closer, sniffling, interested. He doesn’t back away.

“And the thing is, I know I ain’t crazy cause I don’t care about all that stuff. It’s just how my dad brought me up, I got made like this. I didn’t get a choice. And it ain’t so easy to get out of it. I can try but it don’t really matter, I can stop answering phone calls and just stay in my room and write, but people—”

“You write?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I mean, it ain’t good, it’s just for me, really.”

“I write too,” you say. “In my journal. Or I used to.”

“Okay,” he says. “Well that’s what I’m saying, I get that. But at least you don’t have to change who you are to do that. I know my friends are talking behind my back right now about how crazy I am, making all these assumptions about things they don’t even know.”

He just keeps talking. He’s not making a move towards you, even with your pants off. You’ll have to step it up.

“So what are we supposed to do?” you say, holding out your hands and then letting them fall towards him, one grazing down his side, the other staying put on his thigh.

“Well, for starters I’m not gonna be the guy everybody wants me to be anymore, I’m going to be who I want to be. Even if people don’t like it. But, that doesn’t”—he takes your hands, lifts them, gives them back to you—“mean we gotta give people any cause to judge us more than they do already. So just, how bout you go put your shorts back on, and we can keep talking. With the door open.”

“You—you don’t like me?”

“No!” he says. “That ain’t it at all!”

“You think I’m crazy too, don’t you.”

“No! I’m telling you, it ain’t crazy! It just ain’t normal, and people get scared when they see something that ain’t normal. Shawn knew that, too.”

Fuck. Don’t let him go there, keep him away from Shawn, Joey did that to you too and everything got—
“Did you tell him about this?” he asks. “About how you cut yourself?”
“Yes but I didn’t show him. I’m showing you.”
“He understood, didn’t he? He didn’t make you feel crazy at all.”
“No but I feel crazy now and he’s not here, Ty, I need someone else, I need you to help me with this.” You try to bring your hands to his face but he catches them by the wrists.
“Callie,” he says. “I’m doing the best I can.” His eyes are brimming with hurt. There’s some deep sadness inside him that he won’t let you touch—at least, not right now.
But you’re so close now, you can do it, just do it, just get him off and get him fixed, you try to pull your wrists away but Ty’s hands are, always, and maybe you should be crying—but then Joey knocks: “Hey, what are you doing? Callie I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it. I’m coming in.”
Ty is up before you have a chance to react, pressing himself against the door, which Joey had opened about an inch. It slams shut again, and with one hand Ty reaches down and tosses you your shorts. He says, “You stay in here long as you want. I’m gonna go talk to him.”
“No,” you say, but he slides himself out the door. Quickly, you put on your shorts to follow.

Joey

She’s in there with him and they’re doing something, and then suddenly Ty’s in my face and he’s out for blood, and now I know they were doing something. He’s got his shirt off, too. But he’s got his shirt off all the time so I don’t know if she took it off him or not, but now I’m thinking about how we made fun of Shawn that day for getting so mad about it and suddenly it’s not funny anymore. I know they were probably doing something.
I’m about to tell him to keep his fucking hands off, but then Callie’s right behind him and she’s glaring at me, and he’s sticking his finger in my chest and saying, “What’re you sorry for? What did you do?” and I know if I tell him anything, then Callie will beat the crap out of me because we’re suppose to keep it a secret and if she didn’t tell him than I can’t either. Maybe they’ll both end up beating me.
I go, “Nothing.”
“What was it?”
“Nothing.”
“Did you call her crazy?”
I look at Callie, and she looks less mad about this option.
He goes, “Did you?” and I pull out my acting skills. I go, “Yes, okay! Fine! She was telling me something. About Shawn, about how she thinks she can hear him in her head.” And Callie looks mad again but I don’t care, this is a good lie and she can’t be mad at me for telling him about us because I’m not. If she wants crazy I can give her crazy. “And I told her, I said Shawn’s dead, Callie, and she said I know he’s dead but sometimes at night if I’m just laying there and I say something it’s like I can hear him answer me, and it’s like he’s really there because he doesn’t always tell the truth! and I said, Callie that sounds kind of crazy, and she said I don’t care if it sounds crazy, because that’s what’s happening! And sometimes—or anyway, that’s when she started crying and ran upstairs.”
He’s got his bottom lip curled under. He turns to her and goes, “Is that true?”
“Well. Kind of true, at least.”
He goes, “Tell her she ain’t crazy.”
“You’re not crazy, Callie.”
“You tell her that’s not crazy, it’s just sadness. Tell her.”
“It’s not crazy it’s just sadness.”
Then Callie goes, “It’s fine.” We both look at her. “Stop, it’s fine, I’m not upset anymore.”
Ty goes, “You sure?”
She nods.
I go, “I like your shirt, by the way.” Because if this was any normal time we could make fun of each other like that instead of being so serious. Even if I’m this mad at him, and he’s this mad at me. But he doesn’t make fun of me back, which I was pretty sure he wouldn’t, but I kind of hoped he would. But he just turns and goes back to his room.
Then it’s just me and her. And she notices that too, so she pushes past me and goes downstairs. I have to catch her, though, because she can’t be mad at me, I can’t let her.
I want to apologize, I really do, but first I go, “Hey! What were you doing with him?”
She’s at the kitchen table. I sit down next to her. If she says she was just crying I’ll believe her because that’s what her face looks like, like she was crying. Instead she goes, “We were fucking, Joey.” But still she says it all sad-like.
“No you weren’t.”
“Then what do you care? It’s called privacy, Joey, look it up.”
I go, “Hey. Callie. I didn’t tell him.”
“I know.”
“And I am sorry. It’s not my fault, Shawn lied to me, is all.”
She looks at me with her sad-eyes.

Callie
He says, “I mean, a long time ago he told me that.”
But the lie is all over his face. It’s not crazy, Ty said, it’s sadness. But you’re not sure it can’t be both.
His apology seems genuine, but it isn’t even what he said that’s getting to you: You did it again. Lost control and just, smacked him in the mouth, how could you hurt someone you’ve been working so hard to heal? No matter what stupid shit comes out of his mouth.
Out on the driveway, the minivan is parked, the obstacles removed. You look towards the front door, and Randall is there, staring in at you.

Vickie
It’s a fine line, between needing to forget, needing to do things for yourself, to make yourself feel better, and the looks of disappointment they get on their faces. All day long at work I thought about those looks, determined at least for tonight not to drink. I allowed myself the possibility of drinking tomorrow, if only to have strength for tonight. Even without Peter’s help. But my god this grief was trying to kill me.
Callie was over, still, as expected. Joey and Randall sat on the couch together, and all three looked at me when I walked in. “I bought take-out,” I said, finding a place on the table to place it. “Chinese, I hope that’s okay. Callie, does that sound good?”

She had already gotten up, as if expecting to be kicked out. She said, “Um, yeah. But, my dad probably needs to eat, too. So maybe I should just go home, or I could call him, you know. But I should just go home.”

I sighed and got the phone for her, then went upstairs to get Ty.

I knocked and poked my head in, but then walked all the way inside when I saw him. “God, you too?” I said. “Why does everybody look so wiped out today?”

Ty

Twice already I done it and I’m thinking about a third. But then I hear Mom come down the driveway and I put the magazines away.

She comes in and asks what’s the matter and I can’t help it, I ask her, “When did you start drinking?”

“Like, today?” she says, trying to laugh it off. But I just look at her. Finally she walks in and sits on my bed right where Callie was sitting. “Well—I was a little troublemaker, I guess, so it was about your age. But it was way too early. I think, I was very reckless and I put myself in a lot of dangerous situations.”

“That why you drink in your room now? Cause it’s safer?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You guys shouldn’t have to see me like that. Coping like that, I’ve been having some trouble coping with your brother’s death, but I’m not trying to make excuses for it, and anyway I’m not drinking tonight. Okay?”

“I ain’t judging you, Mom.”

“Well, maybe you should. There are other things I could be doing, other ways I could be coping.”

“Like going to work?”

“Yes, that’s a good one, work helps me. Keeping your mind busy helps.”

“And your body?”

“Yeah, that too.”

I been keeping my body busy all day. After Callie came in and took her pants off. Don’t know if it helped me. I don’t think it did.

“Are you trying to ask,” Mom says, “if you ought to go to football tomorrow?”

And I wasn’t, cause I wasn’t even really thinking about going, but I can’t tell her I was talking about jerking my meat, so I shrug like yes.

“Well, baby, I don’t think Shawn would want you to skip it just for him, do you? You feel like you need someone’s permission to go? If you’re ready, I’m giving it to you. You have permission. On behalf of Shawn and everybody, you should go.”

“But what if I ain’t ready?”

“Then don’t go. Or if you’re not sure, go, find out, and come back home. But it might make you feel better, getting back into something familiar. You’ve been kind of a hermit these past couple days, and we miss you.” She rubs a hand on top of my head like she used to do.

“Now come on downstairs, the food’s getting cold.”
She stands up. Then she says, “And you know what, it might be a good night for a campfire, if you want. We still have a lot of marshmallows left over, so you guys better use them before they get old.” Then she winks and she leaves.

Peter

“No,” I said.

Someone must have been in the room with her, because the expected tongue-lashing didn’t come. After a loaded pause, she replied with a faux-calm, “Why not? They’re inviting you over here. You should take them up on it.”

“Tell them I said thanks, but I’m just going to stay here, I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“No,” she said, as if I’d asked her a question. “No, why would I?”

I didn’t get it at first, and so just kept talking. “We can discuss when you get home, if you want. Tell them I said thank—”

“You bought the toilet paper, and you put it away! How should I know where it is?” Then her voice became somewhat muffled. “Yeah, he’s got the—he’s not feeling well.”

“How…incredibly mature of you, Callie.”

“Well if they’re stained we can go to K-Mart this weekend and get you some new ones. Why are you telling me all of this over the phone, anyway? It’s kind of gross, Dad.”

“Goodbye, Callie.”

Randall

Callie started clearing off the table. I said, Hey—you don’t have to do that.

Well somebody’s got to.

Mom came back downstairs. Callie, she said. We can just eat in the living room. Don’t worry about that.

Really, I don’t mind.

Mom watched her for a moment with a blank face, as if a shrine were being dismantled in front of her. Then she said, Well I guess if your dad’s coming—

He’s not, he’s not feeling well.

Oh.

I stood up and went to the kitchen while Mom just watched. How about you help me get out some plates, I said.

This’ll only take a minute.

Callie, I said. Stop it.

She paused and looked at me. Mom let out a sort of sigh and sat down on the couch.

Ty came downstairs, and we ate. Some beach volleyball came on after SportsCenter, and we watched it. We watched beach volleyball. The whole match. And it was guys.

When it was over, Ty said, So were we gonna start a campfire tonight?

Joey and I looked at each other. Joey said, I guess, if you want to.

Well Mom said—

It doesn’t matter, Ty, Mom said. It was just an idea.

I asked her, Did you want to?

I don’t care.
Would you come out with us?
No, she said, if you guys do that I’ll probably just go to bed.
Well forget it then.
Ty shrugged his indifference, too. But I didn’t think he understood, that this was really hard for her, but important. Of course she wanted us to voluntarily leave her, because then she could give up. And maybe she wouldn’t drink if we left her alone and maybe she would, but either way she’d be alone, and if she was willing to even try, to let us keep her company instead of staying in her room, we had to take her up on that.
Callie stood up, collected the dishes and took them to the kitchen. Nobody stopped her. After a minute I got up to help dry. Somebody had to. Somebody had to do a lot of things around here, and it wasn’t Callie’s responsibility, it was ours. Which meant it was mine.
Chapter Eighteen

Peter

Being the good father took less effort than I’d prepared myself to give it, due to Callie’s routine absences. Without her around, I found myself out of excuses and resumed work on my novel. The project, on the whole, could be considered a disaster: For starters, it was a decade old, and not only was it far from being published itself, but it had also kept me from working on other, scholarly publications. Which isn’t to blame the novel for my rapid failure to achieve a tenure-track position, but lack of publications certainly hadn’t helped. Beyond that, Portia saw the novel as a major factor in our estrangement and ultimate dissolution. It wasn’t until now, having spent time as a single father and time watching Vickie with her boys, that I began to see what my ex-wife might have seen. And maybe to agree with her, a little.

Except, despite all that, the novel could still trigger inside me brief flashes of pride. For years I had put everything into that novel. I mean, yes, the novel itself had received every good idea, every depravity and hardship, every variety of violence, perversion, natural disaster, and tragedy I could conceive of. But also, I had put everything of myself into it, outside of the smallest increments reserved for teaching, every ounce of effort I could spare. After a good writing binge, I would stand up from the desk, physically exhausted. It was a huge project, fifteen hundred pages of material to date, and with Portia gone I had expected that number only to grow exponentially. But the day she left—actually, the moment she left, the moment the door closed behind her and shut out the December cold, was the last I had gotten the urge to write.

And I know, perhaps even knew then, it was just an aversion tactic. The door had shut; instead of allowing myself to feel any one of the hundred real-life emotions begging for my attention, I had thought, Time to write. It worked, too. I wrote for an hour without feeling a single tick of the clock. But when I finally backed my eyes off the screen and looked around, that was the end of writing. I had lost my taste for it.

Even now, with revamped determination and relatively ample time on my hands, I could still feel the artifice in the process, and I knew exactly why. It was Shawn. Every character, every scene, I could only pile up dry sand in my attempt to build a castle. As if by carrying him that day I’d scalded my fingers, and wouldn’t be able to feel anything again.

In lieu of writing, I began deleting. And at that task, I was enormously successful.

Ty

My dad said once that safeties and quarterbacks gotta think the same. They both gotta know where the ball should go. That’s why in high school a lot of quarterbacks play safety on defense, cause they’re the most likely to know what the other quarterback is thinking. It was the smartest thing my dad ever said. But then he said, “And also their helmets are pretty much the same.”

“They are?” I said. We were watching some football game on TV. “Pretty much. See? Which, for high school, you know. It’s a matter of convenience.”

He said it like he was the wisest man on earth, and for a long time I tried to figure out what he meant by saying them two things together. A quarterback and a safety think the same, and they wear the same helmet too. I thought maybe he meant what somebody looks like on the
outside shows what they’re like on the inside. But convenience? Later I decided he was just trying to get me ready for life as a football player, and then even later, after the divorce, I decided he never had any idea what he was talking about, he was just babbling, there was no connection at all. Like a little kid’ll tell you everything they know of that’s the color blue. He probably don’t even remember saying it.

But that outside-inside thing I came up with on my own stuck with me. Most of my time in school I been concerned with looking good on the outside, cause then people would know I was great on the inside. But when I thought about it some more, especially after Shawn died, I realized that the better you look on the outside, the more people think you’re trying to cover something up. Which made me mad at first, until I figured out they were right.

Last night I decided to go to football, as long as Coach didn’t make me play quarterback anymore. I ain’t a quarterback. I can think like one, so I can still play safety, but when I put on that helmet that makes me look like a quarterback, I gotta know I’m not. I got to know: it’s just a matter of convenience.

First thing we gotta do this morning is meet in the locker room to get fitted for pads. A bunch of guys say hey, glad to have you back, but after that they don’t talk to me because they don’t know what to say. The new coach don’t even say hi. Got too much shit to do, he’s too excited. He’s never been a head coach before. Lot of people don’t know that but I do, my dad looked him up. When we have our pads and helmets he makes us all repeat after him: “These pads are my weapons! These pads are what will guide me in battle and lead me to victory! These pads are an extension of me, and I will care for them and protect them, and they will protect me in return!” It sounds like something I heard in a movie once, with soldiers talking bout their guns, but really I know it’s just cause the school is poor and we can’t afford new pads, so we gotta take care of these. Everybody around me shouts. I don’t shout. Nobody says a thing about it to me, but some people look.

I don’t expect the coach to take the news well, he’s too damn excited. So I think about how to break it to him gently. We run out to the practice field and he splits us into offense and defense, and I jog with big Tommy over to the defense. But he yells, “Patterson! I said offense over here.”

We start off conditioning, carrying our pads cause we’re not supposed to wear them yet. But we have on the helmets. We run the hill, and we run the gauntlet, and we drop down and do push-ups, sit-ups, squat-thrusts. We put down our pads when we run the tires, but that’s probably more for the pads’ protection than ours, so we don’t trip and drop em and fuck em up. For an hour we just run and condition, run and condition, and it feels good. Mom was right. It helps.

After we break for water, we start in on formation drills. I keep pushing Darryl in front of me in line, putting him with the better receivers. It’s like he got taller since I last saw him. Or maybe I got shorter. We get through the out-routes, the slants and the posts before Coach pulls me aside.

He takes me over by the water spouts and slaps a hand on my shoulder. “First off, just want to say officially, welcome back.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

“Second, I’d like to kindly ask you what the fuck you think you’re doing.”
I ain’t figured out the right way to say it yet, with all the running and stuff, so I just say, “I don’t know.”

“Well in case you forgot, you’re a senior this year. I expect to see a little leadership out of you.”

This might be my chance. Or anyway, I’ll take it. “I am, Coach. Darryl’s the future of this team, not me. I just want the team to do good, you know.”

“That’s not your goddamn decision, buddy. You’re a senior and I expect you to act like one.”

“Well what do you want, you want me to act like a senior or you want me to act like a leader?”

“You’re arguing semantics with me?”

“No, Coach, I ain’t arguing, I’m just saying—”

“Well luckily,” he says as he backs up a step and sighs, “your dad warned me about this.”

“My dad?”

“He said you’ve been acting a little funny lately. That’s why I asked him to come out today.”

“You what?”

Coach turns to the director’s box, high above the field. We don’t ever use it, nobody’s supposed to be up there, it’s a marching band thing. But there he is. He’s up there. And he starts coming down.

“Now don’t worry,” Coach says, “I didn’t tell him you called him a dickwad.”

“That’s all right,” I say, “I can tell him.”

Randall

With Ty at football I couldn’t practice driving his car, so we sat there, like we had been for days. I could remember a time when TV seemed like the greatest thing ever. If someone had offered me the opportunity to do nothing all day but sit around and watch TV, I would’ve been all over it. But now I realized that it was the fact that I hadn’t been allowed to do it which made me want to so badly.

Similarly, now, it was as if some outside force were preventing us from talking to each other. A good conversation, now. That was all I wanted.

So when Callie said, Hey, thanks for helping me with the dishes last night, even though it wasn’t exactly a deep, conversation-starting question, I was admittedly pretty excited. She was in the easy chair next to me, while Joey lay on the couch.

No problem, I said. The next task was to say something back to her immediately, to continue the vein. But suddenly in looking at her, I thought of Miss April 2002, who does not talk, and to whom I had nothing to say. Looking at her, that was easy, and that seemed like all I was capable of doing to Callie at that moment.

She stared back. Not upset, not giving me that ‘pervert’ look. But just, waiting.

Joey said, You want to do dishes? Callie looked away from me, at him. I’ll help you with some dishes, if that’s what you like doing. We can even go get out all the clean dishes and wash them too. Like for practice. So that we’re good at it when the game’s on the line.
Callie turned somewhat pink in the face. Whatever happened between them yesterday wasn’t over.

I said, Should I leave you two alone for a little bit?  
Sure.
No, said Callie. Everything’s fine.
I got up and turned off the TV. What’s going on? I asked.
Their faces bounced looks off each other, comparing notes on the secret.
If you just tell me, maybe I can help.
Just then I heard a car pull down the driveway. Ty was home. Joey said, Screw it. Let’s just tell him.

Joey, she said, if you say one more word I’ll never so much as talk to you again.

Ty came in and stood just inside the door. I looked at the clock on the kitchen wall behind him; he was home early. His gaze drifted to each of us, and at first I believed he knew what was happening right now, in this room, without having heard a word. I knew he’d played a part in whatever happened yesterday, too, so just seeing us sitting in a room without the TV on may have been enough to tip him off.

But he kept looking, face to face to face. Something was wrong. Something with him.

He put his index fingers to his temples as his eyes stopped focusing on us, and he turned toward the kitchen. I stood up to follow him and heard the others stand, too. He walked up to the sink, stopped, still rubbing. He opened a cabinet and took out a plate and set it on the counter.

Then he got a box of crackers and, leaving the plate there, walked past us back to the living room, on up the stairs, and into his bedroom, all of us close behind.

Finally he sat on his bed and put a cracker in his mouth, chewing slowly. Callie crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall, and Joey sat down on the carpet.

Well, Ty said, and then swallowed. I punched Dad in the face.

Randall’s face goes all white and he starts drilling Ty about what happened, asking him all these questions, and I listen good as I can, but I’m so happy I can’t pay too good of attention. Randall has to ask about all the details before he believes it, but I believe it as soon as he says it. That’s what’s wrong with Randall, he doesn’t have any faith. He doesn’t just know things, he has to prove it. I listen to him ask all these questions and I know that’s why I never told him about how to talk to Shawn, because he’d ask all these questions and he’d end up not believing me, just like Callie.

And forget Callie, Ty can have her. He deserves her.

I’ll tell Ty later, though, because he has faith. He believes in himself, and I can’t believe I’ve been so dumb. When we went golfing with Dad he was the only one to tell him how big a douchebag he was. Randall couldn’t do it, he kept being all nice about it, and sometimes nice just doesn’t work. Sometimes only a punch in the face is what works.

Randall wouldn’t even know what to do with her. I don’t really know what to do with her, either, and yeah I’d probably figure it out but Ty knows what to do with her and he should have her. I’m giving her to him. He’s been trying to deal on his own, by drinking which is stupid, but I
think he’ll stop that now and he’ll go back to being Ty and he’ll fuck her every night, he’ll fuck her hard and she’ll totally get off and come and I’ll have my big brother back. I got one back in secret and one back I didn’t even know I’d lost.

Plus we won’t ever go back to Dad’s again.

Everything is wonderful.

Randall

Bit by bit I got the story out of him, and it was the worst-case scenario.

Well, congratulations, I said to him. That was epically boneheaded of you. Maybe we should drive over there and pee on his truck, while we’re busy pissing him off.

What do you mean, we?

This isn’t just about you anymore, dipshit. He’s going to want to get even but he can’t just return fire. So who’s left? Who can he take it out on?

Nobody, he’ll get over it—

What if he takes it out on Mom?

No, Ty said. He don’t even live here, what’s he gonna do?

I don’t know what he’s going to do, but I know what he could do. What if he challenges custody? What if we all have to go live with him, because of this. Think about that.

Come on, said Callie. His son punched him. How is that your mom’s fault? What could he even challenge on?

I don’t know, maybe the fact that under her supervision, one of us died?

Everybody grew silent. They each looked at me with contempt, and then each turned away. I didn’t blame them. I had just tried to use Shawn’s death as a means to win an argument. It was disgusting. It didn’t matter if I was right.

I left the room, went to mine. I sat on my bed. I lay down. I sat up again. My forehead felt like it was boiling. I should have just kept my cool. I should have said, Don’t worry about it, Ty. Mistakes happen. I’ll call Dad tonight and smooth things over. Everything will be fine.

I didn’t, though.

Callie

When Randall leaves, Ty tells you both to leave too. You specifically hesitate, to give him the chance to recant your expulsion, but he doesn’t. So you wind up alone in the living room with Joey once again. After a few minutes of silent sitting and avoiding eye contact, you stand up and turn on the television.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“What, like really sorry? Or are you gonna act all pissy again in ten minutes?”

“I was being immature. I’m sorry. I don’t know why you did what you did with me, but I don’t think it had much to do with me, so let’s just forget it.”

You want to shake him, grab him by the shoulders and growl at him until he understands. Yes it was for him, and there’s more for him if he needs it, but he’s not the only one in need. And this is precisely why you can’t say anything else to him now. If this attitude will keep his mouth shut, then so be it. Ty sounds like he’s on the verge of something even bigger than hitting his
father, and it’s like Randall’s forgotten how to smile and or even how to blink, and they need you now. You can come back to Joey later, if you have to.

The phone rings. No one gets it. You’ve been trained not to, and they turned off the answering machine sometime last week. Now it’ll ring, pause, and ring some more with a consistency near maddening.

Joey turns the TV up.

“Why don’t you just unplug the phone?” you ask him.

“What if we need to make a call?” he says in all seriousness.

Randall

I heard a car pull down the driveway, but I didn’t get to my window in time to see who it was, as only the top of the driveway is visible, so I had to run downstairs. In the living room, Joey said to me, Mom’s home.

Which at first was a relief that it wasn’t Dad. But then I saw she was over two hours early, and that didn’t sit well, either.

She stormed into the house and took off her sunglasses. Where is Ty?

Room, said Joey, pointing.

Her purse still on her shoulder, she stomped up the steps. We heard banging on the door. In the kitchen the phone started ringing again. I could hear, What were you thinking? and That fucking asshole, and Never any peace in this house. Then they stomped back downstairs and walked single file through the living room, suggesting she was chasing him.

And the second call, she was saying, was from your coach. Guess what he wants?

Ty put the plate away he hadn’t used, then picked up the phone and hung it up. What? he said. Dentures?

No, he wants you to apologize to him or else he says he’s going to swear out a warrant for your arrest.

Oh, for what?

Second-degree assault, is what he said.

I only hit him once!

You hit your coach, too? Joey said.

What’s second-degree assault? I asked.

The phone started ringing again. Mom grabbed it. What? she shouted.

The voice started talking. Mom just began nodding at Ty and pointing at the phone, probably the coach. Ty sat down at the table and, pushing debris out of his way, buried his face in his hands.

Yes, Mom said. Yes he will. Yes he’s right here.

Callie tapped me on the shoulder. Dad says it’s assault with a deadly weapon. She had her cell phone to her ear. Everyone paused a moment and looked at her.

What? said Ty.

Assault with a deadly weapon? Mom said into the phone. You’ve got to be kidding me.

What, did you try to stab him with your cleats? said Joey.

He says you threw your helmet at him, Mom said.
Oh my god! Ty yelled. I took that off before I even started talking to em!
He says he’s got witnesses—did you throw your helmet or not?
I tossed it. I lightly tossed it on the ground and that was before anything happened.
And then Mom said, back into the phone again, All right motherfucker, I’ve had about enough of people screwing with my family, now when I hang up, don’t…no, don’t you dare—
Callie tapped on me again. Dad says if he just hit him once the most it could be is a fifth-degree assault, which isn’t even a felony. And if it’s on a football field the judge will just throw the case out anyway. He wants to know if he needs to do anything—
No, I said. No, I can do it. I’ve got it under control. You can hang up now.
She looked at me.
Look, I said, I don’t need your dad to clean this up for me, I can do it!
Randall? she said. This isn’t about you.
Mom closed her eyes and put a hand over the mouthpiece, gritting her teeth. Ty, will you just come over here and apologize to this idiot?
Ty didn’t move.
Come on. He says even the lesser assault charge is up to ninety days in jail, so just do it.
I can’t right now, said Ty.
Do it. Now.
Tell him I’m still too worked up and I can’t fucking do it right now! Tell him I’ll call him later and do it for real, okay? Does he want an apology, or does he want bullshit?
Mom glared at him.
I’m serious. Just let me cool off. You know I’ll start feeling bad about this, I just need some time.
Shaking her head, she said into the phone, He needs some time. Because, damn it, he’s a good kid, and he knows when he calms down he’ll want to apologize, and he’ll mean it. He’ll call you later, he’s got your number, good-bye.
She hung up.
Callie said, Dad says nobody goes to jail for their first misdemeanor charge.
Oh how would he know? asked Mom.
How would you know? asked Callie. Then she looked at the phone. He hung up on me.
Good, I thought. I didn’t need his help. Okay, I said. Let’s just all keep calm about this.
When are you going to call him back?
Ty stood up and headed for the stairs.
And we need to talk about what we’re gonna do about Dad, too! I shouted after him.
Fuck off! he shouted back.
Mom sat down at the table. Her hands were shaking as she started massaging her forehead.
Hey, I said. Everything’s going to be fine.
Really? she said, softly sarcastic. How?
I couldn’t come up with anything.
Joey

Mom and Randall go to the grocery store. Mom is going to go by herself, but Randall says he’s coming too, he wants to drive. Mom looks like she kind of wants to tell him no, but she lets him come anyway.

When we’re alone, I go, “God, I hope Ty’s okay.”

Callie goes, “Yeah.”

“You might want to check on him.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Look, I don’t care. Lots of people like him, it’s okay, I get it.”

She goes, “It’s not like that,” but I don’t believe her.

“And anyway, he probably needs you right now. He needs to feel better. You make people feel better.” She looks at me like she’s kind of embarrassed. “I mean, believe me,” I go, “I know from experience—”

And she’s already getting up. “I’m going, I’m going.”

Take that, Shawn. That’s what you get for lying to me.

Ty

I shouldn’t have even come today. I realize clear as day, watching Dad take the steps of the ladder carefully, one by one cause they’re rusty and weak. Maybe Mom would miss it, maybe she wouldn’t, but she even told me to come home if I didn’t want to be here. Me being here only makes other people happy, and not even in a good way but only in a selfish way, and Dad’s at the top of that list. And he don’t deserve to be happy at all. And now when I quit it’s just gonna make everybody even more pissed than if I woulda never came. Shoulda just stayed in my room.

He walks up to Coach and me and he’s got a grin on his face, and I grin right back at him because he don’t even know what’s coming. He should but he don’t. I say, “Coach, I’d like you to meet my dad, Philip Patterson. Dad, meet Coach.”

Dad sticks out his hand, and Coach shakes it, even while he’s saying, “We met this morning, actually.”

“Nice guy,” Dad says. “I was worried about this whole changing coaches thing, but I gotta admit this guy knows his stuff.”

“Good,” I say. “I just wanted to make sure you guys were well-acquainted, because Coach, this man right here”—I hold out my hand like a presentation—“is the reason I’m quitting the team.”

Their smiles fade.

I toss my helmet to the grass and it rolls like a ball. “What did I tell you? You remember that? I said if you came down to practice I was gonna quit. I said that, I told you that, didn’t I.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Yes I did.”

“Well I didn’t think you were serious. And anyway, he asked me to come. Nicely. I mean, I was all ready to give this guy a piece of my mind, but he don’t need it, he knows what he’s talking about.”

I look over at Coach. “What, I’m starting? You told him I’m starting quarterback?”

“Well damn hell, Ty, nobody knows this team better than you,” he says.
“That’s not an answer. Am I starting?”
He squirms a little in his shoes but his face keeps tight. I can see his whistle, poking up from inside his shirt like a tiny alien. He says, “Yes.”
Dad grins like he’s right, but he’s not.
I say, “At quarterback?”
Then I see his eyes flick over toward Darryl. The quarterback every high school coach wants. Six-two, a thick frame, a good arm, and young, too. He’ll have him for the next three years, he’ll get to mold him into exactly he wants. Coach only looks half a second, but he starts touching that whistle under his shirt and he don’t answer.
I try it again. I just say the word. “Quarterback.”
There go his eyes. He probably has wet dreams about this kid.
“Can’t answer me, can you.”
“I don’t want to say a hundred percent. You got to earn your job, just like everybody else.”
“And he will,” Dad says. “Believe me.”
“Hey,” I say, “how thick is your skull anyway? He has no intention of starting me at quarterback, he just wants to make the new guy work for it. Then he’s gonna toss me aside and I’ll be signaling in plays just like last year.”
“Boy—”
“Shut up,” I say right back. I’m pointing at his big red nose. “Let me fuckin talk a second.”
He’s staring at me so hard he can probably see the back of my brain, and then he makes a mistake. He takes a long, slow step closer to me. Right into my proximity, and it’s too damn close. He says, “Don’t point that fuckin finger—”
I swing at him like he’s asking for it, because he is, and I’m not just trying to shut him up like I was with Randall, I’m out for pain. I aim for his eye but he sees it just in time, so I catch him in the forehead, and soon as I feel my knuckles on his face I know I just opened the box and there ain’t a damn thing I can do to close it up again. He ain’t gonna hold back on me no more.
But for now I caught him off guard. He ain’t ready for this, like he had to get warmed up first, he’s moving too slow. When I hit him he takes a step back, then throws his own punch. I hardly have to move to watch it go by, and when the rest of him follows his hand I throw my knee into his gut, and he falls to the grass like he dropped a contact, trying to catch his breath.
Then that dumbass Coach grabs my arm, and he shoulda waited a second because I punch him too. Soon as I do it I wish I didn’t, but it’s too late. He falls backwards, tries to catch himself gentle but he still lands smack on his ass. His lip is busted open, and he touches it like they do in movies to see the blood. Other coaches are running over, and the players are following, the receivers, the running backs, fat Tommy and all the defense. But it don’t matter, I’m done with this team.
“You lost your damn mind, boy.” Dad coughs and spits, and he’s watching everybody close in, so he must feel like it’s safe to talk again.
“No,” I say back, “I’m just keeping a promise.”
They all surround me now. Coaches and players, they’re all around, they’re too close and I feel the pressure. But the fight is already over, so nobody tries to grab onto me. Yet. They might
if they think Coach wants em to. If he just gave the word, they’d stomp me straight down to hell. So I start taking big deep breaths like some rabid animal and I raise my arms out wide like an invitation. No one comes.

I look for an exit, and I see Tommy. His fat ass looks just like a doorway and he sees my crazy eyes lock onto him and already he’s backing up scared, I walk straight for him and he backs up some more, bumping into other kids, they all back up and I walk out of the circle. I walk straight to the locker room. I don’t stop.
Chapter Nineteen

Callie

“My dad’s been arrested. Twice.”

Finally he opens the door for you. You walk over and sit on his bed, but he stays standing. Joey’s downstairs, and Randall and Vickie are gone, so the atmosphere feels reasonably private, even though he didn’t shut the door again. But you’ve already decided this will have to come in stages, with him. He’s not going to let you in all at once. Just contact. Just a kiss. That will be enough for now.

Ty

“What for?” I ask her.

“Drinking, sort of. Both times. I didn’t know about it, until my mom told me. After they separated. He used to hang out with a bunch of jerks, I don’t know why. I mean I’ve met most of them, and I can see how being around them might lead to some bad situations.

“Anyway, he got arrested for underage consumption when he was in college. And then not that long ago, with his friends again, he was the driver and they went off the road and ran into some guy’s house. It was really late and nobody was home, and he barely did any damage I guess, so they just left. Well, the next day he went back to the guy’s house to apologize, and the guy had the cops there. Dad stopped anyway and confessed and apologized, but they still arrested him. They couldn’t get him on the drunk driving charge, but they did charge him for leaving the scene of an accident.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, I know. Kind of fucked him over at his job, too.” She’s sitting and I’m standing so it’s a weird way to have a conversation, but I ain’t gonna sit down next to her. I can still see the mark on her forehead where it busted on the windshield, and last time she was in here alone her damn pants came off so quick I didn’t know what was happening. But I know why Shawn liked her so much. They think the same. Seems like she’s asking for trouble, like she wants to get hurt. She even cut herself, she showed it to me. And I almost want to find out what she knows. But there’s a difference between her and Shawn. I coulda saved Shawn from himself by talking to him about it, but if I talk to her, who’s gonna save her from me?

“My point is,” she says, “my dad probably knows what he’s talking about. Okay?”

“Wait, so they can’t arrest me?” It don’t make much sense, since it’s a whole different crime he did, but I don’t even say it. Looks like she knows already.

“Well they can still arrest you. If the coach does file a charge they can arrest you, but you probably won’t go to jail.”

“Where they gonna take me when they arrest me, then?”

“Ty, no, that’s not the point, if you apologize you don’t even have to worry about—just, just settle down, come here.” She opens up her arms. She’s trying to be nice, I know that, but she’s got to remember some things, and her hands are so soft and she smells like something delicious and goddamn that scar mighta been the sexiest fucking thing I ever seen but it don’t matter, it don’t matter and she’s gotta remember it don’t matter cause even if you end up with something beautiful like that you gotta remember the pain. The mark is still on her forehead but she forgets the pain. She’s even forgetting Shawn. She’s his girl, not mine.
I don’t get any closer. But she don’t stop. She licks her lips quick and she says, “Come here, baby,” and it’s a whole new voice she’s trying on like a pair of shoes, cept she’s saving the receipt for when she don’t need it no more.

And that’s enough. All I can stomach, right now. “I need you to leave, please.”

“What’re you afraid of?”

“I ain’t afraid of anything. How can you forget him so fast?”

Finally she stands up. “It’s not forgetting!” She starts walking past me to the door. “You need help, okay? I’m just trying to help.”

It is forgetting, though. I don’t even say it, cause she knows.

Randall

The driving instructor, a man about my height but twice my weight, looked me up and down. Randall, is it? he said.

Yeah. I offered him my hand, which he took, shifting his clipboard to his other hand.

Let’s go check your blinkers.

We’d spent the past two days waiting. Waiting on Ty to get arrested. Waiting on Dad’s lawyer to get in contact with us, or waiting on Dad to get fed up with his own waiting and just show up all pissed-off. I’d felt paralyzed in my shoes, and I saw the same feeling behind everyone else’s eyes. I hadn’t driven since taking Mom to the grocery, where she bought mostly frozen meals, instant dinners to be popped into the oven or microwave, nothing that couldn’t be served quickly, en masse, and eaten in front of the television. And also some chocolate bars and graham crackers. Wednesday night crept by, and Thursday was even slower. I couldn’t think up a way to pass the time effectively. Mom was the lucky one, getting eight hours of hard labor to take her mind off the uncertainty. The rest of us just counted down the minutes until the next commercial break.

The fat man wore a white short-sleeve button-up and a tie that didn’t extend past his belly button. The sweat-stains were impressive, especially considering we were still experiencing a cold front that had kept the thermometer below seventy-five the past three or four days. For some reason I imagined him to have recently had a beard.

He spoke at me through my open driver’s window. So, yeah. Left turn signal. Right turn signal. Brake lights. Flashers. Good.

I thought I’d be more stressed out than this, but the past few days of nail-biting anticipation had taken the edge off. Ty hadn’t called to apologize to his coach yet. He said he’d do it today; I’d believe it when I saw it. I wanted to just make him do it, to just say, Hey. Do it. And he’d have to because I told him to. But I felt handcuffed lately, knowing nothing I could say had any effect on him, or on Joey or anybody else. I’d tried being nice, I’d tried being angry, I’d tried keeping calm, and nothing made anyone listen to me. I just needed more authority. I needed a paycheck. Money talks.

He climbed into the front seat, and the car’s axis shifted on its poles. As he pulled out the seatbelt and swung it around him, he said, So, yeah. Here’s what we’re gonna do. There’s the road portion first and then we’ll come back and test your maneuverability in the parking lot here. Now, pre-ignition. Run through your checklist?
Ty had brought me to the test. The fat man had said hello to him as if he knew him, but Ty had just turned and walked out. I was hoping he had just gone down to the video game store. If I got my license and he wasn’t back, I was going to leave him behind, as a thank-you for shunning the man with our future in his hands.


Did you check your mirrors?

Shit, forgot something already. I said quickly, Yeah, I checked them while we were turning the blinkers on and stuff.

Okay, he said. I pulled the car up to the traffic-light exit of the parking lot. Okay, yeah, we’re gonna turn right here.

Can I turn right on red here?

I don’t know, he said, can you?

Yes?

Then go ahead.

I looked for cars as he wrote something down on the clipboard. So how many things can I get wrong before I fail? I asked.

Well, certain things are worth certain points. You get in an accident, you only need one thing wrong. But how bout we worry about that when we’re done, okay? So, yeah.

He guided me out of the main part of town, just like Ty said he would. Down to the three-way intersection, with the stop sign, the yield, and the right-of-way. I yielded, or at least, I felt like I yielded, but what’s the difference between a yield and a not-yield, exactly? Did I yield enough? Did he mark me off for something on the clipboard, or was he just playing tic-tac-toe?

We’re going to just, merge onto the highway up here, so. Yeah, you’ll want to be going a little faster, yeah, so. Little faster. Okay, so, yeah.

He was tugging on his ear, guiding me, giving me instructions. Was he supposed to help me like that? Was I screwing up that badly? As soon as I got onto the highway, the woman in the SUV behind me swerved around me and into the passing lane. Bitch, I thought. Fucking bitch gonna make me crash.

But then I wondered if I’d deserved it, if I really was going too slow.

I didn’t want to get too close to the speed limit, though. I couldn’t. That had to be a deduction. I couldn’t afford to risk it.

We crested a hill. The SUV, now about ten car-lengths ahead, pulled back into the right lane. How long do we have to be on the highway? I asked.

Until I say so. Don’t worry about it, just drive.

I’m not worried.

I didn’t say you were. I just said, Don’t worry.

I’m not.

Okay, so, he said. I thought I saw his hand move and tried to sneak a look at the clipboard, keeping one eye on the road. But I couldn’t see what he was writing. I looked again.

We hit a bump, something huge. I gripped the wheel tighter. What was that?

Nothing, just, yeah. Look, pieces of tire there, from a semi, had a blow-out, you don’t have to—
Ahead of us, the SUV hit some more pieces of the tire, then swerved to dodge a big one. Not just a normal swerve a hard swerve she kept swerving, I hit the brakes she kept swerving kept turning across the left lane slammed—slammed head-on into the median.

Shit, said the fat man. Shit shit. Pull over, pull over. Shit.
I parked the minivan on the right side of the highway as far from the traffic lanes as I could. Ahead I saw a semi-truck pulled over, too. The driver was standing back by his shredded tire. Then the fat man was getting out of the minivan.

I said, What are you doing?
We just witnessed an accident, what do you think I’m doing? he said.
Do you think she’s hurt?
I don’t know, she hit pretty hard. Tell that truck driver to radio for help.

Cars whizzed by, but no one else had stopped. I ran up towards the semi, and when the driver saw me he started running back toward his cab. He’s making a break for it, I thought, and I yelled, Hey! Hey you! Stop, I saw you! Stop!

He stopped and turned. What?
That was your tire! That was your tire that made her crash!
I know!
Well, you can’t just—where are you going?
I’m calling for help, what the fuck do you think I’m doing? And he turned back to his truck.

Back down the highway the fat man still waited to cross the road. Cars were slowing down but not stopping. I’d caught up to him by the time he could cross, and I beat him to the SUV. There was smoke, the air was hazy, and I got around to the driver’s side window. The fat man came panting up behind me. Her window was busted out, and the smoke, I said, It’s smoking!

He said, It’s just the airbag, check on her. Check on the driver, see if she’s all right, see if there’s anybody else in the car.

Finally I let myself look directly at her, and I found she was looking at me. The glass had cut her face. She had a haircut like my cousin, sort of short, up to her chin about, and she looked at me like I had all the answers.

Hey, I said. Um, are you okay?
She said, It’s smoking.
Tell her she’s been in an accident, he said.
You’ve been in an accident.
Still standing behind me, he asked, Is there anybody else in the car, like a baby or something?

I don’t see anybody, I said, turning towards him, but he shoved me back to face her.
Ask her, ask her!
Is there anybody else in the car?
No, she said. Her hand was fumbling against the side of the door. Finally the guy leaned around me and spoke to her directly.

No, ma’am, you gotta hold still until the ambulance gets here, is that guy calling an ambulance?
He said he was.
Where is he?
Calling the ambulance, probably!
Well how long could that take—
Help, said the woman.
We looked at her.
My leg. I can’t move my leg.
I stuck my head in the window. There was glass all over her lap, her shirt, the airbag was
deflated and hanging from the steering wheel. Her left leg was under the dash, and I reached in to
move the airbag and hopefully get a look at her right leg. Instead, she took my hand in hers.
Help, she said again, softly. I can’t move my leg. My leg…
Her eyes began to close. I know, I said, I’m just gonna look at it.
Don’t let her move her head, she might have broken—oh, shit, I think she’s going into
shock.
Her hand kept squeezing tighter.
I turned back to the fat man. Go back to the car and in the back there’s a blanket. Go get
the blanket, she needs the blanket.
He nodded and did as I said. Cars had started changing to the right lane and creeping past us, gawking. He got across much more easily this time, and he was hurrying. She still held my
hand, but her eyes were closed. Awkwardly, I reached my other hand inside the car and moved
the airbag.
There was blood. Something was bleeding, I couldn’t see what or where, but the part of
her leg I could see, her shorts were absorbing it like a sponge, and I became certain she was
going to die, right here, holding onto my hand. Maybe she was dead now.
Ma’am? I said. Ma’am?
The fat man wasn’t back yet.
You know my brother just died, I said. I felt like I had to talk, I had to say something. He
fell from a window, and he broke his neck, and he died. So, you see, you’ve got nothing to worry
about. You might be a little hurt but you’ll be absolutely fine, okay? Because this isn’t your time.
This can’t happen to you with me here, because with me here, the sad thing is already here, so
you can’t be the sad thing. You’re gonna be fine. You’re not the sad thing. You’re gonna be just
fine.
She opened her eyes. The fat man came back with a blanket, and we draped it around her
shoulders, but she kept on squeezing my hand, so the blanket was over her and me and our hands
were underneath it. The ambulance came, and they talked about needing to cut her out of the car,
but then they found the seat could still be moved back. Someone climbed in the other side and
secured her neck, and they scooted the seat back and freed up her leg and the whole time she
kept squeezing my hand, looking right at me. I looked at her when I could, but I couldn’t always
look.
The fat man had to drive back to the DMV. I was kind of shaking. We walked in, and he
said, Congratulations. You’ve got your license, you passed with flying colors. Which made me
look at him, because we didn’t even do the maneuverability. He said it right in front of Ty, right
in the lobby like we were putting on a show. We went and he took me in the back to the
bathroom and said, Might want to wash up and stuff, so. Fix your hair, you know. Come out when you’re ready, so, yeah.

They took my picture and I filled out the paperwork and I paid the fees. Then Ty got in the passenger’s side, and I told him I was tired of driving and I wanted him to drive home, please.

On the way home, he finally asked, What took so long? You look kind of shook up.
There was an accident. On the highway, we got…held up…
Well, he said, you can thank me later. That guy, he knew me. He knew about Shawn, so as soon as he saw me, I knew you were good.
Yeah, I said. Thanks.

Peter

It was the novel of my life, and it had nothing to do with me.
I’d spent the week hiding. To Callie it must have seemed normal behavior on my part, but this time it was willful. I didn’t want to get talked into going back next door, and more than that I thought it might take just a short period of intense seclusion to break back into the story I’d been writing for years. I read and reread, picked out sentences I liked, tried to find meaning, tried to find any part in the novel which actually said something. But Shawn stuck with me. Never had I so clearly witnessed life’s scathing temporality as when I held him in my arms and carried him around to the front of the house. In the fragility was the essence; nothing I had written thus far had even come close to explaining, describing, or even making a passing reference to that same feeling. I began to realize that nothing in the work spoke to who I was or what I believed; instead I’d written a tabloid-worthy parade of extreme circumstances, extreme characters, bizarre violence and no resolution. A study of the anti-climax, which would have been one thing if it was intentional, but no. Whatever I had to say, I wasn’t saying it, and as the week crept by I began to believe I didn’t have the ability to do so.

I decided I had two options. I could scrap this project and start again, start fresh and put together a project that meant something to me. Or, I could stop hiding behind a failed ambition and admit to myself I’d peaked as a writer. I could take writing completely off my priority list, leaving only Callie.

To my surprise, I felt strangely comfortable with that.
Chapter Twenty

Ty

“Listen to me,” I tell him. “I been figuring this out—everything we do backfires.”

Randall says, “Yep.”

“You probably shoulda just kept on driving.”

“Yep.”

“Because what happens? You try to help, bam. Backfire. She up and dies.”

He shakes his head.

“The only thing we can do,” I say, “is not, fire, first.”

“Yep.”

“Bam. No backfire if we don’t fire.”

“Yep.”

“You ready for another one?”

“Give me a minute.”

Callie lights up another cigarette.

Callie

Your dad knocks on the door, peers in the screen. You see him from the back porch, and run through the house to let him in.

“What are you doing here?”

He looks around. Joey’s sitting by himself in front of the video game console and doesn’t even look back to see who it is. The other two are on the back porch. He’s got to smell the cigarettes on you. There are plates and glasses all over the living room, some clothes scattered around. The house itself is starting to take on a smell. The phone is ringing. You can only imagine what it must be like, to see this not as it all gradually accumulated, but all at once. He’s got to be mad about something. Something must have upset him enough to give up his holdout and come over, and now add to that, this vision of chaos.

“I’m here to help,” he says.

You don’t know where to begin. Joey’s got two controllers out, and you know he’s playing video games with Shawn but there’s probably no good way to explain that. So you take your dad out to the back porch, where Ty and Randall have out bottles of both whiskey and rum.

“Hey!” they say in unison.

“Mr.—”

“Peter!”

“Mr. Peter!”

“The big P!”

“Captain P! What’s going on, man!”

Dad walks over to them. Doesn’t say anything about the liquor bottles. Randall has brought down his cigarette stash and they’re both smoking, but neither of them likes it. Mostly they’ve just been lighting them and holding them, or occasionally handing them to you. Ty sees your dad looking at the cigarettes. “Oh, hey,” Ty says, “listen, don’t you worry. It’s just cause we’re a little stressed out. We ain’t addicted or nothing.”

“Yeah,” says Randall. “We’re just trying to get by.”
“Just trying to get by, man.”
Dad nods pensively, and then asks, “Why are you boys drinking, then?”
Randall says, “Oh, that’s for the shit.”
“Yeah, the shit today,” says Ty. “Oh man, man. Let me tell you about the shit. I’ll tell you
—no, let him tell you about me and I’ll tell you about me. About him. I’ll—wait, what are we
talking about?”
Dad looks at you, and you roll your eyes. “Ty here,” you begin, “decided to call up his
coach this afternoon—”
“Yep!”
—-but instead of apologizing, he told him to go...how did it go again?”
“Said, to fuck himself with a pylon.”
“Yeah. That was it. And Randall—”
“Ain’t so bad, really,” says Ty. “Them things are pretty soft.”
Randall says, “Mr. P, I killed a lady today.”
“No!” you say quickly. “No he didn’t. He took his driving test and there was an accident
during the highway part, and the woman in the accident got taken away by an ambulance. And,
he doesn’t know whether or not she died.”
“Why don’t we call the hospital to find—”
“No,” you say, cutting him off. “I wanted to but they won’t let me.”
“Better if I don’t know,” says Randall. “If she died that means I held a dead lady’s hand
today. I can’t, no. I don’t wanna know that.”
The phone starts ringing again. Dad stands up, but you say immediately, “Don’t, they’ll
just yell at you if you do.”
He turns to the table with the liquor on it, almost in the same motion, as if he was
planning on doing this the whole time, or maybe doing it, too. He gets his hands around both
bottles before his wrists are caught by a brother each. Ty’s mouth tightens up, and he slowly
shakes his head.
“Shouldn’t take his liquor, doc,” says Randall. “He punches people.”
“Yep. I do.”
“Less you want a drink too, can he have a drink, too?”
Dad says, “I don’t want a drink.”
“Good,” says Ty. “This was a gift. For Shawn.”
“You said it!” says Randall.
“Aww shit, I did.” Ty pours a little more whiskey in each glass. “For Shawn!”
“For Shawn!” says Randall, and they down it.
Inside, Joey yells, “For Shawn!”
You turn to the house and yell, “Shut up, Joey!” Your dad looks at you, and you can only
shrug. “He’s been like this since they started drinking. He keeps saying he knows what Shawn
wants and they don’t. So they keep saying that, and—”
“Saying what?” says Ty, trying to make you say it again.
“Shut up,” you say, noticing how tired you are. “And so, whenever they say it, then Joey
yells it, and half the time they start yelling at each other. And I have a headache and I can’t deal
with them all at once, and Vickie’s gonna be so mad when she gets home...”
“You know I just gave them the blanket,” says Randall. “That’s the blanket, that was a special blanket. She was in shock so I just gave them the blanket.”
Dad says, “Maybe you guys ought to hide the liquor before your mom gets home, huh?” “Maybe.”
“What if I was the last person she ever saw? What if she died right there in the ambulance?”
Ty says, “What if she died in the blanket?”
“Oh, no,” says Randall, “that was a special blanket.”
“Why was that blanket in the car again?” asks Ty.
“It was for Shawn.”
And Ty yells, “For Shawn!”
And Joey yells, and Randall yells, and Dad starts to head inside. “Don’t answer the phone,” you remind him, but he doesn’t respond, so you follow him. The phone isn’t ringing, or else you’re sure he would’ve answered it, but he does go straight to the table and starts clearing it off. “Dad,” you say. “You can’t do that either.”
“This house needs to be cleaned, Callie.”
Joey shouts from the living room, “Hey, what are you doing?”
“I know!” you say. “Just stop, please, they don’t want the table cleaned.”
“I’m cleaning it.”
“Don’t!”
“Callie!” He actually yells at you. “The house needs to be cleaned. You can help me, or you can go home.”
The phone starts ringing again. He walks over to it. “Fine!” you say. “Fuck everything up! It’s what you’re good at.”
He glares at you as he picks up the phone.
You leave him there. Two steps out the door, you see Vickie’s car pull into the driveway, and you pause just a moment. But only a moment. He’s claiming this mess, and he can have it.

Peter
“Hello?” I said into the phone, watching Callie turn and walk out the door.
There was a long pause, first. Then a throat-clearing.
I waited.
“Who is this?” said the voice on the phone.
“Who’s this?” I asked back, some anger seeping into my voice. Vickie’s car pulled down the driveway. I had too much to think about at once to be dealing with a prank caller.
“No, who is this?” he said again, and I recognized his voice.
“It’s the maid,” I said, and hung up.

Vickie
“Don’t do that,” I said, the moment I saw Peter clearing the table.
“I told him!” Joey shouted.
He didn’t stop. “Go talk to your sons,” he said, leaning his head towards the back porch.
“Stop it,” I said again.
“You’ve got bigger problems than someone cleaning your house. Go talk to them.”
As soon as I set foot on the back porch, Randall stood up. He froze in his tracks. I put my hands on my hips. It felt like a stand-off. Then he walked two steps to the railing and threw up.
I started towards him. There were liquor bottles, and the ashtray was full, and Ty held a cigarette. I started patting Randall’s back. Ty said, “Mom—it couldn’t be helped.”
“Go to your room.”
He scoffed. “What? I’m seventeen—”
“Now, Ty.”
He walked inside. I heard him say to Peter, “Hey, don’t do that!”
“Ty!” I shouted.
Randall was coughing over the edge, apologizing and spitting. I kept rubbing his back, rubbing and patting. I said, “No, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I haven’t been there for you guys.”
“No, you don’t understand. I gave away his blanket.”
“What?”
“I just gave it away.”
“What blanket? What are you talking about?”
The door opened behind me. I expected Peter, for some reason. Or maybe I hoped for Peter. I needed help. I needed some understanding, and another voice of authority to join in the chorus of whatever is wrong it’s all right.
But it was Joey. He walked over slowly, looking at Randall. But he didn’t speak for a moment, and I thought he might be working out how to tell me what was going on. Instead, he grabbed the liquor bottles and ran.
“The blanket,” Randall said, before I could yell at Joey. “It was Shawn’s. I gave away Shawn’s blanket, Mom. What’s wrong with me?”
The door opened again. Peter held the phone. He said slowly, “Hey—look, I know you didn’t want me to call, and if it was bad news I promise I wouldn’t have said anything, but it’s not. They said she’s stable. She’s in stable condition, she’s not dead. You probably helped her. She needed you and you helped her and she’s fine because you were there.”
Randall had been holding his breath, and when Peter stopped talking, he inhaled deeply, let it out slowly, as if trying to stay calm.
“What happened today?” I said.
“Randall saw an accident. He stopped and helped. That’s all I know.”
Randall was standing now, and I looked up at him. The facade of calmness faded with a few rapid blinks, and of course it did, he felt sick, and he’d been drinking, for what I hoped was the first time. But he was happy now. He looked at me with his sick happy eyes and his vulnerability caught up to him, and he leaned over to embrace me.
When I looked again for Peter, he was already inside, where he went back to cleaning up the kitchen.

**Joey**

I knock on his door. He goes, “What?”
“Here.” I walk in and walk right up to him and give him the bottles. He looks a little surprised, like I was supposed to steal them or something. He even checks the bottles, like I took
some of it and put it somewhere. But me and Shawn already figured it out. If he wants to get drunk, fine. He fucking deserves it.

I thought Ty was on my side. But if he’s just another dumb drunk, he’s on Dad’s side. Even punching Dad, it doesn’t matter. Just a couple of drunks fighting. Big deal.

Randall, too. And Mom, too, what the hell is the matter with everybody. We aren’t supposed to act like this. I’m sick of it. Shawn’s nicer than me, though. I swear if I didn’t have him to talk to I might just turn fucking crazy myself, except I’d be crazier than all them. They’re the pathetic kind of crazy, they just drink, but I’d be the real kind and show them the kind of idiots they’re being.

Except when I go to my room I start wishing I did go real crazy, instead of listening to him. Because Shawn’s nice but he’s wrong, he wants to let them all get sick of being idiots on their own. Like they gotta fight their own battles or something. Like they gotta find their own way out, well they’re not going to, they’re just going to keep getting dumber and dumber because that’s all drinking does to you.

I wish I never gave back those bottles. Shawn isn’t always right, sometimes he lies and gets me slapped, even. I tell Shawn in my head, Shut up for a while, I’m tired. Then I wonder if he listened to me when I said that, so in my head I go, “Shawn?” and he doesn’t answer.

**Callie**

After about half an hour you can’t take it anymore. You could call, but they don’t answer—or maybe now they do. And sure enough, he answers on the second ring. You immediately demand to know what he thinks he’s doing.

“I told you, Callie, I’m helping.”

“Well you’re doing it all wrong. You can’t just decide what you want to do and do it.”

“Sometimes that’s what people need.”

“Did Vickie tell you to stop cleaning?”

“Yes.”

“Did you stop?”

“No.”

“Dad!”

“Callie!” he says back to you in the same tone. You hang up. Goddamn it. It’s still up to you.

But then the phone rings. Your father does hate being hung up on, so you’re not surprised, and maybe now he’ll be willing to listen. You pick it up and say, “What?”

Your mom says, “Hey, Callie!”

“Oh. Hi Mom.”

“So what time did you want me to pick you up tonight?”

“Well—um, tonight’s not a good night for me to come over.”

Immediately on the offensive, she says: “Why not?”

“It’s a bad night, okay? Some more stuff happened at the neighbors’, and I’m trying to work it out.”

She gives her I-don’t-buy-it-but-I’ll-humor-you sigh. “What happened?”

“I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.”
“Callie—”
“I need to get off the phone, I’ll call you in the morning.”
“Callie!”
“Bye!”
You hang up. It takes a few seconds before you realize you’re staring at the phone, waiting for someone to call back. But no one does.

Peter
It was a simple matter, really. I cleaned. That was all I did. First the table, and then I pulled it out from the wall and found the missing chairs and replaced them. Vickie started doing the dishes. Then I picked up all the dishes in the living room and brought them into the kitchen and I told her to make dinner, I’d take over washing dishes, and I did that. Randall picked up the rest of the living room, and then I told him to just lie down for a while until supper was ready, and he did. Then Joey came down and started playing video games again. Vickie asked what he’d done with the liquor bottles, and he said he dumped them out so his brothers would stop acting stupid. She seemed to accept this.

When dinner was ready we sent Joey to get Ty, but he returned alone. “He’s passed out or something, I don’t know. He won’t come,” he said.
Vickie sighed and started to go upstairs, but I stopped her. “Just let him sleep it off.”
She looked surprised. “Really?”
“Yeah, you can yell at him later.”
“I don’t want to yell at him, I just want to talk to him.”
“Well, talk to him later.”

Joey and Randall were looking back and forth at us. I realized what we sounded like. We sounded like we were married. I sounded like I was the father here. And for a split second I almost apologized, but then I thought about what I’d told Callie—that sometimes people need to be told what’s best for them—and I didn’t want to make myself out to be a liar.

After we ate, Vickie told Randall and Joey to go start a campfire, and then see if Ty would join them. They did, while we cleaned up—I hadn’t done so many dishes in one day in years, if ever—but Ty still wouldn’t come down. The boys went back down to the fire, while I called Callie to see if she wanted to come over and eat. She didn’t answer.

I settled into a chair on the back porch next to Vickie. She had poured herself a drink and now offered me one, but I declined. We sat for a few moments. Joey ran up to grab the supplies for s’mores, and then we watched as they toasted marshmallows over the fire.

Then Vickie said, “I thought I told you we couldn’t be friends.”
“Yeah, well,” I said. “You were wrong.”
She laughed. “Was I?”
“Yep, fraid so. This is going to be a friendship, whether you like it or not.” She was laughing again, but I had something else to say, so I said it. “I held your son.”
She stopped. Then she leaned over and took out a cigarette. “I know you did.”
“I held your son and I brought him to you, and maybe this is selfish on my part, but I need to know the woman I did that for was my friend, and will continue to be my friend, because I need to believe that action had some meaning.”
“Jesus, you sure you don’t want a drink?” I looked at her. She said, “Sorry.”
“And I don’t care if we’d only known each other a week or two when that happened. I
don’t care if I’d never met you before, I need to know that people can count on each other to be
strong for each other when we need it.”
“Okay.”
“You know the last person I tried to prove this to I ended up marrying.”
She coughed as she exhaled, but I said quickly, “I met her and I went on a few dates with
her and one night we slept together. It wasn’t any mistake, we just, did it. But in the morning, I
woke up and she was looking at me, and she asked me, Are you going to break my heart? I said,
No, no, of course not. But she looked so skeptical, and it made me really want to prove myself to
her, and that’s how the whole next year went. And the final step in proving myself to her was a
proposal. But I’m not that kind of fool anymore. Marriage should be the last resort between a
man and a woman.”
“Really?” said Vickie. “The last resort?”
“Maybe that’s the wrong term. It should feel natural when it happens, like you’re already
married. The marriage should fit itself to the relationship, not the other way around.”
“So, what—does friendship come first?”
“Yes, definitely.”
“And friends can have sex?”
She caught me off guard. I stuttered to a stop, then looked over at her, then thought about
it. “Yes,” I said. “As long as they’re not having sex with anyone else, sure. I mean, maybe for
some people that would be fine, but I would only want to be sleeping with one person.”
“Well I’m not sleeping with anyone else.”
“…Neither am I.”
She smiled.
I said, “But friends don’t kick each other out, either. A good friend knows when to leave
on his own.”
She said, “Okay then. Fair enough.”

Randall

Joey got up and put a log on the fire. Are you feeling better? he said, not bothering to
hide his disapproval. You were puking your guts out.
Despite the embarrassment of being unable to handle my first few shots of liquor, I’d
largely stopped thinking about it, thinking instead about Peter’s call to the hospital. I said, Yeah, I
drank some water and ate. Eating helped. I still got a headache, though.
We sat for a while. My thoughts kept returning to what I’d done that day, and for the first
time I let myself feel a little bit of pride. Maybe I had felt it before, but I hadn’t let myself call it
pride. It was what I should have done and I did it, and if it was wrong to feel proud of myself for
that, then let me be wrong. I wondered if Joey knew. I felt like I had to tell him if he didn’t. But
then I felt like I had to tell him even if he did.
So, that lady lived.
What, the dead lady?
Yeah, she didn’t die. Peter called the hospital.
Wow. That’s lucky.
Yeah, I said. Or, you know, maybe I helped. I gave her the blanket so she didn’t go into shock.
Wow, really?
Yeah. Crazy, huh?
Yeah.
One of the logs popped. We watched the sparks fill the air, dancing around in the air currents. For some reason it reminded me of the day Shawn got burnt, the way he twirled around like he did. I said, Hey, do you think Shawn’s mad at us?
Me? What did I do?
Well do you think Shawn’s mad at me? For getting him the cigarettes and stuff? For not getting him out of the fire when I should have?
He rolled the question around in his head. It felt like an unreasonably long amount of time. Jeez, I said, don’t leave me hanging or anything.
No, he said quickly, definitively.
If you don’t know, just say you don’t know.
I don’t know, he said, and I believed him.

Vickie
Things felt comfortable for the first time since the night Peter smoked a cigarette for me. When we sat right here, exactly like this. The thought made me want a cigarette.
“I’m going to try to be a better father from now on,” he said suddenly.
“Callie’s a very empathetic person. She’d love a serial killer if she had to call him Dad.”
“Oh, come on. If anyone needs to recharge their parenting batteries here, it’s me.”
He smiled, but didn’t say no. “You’ve been having a rough time of it lately, but I’ve seen you with them. These boys are crazy about you, they’d do anything for you, and they aren’t exactly an easy crowd to win over.”
“You’ve been doing fine with them tonight.”
“Yes, but you’ll notice how my daughter is conspicuously absent?”
“You’re being too hard on yourself.”
“No, I’m not. I’ve been a terrible father, my entire life, and do you know why?” He started laughing. “Because I was trying to be an artist. You know what I’ve been doing this week? Trying to work on my novel.”
“What’s wrong with that?”
“I’ve been working on it for almost ten years. I counted up the other day, and do you know how many characters I have? Two hundred. I might as well have been writing the Bible.”
I laughed. He shot me a look. I said, “Well don’t tell it like it’s funny if you don’t want me to laugh.”
“Okay, okay,” he said, conceding the point. But he stopped talking, as if he couldn’t tell it any other way and couldn’t take the laughter.
We sat and watched the world get darker. “So,” I said. “You don’t think I’m a terrible mother?”
“No, I think you’re the artist.”
“Flattery will get you everywhere, Peter.”
“It’s only flattery if it’s insincere.”
“You mean it? You think I’m literally an artist?”
“Absolutely. I mean—do you know how tired I’ve been ever since Callie moved in with me? It’s exhausting, it is mentally exhausting to try and keep up with her. What she needs, what she will need, what she wants... You’ve been there for these boys like that ever since they were born, and I’m only just waking up to it. I can only imagine how tired you must be. The only thing I’ve ever tried to do that made me this mentally tired was write that novel.”
“Maybe,” I said, “if we’re both so tired we ought to go to bed.”
You can’t eat. You want to eat but you can’t. The phone finally rings but you don’t answer it. Implying that you’re not here. When it stops, you decide that’s enough, you’re sneaking over. If you’re going to suggest you’re gone, you might as well be. It’ll be night soon. Grab your black hoodie, from the dresser where the other things are, deep and buried in the underwear drawer.

Grab those, too.

As you approach the front of the house you see that Ty’s light is on. Change course, head to the back. You can peek around the corner at the campfire unseen. Sure enough, Joey and Randall are there, but no Ty.

Then you realize where you’re standing. Ten feet away, your father performed CPR on Shawn. Right there in the grass. Block it out, right now. Thinking about that, it would wreck you. Head around to the front of the house, stay close to it, so Ty can’t see you out his window. You don’t want him warned of your coming, but you can’t say why.

It takes some courage to peer through the living room window, but no one is inside, and you can see through to the back. Dad and Vickie are on the porch; you’re safe if you’re quiet. Creep through the screen door. Softly take the stairs.

He’s on the bed, eyes closed. Turn the light off as you go inside. There’s still enough daylight to see him. Just enough.

Say, “It’s okay.”

Say, “I’m going to fix you.”

I knew what I sounded like, to keep bringing up the sex. I didn’t need him to look at me like that. “Are you taking me seriously?” he said. “Because I mean it. This is why great writers have dysfunctional families. It comes from the same source. Raising a family and nurturing a work of art take a lot of the same skills. Creativity, patience—”

“Yes, okay? Seriously. Yes. It’s just that no one’s given me such a large, genuine compliment in a long time and I don’t know how to take it. And I mean, I know you’re waiting for Callie to show up, but she will come, and when she does I’d prefer she and the boys still be outside while we’re in the bedroom. So, pardon my impatience, but now is the time.”

There it was. The first unguarded, honest sentiment I’d expressed all night. As if to make up for the lack of sarcasm, he said with a hint of playfulness, “And you won’t kick me out right away?”

“You can leave whenever the fuck you please.”

“All right,” he said, and he held out a hand to help me up from the chair. “Let’s go.”

“It’s not forgetting,” you say, “it’s remembering. It’s remembering in the best way I know how. I remember him in bed, just like this. I remember pulling back the covers and looking at his legs, looking at what had happened to him, the scars he’d keep for the rest of his life. I remember him alive, that’s what I remember. That look he would get when we were alone in the woods.
When he thought about kissing me, I could tell, on his face, just like how you’re thinking about it now, I can see that. I could see it on him, too. Lift your hips up a minute.”

Your hands are sweating. The little gel packet is hard to open, so you rip it with your teeth. He’s not talking, but his eyes are open now, and looking at you. And why should he be talking? This activity doesn’t require talking. You just can’t shut up because you’re nervous. He must not be nervous because he’s not talking. You rub it on, then wipe your hands on the sheets.

“You know, he called me a liar once. I didn’t take it to heart at the time, I didn’t think he had any idea what he was talking about, he was babbling about how your mom told you guys once, that we have to pretend to be the person we want to be, and that’s the only way to become that person, and then something about your dad pretending but it didn’t work. Wait, okay. I guess it was because your dad was pretending to be something he didn’t want to be. That’s what he was saying. I’m sorry I’ve never done this before, I don’t know how it goes on. Is it—okay, I think—yeah, there.

“So he was saying I was pretending but it wasn’t the good kind of pretending, like what your mom said. I was being your dad, and sooner or later it was going to catch up to me and I was going to regret it. Well, then he went and got himself hurt, and I completely forgot about it for a while, but I stopped pretending. Without even noticing I just stopped lying. I mean, whenever I could. There’s some things you have to keep lying about, but I noticed that other people lying was really starting to bother me. Okay, are you ready? Hold still.”

Of course he’ll hold still. He’s been doing nothing but holding still. But whatever, it’s your first time, so what if you can’t shut up. Even as you grab it, and put it…in…

“Okay so—so. So, um. Ow, sorry. Ow, fuck. Okay so I stopped lying and other people kept lying and I didn’t like it anymore, I didn’t know why they had to do it anymore, Shawn was hurt and then he was dead and people kept lying and I wondered why. And then I saw how much pain you were in and, um. I’m just gonna sit here a minute, is that okay?”

Like you’re split up the middle, or trying to. Jesus. Fuck. Some sort of fire, just, breathe, don’t forget to breathe, fuck, fuck. It’ll stop. Okay. Keep talking, it was better when you were talking.

“So what if your mom was right, you know? I had to help you guys and I didn’t know how to do it and so how else am I supposed to figure that out, right? So. Okay I’m ready—again.

“Okay so—if I was gonna help you guys I had to pretend I was somebody that knew how to help you, and things started falling together and they started pointing me in this direction and—and I guess what’s been bothering me lately is I don’t know if I’m pretending for the right reasons. I mean, I hope, I am, but how do you know? How am I supposed to know, if what I’m doing, is the right thing, to be doing? Or if it’s what, what I want. God. Okay. Okay.


The wetness between your thighs is disturbing, the gel all over him, and the penis, the first penis you ever touched you put inside you, hard like plastic covered with goo and a balloon and inside you and this pain, distracting, unnerving, but not as daunting as his silence. You lean down close to him, close to his face, his whiskey breath.

“Cheep,” he says, and closes his eyes.
**Ty**

In my head I know I’m drunk but I’m waking up and it’s getting dark out and then I know what’s happening and how come that wasn’t the first thing I knew. Callie’s on top of me and my dick is in her and I know this ain’t right. But for as long as she’s going at it, I can’t really move right in my drunk head so I give up moving but I could still talk, except she don’t shut up it’s like she’s sucking all the words out of the room and using them herself, and I don’t get none.

Then she makes me say something and the only thing my mouth feels like saying is the last thing that Shawn ever said to me. Except this time, it makes perfect sense. It’s the give-up noise, and it’s perfect because that’s what I do. I just close my eyes, and I’m hoping she leaves, and that wherever Shawn is he ain’t here, because he’d be so mad at me. But I think he might be here because I said Cheep which is what he said when he couldn’t take me being in the room anymore.

But she don’t leave. She keeps going, even with me pretending to sleep, which is all I can do cause my body don’t let me do anything else.

And then it comes. I wish it don’t but it does and something’s wrong after. I should go to the dark place after it comes but now something’s wrong because I don’t feel different. Not at all, before and after just the same. And it don’t take me long to figure it out even with my drunkness, I’m always in the dark place now, that place I go when my head empties. Which means my head is always empty. And how can I figure out anything if my head is always empty, I’m always in the dark place now don’t know how to get back just leave me alone but she won’t, she just keeps going.

**Callie**

You think he’s done but you don’t know how to know without visual evidence, so you keep moving. His eyes have been closed for a while, and for a second his body got tense but then it went back to normal, and you think he’s done but you don’t know until it slips out. And thank god for that. Fuck, that hurt. His eyes stay closed. You lie down next to him, hoping that your eyes will stop watering now that you’re done, hoping his sleep is genuine, hoping it worked.

And only just now it occurs to you: How are you supposed to sneak out? It’s not like his door has a peep-hole. You’ve only your ears to go on.

Lay as still as possible. Listen. Remember, he’s the first priority, if you get caught that would be bad but you have to let him sleep. That’s part of it. He has to sleep.

Did he call you cheap?

You don’t hear any voices, but the house creaks once in a while, and you’re not sure if it’s people walking or just natural. His breathing grows regular, and you let him sleep for as long as you can. But sooner or later you have to move, don’t you. You can’t stay here all night.

Don’t worry about it, he was drunk and half asleep, it was just a noise, not a word. And anyway, it made you shut your mouth, didn’t it.

Finally you sit up. He doesn’t move. You swing your legs off the bed and he doesn’t move. He’s out and you’re free and it’s time to go. Quickly put your underwear and shorts back on, then your sandals. Tiptoe to the door. You wore the hoodie the whole time.

The hallway is silent. Ease the door open. Step out.

Randall says, “Is he feeling better?”
Fuck.
“I don’t know,” you say, “I think so.”
“Did he eat?”
“No.”
“He should eat. He hasn’t eaten anything but crackers since football practice.”
“Yeah, probably, but he’s asleep now.”
“I bet he is. And Joey?”
“What about him?”
“You went to him, too, right?”
He’s got a blank face. You don’t know what to make of it. “Yeah.”
“Did it help?”
“I think so.”
“Okay,” he says, “good. Now it’s my turn.”
Suddenly you want to cry. You don’t think you can do it again right now, but he’s right.
The rest of the house is quiet, and this is probably the best time, so you just nod and walk into his room.

Randall

She walked in, already on the verge of tears, I could see them coming. I had to act quickly. I knew Ty couldn’t do it. He’s all emotion. He doesn’t know how to behave when the big moments come.

I turned and closed the door and stayed that way, as if it would be easier if I didn’t look at her. I said, I know you haven’t asked me, and I know I’ve been…kind of letting everyone down lately. But I can help you, too. I mean, I figure this is probably something you need to hear from all of us, and maybe that’s why you went to them first, because they’d be the hardest. Joey especially, he can be pretty hard-headed, and I’m sorry about Ty, I’m sure he meant well but you still look upset, but no matter what he said in there I know he doesn’t blame you either. None of us blame you, and—

It was the crux of my speech, and so I felt I should look her in the eyes, now. And there she was, sitting on my bed. Naked.

And crying. Naked and crying. I covered my eyes with my hand and turned back around. What’s the matter? she said. Just come over here. Come on, I can help, I can do it, just—

Callie.

Come on, you fucking pussy, get over here and just…

Just what? I said, turning around.

She held a wrapped condom, staring at it, sitting on the bed and staring at the condom. I stared at it, too. I didn’t think she really wanted me to look at her, so I stared at the condom.

What the fuck, am I doing, she said. You don’t even want…me you don’t even…what the fuck?

She was hyperventilating and talking all at once, and then—I walked over to her. There was no other option, I couldn’t comfort her from ten feet away, and she looked so thin naked but I was trying not to look. I sat down and pulled the covers up and patted them secure around her
shoulders, and the condom was released and dropped to the floor. Where I saw now, by the light of my reading lamp next to my bed, a multitude of other individually-wrapped curiosities.

Where did you get all this?

My doctor.

Why? I asked—the covers were slipping. I had to touch her again, she wasn’t holding them, I pulled them tighter around her and kept a hand on her opposite shoulder to hold them.

The room smelled like petroleum jelly.

Because I went on birth control.

What? I said, by which I really meant why.

The Pill! she said. Birth control, okay? And then the doctor just asked if I was gonna be having sex and I said yeah and she gave me this, all this stuff.

She started crying again, and this time it was as though she meant it, unable to speak through the sobs, eventually burying her face in my shoulder. Something about that calmed her enough to say, But it doesn’t work. I thought it works but it doesn’t work, my mom was wrong, and my dad and Dr. Werner, but Ty was right it’s just forgetting and Shawn…and Shawn…

The covers were slipping again despite my holding them, and she really didn’t seem to care, and I could see down the front of her naked body, pretty much all of it.

What did Ty say? I asked. Did he do something to you?

She kept talking as if I weren’t even there. But I brought all this, the stuff, I brought the stuff, and even then, even then, he didn’t want to, he didn’t want me to fix him, he didn’t want, maybe he’s right, maybe he is right and I didn’t know, Randall? I didn’t know, I didn’t know!

Her eyes met mine. And it wasn’t a pillow! I didn’t know!

Hush, hush, I said softly, we’ll figure this out, okay? We’ll figure this out, hush now. I started parting her hair with my fingers, something my mom always used to do to me when I was crying. I really hoped Ty was asleep; otherwise he could hear all of this. Joey was still out at the fire, as far as I knew, but if he were in his room on the other side, that too would be within earshot. And if Mom or Peter happened to walk upstairs, or even outside beneath my window—

But they wouldn’t go there. Not there. Not for anything.

I spoke, keeping my voice low. What happened? What were you doing in Ty’s room?

She pulled back from my embrace again, looked at me.

Callie? I said. You can tell me. What happened with Ty? And Joey? What’s been happening with Joey? I thought I knew but I don’t, you have to tell me. I’m right here, just tell me, I’ll understand.

She took a deep breath. I looked into her eyes and saw, perhaps, trust.

I thought I could help them, she said.

How?

She looked down, embarrassed, and kept quiet.

By sleeping with them?

She closed her eyes. Some more tears ran down her cheeks as she nodded. I pulled her in tighter, embraced her, sad for her, sad with her, she needed me and I was here and it felt…right.

Did you sleep with them, Callie?

She sighed. Joey just, he just came in his pants, I just took his hand and had him touch me and he came right in his pants. That’s why he went sliding down the hill, that’s why—
And Ty?
I was really, I was just trying to help.
Did you sleep with him?
She looked me, deep, deep in the eyes. For so long that I lost myself, I felt it happen, I felt myself give my self to her, whatever she wanted, I would get it, whatever she asked of me she could have. But—but I needed an answer, and I forced myself to break eye contact and look away.

Finally, she shook her head. No, she said. No he was too drunk, and he didn’t even want me, he didn’t even want me, Randall, he didn’t even…

Come here, I said. Shh, come here.

Am I gross, Randall? Am I ugly?

No! No, look at me—no. You’re probably the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen.

Really?

Yes, really. Yes, Callie, I mean just now, just looking at you now, I didn’t even have to touch you and I almost pulled a Joey, I swear.

You mean it?

Yes, I said.

Really?

We were looking at each other. Then the hand holding the blankets—letting them go, letting them fall—reached over to the crotch of my pants. My proof. She found it.

And then we were kissing.

Callie

It surprises you, sleeping with Randall. Compared to the days of work you had to put in with Ty, it’s the simplest thing. Randall opens himself up to you in minutes.

It worries you, though, having sex twice in a matter of hours. You expected to be sore after the first time, and now here you are, back at it again. This time you put the condom on first without thinking. But then, that makes more sense, doesn’t it. It’s called spermicidal lubrication. It’s supposed to lubricate, not just kill all the sperm inside the condom. It’s for the escapees, not the main batch. You hope Ty doesn’t think less of you, but you did tell him it was your first time.

Even in the act, Randall proves himself much more cooperative. It only takes about three or four minutes until his body tenses, but something is different this time. Maybe the lubrication helps, and it still hurts at first but just before the end, just before he tenses and releases, you feel something new. At first you think it’s another wave of pain coming and you brace yourself, but it’s not pain, it’s some other response inside your body, some new sensation—one you didn’t expect. Because you’re broken, after all, you’re not supposed to feel anything. But then, you do. It’s just a moment and then the sex is over, but it’s undeniable, and suddenly you understand why women do this. Why Vickie could be healed by this.

Your father better be getting his shit together.

You lie down next to him when it’s done. He wants to kiss you some more, so you kiss back, but in your head you’re reviewing how you succeeded here. It took the truth, yes, Randall responded to the truth. At first. You were upset about how frustrating Ty had been, and you got a chance to let that out, but ultimately it was a lie that got you here. One little lie, which, traded for
Randall’s healing, doesn’t seem so significant. Except it was, it was a deliberate lie, and before you can stop yourself, you offer Shawn a mental apology. Sorry, Shawn, but it was necessary.

Anyway, behavior should matter more. You acted out the truth. Your body was honest with both of them.

Finally Randall settles down, and you tell him you better go, wouldn’t want to start a family controversy or anything. He says you’re probably right and lets you go. You thank him, genuinely. He says, “You’re welcome,” probably for a different reason entirely. You make it back into the hall without anyone else surprising you. Softly you take the stairs, which seem much louder now on the return trip. At the bottom you can see out the window to the back porch, but the angle doesn’t allow you to see the chairs, so you take tiny, baby steps until they come into view. Dad and Vickie are gone. Casually, then, you can walk into the middle of the living room.

In the backyard, at the campfire, Joey sits there still, alone. You feel a small urge to go out to him. But, no. Don’t push yourself. There’s always tomorrow. If he even still needs it.

Down the hallway, the house creaks, and it scares common sense back into you. A moment later you’re out the front door. Only once you get home and find your dad still absent do you realize that creak—that creaking you kept hearing in their house—

You’re hungry. Peanut butter sounds good. As you sit down with your sandwich on the couch, you feel something inside you besides pain. Something gooshy. The doctor said it takes a week for birth control to be effective. It’s been exactly that. All you know is it better fucking work.

I go, “Shawn.”

The fire is raging and I don’t care, I’ll stay up all night, it’s a Friday and my brothers are idiots and I’ll keep putting logs on the fire all I want. If I really want to go to bed I’ll get some water. In a bucket.

“Shawn.”

I can’t hear him anymore. Not since Randall asked if he was mad at us. Not since before that, actually. I don’t know when. I even got a log set up for him, like if he wanted to sit down and talk to me for a while, one for me and one for Randall and one for Ty, but I put up an extra one for him and if anyone asks me I can say it’s for Callie, but she got all mad and left, I don’t think she’s coming back.

“Shawn, I promise I didn’t know you were on fire when I brought that bucket down and dumped it on the fire instead of you. You hear me, you dumbass?”

Now I’m talking to myself, because he’s not answering. Great. I’m talking to myself.

“Or even if I did know, I didn’t think you were hurt. I mean maybe I thought you were in the fire, but I didn’t know you were on fire. I just didn’t want the woods to burn down. Okay?”

I go, “You wouldn’t drink if you were here, would you?”

I go, “No, you wouldn’t, I know,” but it’s not working and I’m talking to myself.

Somebody comes out the back door, and it’s Randall again, finally. He starts coming down the porch stairs, so real quick I go, “And I’m sorry for touching Callie’s boob, I didn’t mean it, she wanted me to. Okay, goodbye.”
Randall sits down and he looks into the fire, and then he just starts smiling. He’s got a magazine rolled up in his hands. I go, “Well you been gone forever, what you been jerking it?” He just smiles, and then he leans over to toss the magazine in the fire. “Hold on, wait a minute! You’re just gonna burn that?” He stops. “No, I just thought I’d warm it up a little bit.” And then he tosses it in.

I reach in to grab it but he goes, “No!” and he sort of jumps over the fire and pushes me back and lands on top of me, and I go “Fuck!” and we roll over and he gets off of me. We stand up and brush ourselves off. I look in the fire and the pages start to go, on the corners.

“Look, I would have bought that off you if you didn’t want it anymore.”

But he goes, “No, that one had to burn. I’ll give you another one.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You know what, you can have them.”

“All of them?”

“Yeah. But I still want the trunk. You’ll have to find somewhere else to hide them.”

I go, “Well all right,” because I’m kind of surprised by that.

We watch it burn. Something in the fire starts to sizzle like one of the logs is wet, but I pretend I don’t hear it because I’ve been watching the fire and if I put a wet log on there it’ll make me look dumb.

“Why’d you have to burn that one?”

“I don’t know. Just had to.”

“Fine, don’t tell me.”

He sighs and then he tells me. He’s so predictable. “It’s just a symbol. I’m getting rid of the past. I’m moving on with my life.”

“What, you think you’re all grown up now just cause you saved some chick’s life today?”

He goes, “No. Maybe. Okay, yeah.” Something in that magazine starts smoking black, like if you burn plastic. Randall puts another log on top of it. “Mom go to bed?”

I go, “Yeah. She shut the window this time, though.” And he looks at me like I should care but I don’t. I go, “What? I don’t care. Callie would be a pretty hot for a new sister, you know? We could do worse.”

“Oh, god, shut up Joey.”

“I mean, Shawn wouldn’t like it much. He touched her boob, once. He told me.”

He goes, “Really?”

“Yep, and you know what? That dumbshit spooged all over himself, too, just like Ty said.”
Chapter Twenty-Two

Phil

“Yeah, shot and a beer.” “Got Jameson?” “How bout Maker’s—know what, nevermind, Jack’ll do me just fine. And a Budweiser.” “Thank you, sir. What’s your name?” “Donnie, great to meet you.” “Couple times, don’t come down here too often.” “Yeah, I like it, just got a regular place closer to home, so.” “Heh, yep, you know. Just didn’t feel like seeing anyone I know tonight.” “Oh, they’re fine and all, just knew they’d be all on my ass about…something. Shoulda never told em bout it, but, it ain’t important, I just felt like drinking without winding up punching a buddy in the face.” “Happened before, yeah. But buddy or not, if I hit you it’s cause you deserve it. We razz each other a lot, that’s normal, but I got a few friends don’t know any better, they just keep crossing the line even when you already told em they crossed it. Sorry to bug you, you got some matches back there?” “Thank you, yeah forgot my lighter. I never do that. Must be…little outta my head tonight.”

Callie

You just start to nod off when there’s a knock at the door. You sit up, turn the TV off. Maybe Dad forgot his key, but that’s not like him. Maybe it’s Vickie. That’s the only other person you think it might be, based on the knock. Or—

Oh, god, what if it’s your mom? You can’t think of a worse scenario than her showing up in the middle of all this.

Phil

“I ain’t never gonna quit. I already know it. But that’s all right. I don’t wanna quit.” “Well they say it on TV all the time, ain’t no secret. All them poisons and monoxides. Not a lot of em, just a little, but that’s what you want, right? A little death inside you. Same way with liquor, kind of. Can I get another shot, when you get a chance.” “Yeah but you know you deserve it. I know I won’t complain if I get it cause I deserve it. My ex-wife’s the same way, gonna smoke till she’s dead and she won’t complain a word about it.” “Yeah, all right. I guess I don’t see her much anymore. Bout four years, we been apart.” “Just three, now. Boys, all of em.” “Weekends. Most weekends.” “No, they hate me. Heh, yeah. But that’s all right, I am the bad guy! I left, didn’t I? Everybody hates being left, it ain’t no secret. Ain’t gonna apologize for it, though, cause it was the right decision. Family is forever, marriages ain’t. We argued all the time, now we don’t. I’d call that a successful divorce. When shit gets bad, it’s the one with the common sense that’s gotta leave. And that person was me. Can I get another Bud, please.”

Callie

You open the door. It’s one of your dad’s friends, one you can usually count on for cigarettes. “James?”

“Hey, Callie. Look I know it’s late but, is your dad here? Can I talk to him?”

He starts coming inside, so you back up and let him in, catching the stink of alcohol as he brushes past. He takes a seat at the table, and his eyes dart around the room nervously. You say, “I’m sorry but he hasn’t come home just yet. Are you okay?”
“Oh, good. Oh that’s good news, but yeah, I’m fine, it’s old,” he says, touching his lip. “I didn’t know what I was gonna do when we ended up here.”

You find an ashtray for him and sit down at the table too. “What are you talking about? Who’s we?”

“Okay, now Callie, just stay calm about this, okay? This is gonna sound bad, but we were coming here to kick Pete’s ass.”

“What?”

“But I didn’t know it was him, I swear!”

“You smacked your hand on the table. “Why were you going to beat up my dad?”

“Oh, buddy, he says your old man is banging his wife.”


“But I only even met my buddy there a couple days ago, I didn’t know—”

“Go tell him to leave. Go, tell him Dad’s not here and you’re leaving.”

James sticks his cigarette in his lip, and he stands up slowly but you push him towards the door. The moment he steps out, the truck’s headlights turn on, and it backs out of the driveway.

“Hey!” says James. “Hey, where’s he going?”

**Phil**

“So this coach, right. Tells my boy he’s gonna be starting quarterback, finally? But Ty knows he’s full of shit, and the coach won’t fess up to it, so Ty punches him. Now what am I supposed to do? I been waiting on my boy to stand up for himself for years, but the first time he does he does it with his fists.” “Yeah, like I was telling you, if someone deserves it.” “Yeah, he was full of shit, but still. Ty shoulda left it up to me, cause Ty’s still a player and he’s still in the system. If the guy deserved a punch I woulda given it to him. Everybody ought to get what they deserve.” “Well, but the man’s…speak of the damn devil.” “Over there. Not that one, one who’s smiling like he just blew ass. That’s the coach.”

**Callie**

“He’s going next door,” you say. “Help me find the phone, we gotta call the cops.” You start flipping couch cushions, scattering papers, pillows, the remote control.

“Why?” he says. “Oh shit, next door?”

“Yes you moron, where my dad is, fuck where is that phone?” Cell phone, get your cell phone, but it’s upstairs and the regular fucking phone should be here, forget it no it’s under the couch look there first.

“Oh, shit,” he says. “Shit, oh, shit—”

“What?” Not here—probably, but the couch is old the middle sags down low and it’s dark, forget it, get your cell. It should be here, why do you even care right now why is this bothering you just go get—
“Callie, you can’t call—” he says, and then stops. Looks to his left. Then lunges for the phone cradle on the wall and yanks the cord out.

“What the fuck are you doing?” you scream at him.

“I can’t get caught here, Callie, I can’t, I will get fired so fast, it’ll look like I was coming here to get revenge on Ty or something Callie your dad, he wouldn’t want me to go to jail, would he? He wouldn’t want me to lose my job, would he?”

He’s a football coach. It sinks in. James is a football coach.

“Well you gotta get over there and stop him, then!”

“Okay!” he says, moving for the door. “No wait, Ty can’t see me here!”

“Then do it quietly! Think of something, just get, get!” You shove him out, watch him run towards the road, around to the Patterson’s driveway, and then down the hill.

That big, dumb…but there’s no time. You run upstairs, grab your cell phone, and then you’re out the door.

Phil

“No I see what you’re saying there, Coach. He had to earn it. You wasn’t just gonna hand it to him, he had to work hard and deserve it. Some people might say three years of training and going to every practice, that might be earning it, but I see what you’re saying.” “This year, yeah, he had to earn it this year.” “No I wouldn’t even want him to, if he didn’t deserve it! And you can’t tell me any different. That’s just the way it oughta be. You deserve something, you get it. You deserve a punch, you get it, you deserve a paycheck, you get that too. You deserve to go to jail, then you go to jail. It’s called fucking justice, that’s even the point of the whole damn country. Truth, justice, that’s the American way.” “Yeah, you deserve an apology, goddamn right you should get one.” “Any time there, Coach. I speak the truth. Always. Ain’t no good, hiding shit. You piss me off, I’m gonna tell you. I piss you off, you damn well ought to tell me back, cause I deserve to know. You wanna deserve the truth, you gotta tell the truth, that’s right. Here, do one with me.” “Yeah. Two. And a beer.” “Cheers.” “Bum one of those off you?” “No I ain’t out, I just want one of yours.” “Ahhh, just fucking with you, that’s a good man, good man, all right. Now listen. I’m proud of my boy. He’s standing up for himself, and he ain’t never used to do that, so he don’t know how to do it, exactly. If you get that apology you gonna let him back on?” “He’ll mean it, yeah.” “Good man. All right.” “I know he’s a good kid, I know it, getting better every day, too. Starting to quit that smartass teenage bullshit. Finally speaking his mind.” “Yeah, probably.” “Appreciate it, yeah, how bout—” “Thanks, really. Thank you, appreciate you saying so. Maybe we oughta do a shot for him, since you brought him up.” “Maker’s.” “Thank you again, Coach. Cheers.” “No, he fell out a window.” “I don’t know, they said he fell. If he jumped and nobody told me then somebody’s getting their ass beat tonight. I didn’t even know—you know who found him? This dude my wife’s banging.” “Yeah, and nobody even fucking told me that till I found it out myself, and that, damn. That ain’t justice—” “No, my ex-wife I mean. Course I meant that, dipshit, he was banging my wife he’d be dead by now. Still needs his ass beat, though. He deserves it.” “No not for banging her, shit. Grown woman, she can give her pussy to whoever the hell she wants to, I don’t own it.” “What the hell I gotta explain it to you for, what you gonna help me kick his ass?” “Bullshit.” “Serious?” “Donnie! It’s Donnie, right? Get this man a shot, he’s a good man. Put it on mine, we’ll do Jack this time, Jack all right with
“Well yeah, what the hell right did he have, being there. Just a fluke. Moves in next door and he’s the last one my son mighta ever seen, he didn’t deserve that. Cheers.” “The man needs his ass beat…cause he don’t deserve to be there. What’s he done for em? How did he earn being there? He didn’t, he just stumbled into it at the right time, and now he’s staying. He’s a leech, Coach. A leech and a coward. Loves himself too much, you know the type. Tucks his shirt in, probably buys that fancy soap for washing his face. Left his backbone at the door, and how you supposed to trust a man like that to do what he’s supposed to? Is he gonna ever stand up to you? He gonna make you earn what you get? Is he gonna make you deserve it? Hell no. I walk into the room and the man almost starts crying. Vick’ll be miserable in a month.” “Because. She ain’t gonna know she’s miserable. She’s booksmart, and so’s he, but it ain’t a classroom it’s a fucking family, and neither one of em has enough common sense to run it. The boys’ll all go to shit right in front of her, and she won’t even notice that either, cause she’ll be thinking about her new daughter. That’s how he got in with her in the first place. He’s got a daughter. That’s all he can give her and that ain’t enough. That ain’t earning your place. They’re gonna die unsatisfied and with shitty ruined kids. Because he don’t know enough to leave. I left. I knew, when I’d come home and we couldn’t stop fighting, I knew to leave and I left. Worst thing I ever had to do, but I did it, and I deserve some respect for that. I deserve to know things. Good things and the bad things, they keep trying to leave me outta the loop and I ain’t ever done a thing to earn that. I deserve to know who found my son. I deserve to know if you’re gonna get your tubes tied and we can’t never have a daughter for ourselves. I deserve to know if I made my son cry for cursing at him, even if I don’t like knowing it, even if I tried to forget it myself I deserve to know it if it happened. And I ain’t the only one forgetting things, they forget too. Who taught em all the basic shit they know? Who taught em to tie their shoes, or hit a baseball. Who taught em to fish and build a fire. Huh? Who bought that guitar for you. Who taught you how to throw a tight spiral even though you got tiny hands. Who went and got a good TV so you like coming over on the weekends more even though I got a shithole apartment? Who’s gonna tell you if you’re acting wrong? Who’s gonna give you some common sense? Not him. Not that guy. Just cause he can make a decent crêpe don’t mean he’ll make a decent dad. Or a husband. And she’ll do it, too, she don’t wanna be single, she’s gonna take whatever chance she gets, and they won’t ever fight about anything cause she’ll have that daughter to talk to instead, even when it’s something that needs fought about. Sometimes you gotta argue to make things better. Just not as much as we was, or we used to, but you still, hey. Hey Donnie. Gimme a beer.”

Randall

Did you hear that? Joey said. Sounds like someone’s here.

Yeah, I said. I turned around. Yeah, look, headlights.

We stood up and walked to the side of the house, and there it was. Dad’s truck. I looked at Joey for a half-moment, and then we turned and ran up the back porch steps into the house. I got to the front door first and locked it, and then we stood there quiet.

Joey said what I was thinking: Peter’s still here.

I said, Yeah, you better go wake em up.

What’re you gonna do?

I don’t know.
Should I get Ty, too?
I almost said yes. I wasn’t about to let Peter get hurt, and Ty might provide some protection. But I changed my mind, because how would Dad even know Peter was here? And if he didn’t know Peter was here, that only left one reason Dad would show up like this.
Nah, I said, leave him. Probably better if he sleeps through this.

Joey went down the hallway and I heard him knocking, and I was trying to listen to him but instead I heard someone yelling Dad’s name and coming down the driveway. Some other guy was here too. Shit, I said out loud, peering through the mini-blinds. He brought a posse.

Callie
You call as you run, and they pick up on the first ring. Simultaneously there’s a flooding wetness in your pants.
“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?”
You get to their driveway and slow down to a jog. James is standing next to Phil at the truck, trying to reason with him, and they turn at your footsteps on the gravel—it’s not a wetness but it’s something. The running, it made something just happen. You stop.
“Callie, you get on outta here,” says their dad. “This ain’t for you to see.”
“9-1-1 operator, hello?”
“Wrong number,” you say, and hang up.
It’s the condom. The first one, it’s in you still.
It hits you again, the paralysis, you’ve got something compromising here and you don’t know how to explain it and it’s got Ty’s DNA in it. What will they think if they find that out? What if they find Randall’s DNA on it, too? What will they do to you? What will Vickie do to you when she finds that out? No one will believe you, no one, you can’t do anything now, it’s happening again something terrible is happening again and this time your dad isn’t gonna bail you out cause it’s him they want, you’re stuck and they’re moving towards the house and all you can do is watch.

Vickie
I was dreaming about Shawn. Except it was Shawn as a baby, and he’d just learned to swim when the pounding on my door woke me. It was so vivid, so real, that baby Shawn in the water. I could smell chlorine on my pillow.
“Mom?” said Joey in a loud whisper. He actually started opening the door, I couldn’t believe it.
“What, Joey, what?” I whispered loudly back, pulling the covers up. Peter woke up beside me, and I put a finger to my lips to hush him. Not that I was keeping him a secret, but still.
“Dad’s here.”
“What?”
“You better come.”
“I am, I am,” I said. I flung myself out of bed and then turned back to Peter. “You stay here, stay hidden.”
“I’m getting dressed.”
I almost said no, just for argument’s sake. “Okay, yes, get dressed, but stay out of sight.”
“You’re letting him in?”
“No, but just stay in here.”
He was already getting up. “I don’t care what he thinks, Vickie, he can see me here, I don’t care.”
“That’s wonderful, but not now.” The man was trying to get his ass kicked. I found my slippers. “If he’s here he’s drunk, and he won’t care about token gestures, so just stay in here.”
“What about you?”
“He won’t touch me. He’d never see the boys again and I’m gonna remind him of that.”
I left before he could protest more.

Joey

I get back to the living room and he’s knocking on the door. He’s trying the door knob but it’s locked, and then he walks over to the window and we’re right there looking at him.
“Hey, kids. Mom home?”
Behind us Mom goes, “Go sleep it off, Phil.” She turns on the porch light, like it’ll make him go away or something.
“I ain’t drunk. I just gotta talk to you bout a few things.”
“It’s two in the morning!”
“Can’t wait.”
“What do you want?”
“Is he in there?”
“Who?”
“Oh come on, Vick, don’t play dumb, it don’t suit you. You want me to come in there? I still got my key, you know.”
“We changed the locks,” Mom goes, but I don’t remember ever changing the locks.
“Oh, he’s drunk enough. We could talk him out of it. It’s all up to me.

Randall’s just standing there. Ty’s up in his room, but it doesn’t matter, I can’t count on anyone. Buncha drunks. I gotta do something.

Randall

She stepped back from the window and pressed her hand to her forehead, like she was still asleep and this was some bad dream she might be able to erase from existence. I pushed past Joey to get to her and said softly, No, Mom, he brought somebody else with him. This is bad news, you have to stay in here.
“I can’t. Just let me think.
He doesn’t sound drunk, though. We could talk him out of it.
Oh, he’s drunk enough.
From the hallway, I saw Peter waving to get my attention. I nudged Mom, and when she saw him she walked quickly over to get him back out of sight.

Somebody else started knocking on the window. It was the other guy. Hi, he said, is Ty here?

He’s asleep. Who are you?

Oh good! he said softly. Listen, I’m Ty’s football coach, I think I’ve talked to you on the phone before, you must be the brother? Gosh, you’re a big one, you sure you don’t want to come out for the team this year?

What?

Hey can you just do me a favor and make sure nobody, um, loses their head about this and calls the cops? This really wasn’t my idea, we’re gonna get out of here in a minute, sorry for the interruption.

I couldn’t believe it. I said, You came here to beat up Ty?

No! I didn’t know we were—

How do you know my dad?”

It’s not important, what’s important is—

James?

I turned. Peter was looking over Mom’s shoulder at the window. James, what are you doing here?

Hey, Pete, he said at a regular volume. Listen, sorry to bother you, I’m kinda here to kick your ass.

The door. We all looked, when we heard the key.

Dad walked in and turned on the lights. He’s here for an apology, Pete. And I’m here for you.

It was too quick, the transition from outside to in. Suddenly he was right in front of me, unhindered, and I took a couple steps back. I flinched, and I couldn’t afford to, it was just me, I was the only one who could stop him. I shouldn’t have flinched. I got angry at myself, and felt the anger take over.

Through the window, James the football coach said, No, no—Peter, don’t listen to him, I came here for you. Okay? Except I didn’t know it was you, so really I’m here for no reason—

Shut up there, Coach, Dad said. What’ll it be, Peter? You gonna walk outside, or do I gotta take you outside?

Just hit him, I told myself. Take two slow steps, he won’t see it coming, you’ll be in range, just hit him in the fucking face. I took a step. He didn’t look at me. And then Mom said, Randall?

She blew it.

I came here for three things. Him, Dad said, that’s just one, I aim to take care of that directly. Two, Ty’s gonna apologize for what he did and ask to get back on the team, I don’t care if he’s the waterboy, and three…Well you don’t seem to wanna listen to the judge, so you’re gonna listen to me.

Outside, Peter said quietly.

When I say I want my sons over, I want my sons over. You done already stole the one. I said outside, said Peter.

Well! said Dad. Attaboy, Pete! I guess you know you got this coming, don’t you.
Mom said, Randall? Call the cops, Randall.
The coach pleaded, No, don’t—
Go ahead, call em. Dad turned to go outside. This won’t take long.

**Joey**
I get scared. I can’t see him. I see his truck but I don’t see him and I get scared. I never thought he’d hit me before. I never been this scared of him before. I can’t let him be here. I can’t let him scare me. I gotta do it. Shawn should I do it?
Shawn?
I creep up the side of the house and then I hear the front door open and I know I gotta go now or else he might walk around and see me and he might kill me but I gotta do it now so he doesn’t kill anybody else. Shawn, tell me to go Shawn, tell me, I can’t help it Shawn I don’t mean to I’m just so scared and he’s so scary I can’t help it if I cry a little bit. Shawn tell me. Shawn tell me.
*Go.*
Shawn?
*Now.*
I go. I go break loose hell on that truck.

**Peter**
The night air struck my lungs, and I became fairly sure I was walking into the most savage beating of my life. But I walked anyway. James wouldn’t let him kill me, but he sure wouldn’t stop him from the beating. I thought maybe I could stall him long enough for the cops to show up, but I couldn’t count on it. I’d go for the nuts. Maybe a long shot, but if that worked, I’d kick him in the fucking face until he couldn’t use his mouth anymore.
Then a terrific crack sounded throughout the night.
Everyone stopped, looked. Joey had a baseball bat.
“Fuckin fuck! Get the fuck out!—Fuckin fucker!” His swears were punctuated with full-armed swings against the side of the truck, and, moaning, he was moaning and sobbing and swearing and beating that truck with all his might.
Phil started to run over. I took half a step to follow, and then found someone holding me back. I thought it was Vickie, but when I turned I saw my daughter.
“Callie?”
“Dad don’t, he’s gonna kill you Dad, stop—”
“Go inside, go—” I said, but then back by the house I saw Vickie turn on James, who was trying to get by her, to run, maybe. But she stopped him, cornering him with a pointed index finger in his face. Randall took a step out of the house with the cordless phone, and then dropped it to try and help his mother. Or to stop her, maybe.
Her volume was impressive but calm, as if aware of itself, perhaps intended to draw our attention. She slapped him. Pointing, slapping, some more pointing, elaborate pointing, switching hands to keep her points effective, or maybe to distract him from the upcoming slap.
“You want to send my son to jail? You goddamn motherfucker! He’s just a boy! He’s only seventeen! Who the fuck do you think you are?”
James backed up against the house, trying to grab her wrists. Randall took his mother by the shoulders and pulled her off, and James got a look on his face of pure thanks. Until Randall punched him. In the nose, it looked like. James’s legs went limp and he slid down to the concrete front porch.

“Okay, now go inside,” I said.

**Joey**

I see him coming. He’s running first but then he stops and walks up slow. He’s looking at me like a killer. I keep at it.

Bam! I go, “Fuck you!”

He goes, “Joey. That’s my truck.”

Bam! “Get the fuck outta here!”

“Joey, I ain’t here for you.”

Bam! “You leave Ty alone! You hear me? I’ll break the fuckin windows I swear!”

“I ain’t here for Ty either.” He’s right on top of me now. I hold the bat pointed at him like a sword. He goes, “I’m here cause I got a beef with that man right there. This is what men do when they got a beef with each other. They take it outside and solve it. But I’ll tell you what they don’t do. They damn sure don’t fuck up each other’s automobiles. That’s bitch fighting. Do you hear me? That’s acting like a bitch, boy. There is never a good reason to fuck with a man’s truck. You got a beef with me, you bring it to me, boy.”

He’s standing there and he’s got his hands up. I’m back against the truck, I got nowhere to go. Then he turns his hands over flat and waves me over, he goes, “Well? Bring it to me, boy!”

I pull the bat back but he’s on me, just like that he’s on me and he’s grabbed the bat and his forearm is busting my mouth up, pushing my head back against the truck, pushing hard, until I finally let go and he steps back again. I can taste blood. He’s got the bat.

But he doesn’t use it on me. He just takes the back of his hand upside my face. My tooth goes loose. I’m on my knees, spitting blood into the concrete, waiting for the next one.

He goes, “You act like a bitch, I’ll hit you like one. You believe that.”

**Ty**

Buncha yellin outside. I did that, done it. I done it. Bottle all gone she gone now buncha yellin, close the window loud. She did it. Randall. No that ain’t right. She did that I heard that just breathe, just breathe in hush. Don’t puke it pussy you did it pussy done it, hush now.

The window closed that ain’t right.

**Callie**

He pushes you in the direction of the house but you won’t let go of his arm, and he ends up half-carrying you down there, lifting and dragging you by the armpits. He says, “It’s okay, I got it now. I got it, everybody inside. Randall, did you call the cops?” He’s trying to herd you all back through the door, but no one’s willing to go.

“Let me help,” says Randall.

“Did you call the cops or not?”
“Yeah, but I dropped the phone, I didn’t tell them where we lived.” You look down at the concrete, at the phone, the back cover of which has popped off. Randall picks it up, clicks it on. “Shit,” he says, “no dialtone.”

While Randall’s distracted, James sneaks away and runs over to Phil, who’s walking in your direction. Carrying a baseball bat.

“Okay, that’s it, we gotta go,” James says. “They’re calling the cops, man, we gotta—”

The baseball bat raises up in the air. Your dad, Vickie, Randall, all of you see, and catch your breath.

The bat swings and connects with bone. You flinch and don’t look, but you hear it. Bone. Your dad’s friend slowly drops down the gravel on the driveway holding his left arm, up by the shoulder.

“Sorry, Coach,” says their dad, “but you deserved that.”

James just stares up at him.

Phil gets a look on his face, some dawning of recognition. “But hey, on the bright side, you just got your apology.”

Your dad turns to you. He reaches out a finger, taps the cell phone still in your hands. “Callie, call the cops. And an ambulance.”

And then he walks up to meet Phil on the driveway. Vickie says, “No,” but you don’t say anything. You’ve just, lost your words.

Randall

We watched him walk. I didn’t want to let him, but he had to know what he was doing. I believed he knew what he was doing. Callie’s cell phone was in her hands, and she just watched him, too. He got further and further from the porch light, but we could still see him, and we couldn’t look away. Like a man walking toward the edge of a cliff.

Dad said, Don’t worry, smart guy, I ain’t gonna kill ya. Just gotta teach you a lesson.

Peter didn’t say a thing. Just walked up and stopped about ten feet from him.

Oh, you don’t have to talk to me, huh? Don’t think I’ll understand all that genius talk?

Who the hell do you think you are?

Peter said, I’m just a friend.

In the corner of my eye, I saw light on the grass. Upstairs, from Ty’s room.

Dad said, Well come on, friend. Let’s do this.

Peter

Just as I felt a sense of unassailable calm come over me. Just as I told my foot to take a step, I heard the glass break.

Vickie

The upstairs window shattered. I gasped and looked to my right, as more banging and smashing followed. I walked up into the yard to get a better look at Ty’s room, and Randall and Callie did, too. There were chair legs. Ty’s desk chair, smashing, smashing, smashing into the window, the frame, until the frame of the window itself came loose and fell to earth.
Then he walked up to the window, swaying. Disappeared again. The chair itself, then, came flying out. It spun a couple times in the air, then hit the earth, bounced somewhat awkwardly off to the side, not forward, not with its momentum but off to the side, and came to rest.

I looked up again. He was back at the window. “Ty?” I said.

Callie

Christ, he’s still naked.

Joey

I’m way over by the truck but I can see my brother at the window. Mom says, “Ty!” and Peter and Dad are both looking, and Randall and Callie and Mom, and it’s like somebody paused the world.

Then he steps up into the window, onto the frame, where he’s broken it. I look harder and he’s got no clothes on. Not a single one.

Randall

No one screamed. Once more Mom said, Ty, but then she stopped. He wasn’t listening to her. He wasn’t listening to anything. He was in some other place, where words and sounds couldn’t reach him. With the light on behind him it was tough to make out his face, but I could see he was looking straight forward. The frame itself wasn’t tall enough for him to stand up all the way, but even slightly stooped he still looked forward. Not at any of us, not down at the ground, but straight ahead. No one cried out or screamed or tried to stop him, because we all knew what was coming.

He moved one foot forward, leaned out the window, and fell.

Vickie

Ty…

Joey

He falls right out the window.

Callie

He falls, and you fall with him.

Peter

His body fell in what seemed like slow motion at first, that one, long, exaggerated step into nothingness, his other foot consciously or unconsciously remaining still, as if this were the only step he’d ever need to take again. That foot still on the ledge kept him from falling feet-first, and he toppled like a building instead, the first few milliseconds of his decent a graceful arc, backlit, beautiful.

Then gravity caught him and smacked him to the ground.
Vickie dashed over immediately. Callie dropped to her knees, watching. After a moment Randall got his bearings and ran over to him too.

“Peter?” Vickie said, then yelled it. “Peter!”
I had never fully turned to watch, my feet still facing the man with the bat. I twisted my body back around to him. Something had changed, something small. His face had gotten a hint less crazy. He still looked mad, but humbled, perhaps.

“If you take one step from that spot,” I said, “I will fucking murder you.”
I took one foot backward, as if a test, and he stayed. Then I turned and ran over to help.

Callie

At contact, you can feel it in your chest. The vibration in the earth, it touches you down to the heart.

Your dad is yelling, something. For a moment, though, you’re in a fog, the world muffled and distant. He fell from light to dark to light again. His feet on the glass.

“Callie!”
Have you really killed two of them?
“Callie! Call the ambulance!”
The phone in your hands. Your hands on your lap. The condom, slick in your crotch.
“Now!”
No. He’s not dead. He won’t die.
You make the call.

Peter

I fell down to my knees next to him, yelling at Callie to use the damn phone. His eyes were open, sickeningly open. I put my ear to his back, listening for breathing, and heard none. Not again.
I put my hands under him to turn him over, and Vickie said, “No his neck, Peter! His neck!”
But I’d looked at his neck. I looked again, and it seemed perfect.

“He’s got to breathe, Vick,” I said, and lifted.
When he was on one side, I felt him convulse, so I stopped. His eyes widened, looking at nothing, and then he convulsed again, spewing vomit into the grass. All liquid, into the grass, soon I could feel it on my knees, his eyes open the whole time. And the smell. Flammable.
She fell over on top of him, embracing, rubbing, whispering in his ear.

Joey

He has to hear me. The gravel is so loud he has to hear me, but I creep closer, holding my breath.

I snap around and grab the bat and pull it away and when I finally breathe again I’m in front of him. He’s got an angry look on his face but I know he just let me do that.
Then he gets a smile on his angry face, but it’s kind of sad, that smile. “Whatcha gonna do now, boy? Bash your old man in the jaw?”

“You shut up.”
“You would, huh?” He laughs. “Will you forget about me already? Go over there, see if he’s okay.”

“I said shut up.”

He goes, “Oh for Christ’s sake,” and just like that he snatches the bat away from me. I swallow. He goes, “Get up, Coach. Come on, shake it off.” The guy laying on his side and grabbing his arm, the coach, he takes his head off the ground and looks up at Dad. “Get up, I said.” The coach tries to stand up, but he can’t do it holding his arm, so he grits his teeth and lets go of himself, and he pushes off the ground and finally he’s standing up. Dad shoves the handle of the bat towards him, and he takes it with his good hand. Then Dad looks back at me. “Happy? Now get over there.”

I don’t know what else to do, so I start backing up. Then I turn and walk down to Ty. Behind me I hear him say, “You hit me with that thing I’ll kick your teeth down your throat. You know that.”

Callie

The flashing lights come over a hill nearby. No sirens, just lights, they flash into the trees. Everyone is still. Everyone watches them come.

Ty, sitting up now, watches them come.

Vickie

I just walked up to him. It’s what I used to do. He’d get his yelling out and I’d wait until he calmed down a bit and then I’d sit down with him and ask him what exactly the hell was the matter. And sometimes he’d try to keep yelling as he explained, but just making him explain always calmed him down. Even after he’d said the meanest things, or broken something, and no matter how drunk he was, I would just walk right up to him the moment I thought he wouldn’t hurt me accidentally. I never did think he would hurt me on purpose. I never was afraid of him.

Not until tonight.

“Well,” I said, “was it worth it?”

“Yep,” he said. “Got these fancy new bracelets out of the deal, so.” He leaned over to show me his hands behind his back.

I sat down next to him, up against the car where they’d put him. “I’m gonna tell the judge. You can’t see the boys anymore.”

“That don’t give me a real good reason to keep paying child support.”

“Forget child support. You pay for the funeral, and I’ll get rid of the child support.”

He grew silent.

“You’re not gonna be able to see them either way. The judge won’t let it happen, and even if he does then I won’t let it happen. You threatened the safety and sanity of my family, and you beat our son. Our youngest son. I’m never gonna forgive you for that.”

“Aw, I just slapped him, and it was for his own good. I was saving his ass from his self. He don’t want to be that guy when he grows up.” I looked at him. “What?” he said. “You don’t do that. You don’t beat a man’s truck with a goddamn baseball bat.”

“But you can beat a man with it, huh?”

“Shit,” he said. “I just got a little carried away is all.”
He stopped talking, and I had no more to say, so I stood up. “No more child support, you pay for the funeral, and you don’t bother us again. Final offer.”
“Don’t press no charges against me, neither.”
Which was too easy. I’d expected a bigger fight for the boys, but maybe he realized now he wasn’t any good for them. Or maybe it was just that the three sons he had left never liked him much anyway. Paying for the funeral, at least, would let him claim the one that did.
I said, “Saving your own ass?”
“All I got left.”
Chapter Twenty-Three

Joey

The walls are blue like toothpaste. I nudge Randall’s leg. Peter and Mom are up at the desk talking to the nurse. Peter’s got an arm around Mom, rubbing her back. “See?”

Callie goes, “See what?”
I go, “Nothin, sis.”
Randall snorts. He puts his face in his hand like he shouldn’t think it’s funny but he does. I start smiling cause he has no idea how funny.

Callie

The condom you flushed at the Patterson’s. You could’ve gone home to change underwear and maybe burn all these clothes, but it felt too long to be away, like the paramedics might rush Ty to the hospital while you were gone—although, even they had seemed calm when they arrived. As if everyone else in the world, too, took stock of their lives when Ty took that first breath.

You were right there with everyone else, until now. How could you not have thought about this? They couldn’t stay together, Dad doesn’t love her, does he? And no way Vickie loves him, unless...well, you never did figure out that whole warmth thing and maybe they have it, just a fluke and they’ve been waiting all their lives for each other, no no no, no. These boys will not be your brothers. It can’t happen. Not after what you’ve done.

Ty is put on a gurney but they don’t give him his own room. He’s just behind a hanging sheet in the ER, and they’re kind of busy tonight. The first doctor says it just looks like a concussion and some dehydration, but he can’t let Ty go until some other doctor comes to look. And who knows when that will be. Meanwhile they put him on fluids and ask you all to go back to the waiting room except Vickie. But she says she needs to step outside for a minute anyway, and after asking Randall to wait there, she tells Ty she’ll be back soon.

You follow her outside. She doesn’t notice you following her; when she turns around and sees you she kind of jumps.

“Sorry,” you say.

“What, you want a cigarette or something?”

“No! I just wanted some fresh air.”

She looks at you, and then you realize she was just joking. You’re too tired, protesting too much, giving yourself away. After a moment, she decides for herself what you want and holds out the pack. You prepare another refusal, but she says, “Oh come on, Callie, you smoked right in front of me. Do you want one or not?”

And before you know it, you’re smoking with an adult. One who will remember this. And as it turns out, this isn’t the first time. After a moment, the significance fades for you—you are, after all, at the hospital again—but evidently not for Vickie. “Heavens, look at me. I just gave a cigarette to a fourteen-year-old. What the hell is the matter with me?”

“Don’t say that,” you say quickly. You don’t like her choice of words. “Nothing is the matter with you.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, but please. I’m a horrible, just horrible parent. You can say it, it’s okay, I know.”

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“No. You’re not. You’ve done everything you could do, none of this was your fault.”
Even as you say it, you feel a sense of relief that she’s not blaming you. “Hey, you want to hear
about parents—do you know what my name is?”
“Lord, Callie, give me a little credit.”
“No, I mean my full name. It’s Calendar. Callie is short for Calendar.”
She waits to see if you’re serious. Your face tells her you are. You watch it sink in. Calendar, yeah, that’s not a name for a person. Finally she starts to giggle. “I’m sorry, Callie, that’s just,” she says, then stops to try and compose herself.
“No, it’s okay. I know. My mom thought she was being wickedly original. Like how other girls are named April or June, well I’m named after the whole thing. I’m ‘all seasons,’ is what she says, but I always tell her, if it’s such a good name, how come you never call me that?”
“My god, I’m sorry, I had no idea. And your dad was okay with this?”
The way you’ve heard it, he had to put up such a fight to eliminate September, Tuesday, and the somewhat non-sequitur Caterpillar, that he just ran out of energy. But you don’t tell Vickie that. “I don’t know,” you say. “Maybe the whole thing was his idea.”
“No…”
“You wouldn’t have let him name me that, though, would you?”
“No, if I would’ve had a daughter I’d have called her Julie. I kept waiting on one but, she never came.” She doesn’t get the hint. You try to think of another way to get to the question, but suddenly the fatigue hits you. It’s four-thirty in the morning. As if the events of the evening hadn’t been enough to wear you out. Or the past three weeks, for that matter, and your underwear are starting the stiffen and chafe and you just need this night to be over.
“Vickie,” you say. “Are you and my dad…”
When you don’t finish, she answers anyway. “We’re friends, Callie. I think. It’s what we’re trying to be.”
She almost puts your mind at ease with that, but not quite. And you can’t say it any more directly, you can’t just say the boys can’t be your brothers; you might as well confess to everything, once you open that door. Instead, you say casually, “So I don’t ever have to worry about calling you ‘Mom’ one day?”
You didn’t mean to hurt her, but she looks hurt. “No, I don’t think you have to worry about that.” And though that’s the answer you were hoping for, her reaction doesn’t allow for satisfaction.

**Vickie**

Phil used to be of the opinion—probably still is—that we wouldn’t have fought so much if we’d had a daughter. Someone who by virtue of her gender might understand whatever nonsense was constantly spilling from my mouth. Naturally, I disagreed. Having a daughter wouldn’t have saved our marriage. I didn’t need someone else to “vent” to; I’d had Shawn.

But for the longest time I’d confused not needing a daughter with not wanting one. Now, hearing Callie just say the word “Mom”—well, my heart leapt, and just as quickly the simplicity of pure exhaustion allowed me to articulate the reason, a feeling I’d had ever since the funeral: I could tell a daughter what to do. It seemed like with the boys I could only tell them what not to do, and I’m not saying any daughter in her right mind would listen to all of my advice, but at
least I would have the option of telling her how to live. I can never tell the boys how they ought to do anything. I can only spectate and scold. I don’t know what they’re going through.

During the two days of the showing and the funeral, Callie placed herself at my beck and call, did everything I asked. No daughter would be that consistently accommodating, I realize that, but still it showed me an aspect of parenting I hadn’t seen before. I felt, I don’t know, essential. Authoritative, somehow. I was guiding her. The hardest two days of my life, and what got me through them wasn’t Peter—at least, not initially. It was showing this young girl how a woman survives something like this. Not that I knew beforehand, but I believed every edict I laid down. Still do.

Now that we had just established I would never be a parent to her, something rebellious inside me made me immediately try to act like one. I held up my cigarette and said, “Hey—quit smoking these things, will you?”

“I will if you will,” she said almost immediately.

“No,” I said a little too defensively, “I need this. This is my…this is how I’ve learned to deal with life. Don’t make this how you deal with life. You can find a better way.”

“So can you.”

“No, Callie, this…” I sighed. Fucking daughters, who needs them. “Look at me. Seriously, do you see someone who can just stop this? This is not just a chemical addiction, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I am killing myself. That’s what I need now, I need to be dying in small little pieces or else how could I put up with all of the ways the world fails me every single day? Every time I hope for something. Every time I enjoy something, every little dream? Every ambition? These things die, right in front of me, every day, and how am I suppose to accept that if I don’t sacrifice a little part of myself, too. I couldn’t do it, Callie. I need to balance every little death I see with one inside me. I need the balance. Or else I’d be so, so sad, all the time. To have to live in a world like this.”

I shook my head and pulled out another cigarette. I didn’t even think about how I was demonstrating my point—what is that called, dramatic irony?—until Callie asked, “What just…did something just die? Just now?”

My subconscious answered on its own: My daughter—but that was definitely dramatic.

“No, I mean—it’s not specifically one-to-one like that, I mean, you don’t have to literally—”

“Yes okay, okay,” she said. “I get it, I’m still young enough to find a better way.”

“No—I’m saying you’re smart enough.”

And even though right then we had a moment, when Callie smiled and I smiled and I felt a silent promise that she would try to find something better than smoking—she was right the first time. I was saying she was young enough. But her tone had suggested resistance, and so I tweaked the message just slightly, and as a result it was received, some of the better parenting I’ve ever pulled off and she wasn’t even my kid. I decided to quit on a high note. I didn’t need one, and now I didn’t want a daughter either.

It made me really miss Shawn, though. It wasn’t that I used to use him, the way Phil assumed I would’ve used a daughter. I didn’t vent to him, exactly; I didn’t miss him badly at that moment because I wanted to explain to him what had really just happened with Callie, what I was really feeling. I missed him because he always seemed to know.
Randall

I decided in the waiting room I was okay with it. If Mom and Peter wanted to get together, I would be okay with it. Any other dude, forget it. But for him, I decided, okay. He could give it a shot, because really, that guy was all right.

Of course, I had to break things off with Callie. The doctor returned looking for Mom, which gave me the excuse to go outside. She thanked me and stamped out her cigarette, but before she could go in, I said, Wait, there’s one more thing.

Callie’s eyes flared, and she caught her breath.

Ty needs some help, I said. Like, mental help.

I know, Mom said. We’ll get him some.

No…it’s more than you know. He’s got this suicide journal thing, he says it’s not real—Mom’s mouth fell open—and yeah, I knew about it, but it didn’t seem like a big deal because he wanted me to read it, like it’s a story he wrote or something—

Me, too, said Callie. He wanted me to read it, too. I didn’t think it meant anything either. I mouthed a quick thank you to Callie. Mom turned back to me. She said, You should’ve told me. I don’t care what he calls it, if he’s talking about killing himself you should’ve told me. Especially after Shawn. Especially after…wait, did you leave Ty by himself?

No, don’t worry about it. Peter’s there.

Callie

It’s hot again. A sticky humidity coats your skin as you walk next door, even though it’s barely nine o’clock.

Randall is awake and watching SportsCenter. He looks at you with bright eyes as you walk in. You sit on the couch by yourself and try not to make eye contact, but he says quietly, “Hey, we need to talk.”

“I know,” you say. “Not right now.”

“Yeah, but later. Don’t forget.”

Soon Joey comes downstairs and gets himself some cereal. He sits on the couch next to you, not too close, but still the proximity bothers you. When Ty comes down, Joey gets up and moves himself to the recliner next to Randall. Ty’s wearing a pair of athletic shorts and a t-shirt. He fixes a bowl of cereal, too, but he settles himself at the kitchen table.

Okay, they’re all here. Take a deep breath. You can do this. Okay, one more deep breath. Just, one more. Okay, go.

You stand up and turn off the TV. Everyone looks at you. “Listen, I need to tell you guys something.” Randall looks concerned. Ty stares down into his cereal bowl, and Joey just looks mildly interested. “I wanted to tell you…My mom’s coming to pick me up today when she gets off work.”

“You?” says Randall.

“Because I’m going to go live with her now.”

“What?” says Joey. Ty pauses and looks at you now, too. “Look, you don’t have to—”

“Shut up a second, Joey,” you say quickly. It’s important they don’t talk until you’re finished. “This is hard enough as it is. I really care about all of you, but I’ve got to leave. I’m afraid I just won’t be able to do it otherwise. I need a fresh start. I think we all need a fresh start.”
“Callie?” says Ty. You swallow. You don’t have the heart to interrupt him. You can still see him, mindless and nude, backlit and barefoot on a broken window frame. They’ve put up plastic to cover it, but the window won’t be fixed for a while—and it’s all your fault, he swears he doesn’t know why he did it but you know. He doesn’t remember being up there, he says. He doesn’t remember falling, but you remember it for him. “Do what otherwise?” he asks.

Everything he’s said since has been spoken softly, slowly, carefully. He’s concussed, it’s supposed to wear off, but God help you you don’t want to talk to him again until he’s speaking normally. It’s too much. One soft word from him and you forget to breathe. Consciously you inhale, and then on the exhale you look Ty in the eyes and just say it: “Be your sister.”

They look at each other briefly, but no one says anything and they all turn back to you. This isn’t a surprise beyond the fact that you’re saying it out loud. “It isn’t anything to be ashamed about, because there’s no way we could’ve known. But the way I acted when I first started coming over here, and the way we’ve all been acting since—up until Friday, even—well, I’d be really embarrassed later on if we didn’t put a stop to that.” That’s important, the embarrassment factor. You need to mention it again, as many times as possible. “I mean, I even put on a bikini and laid out for you guys—”

Joey smiles. “I knew it.”

“—and that’s a little embarrassing when I think about it, but I’ll get over it if the next time I see you guys I’ve got it in my head that you are all potential brothers. It’s even in how I talk to you guys and I have to break that habit, it’s too flirtatious, it’s embarrassing. If I don’t stop it, I mean. I’m going to start thinking of you as brother, brother, brother”—you point to each of them—“and you think of me as sister, sister, sister.” You finish up by pointing to yourself three times, which looked a lot more sincere in the bathroom mirror this morning than it feels now.

Randall is nodding, in full agreement. And Ty seems okay. Maybe it’s the therapy. Maybe because of his meeting with Dr. Werner he’s expecting other people tell him how to think, even welcoming it, but whatever it is he seems receptive. Joey, on the other hand, still seems mildly amused. He waits as if expecting someone else to say something, then raises his hand. “Uh, Miss Callie? I have a question, yeah, um, even if my mom marries your dad, it’s not like we’d be related by blood. So what’s the big deal?”

“Listen to yourself!” you say. Louder. Angrier. Do it, yell at him, find his guilt, find his regret, and if you can’t find it, make it yourself. “Even now you’re flirting with me, can’t you hear yourself? That’s fucking gross!”

“But why?” he says, not at all flirtatiously.

“Because I just told you! In my head, you might be my brother! Can’t you just respect that? Can’t you see that even if you don’t believe it, I do? It’s real to me, okay, I’m not fucking kidding, and if I think of you as my brother, doesn’t that make it even a little bit weird that you’d still be flirting with me?”

Ty says, “Yeah, Joey, Jesus.”

“That’s fucking gross, man,” says Randall.

“All right!” says Joey. “Fine, have it your way.”

He looks embarrassed. Finally. You can stop yelling now, pull it back, relax. “You guys, Joey, look. I’m sorry. We’ve been through a hell of a lot together in the past three weeks, and I
really, really care about you. That’s why I have to go, so that the next time I see you, we won’t be neighbors anymore. We’ll be the children of two adults who may or may not one day get married. Can we agree to that?”

They nod.

You sit down again but you forget to turn the TV back on, so the four of you just sit in silence for a moment. Ty goes back to eating his cereal. Joey just holds his bowl, looking at nothing, and Randall is watching the TV anyway. You should just get up again to turn it back on, but you feel like it would take even more courage to stand up a second time.

You’d probably feel better about running from them—the safety of being far away from you is a good thing—if it were more of a sacrifice for you. But you’re getting something out of the deal. Dr. Werner didn’t have any openings, and your mom wouldn’t let you relinquish your spot before you offered to move in with her. So yes, you’re running, but you don’t have to go to therapy anymore. And also, Mom offered piano lessons to take its place. Two rewards for you, one for Ty, it’s like you’re accepting a bribe.

Finally Randall says, “So this is your last day here, then?”

“Yeah. I’ll be visiting Dad on the weekends, but yeah. This’ll probably be the last time I’m here for a while without him.”

“Well what do you want to do?”

“Take a walk in the woods?” you say before you even think about it. But then you do reflect on it, and yes, that is what you want to do. For once, your gut and your head are in agreement. You look at each of them, checking for approval. They nod, shrug, sure, why not, why not.

Ty

When she says we’re gonna leave it all behind, I suddenly feel all right. It’s like we just erase it, cause she wishes it didn’t happen and I wish it didn’t happen, and so it goes away. All cause she might be my sister. And she woulda been Shawn’s sister, too. So he can’t be mad at me for something even he ain’t allowed to do.

Dr. Werner says he wants to see my suicide journal. Says he’s gonna help me. I hope he helps me remember, cause I forget how I got like this. He says Shawn didn’t mean to go out the window, that it was an accident. If that’s true, me going out the window was an accident, too. I only wanted to know what he knew. If he didn’t mean to, neither did I.

Except—even if Shawn didn’t mean to, I bet he learned a hell of a lot on accident. Me, I don’t even remember doing it but somehow I feel a step closer. To knowing enough. Maybe now, just writing about it—writing and talking to Dr. Werner about it—maybe that’ll be enough.

We go in the woods. We go down the trails, way back, deeper than I been in years. Shawn would. By himself, he’d come down and disappear for a while. I can see why. It’s like no one’s gotta talk, here.

Randall

I still wanted to tell her how special she was, even if she’d beaten me to the punch about breaking it off. But that confession might not come for years, now. Way down the line, when
we’ve made more friends, more mistakes, and had more experiences that will render what we’ve
done here less crucial to who we are.

As we all headed out the back door and down the porch steps on our way to the forest, it
occurred to me that I might’ve had the wool pulled over my eyes. I thought back to the day I’d
called her out on her smoking, how she’d lied to my face and I knew it. I thought I had her
number, then. This girl couldn’t fool me, I was sure of it. And as if that were enough to make her
tell the truth, I’d done nothing since but believe every word that came out of her mouth.

Why would she say that in front of all of us? At first I thought it was for their benefit, to
protect them from knowing about us, and she’d talk to me later. But she treated me just like
them, as if she had no intention of explaining to me specifically why she’d decided to leave. I
knew everything. I could talk.

But what if we all thought we knew everything?

If that were the case, then none of us knew the whole truth. But what else could there be
that I didn’t already know? Had she lied to me about something, there in the bedroom? Had she
left something out? We passed the charred Smoking Log, each of us slowing to give it its due
moment of respect. And then—how could I have missed it?—I knew what she was hiding.

She’d slept with Shawn.

The pieces fell into place. All her guilt, her instant subservience after his death, a desire to
make us feel better the only way she knew how. And Joey, with his story about Shawn’s
premature ejaculation—of course I’d believed Callie instead, thinking Joey was subbing in
Shawn for himself. But if he wasn’t lying, if Callie and Shawn had gone that far, it really wasn’t
a stretch to think they’d gone further. I couldn’t know for sure without asking her—but that was
obviously what she was trying to avoid.

Despite the complete lack of evidence, the idea took hold of my mind. Maybe she really
had slept with Shawn. Because really, if she were trying to help people, to fix them—he
would’ve been first on the list. For the moment, though, it really didn’t bother me. If it happened,
I was glad for Shawn, that he didn’t die a virgin. Which might sound crass, but that night with
Callie really had opened up a new world for me (among other reasons, I felt no pressure to
masturbate anymore, having much preferred the real thing), and it made me glad to think Shawn
and I could have been so monumentally changed in the same way. It made me feel close to him.
That was a feeling I hadn’t expected to come across ever again.

But—and I believed this was her goal—even though it made so much sense, I couldn’t
prove it. And if it ever bothered me in the future that I might’ve slept with the same girl my
brother did, I would have to admit to myself: I didn’t know that for sure.

I decided never to ask, never to know.

Joey

We go down past the Chocolate Factory and I start to tell Callie about it but she says
Shawn already told her. About the deer piss and everything. We keep walking. Shawn says in my
head, “Yeah, dumbass, you should’ve asked me first.”

It isn’t really talking, when I hear Shawn, it’s like I know what he knows. Or what he
would say if he still could. But I do talk back in my head. I go, “No, you’re the dumbass.”
“You’re the one who gave away a hot chick, and it didn’t even matter because she’s leaving now, you dickless reject.”

“Fucktard, you gave her away first by dying.”

And I know I’m just talking to myself, really, but I still feel bad for that one. But Shawn doesn’t care. I know he doesn’t care, because he knows he fell out a damn window, it’s not like a big secret or anything. He doesn’t get mad or run away, either. He knows just because I said something to make him mad doesn’t mean I hate him. He goes, “Queerbait, if I gave her away first it means I had her first. So you got sloppy seconds. What do you think about that?”

Which makes me laugh because sloppy seconds means a guy that fucked a girl after another guy already did. It doesn’t make sense because nobody fucked her at all, but it still makes me laugh. Shawn got himself a foul mouth, wherever he went. He never used to talk like that, but he does now. We were all too fast for him, and he couldn’t come back at us and got his feelings hurt, but he’s fast now.

We’re pretty far back in the woods now, but we keep going, and there’s no trail anymore so we’re following the creek. Randall’s leading and Ty’s right after him and Randall goes up this creek bank that’s pretty steep, and his foot slips. He slides in the mud back toward the creek, and right at the edge he stops sliding but he’s leaning back and waving his arms, trying to keep his balance. And Ty’s right there. He’s right there, but he doesn’t do anything.

Instead of falling straight backwards, Randall steps off the bank and into the water. And I want to laugh so bad, because Shawn’s already laughing, but I’m looking at Ty instead. Because he didn’t do anything, and it’s either because he’s still too slow in the head—or because he knew it would be funny if Randall fell.

Well, what do you know. Ty cracks a smile. And I can’t help it, I bust up, too. Randall just nods like he has it coming. He’s not wearing sandals, either, he’s got on his Nikes with socks except now one Nike and one sock is all brown with mud. I go, “Oh, shit, man. Looks like you stepped in something.”

Randall goes, “Really? I missed it, what was it?”

“I just told you. Shit, man.”

Ty laughs a little bit. I look behind me and Callie’s smiling, too.

We get up the creek bank. I pull Callie up by the hand so she doesn’t slip, too, and when I turn around Randall’s right there. I get nervous at first because I think he might try to push me into the creek. But really that wouldn’t be so bad.

Instead he goes, “Hey, look. Look over there, you see it?”

I look where he’s pointing, across the creek, a bunch of weeds and dead leaves and mud, but I don’t know what he means. “No, what?”

“Right down there, just next to the log. Right there.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a posy!”

And when Ty hears that, he just cracks the fuck up.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Callie

In your bedroom at your mother’s house—formerly just, “your house,” now “your mother’s house”—you open the closet door and drop to your knees. The carpet is loose in the corner. You pull it back from the walls and lift the broken piece of plywood beneath it. This is where the knife you’ve smuggled back with you goes, but before you put it away, the cigarettes catch your attention.

It’s the first pack you stole. There were two left in it, originally. A friend of your father’s, not James but another friend, had left the pack along with a lighter and this knife you hold in your hand. You didn’t have to perform an elaborate routine of artful deception to get them, either. It wouldn’t have occurred to you to do so anyway. These items were not high on your wish list, but the way they sat there, ominous and secret on the counter next to the toaster…who would it hurt if they disappeared?

That was the goal all along, though. To rebel a little bit without hurting anybody.

You walked in the woods with them for the last time today, and when you came to the spot where you smoked your second cigarette with Shawn, without a filter, you realized what he must’ve thought. Why he’d gotten so upset. It wasn’t because you’d kept your stash a secret, it was because he thought you’d been smoking all along. That first cigarette with him, he thought you were faking that.

The pack in the hiding spot at your mother’s now holds eighteen cigarettes. You’d pilfered them until the pack was full, then took two along with you when you moved to your dad’s, and though you couldn’t have said for sure at the time why you’d brought two, now you feel pretty confident: it was to give someone the opportunity to talk you into smoking one with them. You’d imagined it would be some new girlfriend at your new school (another good reason to move back—old friends, people who knew you before all this). But Shawn had other ideas, and as it turned out, he’d brought his own. In fact the only one you ever smoked by yourself was the one Randall saw you smoking in the dark.

At twelve, though, when you stole this first pack, you hadn’t had the courage. Smoking at the time was still too big. You’d never actually held cigarettes before. You had no idea that before they were lit, the pack smelled like raisins. And you liked raisins. How could they have the same smell as something you liked? Weren’t these things more dangerous than guns and drugs and sex combined? Well, no. They have a certain power, but you might not even call it danger, now. Not unless you’re careless with them. And you won’t be. That much Vickie is right about. You can find something better.

On the other hand, she’s fooling herself if she really believes the “just friends” bit. You were glad to hear it—it’s what you needed to hear—but now you’re not so near to…all the things you did with them. For them. Now it’s enough to know there was a dividing line between what they were then and what they might eventually become. It’s not like you really believe what you told the boys, but even if Vickie’s in denial it could conceivably happen.

You had to act like you believed it, though. And you’ll continue to act, to lie to them, to pretend. Despite what Shawn believed, the danger of pretending is never so clear-cut. It worked for his mother, but not for his father. That’s hardly beyond reasonable doubt.

On the other hand, the danger of a knife is well documented. You know what they can do.
You don’t put the knife away. Instead you stand up and lock the door. Then you walk over to the window and shut the blinds.

Returning here means you failed at living with Dad. It was an ambitious goal, you never were that compatible and in fact you feel like you barely knew him, before all this. But still, you failed. You’d call it a medium-sized death. For the smallest deaths, you intend to play piano. For the bigger ones, maybe a late-night cigarette, but those you'll try to use sparingly. Your shorts drop to the floor.

Sit on the very edge of the bed. Straighten your legs. First, remember. Hook your thumb into the underwear’s elastic on your left thigh; pull it down just enough to see the scar. Feel it, trace it with your fingertips as if writing a message in sand. Then, pick up the knife. Unsheath the blade. Hold it like a pen in your left hand and use your right to pull down the material on your other thigh. Press with your forefinger; slit the skin three times, connecting the cuts at the ends. A triangle. The first time, you made four cuts, two parallel, and then two connecting. First there were four, now there are three. It feels right. It fits. Take a tissue and blot the blood. Then another. The third, fold and press, then carefully replace your underwear over it to keep it there. Put your shorts back on. Put the knife away.

You expect a certain exhilaration, but any such thing that comes is dispelled by your first deep breath. Which is good, it means you probably won’t freak out when people find out about it this time. And this time, you have an explanation. Vickie’s terminology will prove useful—even if it’s not quite a balance you’re feeling now. You’re not quite self-loathing enough to believe you have to damage yourself to be able to face a damaged world. It’s as if she’s not really aware she puts on such a front for the boys, for Dad, even for herself. You, however, are aware. All you really want is the secret. Some definable moment to separate the bad events, during which you are a you that nobody else knows. Then maybe you can be someone better the rest of the time.

In any case, by the time you unlock the door, you feel ready to face your mother.