Blood from a Stone

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Emily M. Grekin

June 2012

© 2012 Emily M. Grekin. All Rights Reserved.
This thesis titled

Blood from a Stone

by

EMILY M. GREKIN

has been approved for

the Department of English

and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Joan C. Connor

Professor of English

__________________________________________

Howard Dewald

Interim Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

GREKIN, EMILY M., M.A., June 2012, English

Blood from a Stone

Director of Thesis: Joan C. Connor

Blood from a Stone is a collection of short stories written by Emily Grekin. The stories investigate friendship, loss, the clash between childhood and adulthood, illness, and our overwhelming desire to connect with others. The introduction discusses the effectiveness of child and adolescent narrators, specifically in the short story "Train" by Joy Williams and the novel The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake by Aimee Bender. Grekin analyzes the vulnerability and emotional perceptiveness of the protagonists in each of these works, and then examines her own child and adolescent narrators in her stories "Blasting Caps" and "Newport Shores."

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Joan C. Connor

Professor of English
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my family for always supporting me, encouraging me, believing in my work, and providing me with endless writing material. Thank you John Shepard, for staying on the phone with me when I have writer's block, for telling me I'm going to write the next Great American Novel, and for loving me always. Thank you to Gary Gondek, Jim Nelson, and Cameron Kelsall for being excellent critics and friends over the past two years. Thank you to Joan Connor for your friendship, guidance, reading and re-reading my work, and pushing me to be the best writer I can be now and in the future.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The Influence of the Protector/Failed Protector Role on</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Characterization of Children and Adolescents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood from a Stone</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blasting Caps</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Selected Blog Entries of Linda Green</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood from a Stone</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newport Shores</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cab</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION:

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PROTECTOR/FAILED PROTECTOR ROLE ON THE
CHARACTERIZATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

It wasn't until I was compiling my thesis and looking over the totality of my work
that I realized how often I write about complex, difficult relationships between children
and adults. I began to explore my characterization of both children and adult characters,
and how that characterization influences the dynamic between the two. How could I have
crafted so many similar relationships throughout my work without understanding the
overall effect and significance of this choice? No doubt about it, this move had been quite
instinctual.

But why is this move such a natural one for me? I began reflecting on my life as a
writer and reader. The stories that resonate most for me, that stick with me for months
and years after I read them, are stories that revolve around a child character and an adult
character who protects (or fails to protect) him or her. Three such works that I find
particularly effective are the short story "Train" by Joy Williams, the novel The
Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake by Aimee Bender, and the short story "A Good Man
Is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor. After careful analysis of these works and my
own work, I believe I'm drawn to reading and writing stories that focus on the
characterization of children against the backdrop of their protectors for two reasons.

The first reason is personal: I remember my own childhood with extreme clarity
and I reflect on the emotional intensity of those memories quite frequently. I remember
the anxiety I felt during gym class, the excitement and eagerness to learn about the world, to grow up and be a teenager and drive a car and fall in love, the frustration I felt when adults talked down to me. I remember always feeling as if I understood more than adults gave me credit for. And above all else, I remember valuing the comfort and security my family provided for me; even at a very young age, I was conscious that I was lucky to be so well taken care of, so loved. Consequently, a small part of me wanted to stay young forever, to stay safe, to elude the future, old age, and, of course, death. I wanted to believe that my parents could protect me from death. That central conflict—wanting to grow up but also wanting to stay a child, wanting to stay protected by my parents—led to heightened childhood emotion, and ultimately solidified vivid, powerful memories.

The second reason I'm drawn to these stories (which directly stems from the first reason) is because I am a writer, and thus I feel compelled—obligated, even—to try to capture such powerful, emotionally resonant moments on paper in the most effective way possible. From a craft perspective, child and adolescent characters are extremely dynamic and accomplish a great deal. They can portray vulnerability and innocence, while also being observant and wise. They show emotional depth, and these emotions are on the surface, are easily expressed and available to readers. What's most interesting to me is how the combination of any of these factors can create fantastic, poignant humor, even in rather serious situations. These are the moments that make readers laugh and reflect on their own childhoods; these are the moments that resonate.

When I first read Joy Williams's story, "Train," I became infatuated with the two young protagonists, Danica Anderson and Jane Muirhead. Williams describes them as
"little girls" from the very first line; however, we quickly realize that Jane tries to act like a sophisticated adult because she craves attention and control. This central conflict gives the character shape and helps to capture the overall heightened emotional resonance of childhood.

When readers first meet Jane, we see that she wants others to view her as older, more worldly and experienced than she actually is at the age of ten:

She liked to wear scarves tied around her head. She claimed to enjoy grapes and brown sugar and sour cream for dessert more than ice cream and cookies. She liked artichokes. She adored artichokes. She adored the part in the New York City Ballet's Nutcracker Suite where the Dew Drops and the candied Petals of Roses dance to the 'Waltz of the Flowers.' Jane had seen the Nutcracker four times, for Godssakes (Williams 402).

Williams infuses her third-person narration with Jane's voice through her use of free indirect discourse. This allows us to grasp Jane's pretentious attitude and exaggerated affinity for more adult tastes. But we know Jane is only ten. As a result, Jane's desire to act like an adult actually makes the reader more conscious of how young she is, and the reader can't help but laugh at Jane's failed attempt to discard her youth.

Right after Williams introduces us to Jane as a wannabe adult, we learn about Jane's extreme attachment to her grandmother, how she is fearful of death and loss. Jane had a nightmare in which "men dressed in black suits and white bathing caps had broken into her grandmother's house and taken all her possessions and put them in the road. In Jane's dream, rain fell on all her grandmother's things. Jane woke up weeping. Dan had
wept too" (Williams 402). She is a child; she fears the loss of her grandmother's possessions in her dream, and we can infer that this symbolizes the fear of death and losing her grandmother in real life. Her emotions are unguarded, on the surface and she does not hesitate to express that emotion. Similarly, Dan cries for Jane, even though this was not Dan's nightmare. It is interesting to note the absences of Jane's parents during this scene. Jane's parents do not come to her side to comfort her or soothe her of her fears. She must deal with these fears on her own. Williams depicts Jane and Dan as possessing a certain fresh vulnerability, for young children can easily access their emotions and have no qualms about expressing them fully.

In the wake of this touching flashback, Jane continues to try her best to act like an adult throughout "Train," and we gradually come to understand that she acts this way as a direct result of feeling unloved and neglected. Her parents are characters who fail to protect her; they are too involved in their own marital issues, fighting "continuously and as bitter as bitterly as vipers," to pay attention to their daughter (Williams 404). And so she must act like an adult. Jane just wants her parents and other adults to notice her and care for her, and she craves some semblance of control over her life. When Jane sees her father talking with a young man on the train, paying more attention to this stranger than he ever does to his own daughter, she interrupts their conversation and says "Birds are only flying reptiles, I'm sure you're all aware . . . it's true, it's true" (Williams 405). This comment has nothing to do with the father's conversation. She merely wants to gain control over the moment and capture their attention with her intelligence.
"Train" heavily influenced my own short story, "Newport Shores." I can see now that I was trying to mimic the same duality within Ellie's character that Williams created within Jane. I can see that Ellie is young, but eager to grow up in order to gain control over her chaotic and unstable home life. Her parents also are experiencing marital problems, and she, too, wants to feel less helpless. While she expresses her desire to finally be "a true teenager," I don't think she's necessarily prepared for the dark, very adult situation she's forced into: a party thrown by a man about to die of cancer.

How does she cope? She attempts to cope by approaching her father. She has some semblance of a loving relationship with her father, as evidenced by the fact he affectionately calls her "kiddo" and stealthily gives Ellie a glass of wine. But he fails to protect her and help her work through this emotionally difficult party that is suggestive of a funeral. The young Hispanic woman soon steals her father's attention and he forgets Ellie is even there. And while he's busy flirting with this woman, her mother is busy criticizing her father. Ellie is once again on her own, vulnerable and disconnected from the adults in her life who are supposed to keep her from life's hardships and the scariness of death. Because no one is protecting her, she copes by trying to act like an adult, just as Jane does. So Ellie orders a martini. (I think this moment is pretty funny, that she, at the age of twelve, can so confidently order a martini like an adult, and the bartender thinks this is funny as well.) She diverts her attention to her crush, Robbie. When a party guest, Dr. Chopper, "lean[s] forward to shake Ellie's hand in that condescending way adults do sometimes," Ellie acts mature and poised, while inside she hides her childlike, snarky nature. These conflicting impulses within Ellie manifest themselves in a moment of
humor: Ellie, in an attempt to escape, tells Dr. Chopper, "so very nice to meet you. But if you'll excuse me . . . I'm just on my way to the lavatory." She acknowledges that she "spoke with a slight British accent. It just came out that way." We feel for her, that she wants to maintain her composed, adult-like exterior in order to remain in control of her situation, but we also laugh at the odd and unexpected accent. We can sympathize with her confusion and desire to remain in control of the tense situation she's found herself in, and we can see that she only feels the need to gain control over her situation because her parents are failed protectors.

In much the same way, Jane's parents and Ellie's parents are characterized as failed protectors. Robert's father, in my short story "Blasting Caps," is also characterized as a failed protector. But in this story, Jimmy's parents do care for him, love him, and protect him, and thus we see a contrast between the different characterizations of these parental figures. When Jimmy is injured, his parents sit by his side in the hospital, asking Jimmy, "Are you in pain, honey?" They are hesitant to tell his son about his missing fingers because they are trying to protect him from the painful reality of the situation, and when they finally do tell him, they cry, further proving their love for him and desire to protect their son. When Jimmy is out of the hospital, his parents make a point of telling Jimmy to "come back before it gets too dark." They want to keep their son safe. They embody the successful protector role. In contrast, Robert "flinched at any mention of his father," and Jimmy suspected the "array of bruises lining [Robert's] jawbone and neck" were a result of his Robert's father's abuse. When Jimmy goes home with Robert, he comments that most of the times he had been over to visit, Robert's father has not been
present. We infer that Robert's father not only fails to protect his son, but actually does quite the opposite; he actually intentionally causes physical harm to his son.

We see that Jimmy and Robert act differently in school and react differently to difficult situations as a result of their upbringing, supportiveness, and protection from their parents. From the beginning of Jimmy and Robert's friendship, we see Robert as an instigator and troublemaker, while we see Jimmy as a well-behaved, good student. Robert is the one who suggests they let the class hamster run around the classroom and "stretch his legs." Jimmy is the one who responds, "But we aren't supposed to take him out of his cage." Flash forward a few years, and we see that Robert is still crying out for attention through his actions, while Jimmy is focused on school and learning. Robert is the one who steals the blasting caps from his abusive father, and Robert is the one who convinces Jimmy, who is extremely hesitant and nervous about this prank, to participate in the prank of blowing up the outhouse. Already we can see the connection between protector/failed protector role and the characterization of children; Jimmy, who is very protected by his parents and feels bathed in their attention, doesn't feel the need to actively draw attention to himself, especially in a negative light. One might even go so far as to say that Jimmy lacks a certain edge, a certain agency that a neglected child must develop on his/her own in order to cope. Robert is afraid of his father and is often ignored by him too. He decides to call attention to himself by being a "bad kid," just as Ellie and Jane cope with their neglect and the hardships in their lives and call attention to themselves by acting like adults.
The second work of fiction that significantly influenced my own work is actually a novel—*The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, by Aimee Bender—and its impact can be seen in my short story "Blood from a Stone." I think it's important to understand that not all adults who are characterized as failed protectors are willfully and intentionally negligent of the children who depend on them. Some adult characters try their best to successfully protect their children but fail to do so anyway. Bender's novel follows a young narrator named Rose from the age of nine to twenty-two. On her ninth birthday, she discovers she can taste the emotions of the person who cooks the food she eats. This is troubling to her, because she discovers that her mother, who on the outside appears to be happy and content, is actually incredibly depressed and unfulfilled. The novel chronicles Rose's struggles to cope with this talent (or burden) of hers as she grows from a child to a teenager to an adult.

Rose's mother expresses her love for her children by constantly baking for them. This proves to be a problem, because Rose loves her mother and wants to eat her food, but can't stand the painful, upsetting emotion she tastes. As a result, her anxiety builds slowly over the next few months. But one morning, when Rose tastes her mother's pie, she can't contain her emotions anymore, and she experiences a full-blown panic attack. She describes the sensation of eating her mother's pie as "a gripping in my throat. The graininess of the pie dough, of the peach syrup: packed, every bite, with that same old horrible craving . . . I started tearing at my mouth. Get it out! I roared" (Bender 73-74).

Rose's mother tries to protect her daughter from herself by asking her questions about what is wrong, by worrying, by driving her to the emergency room. She sits by her
daughter's side hours in the hospital, until Rose is finally calm and ready to go home. Rose notes that her mother "stares at [her] from the heights of adulthood" while she is in the hospital (Bender 78). This quotation showcases the distance between mother and daughter, the unbridgeable gap, and while Rose's mother wants to protect her daughter, she simply has no control over Rose's internal affliction; there is nothing she can do to protect her child. She is characterized as one who tries to fulfill the protector role but fails.

We see this theme of attempted (and ultimately failed) protection continuing throughout the novel. When Rose tastes "a wallop of guilt and romance" in the dinner her mother cooks one night, Rose knows her mother is having an affair (Bender 92). Her mother tries her best to hide this from Rose for years, tries to guard Rose from emotional pain with the illusion of a happy family. But she can't keep Rose from tasting emotion in food and discovering her mother's secret. At the age of twelve Rose must live with the knowledge of her mother's infidelity. Consequently, Rose has to actively find ways to cope. She forces herself to rationalize and understand her mother's actions. She lets go of her blissful and ignorant youth and learns to cope because her mother cannot protect her from reality. Later on, Rose even begins to protect others, helping her mother deal with her own choice to have an affair: when Rose's mother finally explains, "He's a nice man . . . I know it's wrong, she said, falling back into panic, shoulders rising. I know I should give him up," Rose says, "No one wants you to give him up" (Bender 223). Although she is very young, she has learned to act like an adult and have a very mature understanding
of others' emotional hardships. Her mother can't protect her from reality, no matter how hard she tries, and so she has to protect herself.

Similarly, in my short story "Blood from a Stone," Ernie, an army vet and security guard, tries his best to protect Samuel and Trevor but ultimately fails to do so. Ernie is actually hired for the sole purpose of protecting these teenage boys, who face harassment problems at school. Ernie follows them around the mall, escorts them to an art museum, and is almost overzealous in his desire to finally make a positive impact on someone's life and protect these boys. While at the art museum, he thinks he's spotted the boy who has been harassing Samuel and Trevor. He sees a kid who "resembled a bulldog, and Ernie knew instantly, somehow, that this was the bully, this was the guy who'd been embarrassing and harassing Samuel." Ernie feels "paternal rage" at this moment and threatens this boy with his gun. He tells him, "I'm watching you. If you ever go near Samuel and Trevor again . . . you will regret it." He feels "adrenaline swim through his blood . . . and realized he was doing something right for the first time in a long time."

However, he quickly learns he's threatened the wrong boy, that the boy he's pinned against the wall is actually named Noah and is "harmless." Not only has he failed to protect Samuel and Trevor, but he has actually unintentionally hurt an innocent bystander. When he realizes his mistake, Ernie says, "Tell Noah I'm not really watching him, will you? I'm not watching anyone." At this moment, he understands that he has caused more harm than good. The real bully who harasses Samuel and Trevor is still a threat to them. I see a connection between Rose's mother and Ernie, in that they both are passionate in their desire to keep the children who depend on them safe and secure.
However hard Rose's mother and Ernie try to do so, they fail to protect these children from threats that are internal or external, emotional or physical.

Consequently, Samuel and Trevor must take on the role of protector, just as Rose does in *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*. Trevor even provides emotional support for Ernie, questioning him about his traumatic separation from his wife and giving him advice on how to win her back. He helps Ernie deal with the tragic, lonely life he has recently started to live, and tries his best to protect Ernie from his own sadness. He tells Ernie about his parents' divorce and how his father won back his mother by giving her an expensive ring. Ernie considers taking this advice, but knows he can't afford such a nice ring on a security guard's salary. Since Samuel also wants to protect Ernie from his lonely existence, he insists on purchasing the ring for Ernie. Ernie is characterized as a failed protector, and consequently, Samuel and Trevor must become protectors themselves. They are characters with agency, characters who must learn to cope with their victimization. They are characters quite similar to Jane, Ellie, Robert, and Rose, who all lack a protective adult figure in their lives.

Failing to fulfill the protector role not only influences the characterization of the child or adolescent, but also the characterization of the adult who experiences that failure. While crafting Ernie, I looked to Flannery O'Connor's classic short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," for inspiration. In this story, an infamous murderer called The Misfit kills an entire family, whose car has just crashed. The Misfit, who is armed, descends on the vulnerable family and quickly gains control over them; the family has no way to protect themselves. Throughout the story the grandmother is characterized as selfish and
testy, as loving her son, and panic-stricken as she tries to protect her family from The Misfit. She tells The Misfit, "You shouldn't call yourself The Misfit because you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell . . . I know you're a good man . . . you're not a bit common!" (O'Connor 128). It's obvious that she doesn't think this man is good; she is terrified of him and is just trying to appeal to his sense of righteousness so that he doesn't kill her and her beloved family. She continues to panic when her son is dragged into the woods by The Misfit's accomplice, Bobby Lee. She screams after her son, "Come back this instant! . . . Bailey Boy!" (O'Connor 128). She has no sense of composure; she panics because she cannot act on her maternal instinct and protect her son. She is powerless.

When she finally hears the gunshots and realizes she has completely lost control, that she couldn't save her son from The Misfit and cannot save herself, we see the grandmother transform under the weight of her failure. She becomes completely calm, her "head cleared for an instant," and she says to the murderer, "you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" (O'Connor 132). At this point she reaches out to touch The Misfit and he shoots her three times in the chest. The grandmother's revelation suggests that she cannot cope with her failure, and ultimately becomes delusional, losing touch with reality. This delusion allows her to displace her protective instincts onto the extremely dangerous man from whom she originally tried to protect her son. She equates this grotesque murderer to "one of [her] own children," and by reaching out to him she enacts her final undying maternal instinct to protect. Her failure to protect her family
causes a major change in her character, causing her disassociation from reality and ultimate death.

Ernie's character also changes when he experiences failure. He is a stoic and quiet character throughout "Blood from a Stone," keeping conversation to a minimum and spending most of his time by himself in his house. But as soon as he accepts his failure to protect Samuel and Trevor, we see his composure deteriorate. He now drinks to the point of vomiting. He sleeps in his car. He willingly admits to the boys, "I think I'm losing my mind. I don't know what to do," and his voice even cracks as he says this, revealing his emotional pain and panic. Ernie and the grandmother both experience a change in characterization as a result of embodying the failed protector role.

Though my short stories "Cab" and "The Selected Blog Entries of Linda Green" don't explore the protector role through the child/adult dynamic that my other short stories explore, I do continue to manipulate similar themes and examine them in different contexts throughout these stories. In "Cab" the reader understands that Eileen will fulfill the role of protecting her cousin, Karla, out of obligation, even though she doesn't want to do so. And in my short story "The Selected Blog Entries of Linda Green," Linda's marriage is cast against an absence of protection, against a backdrop of fear and powerlessness, since ultimately there is no protection from death. One might argue that every character's desire to be protected and to protect others stems from an innate fear of death. But it also stems from a desire for love and support, to feel less alone in the world, for these are the factors that give our lives structure, strength, and meaning; these are the factors that make death worth fearing.
WORKS CITED


BLOOD FROM A STONE
Blasting Caps

The fall of 1952 was a clear and vibrant one in Northern Wisconsin, colder than normal, one that boasted leaves the color of fire and streams of pure midday sunlight. Sometimes the children of Maplewood Elementary School would awake to a dusting of snow that sparkled and tossed around every color of the sunrise: first blue, then plum, pink, orange, gold. By recess, the dusting would have melted, seeping into the earth, leaving the grass damp and glistening like thin little emeralds.

Jimmy stared out the window of his classroom, trying very hard to focus on long division but instead imagining a kickball game and willing the recess bell to ring. A draught whistled through the window and Jimmy shivered, pulled the sleeves of his wool sweater down over his hands. Robert poked him in the shoulder with the eraser of his pencil.

“Oh,” Jimmy whispered, turning around to look at his friend.

“Sorry. I need to talk to you.” Robert hunched over his desk, a smile spreading across his face.

Jimmy glanced toward the front of the classroom to make sure Mrs. Wallace hadn’t heard them talking. She stood by the blackboard, hastily finishing a long division problem with the stub of chalk that was left in her hand.

“We’ll talk at recess.” Jimmy turned back to his piece of paper and copied the problem from the board.
“It’s important. I have an idea you’re going to love.” His smile grew smug, his eyes bright. He crossed his arms across the chest of his overalls.

Mrs. Wallace spun around to face the class, her glasses sliding down the bridge of her nose. “So, who has the correct answer?”

Sally raised her hand. “The answer is…twenty-five?”

“Yes, excellent work, Sally.” Mrs. Wallace grinned.

Jimmy ached for that attention, that recognition. He knew that Mrs. Wallace liked his perfectly slicked dark hair, his neat and tidy sweater-vests, the apples that he would bring for her periodically. He had always been at the top of his class, but whenever Mrs. Wallace called on another student, whenever her compliments were directed at someone other than Jimmy, he felt as if he’d missed a valuable chance to impress her, and he would continue to slip closer to average.

Sighing, he turned around to see if Robert had an answer for the next problem. Robert’s head was on his desk, his papers crinkled beneath his greasy cheek. He yawned loudly, stretching his thin arms lengthwise and hitting the girl sitting next to him. “Hey, watch it, Robert,” Patricia said. "I hope you end up in detention again."

“Sorry.” He laughed. Mrs. Wallace glared at him before turning back to the blackboard.

Robert was constantly stuck in detention during recess for shouting during class or playing jokes on other students. While outside playing kickball, Jimmy would sometimes see Robert through the dusty classroom window, like a helpless fish trapped in a fishbowl. Jimmy would almost always shift his gaze back to the game, trying to shake
the pity he felt when Robert’s brow wrinkled with frustration and he grabbed chunks of his wavy blonde hair between his skinny fingers. Jimmy sometimes wondered if he was so attached to Robert for just this reason: he wasn’t competition. Since kindergarten, Jimmy had been the better student, always favored by teachers, and he knew he always would be.

In the moments before the bell rang, Robert still sprawled out on his desk, Jimmy recalled that fateful day the two of them became friends in kindergarten. They had stood next to each other, knees bent, staring at George Washington, their class pet—a brown fuzzy hamster adored by all of the kindergarteners. During winter break and spring break, the kindergarteners often engaged in heated fights about who was to take George Washington home and care for him. Hair was pulled, tears were shed.

“He looks so cooped up and miserable,” Jimmy had said while wiggling a loose tooth in his mouth.

“He needs to stretch his legs,” Robert explained to Jimmy as they stared through the metal slats of the cage, George Washington staring back at them and gripping the metal wires with desperation. “Let’s just take him out for a few minutes,” Robert said.

“But we aren’t supposed to take him out of his cage.” Jimmy gasped, shaking his head.

“Look how sad he looks. C’mon. Just for a few minutes.”

After a few moments, Jimmy nodded, and Robert opened the door of the cage and scooped George Washington into his palms. He then carefully set George Washington on the hardwood floors of the classroom. For a few seconds, the hamster just sat there,
squeaking, unsure of what to do. “Run, George Washington. Stretch your legs,” Jimmy encouraged, giving the hamster a little pat. As if he had understood Jimmy’s words, George Washington shot across the classroom, transforming into a blur of brown fur.

Jimmy screamed as loud as he could. “Catch him!”

George Washington bolted around bookcases and under desks. In a flurry of panic the students and teacher dropped to their hands and knees as they all tried to catch the speeding hamster.

“He’s over there, by the chalkboard,” someone had yelled.

“No he’s not. He’s by the window!”

“He’s—ahh! Don’t step on him.”

After several minutes of crawling, his knees raw, red and full of splinters, Jimmy had yelled above the rest: “I got him!” His heart rate finally started to slow as he carefully placed him back in his cage. As punishment, the two boys were forced to stand in separate corners of the classroom, each facing a blank wall for ten minutes. Robert gave Jimmy a sheepish glance before they parted, and when he reached his corner, he punched the wall, hard enough so that several other students around him heard and turned to look. He then clenched and extended his fingers before his face.

The wall in front of Jimmy blurred as tears dripped down his cheeks.

Those ten minutes were agonizing for Jimmy. He had never gotten in trouble before at school, and as he stood, he thought of himself becoming one of the bad kids. He thought of the guilt that would’ve weighed upon him if George Washington had been squished, or lost forever.
When they were finally permitted to go to recess, the two boys ran outside as quickly as they could, breathing in the fresh air, absorbing the sunshine on their faces, basking in the over-all euphoria of recess on a much deeper level than the other sheltered kindergarteners.

Just as Jimmy was beginning to recall that sense of liberation he’d felt so strongly, the bell rang. Desk chairs scraped and squeaked against the floor as Jimmy’s classmates flooded out of the classroom, and Mrs. Wallace began to erase numbers from the blackboard.

Jimmy and Robert grabbed their jackets, walked outside together, and sat down on a cold wooden picnic bench. The wind had picked up, blowing leaves off of the lofty trees that surrounded the school. At the edge of the field, someone had raked a pile of leaves together, and three or four students jumped in, squealing as the leaves crunched beneath their weight and stuck in their hair and up their sleeves.

“What did you want to tell me?” Jimmy placed his elbows on the picnic table.

“I don’t even need to explain it.” Robert shook his head. “I’ll just show you.” He reached into his pockets and pulled out two metal cylinders. They were lustrous, smooth, enticing.

Jimmy smoothed his hair back with his hand. The oil he’d used to slick his hair earlier that morning left a film on his palm.

“Two words.” Robert paused dramatically. “Blasting caps.”

“Where in the world did you get those?”
“Stole them from my dad. He was going to blow up some tree stumps tomorrow on the farm.”

Jimmy pictured the tree stumps in front of his own home. Three large oak trees had contracted a white fungal disease, and his parents were worried that other plants surrounding their home might contract the disease, too. So, they’d hired a man to come chop down the oaks. After the woodcutter’s long day of work, what remained in Jimmy’s front yard were flat, two-foot high stumps, with beautiful concentric circles on their surface. His tree-swing sat crumpled and knotted in a pile by his front door.

Jimmy sat up a little straighter and he cleared his throat. “Do you think that was a good idea, stealing those from your father?” Robert’s father had a bald head as shiny and smooth as a pearl, and veins popped out of his temples when he clenched his jaw. Robert generally flinched at any mention of his father, and when he had come to school one morning with an array of bruises lining his jawbone and neck, explaining he had fallen out of bed, Jimmy suspected his father was actually responsible. Robert had insisted he was fine, tracing his bruises lightly, and had changed the subject.

Now, Robert shrugged off Jimmy’s concern. “Nah. Don’t worry about it. He won’t notice they’re gone. He has a whole drawer of these he just bought.”

“Okay.”

“We can blow things up.”

Jimmy cradled his face in his palms and moaned.

“No, Jimmy, listen.” Robert reached across the table and shook Jimmy’s arm. “It could be the best practical joke in the history of Maplewood Elementary School.”
“What do you want to blow up?”

“The outhouse.”

“Why do you want to blow up the outhouse?” Jimmy’s tone was accusatory, strained, not the least bit curious.

“Because everyone will be terrified. Especially if we do it tomorrow, at the Annual Picnic, when all the parents are there.” His eyes became focused on an area of the schoolyard Jimmy couldn’t quite pinpoint. Robert raised his eyebrows and then started laughing, most likely at the thought of all the adults panicking from the explosion. He threw his head back, covering his mouth to stifle his laughter.

“I don’t know.” Jimmy shook his head.

“Come over to my house after school and we can make a plan.”

At the other end of the field, one of their classmates had kicked a partially-deflated red ball high into the air, and the other kids cheered as he ran over all four bases.

“Trust me, Jimmy.” Robert’s eyes were large, honest, and unblinking.

When the bell rang at the end of the day, Robert and Jimmy hopped on their bikes and pedaled down Main Street, past the hardware store, the diner, the bakery. Soon, Main Street morphed into hills and empty fields that led the way to Robert’s dilapidated farmhouse. The last five minutes of the trip were over dirt roads, and as the boys pedaled faster and faster, dust and grit flew up into their faces and mouths. Jimmy knew they were getting close, because he could see the curves of Robert’s father’s bright red Ford Pilot parked on the street in front of his house.
They propped their bikes against Robert’s front porch, which was at one time painted a pure white, but was now weathered and weak. Its wood floor sunk toward the middle, and Jimmy found himself imagining an old man with a curved spine. The peeling paint reminded him of wrinkled skin. They pushed open the front door and grabbed a box of Rice Krispies Cereal from the cabinet above the kitchen sink. The house was musty and dark, with evergreen and brown walls and three polished wooden rifles displayed in the living room. Robert’s mother had died when he was just a baby. For the first time, Jimmy noticed that there were no feminine touches around Robert’s house—no ruffled curtains, no plastic covering on their couches.

Together the boys leaned over the kitchen countertop and stuffed handfuls of Rice Krispies into their mouths. Cartoon children were captured dancing around the dusty blue cereal box, singing “Snap! Crackle! Pop!” and Jimmy heard the cereal snapping and popping as he chewed. After Robert swallowed, he began to explain his plan. “The main thing is, we can’t let anyone see us going into the outhouse.”

Jimmy nodded, all the while staring out the large window at Robert’s father, who was attempting to chop down a tree with an ax that glinted in the sunlight. His bald head glowed in the sunlight, and he grunted with each swing. After several swings, he dropped the ax behind him, kicking the tree over and over and cursing. Most of the times Jimmy had been over in the past, Robert’s father had not been around.

“Jimmy?” Robert waved his hands in front of his friend’s face. A chunk of blonde hair covered one of his eyes.

“Yeah. No one can see us get into the outhouse. Got it.”
'And the other thing is—'

Robert’s father swung open the back door and slammed it behind him, setting his gaze on Jimmy and Robert in the kitchen. That infamous green vein, like a thin snake, throbbed on his temple and he continued to stare, unblinking. When he finally turned away, he dropped his ax on the floor and stomped up the stairs.

Robert stared at the floor, crunching a hand full of Rice Krispies with his fist until it crumbled to the countertop like sand.

Rolling around on his tan flannel sheets that night, Jimmy dreamed of Robert’s farm and of Robert’s father. He dreamed that the bulky bald man had gone into his shed, opened his drawer, and found it dusty and empty, his blasting caps missing. In his dream, Robert's father had rumbled up the creaky stairs of his house, to Robert’s room. Jimmy could barely see through the darkness of the house, could barely make out the polished wooden rifles hanging on the wall. But the dark interior decor was not what shook Jimmy awake only moments later. It was the image of Robert’s father pulling his fist back and smacking Robert’s jaw, his neck, his chest, one blow after another. Robert slumped lifelessly against the wall, sinking toward the floor, a lacy pattern of green, purple, blue bruises developing along the delicate contours of his face.

Jimmy’s eyes snapped open, and through the dark he tried to make out the familiar shapes of his desk, his dresser, the lamp beside his bed. He turned on the light, gasping for breaths, the small of his back moist with sweat.
Parents, teachers, and students flocked to the schoolyard behind Maplewood Elementary School for their annual school picnic. The sun hung low in the sky, failing to take the edge off the chilly air. Mrs. Wallace came to meet the parents, students came to feast on barbecued chicken and play tag with their friends, and parents mostly came to share their latest gossip with the other parents. The event was talked about all over town, since never before had there been a chaos-free Annual Picnic; however, the teachers and parents remained hopeful that this would be the year the picnic ran smoothly. Two years ago, a young girl had disappeared from the picnic. Her mother had panicked, grabbing the shoulders of other students and demanding her daughter’s whereabouts. Her father had remained silent, pacing the length of the schoolyard and staring at his feet. About ten minutes after the police had been notified, someone spotted the little girl at the town ice cream parlor, ordering a scoop of chocolate ice cream with her allowance money. “I got bored at the picnic and wanted some ice cream,” she told the police, tugging on her blonde pigtails. Last year, a young mother had passed out at the picnic, collapsing to the freshly mowed grass. After rushing her to the hospital, it was discovered that she had a severe iron deficiency.

Robert and Jimmy sat on the picnic bench, licking barbeque sauce off their fingers. “I didn’t know my dad was going to come until this morning,” Robert muttered, watching as his father chatted with Mrs. Wallace at the picnic table next to them. His father rested his rough hands on the table, smiling so wide that Jimmy could see all of his crooked teeth. Then he slid a piece of chocolate cake toward Mrs. Wallace, and she heaved a large forkful into her mouth. "Delicious. Did you make it yourself?" Mrs.
Wallace asked after swallowing. Robert's father threw his head back, laughing. "I don't have an ounce of talent when it comes to cakes and sweets, unfortunately. Robert's mother did, though, may she rest in peace." In the glittering sunshine, Jimmy realized Robert's father didn't look so scary; his skin was illuminated, warm, and the throbbing vein on his temple had disappeared. Hunching over the picnic table, he almost looked self-conscious about his large frame, which dwarfed Mrs. Wallace into a fragile toy.

“He only came because Mrs. Wallace told him she needed to talk to him about my behavior in class. We stopped by Miller's and picked up that chocolate cake on the way here.”

“It doesn't look like they're talking about anything bad right now. Are you happy he came?”

Robert shrugged.

Jimmy glanced over at his parents standing in a different circle, talking and laughing with other parents. His father had his arm around his mother’s waist. She looked very pretty, Jimmy thought, her cheeks flushed from the cold, her hair pressed down over her ears from her black velvet hat. She saw her son staring at them, and waved cheerfully. Jimmy waved back, noticing that the rough wood of the picnic bench was snagging the seat of his jeans.

“Ready, Jimmy?” The two boys looked at each other and nodded, beginning to casually make their way toward the outhouse at the other end of the field. Jimmy felt himself starting to sweat despite the cold. Even though he had trouble calming his nerves, he couldn’t deny the twinge of excitement that spread throughout his body, making him
hyper sensitive to sounds and smells around him. Jimmy envisioned the expressions of shock and fear that would surely spread among the faces of his classmates, and it gave him a tiny thrill to be part of the mischief. Then he imagined his parents' sagging faces, their raised eyebrows when they found out their son was responsible for the explosion, and his excitement flipped into anxiety. Robert tilted his head toward the sky as he whistled “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”; Jimmy shielded his eyes from the sun’s rays, realizing that his breath was visible in swirling tufts of steam. Robert patted the pocket of his dirty overalls, which bulged slightly with the shape of the blasting caps, and Jimmy inhaled the smoky scent of barbeque. Together they sauntered across the grass, waving idly to their friends.

Before he knew it, he and Robert stood in front of the outhouse. They looked to their left, to their right, behind, to make sure no one was watching them, and then they slipped inside the rancid-smelling interior of the outhouse. Robert locked the door and pulled the two blasting caps out of his pocket. It took several moments for their eyes to adjust to the dark, to clearly make out that magical, metallic luster of the cylinders that rested in Robert’s palm. They squinted to see each other clearly.

“Okay, Jimmy. We’re going to set off the blasting caps and get out of here. We’ll jam a stick in the door so that no one can open it, and by the time we make it to the other end of the field, the blasting caps will explode.” Robert clapped his hands together in front of Jimmy’s face. “BOOM!”

Jimmy jumped backwards, his pale face scrunching in fear.
“Here, take these. You set them off by ripping the top off. I’ve seen people do it by biting the ends.”

“I’m not doing it.” Jimmy shook his head and tried to make his face hard so that Robert knew he meant business. Jimmy suddenly felt nauseated and worried that he would throw up all over his friend. The two boys were crammed together, practically touching, and the scent of the outhouse mixed with Robert’s breath on his face was unbearable. A line of white light from a crack in the roof sliced through the darkness.

“Don’t worry, it’s easy.” He thrust the caps into Jimmy’s hand.

Jimmy thrust them back. “No. You do it.”

“Stop being such a girl. You scared Mrs. Wallace is going to find out or something?”

“No. Why can’t you do it?”

“Because I asked you first. Are you scared of detention? Or getting in trouble? It’s not that bad, I’m in detention a lot—”

“No, it’s just—“

“Good ol’ Jimmy. You know what? It’s fine. I knew you were chicken.” He shrugged, and slowly brought the blasting caps to his mouth.

"Me? Chicken?"

Robert nodded.

Jimmy frowned. The floor was sticky. His shoes were probably filthy. “Give me those.” Jimmy could make out Robert’s huge smile through the darkness as he grabbed the blasting caps from his friend.
“Okay, ready?”

Robert nodded, his fists balled at his sides.

Jimmy lifted a cap to his mouth, crunching the metal around the fuse with his teeth. Neither of the boys knew that Robert’s father always used a dynamo device to send a current through a line, igniting the blasting cap at a safe distance.

“Okay, I did it.” Jimmy beamed. “Now let’s—“

A blinding pain shot up his arm before he heard the deafening noise. Milliseconds before the actual explosion, as Jimmy’s face began to contort with pain, Robert frantically tried to unlock the outhouse door, but was thrown backwards over the toilet and into the aluminum wall. Clenching his teeth together, Jimmy saw flashes of white, and then darkness.

When he regained consciousness, Jimmy found himself flat on his back by the picnic tables. His parents crouched on the grass, their faces only inches from Jimmy’s nose, and he tried to sit up but found it too painful to move. He didn’t know how he’d ended up on the grass, or why his entire fourth grade class was circled around him, staring, their hands shoved deep in their pockets and their jackets buttoned up to their necks. His head throbbed. The colors of fall blurred around him, and he heard his classmates whispering to each other: “He’s awake,” “Oh my gosh….” “Did you see….” “Look….” He only caught the first few words of each sentence, and each became a small, compact weight that pressed on his forehead and eardrums. He found it easier to just lie still and let the hum of their words, not the meaning, wash over him. The hum of their
chatter gradually began to sound like the inside of a seashell—the sound of echoes and loneliness. Jimmy’s mother stroked his arm. For a second, his vision came into focus. Beyond his parents’ faces, he saw Robert, or a boy who looked like Robert, being dragged away from the picnic by his father, who gripped his son’s elbow. The side of Robert's coat was covered in blood and dirt, and his hand covered his cheek. This was when Jimmy felt a prickling sensation down his arm and he began to remember the explosion. This was when he felt himself being lifted onto a stretcher and rolled toward an ambulance. This was when he started feeling unbelievably light and he once again slipped out of consciousness.

Several hours later, Jimmy awoke in a small hospital room, his mouth dry and his eyes crusty. His parents were sitting in green padded chairs next to his bed, and he saw relief flash across their eyes when they realized their son had regained consciousness.

“Are you in any pain, honey?” his mom asked, her voice distant and soft.

“No…my head hurts a lot, but that’s it.” It was difficult for Jimmy to speak—his throat felt dry and scratchy and his tongue had transformed into a sheet of sandpaper that scraped the roof of his mouth.

"That’s because you got yourself a minor concussion,” his dad said.

Suddenly, the details of that afternoon came clearly to him: the golden fall leaves, the barbeque sauce, Robert’s breath on his face, the crunch of metal under the force of his teeth, the burning pain that had traveled up his arm, his head smashing into the aluminum walls.
He glanced down at his right arm and saw that his fingers and forearm were completely covered in pristine white gauze.

“Did I break my arm?” he asked.

His father rubbed the back of his head with his hairy fingers. “No, Jim, you didn’t break your arm.” His large stomach pressed against the buttons of his shirt. “What’s important is that you’re alive, son. Remember that.” He patted Jimmy’s left arm.

“It’s true,” his mother agreed, brushing Jimmy’s forehead with the back of her hand. “We’re so lucky.” She bit her lower lip as she choked back a sob. “I don’t even want to think about what could’ve happened.”

Jimmy nodded, his heart racing. He didn't want to know what was coming.

Tears dripped down his mother’s cheek. “You lost four of your fingers in the explosion, honey.”

Jimmy opened his mouth to speak but found he had nothing to say. He wanted to cry, but the urge passed quickly, and he like he might fall asleep. He wiggled his fingers on his left hand. It seemed very strange to him that beneath the gauze bandage on his right hand there were no fingers, just a thumb. He wondered what his hand looked like, if he had stubs of fingers left, if there was blood and swelling and puss and bruises above his knuckles. Right now it was numb. His entire body felt numb, besides his headache. The clean white bandage made him furious. He knew that the bandage was just there not just to keep the wound clean, but to hide what was real, what he was not ready to accept.

Then he remembered Robert. He wasn’t going to let his best friend off the hook as easily as he did when George Washington ran loose in kindergarten. Jimmy would have
to learn to write with his left hand now, he realized with frustration, and he’d never be able to play baseball again. He pictured himself at recess, sitting on the picnic benches alone while his friends laughed and ran from base to base, taking turns batting. He blamed himself for going along with Robert’s stupid prank, but he mostly blamed his friend for persuading him to do so, for forcing him to be the one to set off the blasting cap when he clearly didn’t feel comfortable doing so.

“What on earth happened in that outhouse, Jimmy?” his mom asked, her voice shaking.

Jimmy closed his eyes. “I don’t really know,” he murmured before drifting off to sleep.

After the doctor was certain an infection would not spread, Jimmy was allowed to leave the hospital to recover at home for a few days. When he went back to school, his hand remained wrapped in the gauzy white bandage.

Upon walking into his classroom and sliding into his desk chair, Jimmy heard muffled whispers in every direction. “It was only his hand?” “I heard he had his head blown off,” “Aw, someone told me his eyes were burned out of his sockets!” Jimmy half smiled, bracing himself for his impending encounter with Robert. He wasn’t sure how to act, if he should ignore him completely or yell at him, if he should rip the bandages off and show Robert his grotesque, mangled hand. The doctor had given Jimmy stern instructions to keep the bandage on for at least two weeks, until his checkup. But Jimmy just couldn’t stand it anymore. And so the night before, he’d unraveled one corner of his
bandage ever so slightly to peek at his wound. His stubs of fingers were swollen, little fleshy balloons protruding from his knuckles, and some of the gashes on the backs of his hand were beginning to harden and scab over. The made Jimmy’s stomach clench, and so he’d recovered it immediately.

He was uncertain of how Robert would react at the sight of Jimmy, if he would just flash his smug smile, too embarrassed that his prank had failed them, or if he would apologize profusely. Maybe he would feel so guilty that tears would stream down his face, Jimmy imagined. He pictured Robert’s face on his desk, tears collecting into little pools on top of his crinkled, unfinished homework.

None of these scenarios came true, because Robert’s desk remained empty for the entire day. According to his classmates, he’d never come back to school after the explosion. No one had bothered telling him Robert's father had pulled him out of school, had decided to home-school him from now on.

The news made him feel like he'd just inhaled water. Why was Robert's father doing this? As punishment? To better keep an eye on his son? While Jimmy walked home that afternoon, he tried very hard to imagine what Robert's life would be like from now on. At first, he thought Robert was the type of kid who sooner or later would feel trapped and run away. But Robert had nowhere to run, did he? As he thought harder and harder, the image of Robert's father dragging him away from the Annual Picnic stirred in his mind. He tried his best to suppress it, dismissing it as nothing, but found he could not. As he walked down the cracked sidewalk, crunching dried pinecones beneath his saddle shoes, Jimmy’s pulse raced. He thought about riding his bike out to Robert's house, just
to say hi, to see if his friend was doing okay, but somehow he felt this would be impossible; Robert's father had built an invisible barrier between Robert and the rest of the world, and Jimmy felt it would be taboo to cross this barrier. He wasn't even certain how Robert's father would react if he visited them. For all anyone knew, Jimmy had pressured Robert into stealing the blasting caps. His father might even flip out and hit Jimmy if he showed up at their house.

While recovering at home the past few days, Jimmy had felt as if he were climbing a steep staircase with Robert waiting for him at the top platform, his anger growing with every step he took. But their confrontation didn't happen, and when Robert failed to show up at school, Jimmy felt like he’d tripped, losing his balance, tumbling backward down the staircase into nothingness.

People around town dwelled over the explosion for weeks. They slipped it into conversation at grocery stores and waiting rooms of doctor's offices. "That poor boy, losing so many of his fingers," they said, shaking their heads and grimacing. But really, they relished the morbid excitement of the whole event—the fact something different and memorable had happened in their town. "I could hear the explosion from my house and I live almost a mile away from Maplewood," Jimmy overheard a woman say at the drugstore, as if this were something worth bragging about.

Jimmy developed insomnia when he finally accepted that Robert wasn't returning to school, that he would be stuck at home, night and day, with his father, and no one else. Night after night Jimmy lay on his flannel sheets, his eyes burning and dry, staring at the
ceiling. During recess, Jimmy now sat alone on a picnic bench, lacking any desire to play with, or even talk to, his other friends, who ran around chasing each other, carefree and happy. He pressed his cheek against the rough wood of the picnic table, drifted in and out of sleep, and thought again about riding his bike to Robert’s house. Maybe it was his utter exhaustion, or his growing frustration, or his need to move, to just do something, anything—but he decided he would do it. He promised himself he would ride his bike out to Robert's house that evening, regardless of any frightening outcomes he anticipated. He dug his thumbnail into the soft wood of the picnic table over and over. The slivers looked like new moons, white, clean.

So that evening, after Jimmy's mother cleared the dinner plates and piled them in the sink, Jimmy informed his parents that he was going next door to work on a writing homework assignment with his classmate, Paul. "Okay, but come back before it gets too dark," his mother said. She donned her pink lacy apron and filled the sink with soapy water. He wasn't sure why he felt compelled to lie to his parents; they'd never outright said he couldn't go to Robert's, but somehow he knew they wouldn’t be okay with it, and he couldn't stand the thought of them saying "No, why don't you just stay home tonight."

The sky was just beginning to show streaks of an orange and pink sunset. He grabbed his bicycle, which was propped against his house, and rode down Main Street, out toward the country. Jimmy had learned to ride with one hand. It was easier than he expected.
He knocked three times, then four, five, six, but no one answered. Jimmy stood on the porch, hoping it would not collapse. He traced the peeling paint on the doorframe with his left hand, which felt its way to the doorknob. He tried to turn it, but the door was locked. The house was quiet, but for the wind rattling the loose windowpanes.

Their red shiny truck wasn't parked in front of their house like it normally was, Jimmy noticed. Maybe they'd gone out to dinner, or to pick up some groceries. But Jimmy didn't believe this was the case. Robert and his father didn't run errands together. They barely spoke to each other at all, from what Jimmy always understood. Something was wrong. The house felt quiet, dead.

He zipped up his coat, took a deep breath, and looked through the windows. A translucent curtain was drawn, but he could see through it, and it looked as if their furniture was gone. The room looked empty, small. A sharp stream of orange light shined through a window on the opposite side of the house, illuminating a dirty spot in the middle of the room.

He walked around back. They weren't there, either. Corn stalks rustled together in the distance, and it sounded as if there were people all around him, whispering.

He walked back around to the front of the house and sat on the porch steps. They creaked beneath Jimmy's weight, as if they were groaning, exhausted.

That's when he noticed a small green sign on the far end of the property flapping in the wind. "FOR SALE," it said with a phone number printed below. He stared at the sign for what felt like a half hour, and said the number out loud seven times in a row. He
traced the numbers on his thigh with his finger. As soon as he got home he would write it down. He would call the number and he would find out where they were.

The sky was turning navy blue. He knew his mother would start to worry if he wasn't home soon. He got on his bicycle and tried to ignore his shaking, unsteady legs. He pedaled as quickly as he could, his heart pounding faster and faster, and Jimmy realized how much he hated Robert's father—for taking Robert out of school, for dragging him away from the picnic, for having those blasting caps in the first place.

When he opened his front door, Jimmy’s mother and father were sitting next to each other on the family room couch. As Jimmy’s father discussed the parts he needed for his lawn mower and his mother nodded as if she were interested, Jimmy remembered his parents looking down on him as he woke up on the field after the explosion. He’d thought the chatter of his classmates resembled the rushing echoes of the inside of a seashell, and as his parents waved from the couch and asked if he finished his homework, he felt his chest tighten from the intensity of the loneliness he felt. Jimmy climbed the staircase two steps at a time to his bedroom and jotted the phone number on a sheet of notebook paper. He pinned the sheet to his bulletin board and stared at the numbers until they grew jumbled, blurry—until little black dots freckled his vision they didn't look like numbers at all.
Dear loyal readers,

It's with a heavy heart that I inform you of Linda's death last week. She died in her sleep due to complications of pneumonia. Her mind was slipping more quickly than the doctors predicted, though, so maybe it's a blessing that the pneumonia came when it did. We held a funeral just for family members several days ago at North Ridge Church, but we'll also be holding a larger memorial service here at our home in Marshfield.

I can't even tell you how much joy Linda got out of this blog, especially at the beginning. When she realized hundreds, then thousands, then hundreds of thousands of people were reading it she felt so accomplished, so comforted that she had the privilege and ability to communicate with all of you. I'm so proud of her. I want to personally thank you for your support of Linda and her writing, and for making her last years so exhilarating for her. Even when she didn't respond to all of your blog comments, she did read them and talked to me about them, and was elated to receive your feedback.

I only wish Linda had been more cognizant when Kim Kramer, from Random House, approached her. Kim will be including several of Linda's blog entries in the new anthology, *Eluding Time: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer's Disease*. Out of Linda's 512 blog entries, 18 of them will be included in the anthology, which is due to be released January 2nd, 2012.
I'm not sure you can glean this from her blog, but Linda was the most passionate person I ever met. She threw herself into everything she did. Over the course of our marriage she spent hours and hours every week lesson planning and grading papers, even talking to students on the phone. When she couldn't sleep, she'd stay up late into the night jotting down ideas for stories. She hardly ever let me read them. But periodically a tapping noise would wake me up--I'd get up to investigate, peak in the study, and see her hunched over a notebook, biting the inside of her cheek, tapping her pen on our old antique desk, her hair falling out of a frizzy bun. After some years this tapping noise became soothing for me, a sound of home. When I turned 30, we wanted to go to Florida, or anywhere to escape the winter, but we had just had a child and couldn't afford it. So Linda booked a babysitter and took me to a Days Inn and when I opened the door to our room….you wouldn't believe it: plastic palm trees in each corner of the room, tropical music, a Hawaiian shirt hung up in the closet, and leis draped across the bed. She'd even cranked the heat up. When our daughter wanted tickets to see New Kids on the Block when she was in third grade, Linda waited in line with her all night to make sure she could get the best tickets. I'm getting so emotional, and I could go on for hours, days, telling you stories about Linda's passion and love. But I'm going to stop here, and say the obvious—that I'm the luckiest man in the world to have spent 34 years of my life married to the woman of my dreams. I'm sorry that this letter doesn't do her justice, but remember, Linda was the writer in the family—not me.

Thank you for reading, again. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Best,
March 9, 2011
11:12 am

tese people kepe hugging me. it feeles nice and the couch and the fire. my life if my life
if my life my life was growing and happy. they feel good. the fire is all mine i know.

February 7, 2011
8:00 pm

erika tried to take me to the docter and i slapped her cause shes kidnapping me the thing
kidnapping me. im so mad. steve doesnt love me. he trusts her. i told steve shes a thief
and stealing all my jeweles. steve covered his face with his feet. i wonder if he is crying. i
dont know. i went to sleep. there is a women here and a baby here that screams. i hate it.

December 25, 2010
7:15 am

i could not sleep. There is a treee in the room and lots of snow. A fat man told me to tipe
this but its taking forever. He is next to me. he smells like fish. He has a big pressent for
me. i want to sleeeep. It is still dark. I reamober wen I went to the docter and got a
neeadle.
November 24, 2010
12:56 pm

stevie asks me if i remembered thanksgiving before. He says 24 people came to our house
and we had a very large turkey and i ate it all. I think he is lying. I hate him. he just put
my new leg shirts on me. They are blue and coarse. i remember chasing a turkey around
my farm when i was 7 years old. it had long feathers and ran quickly. stevie says to go to
the docter. He's lying. They hate me.

October 31, 2010
5:17 pm

people keep writing to me. steve reads them to me and I like it. I keep forgetting to write
them back though. I Wrote myself a note and put it on my pillow.

October 15, 2010
1:10 pm

I read through my old blog entries today and I remembered the fudge on new years eve
again. I told Steve about the Twilight Zone and he laughed and laughed because of all the
fudge and Sammy throwing up. When I was a teenager I worked at a chocolate factory
assembly line with my best friend Sonya. There was one time we were talking and
laughing about a dolphin and we got so distracted distracted. We had to steal a basket full
of chocolates off the line so we wouldn’t get fired. Then we ate them all all of them. God
I miss those times.
Yesterday was special. Steve told me yesterday it was our anniversary. He got me a new finger bracelet and then made creamy chicken for dinner. It has a huge diamond on it and teeny emeralds. I'm so lucky because I love him and I love the color green. A woman came to interview me about my writing. She took pictures of me and the flash hurt my eyes. We talked about our wedding day when we fell asleep last night. He said when I said I DO it was the single happiest moment of his entire life. I love him so much. He looked at the television with the writing keys just now and said over thirty thousand people had read my journal. He said I'm famous! Then he said to keep writing. The sun is so white.

August 27, 2010
4:35 pm

Zach came to see me today! I was so happy I sobbed. Erika lay on the couch downstairs watching TV and Zach and I sat on the edge of my bed we looked out the window at the backyard. The swings on the swing-set flew back and forth in the wind, over the shimmering river. He told me about his day how he was having trouble finishing his big math project. I told him I would help him with his math but he said he could do it himself, that I wasn't very good at math ever. He's right. I'm a writer and it's true. He is so funny. His hair was buzzed like it was when he was a young boy. He's so skinny now. I told him I need to fatten him up next time he comes home because today he was in a hurry to finish his math but he hugged me really tight before he left and I kissed him all
over his face and cried again. I can't wait til he comes home again. I think I'll make his favorite macaroni and cheese.

June 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2010
7:01 pm

The stars are out right now. Tiger tiger burning bright. They're so beautiful but Steve just closed the blinds. I'm angry at him for doing that. I didn't want to write about this but Steve told me I had to so here's what happened the other day.

He was at work and the kitchen wasn't very light. I wanted to heat up some pasta in the microwave. I lit some candles for light, and I put the match down on the countertop, next to a napkin. I watched the napkin catch on fire and spread for a few seconds. The kitchen was so quiet, except for crackling of flames. It smelled like smoke but the crackling noise sounded so peaceful, like a campfire. I closed my eyes and spun around and pictured myself flying, like a firefly up north in Minoqua, on the lake, flying into the thick dark blanket sky. I felt so bright so bright. But then the smoke alarm went off and soon a fire truck came and a tall man came into the house with a hose. I'm fine. I'm fine, just a little red. The kitchen is black, like a hole. I used to do charcoal drawings when I was a child. I did a charcoal sketch of my hands with long pointy fingernails that was featured in an art show. It's hanging in my mother's closet.

Steve says I'm going to get a helper named Erika. I sometimes worry he's having an affair. I don't want to meet Erika at all.
59

May 2, 2010
2:16 pm

Sonya took me out to lunch today. We went to Applebee's and I got a pineapple chicken sandwich, she got a burger. We talked a lot about how we first met and how fun the neighborhood dinner parties used to be. I remember one fondue party. We had chocolate and cheese, and bottles and bottles and bottles of wine. Sonya and I had showed up in the same black and white striped wrap-around dress and got so drunk. That was when we became best friends and laughed at a joke about a dolphin walking into a bar. I remember that night I had a dream we were flying to California, into the sunset, with palm trees below us. I don't remember what the joke was now but we laughed about it again at lunch today and I'm still laughing about it now. It feels good. She looked so pretty today. I'm so happy right now because I got to spend time with Sonya. She's been so busy. I think the doorbell just rang.

April 2, 2010
10:12 am

I'm so mad at Steve I can't even think straight! He said I can't drive anymore because I smashed the neighbor's mailbox and almost hit their cat. He said someone could drive me around. I hate cats. Everyone knows. I got really hot hot and really angry so I called Samantha. She said she agreed with Steve. I can't believe this. She always sides with her dad and not me. Everyone hates me. I told them both that they were in for a big surprise. They had no idea I went to elementary school with President Bush. He knew I'm a good driver and he would surely tell them I could keep driving. He'll tell them. They can't
argue with the President of the United States of America. Steve laughed at me when I told him. He laughed so hard tears flew down his face. I'm so mad.

February 15, 2010
9:05 am

Steve leaves the paper open for me on the kitchen table before leaving this morning. He highlighted a small article on the last page. "Local Woman Blogs about Her Illness." I'm the local woman! My blog was in the paper. I think more people will read this now. I hope. It makes me feel so close. 4,609 views as of this morning. I can't breathe.

January 1, 2010
2:30 am

Steve fell asleep a while ago but I can't sleep. Too many fire works in the distance.

     Happy New Year everyone. I hope you all kissed people at midnight and felt very in love. I hope you drank bubbly champagne. Steve split a tin of caviar with me and we watched the ball drop on television. I'm scared for 2010 and I'm scared about leaving 2009 behind and never being there again. The last month has been very hard. I focus on my memories so much that I worry I'm not in the present. A friend told me to try yoga. Ha! I'm too old for yoga. I fixate on the passage of time, how I can feel it moving, and I worry about losing all of my memories for good. I know this will happen sooner or later.

     Tonight I remembered a new year's eve from years and years ago. Zach was in high school and Samantha in middle school. Zach's plans fell through and Samantha was sick with the flu, but I was very happy because we were all together. Steve and the kids
and I watched five straight hours of the Twilight Zone Marathon and ate an entire pan of walnut fudge I'd made. After midnight sometime Samantha threw up. I should not have let her eat so much fudge when she was so sick. I miss Samantha and I miss Zach even more. Even though I know he's been gone for a long time now and he's not coming back.

To a healthy 2010 for you and for me. Cheers.

October 27, 2009
8:38 am

I woke up to an email from a former student today—the one who wrote the Disney paper. He said he just wanted to say hi, and to tell me that he's really enjoyed reading my blog so far. He also said that he posted the link on his Facebook so others from our English class last semester can read it if they want to. I felt so excited on so many levels: excited to hear from a former student, to be connected to my old teaching-self again, to maybe gain some blog readers. I raced down stairs to tell Steve before he left for work. "One of my students is reading my blog," I said. "And he's spreading the link around so others can read it too."

"That's really wonderful," he said as he placed his journals in his briefcase, but he didn't sound that excited.

"It is wonderful, isn't it?"

"Yes."

I felt my buzz fade. But he smiled and poured me a cup of coffee, put two sugars and two creams in it. Annoyed, I told him I wanted my coffee black, and he kind of stopped for a second, leaned against the counter, and said I'd never liked my coffee black,
in all the years we've been together. My heart started pounding. "Oh," I said. But he
dumped it down the sink and poured me a new cup.

After Steve left and I finished my coffee, I came back upstairs to write this. I
opened the blinds in the study and my heart sped up when I saw a huge maple tree with
orange leaves lit up by the sun, glowing and sparkling like it was on fire. It's a brilliant
fall day today. I don't know why, but I feel so disoriented. It felt like summer when I
woke up this morning.

So I sat down, logged in, and checked my blog info. Last week, I was at 92 views
(which 92 people were reading my blog? I have no idea. I know my daughter told a
couple of her friends about it, but some people must be stumbling upon my blog through
Google, too). But as of five minutes ago, I've had 187 views. I don't even think I know
187 people! I just blasted the oldies station—it's Beatles Hour on 94.5--and danced
around the study for a couple minutes. I keep trying to imagine 187 people lined up in a
row, all the way down my street, and I try to imagine every single one of those people
crouched in front of his or her computer, reading my writing. This is unbelievable.

August 7, 2009
1:27 pm

Samantha is coming to visit next month! I just got off the phone with her several
moments ago. I'm beyond thrilled. It's been almost six months since I've seen her. It's
hard for her, balancing her new graphic design job, and her husband's advertising job, and
the new baby, and she's all the way in California. I completely understand. But I'm just so
excited she's coming home soon.
I worked up a sweat walking down the driveway to get the mail earlier. That's how hot it is. We really do have the worst weather in Marshfield: tundra-like winters, boiling summers, and crisp falls that last about 72 hours before it snows. The thermometer on the deck says it's 101 degrees, and all I've wanted the whole day is a massive ice cream cone. Then I remembered how years ago, on hot days, I used to stick Sammy and Zach in the back seat and drive them to Weber's Dairy, on the outskirts of town (Weber's is the only drive-thru dairy in Wisconsin). Sammy always wanted strawberry ice cream (because it was pink) and Zach always wanted vanilla. We'd park the car somewhere, and take a stroll through the park, or just sit on a bench or a picnic table. Sammy always gobbled her ice cream down like it wasn't cold at all, but Zach savored his, licking slowly, deliberately, like he knew deep down he needed to enjoy every experience to the fullest. Before long, the ice cream would melt down over his hand, onto his lap, thick and sticky, and he'd have to lick his knuckles clean.

About an hour ago I called Sonya to see if she wanted to get ice cream with me, but she didn't pick up, so I decided to just drive myself down to Weber's to get the cone I'd been craving. Before I even got in the drive-thru line, though, I turned around and drove home. Ice cream isn't fun to eat alone.

So you see, I was feeling pretty lonely and thinking a lot about happier times when the phone rang and Sammy gave me the good news. She couldn't have called at a more perfect time.
May 12th, 2009
5:17 PM

I didn't cry until I got home, which I suppose is a pretty big accomplishment for me, since I tend to cry at the drop of a hat. I had to take a mild sedative at both of my kids' high school graduations so I wouldn't completely lose it. As soon as I hear pomp and circumstance--I turn into a puddle.

Today it got up to 65 degrees, so the classroom windows were open. A light breeze rustled the stack of papers on my desk and tickled my arm hairs while I gave my last lecture, on the importance of integrating or introducing quotes when writing papers. It seems kind of anti-climactic, doesn't it? My last time teaching, and I didn't teach my students anything about the world, or life, or even the power of words and literature—I taught them about quote integration.

I passed back their final papers, told them to have a good summer, and to keep in touch. Before they shuffled out of the classroom, glancing at their grades and comments I'd left on their papers, I told them about this blog. I didn't tell them what it's really all about, but I told them this is a project that is very important to me, and I'd be thrilled if they would just check it out. A few of them jotted down the website, which gave me a little shiver of hope, a way for me to stay connected to them.

I got home about an hour ago, grabbed a bag of bread from the freezer, and microwaved myself two pieces of toast. It tasted soggy and disgusting, and twenty minutes later, after drinking a glass of milk, it dawned on me that you don't microwave toast—you toast it. That's why it's called toast. I know this wasn't a catastrophe or
anything, that a microwave and toaster are pretty closely related—but the toaster was right there in front of me and I didn't know to use it. So I grabbed a hot pink post-it note, scribbled "Use the TOASTER to make TOAST" on it, and stuck it to the Formica countertop. That was when I started crying, saw tears splash into the kitchen sink and flatten, spread out, disappear.

April 17th, 2009
8:05 AM

I didn't mention this yesterday, but since classes end May 12th, I'm going to finish out the year. Steve and I talked it over last week, and we decided that it would be best if I stopped teaching after this semester, though. What happened a couple weeks ago was embarrassing enough for me; I'm sure to have more and more episodes like that, and not only is it not fair to my students, who work hard to pay their tuition, but it'll get harder and harder for me to emotionally cope when I have these episodes.

Teaching yesterday afternoon went very smoothly. We're just finishing up our unit on research papers, and some of their arguments are so sophisticated. One student, who struggled to finish even short assignments at the beginning of the semester, wrote this amazing argument about how Disney movies—specifically The Little Mermaid, Snow White, and Beauty and the Beast--are harmful to a young girl's self-image and emotional development. He found tons of valid sources to prove his point. I really hope I can give him an A on this paper. Maybe I've always just gotten really lucky, or maybe I'm actually doing something right, but my students generally care about their writing and
about respecting me, and it's really hard for me to internalize the fact that my last day of teaching is in 25 days.

But then I'll have more time to spend with Steve, and to write. Which is good.

Steve and I ordered Chinese food for dinner last night. We sat on the oversized leather couch in the living room, hunched over the coffee table, and I told him about this blog. I couldn’t suppress my smile while telling him about this. At first he was quiet, but then he said, "I think it’s a good idea. You haven't written anything in so long. You used to be so talented," he said. I bristled at the word "used" but let it pass, just as he stuffed a crab rangoon in his mouth. I've been bugging him to lose weight for years, but now it just seems silly. I told him there were two points I wanted to discuss with him before I continued with this project.

"Shoot," he said.

I adjusted myself so I was facing him, sat up straighter. "I'm sure you're going to make appearances in some blog entries here and there. Are you okay with that?"

He nodded.

"I don't plan on writing anything negative about you—but I want the freedom to explore my feelings, to be honest."

"Be as honest as you want, Linda." He squeezed my hand and I scooted closer to him, took a deep breath, and moved on to point number two.

"I wrote the first entry yesterday. I wrote that I was going to update this blog every single day until I could no longer do so."
Steve slurped his wonton soup. I was hungry, too, but this was rude. Couldn't he wait to eat a couple minutes? He always tries to avoid the serious conversations with diversions, jokes, and it's always been frustrating for me. You should've heard the conversation when I wanted to have kids and he wasn't ready yet.

"Obviously, for a while, I'm going to be fine. I'll wake up and remember to write in my blog, or I'll type a quick entry between grading papers over the next month. But you know it's going to get harder than that."

Now he put his soup down on the table, the plastic spoon on a crumpled napkin.

"When it gets to that point, you need to remind me to write. I'm taping a note to the computer that has the blog website, user name, and password."

"I can't believe we're having this conversation already," he said. His tone was angry, which made me want to scream a little. Of course we were having this conversation. Did he think we could just live in denial for the next few years?

Then his face went cloudy. He looked upset, then confused, then he frowned. He got up and left the room. Just like that. He rounded the corner, lumbered up the stairs, and shut our bedroom door.

I turned on the TV but I was so mad I could feel my back and shoulder muscles tensing and cramping. He just walked out in the middle of a really important conversation. I wasn't about to follow him. I love Steve more than I could ever possibly put into words, but sometimes he can be so immature. His leaving the room—that's him only thinking about himself. I'm the one who was just diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Not
him. Me. I'm the one who's going to lose my memory, my loved ones, myself. Can't he understand how terrifying that is for me? Can't he be a grownup for my sake?

I must've dozed off while watching an episode of *I Love Lucy*. When I woke up, it was 2:30 in the morning and Steve was perched on the edge of the couch. My feet were in his lap. The TV was off.

"I can do it," Steve said, gently rubbing my feet.

"Do what?"

"The blog thing. I can help you. I'll do whatever you want."

"Oh, right." I yawned, trying to catch myself up to the conversation we were having. "You need to stop being such a jerk."

He blushed, like a kid being scolded. "Sorry."

"This is hard for both of us, you know."

"I know."

"If you want to help me with my project, you're going to have to remind me to write every day, and then you'll have to decide when I'm done, when the blog is no longer a good idea for me."

He looked down at me. "How will I know?"

I sat up and touched the gray tuft of hair right above his ear. "When it gets to the point I can't write coherently, or I get too upset when you try to make me blog . . . I don't know. Hopefully that won't be for a while. But can I trust you to push me as far as you think I can go? To use your best judgment?"
His eyes were red and wet so I rested my head on his shoulder and he finally said, "Yeah, you can trust me." Then he kissed my nose and we cleaned up the Chinese food in silence. That's the thing about Steve. He is so intense. I think his greatest strengths are his ability to apologize and to love.

April 16, 2009
10:15 AM

I should be sad right now. I probably should be panicking, sinking into a deep depression. WebMD tells me this will happen. But I actually feel very serene. I'm sitting at my desk upstairs, looking out the window at the fresh snow. I made a cup of mint tea, which is still steaming in front of me, and Steve's at work, and the house is still. I just had to shut the blinds half way because the sun is so strong today, and I needed to get rid of the reflection on the computer screen so I could type this. The kids who live across the street are in their front yard, wrestling with their golden retriever. They slam snowballs into each other's faces and chests; the boy licks his lips, and I imagine he tastes powdered sugar.

But I feel way more than just serene right now—I feel pretty excited to start my final writing project.

Final. It sounds so dramatic, doesn't it? I promise you that I will try my very best to avoid the melodrama. But if you do find me talking like a crazy person on Days of Our Lives or All My Children ("Alas! I've taken to bed! I've lost hope, I've lost the will to
live, and also my husband is having an affair with my sister!"
) just leave me a comment and tell me to knock it off.

Let me introduce myself before we get started. My name is Linda Green. I'm 56 years old, happily married to my husband, Steve, of 32 years, and I live in Marshfield, Wisconsin (which is three hours north of Madison, for those of you not familiar with the state). I have a daughter named Samantha, who lives in San Francisco with her husband and newborn daughter. I also had a son named Zach, who was three years older than Samantha, but he was killed in a car crash ten years ago during his freshman year of college. I'm sure you're not surprised to hear this was the worst tragedy of my life.

I'm a writing teacher. I teach one section of creative writing and two sections of freshman composition at the local community colleges. I've taught at community colleges for the past 20 years. If you are also an adjunct instructor, I bet your jaw just dropped open, right? 20 years of adjuncting? But I've never wanted any other job, and I'm not just saying this because I'm bitter I never published a novel or secured a tenure-track position. I'm actually telling the truth, and I'm very lucky that my husband has incredible health insurance so that I could afford to keep doing the job I love.

So two weeks ago today, I drove to school, parked my car in the icy faculty lot, blinked the snowflakes off of my eyelashes. My canvas shoulder bag was so stuffed with textbooks and graded papers I thought it might rip, so I held the bag from the bottom, and by the time I skidded through the parking lot and down the hall to my classroom, my arms ached. I sat behind the front table and massaged my shoulders while I waited for my students to trickle in. This is an unusual class—very punctual. Class technically doesn't
start until 2:10, but by 2:00 every student sat quietly in his or her desk. So I stood up to take attendance, and then something happened.

I had no idea where I was, or why I was there.

I don't think I actually got dizzy—the room wasn't spinning around me or anything—but I felt the same shock as when you slip and fall, or when you're positive you're awake but you realize you're actually dreaming. I stared out at all of their faces. Some looked familiar and some didn't. "I'm sorry, I think I'm in the wrong place," I said as I stumbled out of the room, clutching my bag of books against my stomach.

I knew where my car was, in the parking lot, and I knew how to get to the hospital. I drove carefully, not a mile over the speed limit, checking my blind spots before switching lanes.

Later that evening, I was aware that I taught English. There wasn't an epiphany moment or anything. And I understood that, for the first time ever, I had walked out on my class. The doctors did some scans, some blood tests, a urine test, called my husband. Long story short—I'm not going to bore you with the technical details here—I was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's.

I have Alzheimer's disease. It's so weird to type that. I buy organic food, I don't microwave plastic bowls, I quit smoking almost thirty years ago. I did all of this because I've always been convinced I'd get cancer sooner or later (though who isn't terrified of cancer?). But Alzheimer's never even crossed my mind. Not once. It should have, since I've been awfully forgetful over the past few years. I laughed it off when I found the remote control in the cupboard, when I walked into the men's bathroom at the mall. I
chalked it up to stress, but I should've realized, should've known I wasn't just turning into a scatterbrained old lady. I'm only 56. No one in my family ever had Alzheimer's, yet somehow the disease tracked me down. It found me.

The doctors told me I have four to five years left, and I don't want to die thinking of myself a failed writer. I've had three short stories published throughout my entire career, in journals no one has ever heard of or read. I wrote a novel manuscript that agents and publishers told me was "imaginative but lacked structure," and ten revisions later, the feedback only grew worse ("Overworked. You might as well stick this in a blender," one agent said. I gave him a piece of my mind). So after a while, I gave up writing and focused on teaching, because I'm actually good at communicating with my students. It's a common story, I know.

This is my last attempt to reach people through my writing. But why a blog, you ask?

My best friend Sonya's daughter started a really hilarious and informative "New Mommy" blog a couple years ago. The moms at the daycare all started reading it, and they told their friends, and it spread through Facebook and Twitter, and then her blog was featured on some really popular breast pump website. Within a year, the New Mommy Blog had had over 10,000 hits. Think about it! That's so many people. If I could even reach 1,000, or 100 hits, I would be ecstatic; I'd know at least someone heard me, and was hopefully affected by my words. Plus, it comforts me to think that this blog will still be out there, floating around cyberspace for years and years and years, that others might
happen upon this blog long after I'm gone, long after ink would have faded and pages would have yellowed and curled.

Four to five years is a good chunk of time. I'm going to update this blog every single day until I'm no longer capable of doing so.

I'm hoping this blog will help me cope, and will help all of you get to know me a bit better.

I'm hoping that this blog will allow me to take all of you on this scary journey with me, and that in the end, I'll feel less alone.
Blood from a Stone

Ernie put his truck in park and stared at the crinkled sheet of paper resting on the dashboard. 217 Scooter Road, Dentsville, he'd written in blocky, cramped letters. After glancing at the numbers on the gold mailbox to confirm he had the right address, he drove up the driveway and honked his horn three times. The mansion was silent. Oaks towered over the driveway, and Spanish moss hung from their branches like unraveling scarves draped around old women's necks.

“Jesus Christ,” he said to himself. “I don’t have all day.” He got out of the car and pressed the doorbell, which was embedded in a swirling gold frame.

A slender woman in a grey suit opened the door with one hand and adjusted her large hoop earring with the other. "Ernie? Right? Helen. Thanks so much for coming."

Helen's voice was deep and raspy. She stepped aside and gestured for him to come in, her high heels clicking on the marble floors. "Samuel should be down soon."

"Okay," Ernie said. He exhaled, forcing himself to stand up straighter.

"Sorry to be rude, but I really have to run over to the plant. I'm late for a meeting."

"Not a problem."

"Samuel will fill you in, but basically, he's been having trouble at school, like I said on the phone. A bully's been giving him shit. And all the teachers love this kid, apparently. Straight A student, star of the football team. Huge jerk. I've tried setting up meetings with his guidance counselors." She shrugged. "You know how it is, work work work. I'm CEO at Jones's Poultry Processing--I can't remember if I told you that on the
phone." Helen smiled, and Ernie could tell she thought herself a very important person.
"It's just easier to hire security. It'll give me some peace of mind. Samuel, too."

"Right." Ernie closed his eyes for a few seconds. It was hard for him to absorb all this information while focusing on the dark swirling staircase, the crystal chandelier above his head.

Helen grabbed her purse from the bottom stair. "Samuel, get down here! Your guard is here!" she shrieked. Then she shook Ernie's hand and crossed the threshold of the front door, leaving it open behind her. A breeze danced through the foyer, cooling the sweat on Ernie's neck.

A few moments later, a bony sixteen year-old boy sauntered down the stairs, brushing the shiny wood banister with his fingertips.

“You Samuel?”

“Yes,” the boy answered in a breathy voice. It sounded like he had a cold. “You must be Ernie.”

“That’s me.”

The man and the boy stared at each other. “So you’re my security guard. You don’t look as menacing as I thought you would. I requested someone intimidating.”

Samuel raised his eyebrows.

Ernie glanced down at his belly, which threatened to pop the buttons off of his black Strong Security uniform. His belt was tighter than it had ever been, and the side of his gun dug into his fleshy hip. “With a name like Ernie, you thought I’d be menacing?” He didn’t smile.
“Well I heard you used to be an army drill sergeant, and I just assumed you’d be, well, pretty buff and threatening.”

“I still have a crew-cut.” He ran a finger over his fuzzy head, proud of the fact he still trimmed his hair once a week. “And I’m as in shape as I need to be to do the job.”

Samuel tapped his foot. “Well. Okay then. I’d like to go to the mall today.”

“The mall?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind.”

He wants me to guard his ass as he prances around a mall, Ernie thought. Perfect. “Don’t mind. Truck's outside. Let's go.” Samuel slipped on a pair of loafers and locked the front door behind him.

Samuel scooted into the front seat, buckled his seatbelt, and stared straight ahead. He looked like a small child dwarfed by Santa’s throne. “But first, we need to pick up my boyfriend.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“His name is Trevor. He lives on Hill Street.”

Ernie gripped the steering wheel tighter. Maybe that’s why Samuel’s mother had requested a security guard. She’d been so vague about the situation that Ernie hadn't known what to think.

“Look.” Samuel squinted at Ernie. “You were hired to guard me, and my mother is paying you an insane amount of money to do so.” The amount was $100 dollars an hour. “So I would appreciate it if you’d abandon your pre-existing judgments and—“

“Hey now.” Ernie pointed at the boy. “No judging. I swear.”
Samuel rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “Just keep me safe, please.”

The two drove over to Hill Street, which was in a scruffier neighborhood. Plump drops of September rain splashed onto Ernie’s windshield as the houses grew smaller and more faded. Weeds sprang through cracks in the concrete and he felt as if he’d fled the country, gone into the jungle, though in reality they were only ten minutes from Samuel's house. Thunder rolled in the distance.

Ernie had no interest in personal protection services; he actually despised the idea of following around a person who thought himself so much more valuable than others that he deserved a personal security guard. But Joe, his high school friend—who quickly became his best army buddy—had talked him into taking the job. He and Joe had been army drill sergeants together for over fifteen years, and they’d retired at the same time, too.

Just a few months earlier, Ernie gallantly returned home from Iraq, decorated with medals and eager to see his wife, Janice, his peach. When she started getting fatter after their wedding he’d begun calling her that, because she was short and growing rounder, her face glowed warm in the summer, and when Ernie ran the back of his hand across her cheeks, he relished the feeling of downy, practically invisible fuzz. But he hadn’t called her his peach, or felt her cheek like that, in over ten years. The gesture began to feel hokey and tired.
When Ernie marched off the airplane to meet her, she’d smiled, hugged him, and kissed him quickly, but her eyes were blank and stared at a point behind Ernie’s head. They sped home, silently, through neighborhoods that were at once familiar and foreign to Ernie, like a melody that he knew by heart, a tune he’d whistled his whole life, but he could suddenly not remember the accompanying words.

That night, under the down burgundy comforter that had been a wedding gift from Janice’s sister, he’d wrapped his arm around his wife’s waist, pulled her close to him, and she'd fallen asleep immediately. Hours later, when he finally began to enter the rosy haze of sleep, he convinced himself that Janice was simply nervous, and with good reason. They hadn’t been together in over a year and it seemed natural that it should take a while to warm up to each other again. But then he’d interlaced his fingers with hers, and realized she was not wearing her wedding ring.

When he woke at sunrise to gold light streaming through their dusty window, Janice was gone. There was no note, but her car was gone, her half of the closet was mostly empty, and he knew that she’d not just gone out for groceries or an early jog. Ernie was not devastated, and he was not completely shocked. He was in a daze, staring straight out his window across his lawn into the depths of the forest, and he figured that this was a fitting next chapter of his life. The reunion scene he’d imagined on the flight home—Janice running to him, leaving her purse on the asphalt, wrapping her legs around his hips and kissing him all over—now seemed distant and made him burn with embarrassment, and he could not escape the sense that the cracked ceiling was rising and the chipped walls were pushing themselves outward. His split-level house became bigger
than he’d ever remembered it. Unsure of what to do with his hands and feet, he found
himself shuffling around the kitchen inspecting the pantry and refrigerator, both of which
were bare. His heart swelled against his ribs and knocked with a hard, sustained rhythm.
After sixteen years, his wife had left him. Though their relationship had survived long
periods with an ocean between them for sixteen years, he must have known that it was
barely surviving, flopping on the shore and gasping for air.

He was officially retired from the army now and had no job, had nothing to do.
After sitting on his couch and watching the news for an hour, he decided to take a
shower.

He breathed in steam and let boiling daggers of water scald his skin. When the
telephone rang, he’d stepped out of the shower, patted his hands dry on a soft towel and
answered the phone, letting water drip off his body onto the carpet.

“Ernie speaking.” His voice sounded hoarse in his ears, and he realized it was the
first time he’d spoken the whole morning.

“It’s Joe. You and Janice want to come over for an afternoon bbq? Malinda’s
making her potato salad that you missed oh-so-much.”

“Janice left.” He said it matter-of-factly, like he was reading the headline from
last week's newspaper, which was sprawled across Janice’s oak dresser.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s gone. Packed up her stuff and ran away.” The carpet grew soggy and cold
beneath his toes. “There’s no food here at all. I don’t think she’s been living here.”

“My God,” Joe choked out. “I’m so sorry.”
“I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Me either.”

“Let's go grab a beer.”

The last thing Ernie wanted to do was have a heart-to-heart with his friend in a smoky bar, but he automatically agreed anyway. Ernie dried himself off and pulled on civilian clothes for the first time in months—torn jeans and a blue t-shirt. His jeans were tight.

As they sipped their beers at Fat Daddy’s, the bar they’d frequented when they were much younger, Joe said the sympathetic things a friend is supposed to say: “I can’t believe it. You really do seem like you’re in shock,” “What a bitch, to just leave as soon as you come home,” “I’m here for you, buddy.” Ernie nodded.

“Do you know where she went?” Joe burped. His coaster stuck to the bottom of his beer glass and on the other side of the bar, a man had just won a game of foosball. He howled and high-fived a woman wearing a khaki dress with a belt just below her chest.

“No.” He rested his arm on the bar, which felt sticky and tugged at his arm hairs. “I guess I kind of always knew this might happen.”

“Do you think she’ll come back?”

“No.” He could not process the implications of this; he couldn’t project past his next sip of beer, or his next breath of air.

Joe rubbed the back of his neck. “Do you…do you think maybe there was someone else?”
“I have no idea.”

“God, I’m such an asshole. I shouldn’t have asked. Sorry.” He bowed his head.

Ernie cleared his throat.

“You know, I’ve lined up some security guarding gigs over the next few weeks. This company, Strong Security, contracts people, and you and me, we’re pretty desirable for something like that. We know how to use a gun. You interested?” Joe’s eyes widened.

“No right now.”

“It’ll give you something to do. Pay is decent.”

“No thanks.”

“This probably isn’t the best time to talk about this.”

Joe got the bill, like a good friend, and asked if Ernie wanted to spend the evening with him and Malinda. Ernie told him no thanks and drove himself home at exactly the speed limit while his mind hovered above his head somewhere like a sailboat bobbing around a foggy sea.

The next month was a blur of stale air and sagging couch cushions and white noise from the television. The only event that really stood out to Ernie was receiving a brief letter from Janice on a piece of flowered stationery with her new address and phone number. It said to only contact her in an emergency, and on the back, she’d written, “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to say,” in swirling cursive. How trite, he thought, and realized no one really knew what to say. He taped the letter to the refrigerator, and as a result, every morning when he went to retrieve his orange juice, he was reminded that
Janice now lived two hours away, in a nothing town he’d driven through only a few times. He did not let himself explore the reasons she might be living there and did not allow his mind to conjure images of her new life. Being in the army had turned Ernie into a master of self-control, and he took advantage of this skill every second of every day. When he stared at the letter, he forced himself to see an artifact, a museum piece from a different era that in no way affected his own life.

After a few weeks, Joe came over and took down pictures of Janice, hid them in the basement, while Ernie sat on the staircase watching him, leaning his head against the wall. Joe finally shook his head at Ernie, wiped his hands off on his jeans. "I promised Strong Security you'd take the job, Ernie. They're hard up for guards right now. I'm sorry."

Ernie knew Joe was lying. At first he didn't answer. "Fine. Sign me up," he finally said, as he touched the holes in the walls where the pictures had hung only moments earlier.

Samuel and Trevor held hands as they traipsed around the brightly lit mall, Ernie tagging behind them, keeping an eye out for this bully that was apparently making Samuel’s life a living hell. But Ernie saw nothing out of the ordinary: a young mother pushed a stroller into Gymboree, an elderly woman with a cane, wearing a fur coat, hobbled into a luggage store. Ernie puffed out his chest and rested his hand on his gun, trying to appear as much like a security guard and as little like a shopper as possible. He hadn’t been to a mall in years and despised the crowds and nauseating, intermingling
smells of Chinese food and orange smoothies and hot sugary pretzels from the food court. Staring at Trevor and Samuel from behind, Ernie thought that the two looked more like father and son. Samuel was slender and short, while Trevor was tall and older looking. He had longish, curly black hair, while Samuel’s hair was cropped close to his scalp.

Ernie followed the two into a computer store. After grilling one of the employees for a few minutes, Samuel purchased a top-of-the-line laptop. He handed over a credit card with the indifference of picking up some eggs and milk at the grocery store. The ease with which this kid could purchase a computer made Ernie's face prickle with heat. Ernie couldn't buy himself a laptop now if his life depended on it.

The boys then went into one of the department stores and bought several sweaters and ties, and Samuel bought Trevor a pair of leather sandals he’d been eyeing. Samuel promptly swung all five shopping bags towards Ernie. “Would you mind holding these?” Ernie opened his mouth to protest but could not find any appropriate words. No, I won’t hold your shopping bags, you faggo. I’m not your slave. I’m not your personal shopper.

But he said none of these things. He followed the two boys, arm in arm, to the food court. “Can you grab that table, Ernie? By the flowers, over there? Thanks. We’ll be there in a sec.” And so Ernie followed the boy’s orders, hauling the shopping bags toward the table by the tulips, which was covered in crumbs and used napkins. He felt his heart thump with more distinct, angry beats.

After a few minutes, Trevor and Samuel plopped down at the table and unwrapped their pulled pork sandwiches. “You look mad,” Samuel managed as he chewed.
“Well I don't exactly love to spend my Saturdays being bossed around by a sixteen year old, okay? Knock it off.”

“You don’t appreciate being bossed around by a gay sixteen year old, is what you mean, right? You’ve never met a gay person before.”

Ernie slammed his fist against the table. “I don't appreciate hauling your shit around like some nanny! I’m here to guard you. Carry your own damn bags.”

Samuel bit his lower lip. Trevor didn’t say much—he just stared at his food, chewing slowly, clenching and relaxing his jaw.

Ernie had known a gay person once, who'd shot himself in the mouth during their training at Fort Hood, in Texas. In the weeks leading up to Jasper's death, training had grown more and more intense. They'd both felt invincible. Jasper had looked like a Greek god, his smooth, tan skin stretching over sleek muscles. As they all became physically stronger, they also grew more in sync with each other. Ernie and Jasper had hardly been best of friends, but they’d shared the bond of uncertainty and excitement so intricately woven throughout the life of a new soldier.

One night, two soldiers claimed they heard Jasper uttering the name “Christopher” in his sleep rather loudly, and when he rolled onto his back, he displayed for his bunkmates a massive erection. Word quickly spread throughout the camp. Jasper fervently denied being a homosexual and, panicking, outlined his many girlfriends. But the pointing and skeptical glances only increased, and Jasper retreated into himself, using his perfectly-sculpted body as a shield. Soldiers whispered to each other about Jasper as
they pissed in the bathroom; from their beds they would moan “Christopher” into the darkness, laughing. Ernie laughed along, too. The last thing Ernie wanted was for the other soldiers to think that he was gay, too, though he’d been married for several years already at that point.

One morning, only a few weeks after the jeering and joking started, Jasper disappeared. No one noticed that he was gone until that evening. At first everyone thought he was hiding somewhere sulking. Some pledged to lighten up on him, while others felt their reactions toward Jasper were justified, necessary even. But his bed remained empty that night, and the next day, the soldiers were given permission to split up and search the base. The sun was powerful and malicious that morning, whipping the soldiers’ backs with waves of heat. After only a few minutes, Ernie and another soldier found Jasper’s limp body at the far corner of a parking lot, his head surrounded by dried blood. The sun was so hot, and enough hours must’ve passed since he’d shot himself, that the asphalt had absorbed his blood. What was left on the surface was a thick, caked-on layer of reddish brown, parched and crackling in the heat.

There had been a funeral. Ernie barely remembered the ceremony. All he remembered were the sleepless nights that followed. What if he had defended Jasper? Could he have prevented his friend’s death? He didn’t know if it would’ve been worth the repercussions. But Jasper’s empty, perfectly-made bed haunted him.

Officials sanitized and cleared the site of Jasper’s suicide. However, a faint brown circle remained on the asphalt. Every time it rained, for years after the suicide, Jasper’s
blood would seep from the asphalt. The puddle turned to blood as the earth turned fertile and rich.

After they’d finished their sandwiches, the boys crumpled their napkins and sipped their Cokes. The food court was loud and Ernie had to lean over the greasy table to hear Samuel speak. “Hey, look. I’m sorry about the bags. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Ernie snorted. “Forget it.”

“Really, I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted.”

Samuel nodded.

“Just tell me more about your situation at school. I don’t know what’s going on here.”

“Not much to tell.” Samuel stroked Trevor’s thumb and index finger with his own. “This guy is harassing us. Calls us mean names and does stupid stuff.”

“Like what?” Ernie couldn't help but stare at the boys' hands.

Samuel glanced over at Trevor, who finally cleared his throat. His voice was low and smooth. “He cracked Samuel’s car window the other day at school. At least, we’re pretty sure it was him. And Samuel found a vibrator going off in his locker the other day.”

Ernie nodded, expecting as much. “Shitty.”

"It is." Samuel smiled nervously. “Did you teach your kids how to fight?”

“Don't have any."
"Oh. You look like a dad, I just assumed."

"Don't assume things."

"Are you married?"

Ernie glared at Samuel.

"Sorry. We're going to be spending a lot of time together. Just wanted to get to know you a little." A girl in a short skirt tripped over her shoelaces just a few feet from their table, sending soda and French fries all over the floor. “Yeah," Ernie said, twisting his wedding band around his finger. "But she left me.” The words spilled from his mouth as effortlessly as the girl’s soda spread across the dirty tiles.

“When?” Samuel and Trevor asked at once.

“Couple months ago, when I got home from Iraq.”

“Has it been hard?” Trevor asked.

Ernie shrugged. "I’m just taking it one day at a time. I guess I knew this was coming. Maybe I was already prepared for it.”

Samuel squinted at Ernie. “If you knew it was coming, couldn't you have stopped it?” A few tables over, a baby began wailing, and its mother yelled at her child to shut up.

Ernie didn’t know why he’d brought this up, and why the boys were asking so many questions. “I was gone a lot, overseas. We barely talked. Wasn't a lot I could do.”

“Do you think about her a lot?” Samuel propped his elbows up on the table.

“No. It is what it is.” The baby continued to cry.

The three of them rose from their seats and continued walking through the brightly lit corridors of the mall. “You know,” Trevor began, hunching over slightly and
stuffing his hands in his pockets, “my parents separated a few years ago. My dad said he didn’t love my mom anymore, at least not the way he used to. But after a few months apart he started really missing her. And then,” his voice rose as he ushered Ernie and Samuel into a Kay Jewelers, “he bought her a diamond ring, kind of an ‘I’m Sorry’ gift, I guess. She was so happy, she cried. He moved back in and they’re both really happy now.” He smiled and pushed his curls away from his face.

As Ernie rolled his eyes, he approached a glass case that displayed only rings—gold, silver, white gold, platinum—and diamonds galore. Some diamonds were so small they were barely visible, while others were cut into huge ovals, hearts, and squares. Large as paperweights, he thought. The case had built-in lights that shined on the diamonds, spraying tiny rainbows against the walls and ceiling. Ernie noticed the tiny rainbows dance across the black uniform that stretched over his belly.

“Can I help you, sir? Would you like to see any of these rings close up?”

Ernie tore his eyes away from the display and met the stare of a young, muscular man wearing a grey suit. His hair was blonde and slicked back, shiny as waxed fruit and displaying parallel, even comb lines.

“No, no thanks. Just looking.” He peeked over his shoulder and realized Trevor and Samuel were waiting for him by the entrance to the store; pivoting on his heels, Ernie followed them out to the parking lot. As he watched them from behind, he thought about Jasper, and the blood, and every step across the lot took more effort, and with every breath he took in less air.
When Ernie entered his kitchen that evening, he felt a shiver trickle over his skin. The air in his house smelled stale and recycled, and for a moment he found it hard to breathe. He opened the kitchen window just a crack, enough to let in a weak, albeit soothing, breeze. The sky was navy blue and dotted with stars. The stars were so far away--tiny inconsequential specks, really. Would one phone call to Janice really make a difference in the grand scheme of things? He thought not.

He knew her new phone number by heart from staring at the letter on the refrigerator every morning for the last month. Without taking his eyes off of the stars, he grabbed his cell phone from his pocket and punched in the first three digits of her new number. Then he hit “clear.” Once again, he typed in the first three digits, then the fourth…and then snapped his phone shut.

The pinprick stars had retreated farther back into outer space, leaving a solid black sky. How long had he been standing there? The smooth, utterly complete darkness of the night frightened him. His pulse increased and a feeling of desire began to drip throughout his body. He pulled a beer from the fridge, and in one fluid motion, he cracked it open, took a swig, grabbed his cell phone from his pocket, and dialed Janice’s new number. Maybe she was feeling the same desire, he thought. Maybe she was, right that second, regretting her decision to leave him. After seven rings, and after listening to an automated voice message, Ernie hung up the phone. He hit redial. Again, after seven rings, the cold, robotic voice whispered in Ernie’s ear to leave a message after the tone, but he didn’t want to leave a message; he wanted to talk to his wife. “Please. You don’t understand,” he whispered back, before hanging up the phone.
After three more beers, Ernie found himself searching for the pictures that Joe had hidden in his basement. While he turned over old chairs and shook out tablecloths, he thought about all the ways he'd taken Janice for granted over the course of their sixteen-year relationship. When he returned from overseas, he loved her, believing that there was no feeling more satisfying than finally touching the woman you’ve missed for so long. Then the excitement would fade after a few weeks, and he would stop loving her, or feel that he had stopped. Old routines would resume and Ernie would grow restless, resenting the boredom of the suburbs, the simplicity of their life. He'd been selfish and young. He knew this now as he turned over a lamp, shattered its bulb against the wall, and continued to search for the pictures. But back then, when this restlessness became stronger and grew into unhappiness, Ernie even fended off Janice’s advances at night, lying still and feigning sleep, all the while listening to his wife sigh and slip on her bathrobe. He would hear the clanking of mugs in the cabinet, the low moan of steam escaping the kettle.

But these nights were more frequent toward the end of his time at home. Janice would still cry when he left, and when he found himself in far away countries so foreign from his own, his love for Janice would stretch and yawn as it woke from hibernation. His fickleness, his immaturity, had finally worn her down, he understood. He deserved to feel empty and numb.

Ernie unzipped an old suitcase and there they were—all of the pictures that had lined the hallways of his home until recently. There were pictures of their wedding, of their high school graduation, of one of Janice’s family reunions in West Virginia. The glass in front of this picture was cracked, but Ernie grabbed it anyway. As he cradled the
photos in his arms and began to make his way up the stairs, he stopped to catch his breath and felt very dizzy, as if he were bobbing up and down in the ocean. And that’s when he understood that his feelings for Janice were like the ocean, flowing in and out with the tide.

After grabbing another beer from the fridge and chugging it, he reached for his phone. His belly gurgled. In the darkness of his kitchen, he dialed Janice’s number once again. He waited for the beep and then said, rather forcefully, “Janice, I’ve realized the way I feel about you is like the ocean.” He considered for a few seconds that he might explain this statement, but then decided against doing so. “Really sorry, for everything.” He hung up.

He knew she would understand what he meant. He turned the lights on in his bedroom and stared at the cracked ceiling until his eyelids grew tired. It was when he imagined shrinking to the size of an ant and crawling up the wall, across the ceiling, and burrowing in those cracks that he finally slipped off to sleep.

He dreamed of moaning teakettles and puddles of blood and of a diamond scattering light around his room. The light was hypnotizing, helping him achieve some mangled form of peace.

The next day Ernie picked up Samuel, and then Trevor, in the early afternoon. The rain had not yet stopped, and as if protesting the impending Indian summer, his truck rolled along sluggishly. The Spanish moss hanging over the driveway, heavy, dripping like wet beards. “Where to?” he asked the boys.
“The art museum, in Columbia,” Samuel said. “We have to write a paper for our art history class. Everyone else is taking a bus together, but we wanted you to drive us.”

“Got it.”

"The guy that’s been harassing us will probably be there. We'll point him out.”

"Sure thing." Ernie peeked in the rearview mirror and an exhausted, pudgy-faced man stared back at him. Bags had developed under his eyes. His chest burned from consuming too much beer the night before.

Ernie had never been to an art museum. It just wasn’t his scene. If he had to spend a whole day indoors, in a stuffy museum, he at least wanted to see something real, like dinosaur bones or antique rifles from the civil war. He didn’t care for haphazard slops of paint on canvas. After parking his truck, Ernie readjusted his gun and the three of them entered the museum.

A stream of grey light flooded through a skylight in the center of the room. Trevor and Samuel stared at paintings and then said things to each other like "Look at the colors O'Keefe uses on the edge of the grapes," and "Can't you just feel the implicit sexuality in this lilac?" They nodded to each other, jotting notes in their spiral notebooks, while Ernie inhaled the musty scent of oil paint and scanned the area. Clumps of college students wearing thick plastic-framed glasses, suede skirts, and skin-tight jeans lingered by a long painting of clouds, and younger looking kids wandered aimlessly from bench to bench, their eyes sagging and bored.

Samuel reached up and tucked a curl behind Trevor's ear. Ernie turned away.
A muscular kid with a flat nose, wide ears, and chubby cheeks stood by a painting of a bright red poppy and glared in Samuel's direction. He stared quietly, seething, Ernie thought. The kid resembled a bulldog and Ernie knew instantly, somehow, that this was the bully, this was the guy who'd been embarrassing and harassing Samuel.

Ernie, surprised by the paternal rage he felt, walked over to the bulldog so that he was standing next to him. He then removed his gun from his belt. The kid froze while Ernie stroked the smooth, cool handle, the sultry metal of the barrel, the trigger lock, and whispered, "I'm watching you. If you ever go near Samuel and Trevor again, and I mean anywhere even close to them, you will regret it. I mean really regret it. Do you hear me?" he slipped his gun back into his belt. The kid went pale and flinched, but Ernie grabbed his wrist and twisted him around before he could run, pinned him to the wall, right next to Red Poppy, 1927. "I asked you if you heard me," he said right in the bulldog's ear, so close he could smell the kid's minty shampoo. He felt adrenaline swim through his blood, felt quick and alert, and realized he was doing something right for the first time in a long time.

"Ernie!" Samuel screamed, running to where Ernie stood. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure he stays away from you."

"That's just Noah. Oh my gosh. He's harmless. Let him go!" Ernie froze for a second, then released his grip and jumped back, as if Noah's wrists had suddenly burned him. Noah turned around, shaking. "Jesus. Sorry, Noah," Ernie rubbed his forehead. "Just a misunderstanding. You can go. Sorry." Noah bolted to the other side of the room and then down the stairs.
There were bags under Samuel's eyes, too. He sat down on a bench, and Trevor made his way over now, eyes wide. "The guy who's been harassing us isn't even here."

Ernie fixed his gaze on a dark blue iris painting and collapsed on the bench next to Samuel. "Tell Noah I'm not really watching him, will you? I'm not watching anyone."

Ernie parked in his driveway and sat in his truck for a long time, watching the sun slide below the horizon and the sky turn from light blue to pink, to orange, to red. Entering his house, and the loneliness that inhabited it, seemed impossible for him to bear that night. And so he decided to call Joe. He dialed. Joe answered after three rings.

“How you doing, buddy? I was going to call and check on you later this week.” Joe’s voice was rough and comforting.

“Fine, everything’s fine.” Ernie stuck his finger through a frayed hole near the crotch of his jeans. He was still wearing his seatbelt.

“How’s the guarding going?”

“It’s good. Samuel seems like a good kid.”

“Good, good.”

Ernie could practically see Joe’s smug, satisfied smile, his arms crossed over his chest and his cordless phone cradled between his ear and shoulder. “Listen, you want to grab dinner or a beer or something later?”

“Can't. PTA dinner. Malinda will kill me if I back out.”

“Sounds exciting.” Ernie felt he was suffocating so he rolled down his window. A fly buzzed past his ear.
“Let's plan on tomorrow. Is that good?”

“Yep.”

“Okay then. You sure you’re all right? You sound…I don’t know. Different. Quiet.”

“I’m fine. Just tired. See you tomorrow.” He hung up and drove down to Fat Daddy's, craving the hum of human voices, smells that were not the dank smells of his home.

Smoke hit him in the face. The bar was mostly empty, and he sat on a stool and ordered a gin and tonic from a bartender he didn’t recognize. As the bartender made Ernie's drink, he bobbed his head to the rap music that was blaring, and his floppy Mohawk swayed forward and backward like stalks of wheat in the wind. “Nice night out, huh?” Ernie said. The bartender nodded, spun around and shoved the glass at Ernie.

Two hours later, Ernie signed his $45 bill, stumbled out to the parking lot, and dialed Janice’s phone number. No answer. He breathed in deeply; the humid night air smelled like honeysuckle and clung to his skin. He leaned against a large terracotta pot, hit "redial," and again, no one answered. He decided it might be a good idea to just drive to Janice’s house and confront her. So he got in his car, buckled his seat belt, and inched his way out of the parking lot, completely aware of the fact that he was wasted and should not be driving. He figured if he drove very slowly he would be fine.

He drove for twenty minutes with the windows rolled all the way down, the cool evening breeze caressing his face. He held the steering wheel with one hand and his cell phone with his other, continually pressing the “redial” button without taking his eyes off
the road. He was going to fight for her, to make up for his selfishness over the years. Everything seemed clear to him now. Of course she wanted Ernie to come to her. He hadn't been served the divorce papers yet. Of course he should’ve gone to her long ago. Once she saw him, she would realize how much she still loved him, and she would come home with him, and they would hold each other under the burgundy comforter and when he woke in the morning, with the sun bathing him in gold, she would be next to him, curled into his body, the peach fuzz on her cheeks tickling his chest—

“Hello?” a man’s voice bellowed into the phone. “Hello? Hello? Anyone there?”

Ernie dropped his phone and veered off the road.

A man had answered. A man had answered Janice’s phone. Was she living with a man? For the first time, he felt the physical loss of his wife like an amputation, and his future unrolled before him, dark and empty. He saw the next day, the next week, the next year, and it was all encompassed by a dull, nauseating fog. For the very first time he understood what Janice’s leaving him had meant. It meant that all hope had dissipated. It had shriveled from a thriving vine into a grape and then into a tiny hard raisin and Janice had packed this in her bags when she left, too. He skimmed a tree, shattering his right headlight, before slamming on the breaks and vomiting out of his window.

He slept in his car, afraid to drive home. When he awoke, it was ten in the morning and his back killed from sleeping with his knees drawn to his chest in the front seat. Grayness blurred around him as he sped home to change into his security uniform and then to pick up Samuel and Trevor.
Samuel returned a bag of sweaters, because the color didn’t suit him at all once he’d tried them on at home.

“Hungry?” Samuel asked.

“No.” Ernie scowled.

“You sure? Did you eat breakfast?”

“Why does it matter?” Ernie fingered the smooth metal of his gun.

“You look like hell.”

Ernie took a deep breath. He glanced from Samuel to Trevor and back again. “I think I’m losing my mind. I don’t know what to do.” His voice cracked on the last word.

Trevor nodded slowly, knowingly. “Look, I don’t know what your situation is like, exactly, but I know it must be tough. Have you thought about seeing a therapist?”

"Are you kidding me?"

“Okay. What about buying her something nice?”

Ernie’s expression softened and he thought he might cry.

“Like I said, it worked for my parents. A nice gesture can speak a thousand words.” Trevor ran his fingers through his greasy hair.

A thousand words, Ernie thought. He couldn’t even find one right word. And then Ernie bolted toward the jewelry store. Samuel and Trevor took off behind him.

The rings glimmered more brilliantly than they had before, and through the light he could see before him a dingy apartment, the apartment Janice had been living in miserably with a fat bald man. Ernie would kneel before her and open a velvet box, revealing the oval diamond he’d purchased for her. She would be overcome with
emotion, dabbing her eyes with a Kleenex before sliding the ring onto her finger. She would admit that she’d made a horrible mistake and then he would rescue her and take her home.

“The oval diamond,” he said, panting. Samuel and Trevor stood on either side of him, surveying the diamonds. The salesman with the comb lines in his blond hair stood a few feet behind the counter, staring at his watch. He looked up and smiled. “Y’all decided to come back. Which oval would you like to look at?”

“That one,” Ernie said, pointing to a diamond the size of his pinky nail. “Size 7.”

The salesman put the ring onto the counter. Ernie lifted the ring away from its red velvet box, excited by the weight of the jewel between his fingers, and a love so potent swelled in his chest he felt he might be torn apart. He tilted the ring so that it caught the light and sparkled, and then he looked into the glass case and saw that the ring was $3,000.

He exhaled, feeling as if he were coming down from a high, and the vision of Janice accepting the diamond dissipated like smoke. He placed the ring back in its velvet box. She wouldn't accept the ring anyway, he knew, since she'd never cared for expensive jewelry, and a diamond couldn't make up for their rollercoaster of a relationship. She would be offended and pissed off that Ernie thought for even half a second that it could. A diamond couldn't make up for all of the pain he'd caused her over the years.

"Are you going to get it?" Samuel asked, rising on his tip-toes.

"I think it's a good move," Trevor said.
"No." Ernie turned around, desperate to escape the fluorescent lights and soft jazz music.

"Wait," Samuel called a moment later. "Wait a minute."

Ernie looked over his shoulder and saw Samuel reaching into his back pocket for his wallet, pulling out a gold credit card.

Ernie clenched his hands into fists, feeling his nails dig into his palms. He took a deep, shaky breath. "It's $3,000," he said, trying to keep his voice level. "You can't do that."

"Oh, I can. Trust me, I can." Samuel smiled.

Ernie began to sweat as he walked back toward the counter. His cheeks flushed.

"No. Don't. I mean it."

"I mean it, too. I want to help you." Samuel slapped the credit card onto the glass case and leaned over the display of diamonds. Trevor rubbed his back, tracing his knobby spine. "That's really nice of you," he whispered into Samuel's ear, loud enough that Ernie could hear.

Ernie glanced at the diamonds and was momentarily blinded, dragged through time up to the present moment. He leaned against the counter, staring at the boys, and thought about how he had done nothing for Samuel and Trevor so far. He'd only embarrassed them. And he thought about how somewhere in Texas, a puddle was turning red, and some strange man was brushing his hands against his wife's cheek, and there was nothing he could do about anything. He swallowed, hard, and stood up straighter.

"Okay," he said. "Thank you."
They were on their way to a Christmas party thrown by a man about to die. Ellie sat in the backseat, drawing hearts on the fogged up window with her finger, trying to understand why Mr. Stevens would want to throw a party when he felt so sick. He'd been out of work for over a month, since his cancer took a turn for the worse, her father said. Mr. Stevens wanted to see all of his friends and loved ones before passing on, her father said. That Ellie understood, on some level. But he could literally die at any moment. He could even die during the party, Ellie realized.

It was only six pm, but it could've been two in the morning, for all Ellie knew. Today was the winter solstice, and the sun set at 4:14 pm. The darkness was thick, oppressive, and Ellie imagined the headlights on their SUV as muscular arms, working extra hard to carve a path of light for them as they sped north on Port Washington Road, hugging Lake Michigan.

Normally Ellie would've insisted on staying home, even though she was the only one of her friends whose parents still called up a babysitter to watch over her at night. But she knew Robbie might be at this party, since Robbie's father recently started working with hers and Mr. Stevens at Hanover Insurance. To be honest, she felt a little bit guilty that her sole motivation for going to a dying man's party was the chance to see Robbie. But she didn't really know Mr. Stevens. She felt sad for him in the same way she felt sad for her math teacher's grandfather's death. At her twelfth birthday party two weeks ago—a sleepover party complete with a professional manicurist—her friend Kara had mentioned that Robbie had confessed to her twin brother that he had a crush on Ellie.
"But he has a big forehead, and he's kind of gross, right?" Kara had said. "Your face is kind of gross," Ellie had wanted to say. Instead, she wrinkled her nose and shrugged, feeling taller, electrified, like a true teenager.

Her mother lit a cigarette, and Ellie caught her eye in the rearview mirror. The car thermometer read negative five degrees. She shivered, even though the car was warm.

Ellie's father laughed a sharp, incredulous laugh. "We're going to a party for a man dying of lung cancer, for Christ's sake. You really think it's appropriate to light up right now?"

She inhaled, exhaled a tuft of smoke at her husband's face. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Just don't." After about a minute, she rolled down her window and flicked her cigarette into the icy wind. "You left the freezer door open this morning, you know. My mini quiches spoiled."

"I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Why do I even bother?"

"How do you know it wasn't Ellie?"

"Because Ellie, our twelve year old, is far more careful than you've ever been."

These were the first words spoken throughout the whole car ride, Ellie realized, and now the silence grew heavy, saturated. "No, I'm not," Ellie said after a couple seconds. With her fist she erased the hearts she'd drawn on the window and made a mental list of things to talk about with Robbie, if he happened to show up. They'd never had a full conversation before, so she wasn't sure what he liked to talk about. They could
talk about gym, since that was the only class they had together. The cold weather? Too boring. Wisconsin's always cold. She could ask how his dad liked his new job at Hanover. That was all she'd thought of, and as they turned into the parking lot of Newport Shores restaurant, her heart began to beat faster and the list fizzled into dust.

Ellie had been to Newport Shores with her family thousands of times. It was one of the only nice restaurants in the area, and it stood on a hill, overlooking the lake. The east side of the restaurant consisted of one big picture window, so that people could enjoy the view as they dined on fried perch, fresh from the lake, and sipped their martinis.

That night, the normally tasteful restaurant looked like the holiday aisle of K-Mart. In one corner of the restaurant sat a large Christmas tree, dripping with red, green, blue, and purple lights, as well as gold and silver tinsel. In the other corner, a three-foot high plastic Rudolph with a red, lit up nose leaned against the wall. Gauzy white cotton lined the edges of the room, and though this was supposed to look like snow, it reminded Ellie of cobwebs.

Her eyes darted around the restaurant. No Robbie, as far as she could tell, which meant she still had some time to prepare for his arrival; she exhaled slowly, smoothing her black skirt over her thighs. A large group of adults crowded around the old oak bar. Bartenders whizzed around, flipping bottles and plucking glasses from the ceiling rack. Waiters and waitresses wove their way between circles of adults, balancing trays of smoked salmon, mozzarella sticks, and mini quiches on their upturned hands. Ellie was
sure her mother would be just thrilled about the quiches. Her parents melted into a clump of people by the window—most likely Mr. Stevens was at the center—so Ellie climbed up onto the only free barstool. The bartender wore a grey vest that stretched over his belly, and he had the thickest mustache she'd ever seen. "I'll have a martini, up, with three olives, please." She tapped her fingernails, which she'd painted Razzle Dazzle Raspberry, on the bar and averted her gaze. The bartender laughed and said, "Sure," just as Ellie caught a glimpse of Mr. Stevens popping out of the crowd. The man was a skeleton with thin, sagging skin that draped off his frame like candle wax. His scalp reflected the tiny white Christmas lights tacked to the ceiling, and he walked with a black lacquered cane. But he was grinning, and a group of people followed him around like the paparazzi. Mrs. Stevens held his elbow tenderly. The only time Ellie had met Mr. Stevens was at a Hanover summer picnic three years earlier, when she was only nine, and he'd been quite portly then, with thick, graying brown hair and skin that fit his frame like a glove. He couldn't have been over sixty years old, but now he looked like he was ninety.

It dawned on Ellie that she was at a funeral for a living person. She pulled her sweater sleeves down over her hands, which were shaking, and tried to ignore the feeling of spiders crawling all over her body. The crowds followed him around so they could all say their goodbyes, and she remembered a mystery she'd read for her English class, in which a spy is buried alive. Why weren't people crying? The bartender slid a Shirley Temple toward Ellie. It had three cherries in it, she noticed.

Sipping her drink, she wandered the restaurant, walking to the beat of "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," which blared from the speakers. A few younger kids played
cards on the floor, and some other girls, who looked to be high-school aged, sat at a table by the bathroom. One was drinking Miller Lite from a bottle, though there was no possible way she was twenty-one. For a moment Ellie considered marching right up to them and introducing herself, pulling up a chair and crossing her legs just like they did, but she thought better of it. Ellie grabbed a comb from her patent leather purse and tugged it through her long brown hair. Robbie still wasn't anywhere to be seen, and though part of her was thankful for this, she also felt all of that built up, wasted anticipation buzz around inside her body in much the same way her nose itched when a sneeze never materialized.

She approached her father, who was now standing by himself, staring out the big window. "Hi, kiddo." He put his hand on Ellie's shoulder and passed her his glass of wine. "You are twelve, now, after all." He winked and adjusted his glasses. "One careful twelve year old," he said more quietly, glancing up at the full moon.

Arranging the stem between her middle and index finger, she sipped the white wine and passed the Shirley Temple to her father. "Three cherries. Just how I like it," he said, and they clinked their glasses together. The wine tasted like rancid apple juice but she kept drinking anyway. It made her feel warm inside. The moon shined on the frozen lake, reflecting a smudged streak of white light, and for a moment her vision went fuzzy.

"This really is a magical night, isn't it? Look at that moon," her father said.

"I was thinking it's more morbid than anything."

"The moon?"

"What do you think?"
He nodded. "I see how you could look at this whole night as morbid, but I look at it as empowering." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Stevens isn't just withdrawing from society, succumbing to the cancer. He's a go-getter. Always has been. He's out there, here, seeing all these people he loves."

"For the last time."

"Better than never again."

"I suppose you're right." Her father had complained constantly about Mr. Stevens until he got sick six months earlier. He never refilled the printer, laughed too loudly with his clients, and failed to meet deadlines on several occasions. As far as Ellie knew, up until just now, her father had never used the words "succumbing" or "go-getter" in his life. She wished Robbie and his big forehead were there, standing next to her, staring at the moon. She thought he would know exactly what to say at this moment—the perfect combination of romantic and comforting. "Be right back. I have to go to the bathroom," Ellie said to her father, but he didn't hear her. He'd already turned to talk to a tall Hispanic woman in a nice grey suit. He gestured out the window with one hand and placed his other hand on the small of her back. The woman looked at her father's face, her eyes glittering like amethysts in the pale light, then bit her lower lip, shyly glancing down at her feet.

Heat rose into Ellie's neck, her cheeks. She stared at her father's hand, willing it away from the curve of the woman's back. Ellie sent flaming knives into her father's hairy fingers, sent them through his bones, straight into the woman's spine. To her amazement, he stepped backwards to unbutton his sport coat, which had been an expensive birthday
gift from Ellie's mother last year. Ellie then fixed her gaze on the woman, willing her up, off the ground, head first through the picture window. The woman's foot rose—could this actually be happening?—but only to scratch her calf with the toe of her stiletto before placing it back down, softly, on the carpet.

The half-glass of wine burned in Ellie's chest and she suddenly felt nauseated. As she raced toward the restroom, she ran into her mother, who was holding a small plate piled with little cheeseburgers. She chatted with a woman in a tight black dress, and Ellie realized both of them had too much makeup on. Her mother's black eyeliner was thicker around one eye, and her excess blush made her appear flushed, overwhelmed. Her black curly hair frizzed at the bottoms, though she had the top clipped back with a tortoise-shell barrette. "And that’s why I don't see male gynecologists anymore," her mother was saying to the woman, raising her eyebrows. "Ellie! Give me that." She grabbed the glass from Ellie's hand, splashing wine onto Ellie's red sweater.

"Dad gave it to me." Ellie pointed behind her. Her father and the woman still faced the window. His hand wasn't on her back, but they stood so close together their hips touched.

Ellie's mother stared at them. "Who's that woman your father is talking to?"

"I don't know."

Ellie's mother continued to stare, inhaling deeply, then said quietly, "Wine. Unbelievable. I should sue him for child abuse." She pulled on her earlobe. "El, meet Dr. Chopper. She's a psychologist. Her fiancé is Mr. Stevens's neighbor."
The woman in the black dress leaned forward to shake Ellie's hand in that condescending way adults do sometimes. Her fingers were limp like boiled pasta.

"How are you holding up, dear?"

"Fine. And you?"

"I keep tearing up, if we're being honest. Thank you for asking. You're quite mature for your age."

"Yes, I am, Dr. Chopper." She almost called her Pasta Fingers, but stopped herself just in time.

Dr. Chopper smiled.

"So very nice to meet you. But if you'll excuse me," Ellie said, "I'm just on my way to the lavatory." Ellie spoke with a slight British accent. It just came out that way.

"She's a darling," Dr. Chopper said to Ellie's mother as Ellie ran toward the bathroom. She locked the door behind her and leaned over the toilet, pressing on her stomach, waiting for that relief, but nothing came up. When her nausea subsided, she washed her hands and stared at her reflection in the mirror, trying to calm herself. She pinned her bangs to the side and tried to focus on the nice rosy color of her cheeks, or the plumpness of her lips, or her glossy hair. But she could only see cheekbones jutting against skin, dark circles under her eyes, a small wrinkle next to her mouth. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling flickered, drenching her in a sickly glow, then shadows.
Ellie circled the bar, looking for an open stool, so she could sit and have a glass of water. The lights were brighter than before, the music louder. A couple slow-danced to "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." She stared at them while she walked, transfixed by their gentle swaying, until she bumped right into Mr. Stevens.

"Hello there," he said, startled, leaning against a barstool. "Remind me who you are, dear?"

His voice was soft, soothing, and he smelled of rubbing alcohol and musky cologne. She couldn't speak. Something about seeing him close up paralyzed her. He wasn't as pale as he looked from a distance. His dark blue eyes, though a bit red around the rims, focused on Ellie. His forearm was covered in bruises, and she once again felt the spiders crawling over her skin. He looked so present, so alive. Mrs. Stevens stood next to him, and Ellie noticed they were exactly the same height. She wore pearl earrings, a matching pearl necklace, and a navy-blue satin dress that accentuated her snowman-shaped figure. Ellie knew she must have spent a great deal of time getting ready for this party.

"Talk about a cold snap, huh?" Mr. Stevens tried again. He coughed into a paper napkin.

"I'm Ellie," she finally said. "Matthew Patterson's daughter."

"Look at you. You really have grown up."

"It is freezing outside."

He nodded. "Have you tried the mini quiches? Just delicious."
She tried her hardest to smile, even though the mere mention of food made her stomach wiggle like flan.

And with that, Mr. and Mrs. Stevens walked away together.

Ellie followed them. After a few paces, they stopped and kissed—just a quick peck—and Ellie saw tears running down Mrs. Stevens's face, shimmering like tinsel in the gaudy light of the restaurant. Mrs. Stevens placed her hand over her mouth and Mr. Stevens stroked her hair.

Ellie imagined how they might feel a few hours from now, after the moon rose higher in the sky, after the guests said their final goodbyes and trickled out of the restaurant. The chatter would fade until Mr. Stevens could only hear Christmas music, and then one of the bartenders or the hostess would turn off the speakers. His ears would ring, trying to adjust to the silence, while his eyes would try to process the emptiness around him; he would try to understand that all of his friends and loved ones had gone home to bed. Mr. and Mrs. Stevens would glance around Newport Shores, now covered in dirty napkins and bits of food and shattered Christmas ornaments. "We'll clean everything up," the bartender with the thick mustache would say as Mr. Stevens signed the bill for the party. "You two just have a good night." Ellie imagined them driving home in silence, Mrs. Stevens grasping the wheel while Mr. Stevens rested his hand on her thigh. When they crawled into bed, Mrs. Stevens would wonder if this would be their last night together. She would wonder what it will be like to be alone, to roll over in the middle of the night, expecting to lay her head on her husband's chest and feel only pillows, cool sheets, air.
She'll think about the fact that when her husband dies, she will never lay eyes on him again, ever. She'll think about him every day, try to keep his memory alive, but will never hold his hand again, or ask him how his day was, forever, for all of eternity. She'll think about what forever actually means. Maybe Mrs. Stevens believed she'd meet her husband in heaven. That was a nice thought. But there was no afterlife, Ellie knew, despite what her Sunday school teachers told her. There was nothing, and this thought crushed the air out of her lungs. Black spots appeared in her eyes and she ran toward the door, bumping into people every few feet. As she raced down the hill, toward the lake, she realized she didn't have her coat on. Her nose hairs froze when she inhaled.

She plopped down onto an icy bench and stared up at the sky, grateful for the sensation of her face and fingertips going numb. Huge stars glinted at her, and she thought about just how far away they were, how those stars had already burned up years ago. She thought about what might be hiding behind those stars, what exists beyond our galaxy, and beyond that, and beyond that. She felt a panicked sob escape her lips as she thought of the hundreds of millions of years that raced up to the moment she was born, and the hundreds of millions of years that simply won't exist for her after her own death.

"Are you okay, Ellie?"

She blinked and wiped her nose on her sleeve. Robbie stood next to the bench, towering over her. He pulled his knit hat down over his ears. "My family just got here and I saw you running away. Where's your coat?"

Ellie opened her mouth to answer but could only shake her head. He sat down next to her. "This whole thing. It's kind of morbid, isn't it?"
She nodded. Robbie wrapped his arm around her shoulder and she covered her
face with her hands, trying to forget her dad's fingers on the woman's back, the red rims
around Mr. Stevens's eyes. Tried to believe that eternity—the darkness of it, the depth of
it—would not swallow her whole.
Eileen sits in the front seat of a cab, which inches its way from O'Hare to her cousin's house in River North. It's Friday, 5:15, and the sun has just begun to set. When Eileen asked Karla if she should maybe take the el to avoid rush hour traffic, Karla had said "Rush hour, smush hour. Do not take the el. It's full of dirty homeless people. Please just take a cab." Eileen pictured her painting her nails as she said this, cradling her cell phone between her ear and shoulder. But Eileen and the cab driver have now been sitting in stopped traffic for over a half hour, in complete silence, listening to a symphony of honking and sirens and rap music blaring from the car behind them. Dirty snow banks have piled up against the freeway rails. She stares at the jagged skyline in the distance.

When had it ever been smart to listen to Karla?

Eileen is only visiting because Karla needs "moral support" when she picks out a wedding dress this weekend. Eileen, though she had been touched for half a second, had not really wanted to come. In fact, she would've rather walked across a field of nails, or watched seven hours of C-SPAN. But they're family, had grown up down the street from each other, and she knows Karla—an only child--sometimes thinks of her as an older sister. "When a bride-to-be finds the perfect dress and starts happy-crying, while she stares at her beautiful reflection in the dressing room mirror, she is having her 'bridal moment,'" Karla had explained over the phone, and she wanted Eileen to be there for hers. Wasn't that thoughtful of her?

The cab driver frowns and hunches over the steering wheel. Clearly he doesn't enjoy sitting in traffic, either. What a terrible job. She wonders if his back hurts.
Over the past half hour, the silence has transformed from comfortable, to slightly awkward, to painful. She bites the inside of her cheek. She has to say something, anything. "How long have you lived in Chicago?" Eileen finally asks. Her voice is louder than she expects in the small cab, and she feels as if she's just punctured a balloon. She envies people who are good at small talk and striking up conversations with strangers more naturally.

"I just moved here from Jordan, several months ago," the cab driver says.

"Long way."

"Yes."

"I'm Eileen."

The cab driver nods and introduces himself as Asad. Asad looks to be in his early forties, with a long, narrow face and slender fingers wrapped around the wheel.

Then they are quiet again, transfixed by the sky streaked with orange and purple, the city before them that glistens and glows like a ruby. Eileen's phone beeps. Three text messages from Karla: "where are you?" "what the hell is taking you so long?" "im really hungry! i hope you don't make us late for our dinner reservations leeny." Karla is the only person who ever calls her Leeny. Eileen texts back "stuck in traffic," and then switches her phone to silent.

"You know," she begins, "I was at the doctor's office last week, and I was sitting next to this older guy. He plugged his phone into the wall with this huge, really ancient charger. I tried to just read my magazine but he must've seen me watching him. He told
me he lives in a house with no electricity, so he just charges his cell phone wherever he
goes. Coffee shops, restaurants, realtor's offices, doctor's offices."

They roll forward about a foot before stopping again.

"No electricity? Can you imagine?" she asks.

Asad shakes his head. Then Eileen wonders if homes without electricity are more
commonplace in Jordan. How inconsiderate of her to say such a thing. Or maybe it's
more inconsiderate of her to assume Jordan is so primitive. Eileen's head hurts. She
rummages in her purse for Advil but finds only her wallet, a used tissue, a pack of post-it
notes. And now that she's started talking, the silence that descends upon them carries
weight—it is that much sharper, that much more unsettling. This is her fault. She has to
keep talking.

"I have to take my cousin wedding dress shopping this weekend," she says. What
difference does it make what she says? She'll never see Asad again. "You want to hear
something sick? Her dad—my uncle—said he would buy her a dress up to 30,000 dollars.
I know it's their money, her life, I shouldn't judge. But 30,000 dollars? Talk about
pretentious. I make just a little more than that in a year." Why did she just say that? Asad
probably doesn't make close to that as a cab driver.

He lifts his chin. Eileen wouldn't have even noticed this movement if she hadn't
been scrutinizing his face.

"Weddings have gotten so out of control," she says.

"I suppose they have."

Eileen lifts her chin, just as Asad had. "How old do you think I am?"
Asad turns to her. "19?"

"I'm 26."

"You have a young face." She glances at her reflection through the window, in the cab's side mirror. Her face is round, her hair curly and short. She does have a young face, and decides to take this as a compliment.

The sun falls lower, and the orange drains from the sky.

"Have you ever been in an earthquake?"

He rubs his thigh, his knee. "Fortunately, I have not."

"I have, when I was four. Quake of '89. I lived in San Francisco. My dad was at work and my mom was driving home from the grocery store and my babysitter shoved me under the dining room table just as our china cabinet toppled over."

"You remember?"

She looks down at her hands, twists her ring around her middle finger. "Well, no. That's the story I've always heard, though. I do remember the nightmares I had for years after that, that the ground would open up and I'd trip into the crevice. What about a tornado?"

"No tornados. I mostly just worry about ice, slipping. I am not used to it yet."

Is it the friendly crinkles around Asad's eyes, or his soft voice? She takes a deep breath. "Sometimes, when I watch the sunset," Eileen says, "I panic."

Asad turns to look at her, his eyes wide like teacups.

"Watching the sunset is the same thing as watching time speed by right before your eyes. I think it's a legitimate cause for panic. The sky is beautiful and bright, but
only for a few moments, and then it's dark out, and now Karla's getting married, and my life is so stagnant, and I'm on my fourth year of being an assistant editor of cereal labels, and I'm still alone, always alone." She speaks so quickly she's not even sure Asad understands her.

She blushes and notices they're moving past cars in the far right lane. She glances at the speedometer and sees they are sailing along at fifteen miles an hour. She wishes she'd kept her mouth shut. The skyscrapers in the distance twinkle like Christmas trees. She imagines business men and women stuck at work late, turning on desk lamps, leaning over stacks of paper, or glancing out their office windows at the tiny world far below them. She wonders how many of these business people have husbands and wives and little kids they wish they could go home to, or how many of them close their blinds and mess around with their coworkers on the rough office carpet, just because they can, because they want to, so they can avoid their families, or because they had no families to avoid.

"Time plays tricks on us, yes," Asad finally whispers.

Eileen pulls her seatbelt away from her chest and turns toward him. His face is tense, his mouth set in a frown. Her pulse quickens as she silently encourages him to continue.

"Ten years ago, I almost married a woman named Shiran. I loved her very, very much. But we had religious conflicts. We were stupid to fall in love because we knew it would never work with our families, no matter how hard we tried."
Now they really pick up speed to thirty-five, forty miles an hour. In the car in front of them, a woman sticks her arm out the window, wiggles her fingers, even though the temperature is dropping through the twenties. Her bracelet sparkles in the headlights.

"So of course we eventually broke up. We had no choice. It was very painful. But I moved on. I got married, had a child—a beautiful girl, called Adena, who is now seven years old." He lets this sink in for a minute, switches lanes. "But right before I left Jordan, just a couple months ago, I encountered Shiran on the street. We were surprised but also very happy to see each other after so many years. We started talking and I learned she also got married years ago, and that she, too, has a daughter now."

Eileen does not want to breathe for fear of interrupting him.

"Her daughter's name is Adena, too." His grip on the wheel tightens and he stares straight ahead, toward the city. "I can't stop thinking about this. Such coincidences must mean something, don't you think so?"

Eileen doesn't know, but she nods, and notices Asad is shaking. A car speeds by on the other side of the freeway with a whoosh, splashing light across Asad's face, and he doesn't even blink. Eileen says nothing. She wonders if it is difficult for him now to go home at night and face a woman who isn't Shiran, to wonder what Shiran's daughter looks like while his arms are wrapped around his own, how much simpler his life might be right now had he and Shiran not bumped into each other on the street that day.

Within minutes they arrive at Karla's apartment building, which is at least fifty stories high. A doorman spots her and comes to help her with her luggage. Eileen gives
Asad two crinkled twenties, and just before she shuts her door he reaches across the seat and hands her his business card. "If you ever need another ride in the city," he says.

Over the next few days Eileen will study the business card like a map, noticing the bent edge, the small water stain in the upper right corner. She will try to conjure up images of Adena while Karla tries on dress after dress after dress, none of which is perfect. While Karla cries, Eileen will think about calling Asad for a ride back to the airport, but she will not; instead, she will carry the card around in her purse like a good luck charm until she forgets that its there. And then one day, months in the future, when Eileen is on a blind date at a coffee shop and fumbling for cash in her wallet, she'll notice the card is gone. After she picks up her espresso at the bar she will empty the contents of her purse onto the table, unfazed when a tampon rolls onto the floor and the blind date smiles. But Asad's business card will not be there. Though she'll try to engage in polite conversation with the blind date, she will only hear every couple sentences—something about his failed baseball career and his new accounting job--and will instead stare out the window at parents pushing strollers through the light rain, couples dressed up for an early dinner, a group of young men in spandex shorts jogging, and Eileen will realize that she'll never see Asad again, and wonder if it's reasonable that she feels so sad about this.

But for now, when Asad gives Eileen his business card, she simply smiles and slams the cab door shut. She tucks the card in the back of her wallet, behind her driver's license, and watches the cab drive away, down LaSalle, over the Chicago River, until it disappears into a sea of red taillights and exhaust. Then she pulls out her phone to text Karla, "I'm downstairs, on my way up."