DEFINING A MICRO-GENRE: INSULAR FRIEND GROUPS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

and WHAT WE SAW THERE: A NOVEL

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Critical Introduction

Defining a Micro-Genre: Insular Friend Groups in Contemporary Literature

Three tall, gray bookshelves line the back wall of my parents’ office at home. They are filled with historical fiction, Joan Didion collections, and tall, wide books of nature photography. They have been there as long as I can remember, but I only started reading books from them when I was in high school. It was in my sophomore year, after finishing off the Alice Hoffman novels and Erik Larson’s nonfiction that I stumbled upon Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History*. It is an immediately arresting cover: a close-up of a Greek statue’s face and neck, turned to the side, mouth slightly opened and downturned as if looking away from something terrible and regretful—something tragic. The photograph is faded and warm, almost sepia-toned, like something you might find while perusing bins in an antique store. It’s a fitting cover; *The Secret History* is a tragedy, and like all tragedies, it owes a deep debt to the past. When I finally read and finished the book, it was the tragedy that held me—not because it was classical and well-crafted (it was both), but because of the unfairness. After becoming close, the main characters’ bonds lead them to commit a grievous crime against one of their own. After that crime, they turn on each other and the group implodes. Why, I wondered, did the their close bonds have to prove so ruinous and ultimately dissolvable?

When the narrator, Richard, moves to a small Midwestern liberal arts college from California, his immediate attraction to the group of elite, aloof Greek students quickly forms the central drive of the novel: his scheming to speak with them, infiltrate them, and ultimately, appease their leader figure Henry Winters. After a brief, idyllic period of content friendship with the group, however, a dark side of those figures
emerges. Richard learns that in the past, the group, led by Henry in pursuit of his Greek education, attempted to recreate a bacchanal. The ritual left the group out of their minds, seemingly possessed, until they woke with only hazy memories to find the body of a farmer they appeared to have murdered. Afterwards, Bunny, the only member of the group not to participate in the bacchanal, slowly pieces together what happened. To protect themselves from jail, the rest of the characters—including Richard—plot Bunny’s murder. Their plot succeeds when Henry pushes Bunny off an icy cliff. In the ensuing rush to cover up that second crime, tension and guilt set the remaining friends at odds and lead to the implosion of the group, with each of the survivors destroyed in some fundamental way. Although each gets a brief sort-of epilogue, none remain in touch. That is their punishment for their crimes: lonely, unfulfilled, and unremarkable lives—the very thing their group and friendships were designed to avoid.

As a person in the midst of figuring out the ethics of my own insular, potentially destructive friend group, that morality disturbed me. By that year my elementary school group of friends had so far avoided the doomsday advice of high school orientation (“Don’t share your locker combination with anyone; you’ll have a new set of friends by the end of the year.”) and were well set on staying that closely and exclusively together until well after we graduated. That was something we talked about a lot—how we would manage to stay together. Those conversations were more urgent and more emotional than any I ever had with the first few romantic interests that infringed on our group around that time; they seemed urgent in a way I’m not sure any conversations have seemed since. That is partially because, when you are that young and have always lived only in one place and with one group of friends, the loss of both that place and those people at once
looks earth-shattering from a distance of several years. Even now that I have graduated and moved to a different town and made a new group of friends, I don’t think my high school self was wrong to feel that way; for her, that move was quite simply the obliteration of everything she defined herself by and depended on. In her world, there was literally no precedent for such an apocalyptic change.

The urgency was also because my best friend, Elise (name changed to protect privacy), was suffering from several debilitating mental illnesses. At the time, maintaining our group of friends seemed very much like a matter of life and death. It would not be for several more years that either my friends or I voiced the phrase “mental illness” to each other, although our awareness of what was happening surely shifted to include that more medical dimension during that period. I remember thinking whatever Elise was going through was, surely, too unique and terrifying to be classified. She would speak of her rapidly shifting moods in elaborate metaphor. At one point I remember believing she literally woke up as a different person every other day. I don’t think she was exaggerating; I understand she was using what was at that age the most precise description she could.

What she was going through was also, we believed at the time, too risky to be shared. Her parents’ understanding of diseases like depression or anxiety amounted to, “Everyone gets sad sometimes,” and “People who kill themselves are selfish”—whatever the commonplace lines were, they had said them, and said them to Elise. What little we knew of school counselors told us they were controlling and invasive, people who would take all power in the situation away from us. Moreover, they were people who would be obligated to tell Elise’s parents, a possibility that we imagined was even more apocalyptic
than our eventual graduation and matriculation to different colleges. For us, every adult represented that potential threat. Every adult was the enemy, and every well-meaning friend who wasn’t us but might blab to an adult was the enemy. Even now that I have two abnormal psych classes, a year’s worth of therapy sessions, and two bottles of anxiety medications under my belt, I don’t know that we were wrong to think those things; my confidence in those nosy school counselors is still just as low, and any misstep in the past could have been the one that sent Elise over the edge at just the wrong time. In that sense, my high school conception of Elise’s problems as the most important problems in the world was a helpful nearsightedness; I spent every ounce of energy I had ensuring I never made that misstep, even if I didn’t have the education or resources to truly understand what helping Elise should look like. Maybe my reticence towards outside, adult aide is a sign I still haven’t fully escaped the tense, stifling mindset my high school friends and I occupied. Maybe it’s also fair.

At any rate, the edict laid out by The Secret History was clear: my friends’ and my collective decision to handle the situation ourselves should end in disaster—we were a group too insular and contained not to implode. Moreover, it placed the blame mostly on the leader figure of Henry Winters, the most removed of all the characters from a normal life. He was intriguingly different, and so held them all together like a magnet for people wanting more than normal. He was also the cruelest character, the one to unhesitatingly push a friend to his death when expedient. Elise functioned in much the same way for us: we were intrigued by her difference, and felt unique and important for being so close to it. Like Richard with Henry, my other friends and I felt bound to Elise and competed for her favor. It was a tremendously uneven power dynamic. But even then
I knew that if anything went wrong in our friend group, it would not be Elise’s fault for struggling with impossible circumstances she could not control. That would remain true even if she acted recklessly, or desperately, or cruelly; she was doing the best she could with the incomprehensible whirlpool her mind had suddenly become. For obvious reasons, the implicit moral structure of *The Secret History* troubled me.

I was troubled because it suggests there is something inherently wrong with a group of friends that insular and all consuming. The novels make a compelling case for that distrust, as the strength of such groups’ internal logic circumvents any of the individuals’ moralities. At the same time, separate from moral considerations, seems to be a practical assertion from the plot structure outlined above: such groups not only *should not* last, but *cannot* last. The tensions and wills of too many disparate individuals will always, within the groups of the novels above, stumble upon an irresolvable conflict. The groups are formed as a result of alternative desires: desire for power, for an escape from family life, or for remarkable artistic achievement. In many cases the members of the groups written about are conscious to varying degrees that their relationships with their friends preclude a monogamous coupling. As a result, the ideology that punishes those group formations could also be read as a kind of argument for the nuclear family: do not look outside of a nuclear family unit for your primary care and support, because it will not work.

What fascinates me most about the book, though, is the bright, palpable desire to make it work. The novel is filled with love and yearning for its characters as much as or more than it is filled with horror and revulsion for them. As I read it, I felt that desire—for the characters, and for my friends and myself. I too yearned for redemption and
compassion. I experienced keenly the need to return to a better, simpler time—a time when no one was sick in inexplicable and confusing ways. It was comforting to me to know other people felt all of that as well, the same emotions in different shades and permutations, even if their conclusions left me on edge. As I saw it, as a young person in high school, I was living out the section of the book in which tensions arise among the group, and I desperately wanted a conclusion that involved no betrayal or death.

It’s also worth noting that as a high school student, I saw *The Secret History*’s morality not as the subjective viewpoint of one author writing one book, but as a definite truth. A drawback of the kind of fishbowl thinking that forms when you have always lived in one place with the same group of friends is that the limitations set up by books whose arcs spread beyond high school and small towns seem fixed and absolute; there are few other perspectives to be found. Reading books was my primary window to life beyond what I knew. So, naturally, I sought out more books like *The Secret History* to prove that book’s conclusion wrong. I needed more authors on my side, I reasoned. It was my holy mission, my way of contributing to Elise’s health and future.

Surprisingly, those books were not hard to find. Almost immediately I began noticing blurbs on other books’ jackets: “In the style of Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* . . .” and “Much like Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* . . .” I read Carol Goodman’s *The Lake of Dead Languages* and Tana French’s *The Likeness*. A few years later I would add Hannah Richell’s *The Shadow Year*, and Meg Wolitzer’s *The Interestings* to the list. All were novels about insular friend groups whose dynamics create a perfect storm for the perpetration of some crime. In all, the group falls apart by the end in a traumatic, punishing conclusion. None but *The Interestings* offers hope for the central friendships—
and even in that novel, Wolitzer lets her otherwise upstanding, liberal characters stand
blindly by one of their own after he rapes his girlfriend at a party. After all, one of them
could never be a rapist, they figure. Put together, the novels create what we might call a
“micro-genre” of literature. It is a micro-genre connected by common character
archetypes and plot points, and which is defined by the intensity and exclusivity of its
central group’s dynamic.

The novels of that micro-genre share an internal logic: the characters are so
enamored of each other that they lose sight of traditional morality. Fair enough. Any
morality developed and carried out by a small group of young and pretentious people is
certain to run into at least a few problems. Most likely, that morality will prioritize the
lives of the people developing it over that of others—because if they are intelligent
enough to develop it in the first place, the logic goes, they must be superior in some way.
If each member values the other people in the group more than the lives of other people,
they reinforce self-centered ideology for each other. The potential issues with that moral
setup should not be difficult to envision, but they can be summed up by saying any
ideology that prioritizes a certain set of lives over others will disproportionately harm
those others. That lack of regard is certainly part of what led to conflicts in each of the
above novels.

The problem for me with the decisively group-critical ending to *The Secret History*
is the lack of space allotted for embracing any alternative values—not the self-
deifying ideology that justifies murder, but other beliefs perhaps not captured by a default
set of ethics. In some ways, the plot comes across as a punishment to each of the
characters for daring to strive for a family based in friendship rather than blood and for
lives more exciting than the set of experiences dictated appropriate by their small liberal arts college. Those desires, for a family of friends and for escaping a stifling setting, were desires I felt keenly at the time I first read The Secret History, and for the most part are desires I empathize with to this day. I do not believe they are immoral desires, and my literary exploration of those themes did not convince me otherwise. I still strongly believe there should be a literature that makes room for alternative families and considers them valid. There should also be room for characters that express dissatisfaction with their lives and to work to find fulfillment outside of their initial roles and settings.

Although Henry Winters and his followers commit two murders by the end of The Secret History, a solidly damning fact, the book also spends many pages portraying value in a closely-knit group structure. For The Secret History and books like it, the reader finds urgency to continue the story in the narrator’s desperation to fully join the group. To be successful in conveying that urgency, the novels must devote a great deal of space to cultivating an attraction to the main characters. They must also convince the reader the immense amount of effort put forth by the narrator to secure his position within the group is justified. It makes sense then for readers to leave The Secret History feeling haunted by the possibilities of what could have been, if only the characters hadn’t been placed in whatever situation led to their crime. It would be easy to say the words spent on constructing desire for the group are merely a mechanism for making the plot believable, and that readers should ultimately understand their attraction as a false glamour in front of a rotted moral center.

Still, I saw my own compulsion to read more books in The Secret History’s fashion reflected in the sheer number of authors producing such books. I wanted to pluck
the characters from Tartt’s novel and stick them somewhere new, where they could flourish and return to cultivating their initial, compelling friendships forever. While none of the books I found granted me that wish, each book did populate its world with similar characters exploring similar relationships. Those authors share a compulsion to do more with the insular literary group, at least. That such novels continue to be published and read shows the reading public is also hooked on the question of whether that insular group archetype will redeem itself as it implodes through novel after novel. Notably, all of those compulsions and fascinations focus on the characters themselves. It seems unreasonable to conclude characters that warrant such obsessions are merely attractive but morally vacant, their thoughts and desires without true merit. To remain alluring after the novel’s conclusion, those characters would more likely require deeply compelling thoughts and motivations. They must be more than a thin glamour of attraction.

For myself, I could easily see how genuinely important emotional connections could be twisted and frayed into unhealthy realities. I found it natural to give leeway to Tartt’s characters. As Elise’s mental health plummeted through our sophomore year, I watched my friends and I compete for her favoritism. Sometimes winning that competition meant something as commonplace and petty as ignoring each other, when someone said something Elise scoffed at. It was easy to become a temporary pariah of the group, but that risk is not unique among high school friendships. Sometimes again winning meant following Elise into dangerous situations, like hanging out in dark alleys after concerts for too long with strange men who should have been far too old to want to talk to us. Again, however, recklessness and competitiveness are commonplace for adolescents. Most disturbingly to me now, winning sometimes meant validating Elise’s
most incoherent beliefs: that she was fat, that she could befriend strange men in alleyways without being at risk, or that it was only natural to want to die.

I mean to say adolescent girls’ tendencies to seek validation by emulating the most attractive role model available makes a perfect storm when combined with a group leader who is both suffering horribly and wanting to feel less abnormal for that suffering. If Elise wanted to know that eating only five hundred calories a day was entirely natural, one of us would tell her that. We wouldn’t stop there, either. We would begin restricting food and turning up our noses at grease and sugar, both to fall into her good graces and to convince ourselves that nothing was absolutely wrong with her—after all, if we could stop starving ourselves at any time but chose not to, the same could theoretically be true of Elise. That very psychology is also a key factor in the dynamics that lead *The Secret History*’s characters to their downfalls. If any of the group balked at murdering Bunny, he could have been saved. But none of them did—not even Richard, who was not part of the bacchanal and so not at risk of exposure. Richard, like his friends, took his cues from Henry. And Henry wanted Bunny to no longer be a risk. At that point, Richard’s primary concern became whether or not he could be the *most* on board with Henry rather than whether or not he should actually support a murder attempt.

That insularity existed in the group long before the murder forced the characters’ secrecy, however. When Richard first spends time with his new friends, their lack of social connections and common knowledge astonishes him. The group has such a particular, narrow, and inward focus that the world outside of themselves and their Greek studies remains, for them, almost comically unexamined:
Once, over dinner, Henry was quite startled to learn from me than men had walked on the moon. “No,” he said, putting down his fork.

“It’s true,” chorused the rest, who had somehow managed to pick this up along the way.

“I don’t believe it.”

“I saw it,” said Bunny. “It was on television.”

“How did they get there? When did this happen?” (80).

In that early instance, the tendency towards insularity is a charming quirk. It too is part of what the reader falls in love with about the group; it’s their utter lack of self-consciousness. Henry is so entirely secure in his intelligence through his classics education that his having little to no knowledge of science or current events does not embarrass him in the slightest. That was familiar to me: reveling in the lack of attention I had to pay to the world around me when all that mattered was Elise and our small group of friends. Even if I felt constant anxiety over my place within the group, having any place at all protected me from having to care about the people who sat next to me in class. For someone as shy and self-conscious as my high school self, that was the greatest gift I could have been given.

That is another thing I still believe, that my group of high school friends was a gift. For every tense fight we had and every night spent agonizing over our troubled friend, there was something equally rewarding to keep us together. The ability to secure myself against outside judgment was certainly part of that, but there were also less potentially problematic benefits. I had four people I could trust absolutely never to betray my trust. Elise had four people consistently eager to take her late night distress calls. We
all learned more about accepting and forgiving other people over the course of those four
tense years than most people our age, I’m willing to bet. Our group broke the mold: we
stayed together even after Elise got help and the crisis was averted. We stayed together
even after moving apart. My conviction that there could be a different future for the
friend groups in these novels stems from that fact.

When I could not find a novel in the micro-genre with a more affirming ending,
however, I eventually decided to turn to the books’ beginnings instead: Why, I wondered,
did these characters feel compelled to form these groups? Why did my friends and I feel
the compulsion? Moreover, why did such an exact story keep being written and rewritten
from novel to novel? I knew that when I read those books, I was drawn in by the
refreshing alternative they represented: a group of friends fully committed to prioritizing
each other above all else. What, I wondered, led some people to be interested in making
that kind of alternative commitment?

The first thing that occurred to me was that both the characters in the groups and
my friends did not experience this singular alternative desire in a vacuum; rather, most
people in both categories were otherwise alienated from society. That alienation was not
only an ideological one, with characters like the narrator wanting more than their social
narrative lays out for them, but was also a matter of identity. For books with so few
characters getting focus, there are a surprisingly high number of queer characters in these
novels. For any set of books, they also feature a very high number of characters engaged
in incestuous relationships. The Secret History, in line with its Greek studies backdrop,
teases the reader with its characters’ sexualities: Richard fixates on sexuality in the
others, obsessing over their preferences and relationships as he himself betrays only a
forced interest in Camilla, whom he deems boyish. The fixation is not only a result of his own repressed sexuality though: his friends are engaged in an illicit, incestuous, and dangerous web of relationships. As is eventually revealed, Camilla and Charles, the twins, have maintained a sexual relationship since a young age. Camilla also engages in a secret affair with Henry Winters, who in turn (in a particularly Greek master/student setup) has a sexual relationship with their Greek teacher Julian. At the same time, Charles takes out his frustrations with his sister’s infidelity in drunken hookups with Francis, the only self-described queer character. Richard untangles this all from afar and watches with fascination, paying only lip service to his purported attraction to Camilla—who, incidentally, looks almost exactly like her brother Charles. Tartt’s novel is set in a quagmire of messy and secretive desires. As the book is ultimately about how beauty can destroy its viewers, this makes thematic sense.

My friends’ and my own high school experiences were far less dramatic and violent in that regard than the college experiences of Tartt’s characters. Still, as it turns out, all of us are queer in some way. Most of us were not aware of our queerness in high school. Still, it makes sense that queer people are more likely to be attracted to alternative care systems that might prioritize friends over family. We could speak honestly to each other, which was more than we could say of our families. From a purely practical perspective, our queerness, even if undiscovered at that time, meant there was little chance of any of us being distracted from the group by dating. At the same time, I remember the terrifyingly uncertain space that sex occupied for us in our early teenage years. If there was anything in our lives we spoke about with as much subterfuge and as much badly faked understanding as we did with Elise’s mental health, it was sex. There
were vague understandings of what sex was, but adults would not talk about it. We were not supposed to talk about it. As a result, we could not ask questions or easily seek answers about sex. When one of my friends first began sleeping with her then-boyfriend, I had to research the nearest Planned Parenthood on my computer for her because she didn’t want any record of it on her own—as if the clinic would irreparably stain her browser. Sex, much like mental illness, assumed a strange power to threaten and harm us because we did not have the tools to approach either subject directly.

When I made that connection between sex and mental illness for adolescent girls, I knew both would play prominent roles in my novel as powerful forces to be grappled with. I also knew my characters would leave those encounters with greater understandings of their minds, bodies, and agency. Exploring the lack of power my characters had as a result of their lack of knowledge would mean finding realistic ways to empower them by the end. In the manuscript, one of the main characters, Lea, pursues a sexual relationship with a boy as a means of self-harm. It isn’t until the end of the novel that she realizes she can actually experience attraction and enjoy physical intimacy when she pursues those things with women. Jane, another main character, maintains her initial casual relationship with Derek for the same self-destructive reason. For Jane, the sex is a way of satisfying both her need to self-harm and her need to feel validated as being attractive to men. The person she sleeps with abuses those needs and frequently coerces Jane into sex. For Jane, the turning point is a conversation with her older sister in which Jane realizes she is not the only person she knows struggling with guilt and sex. Eventually, Jane is able to articulate that Derek has mistreated her, and she warns other women about him in the public school bathroom. For both of those characters,
empowerment comes through accessing the language needed to describe their experiences—“sex positivity,” “gay,” and “predator” are three terms the girls struggle to learn to apply to their own lives. Once they do, however, that language allows them to define themselves and their experiences and end the manuscript with healthier approaches to sex. The same could be said of their approaches to mental illness, as Lea eventually vocalizes her need for a therapist and breaks the culture of silence her friend group has placed over the idea of professional help.

In that way, queerness is closely related to the culture of silence both my manuscript and the novels of the micro-genre inhabit. In those novels, due to their time periods, many of the queer characters are unable to name or freely express their attractions. Without access to that language, they are even more vulnerable. The queer characters often also serve as great connecting forces, however. What could keep this group together as well as their necessarily hidden attractions? Virtually all of The Secret History’s characters experience a desire for each other that is, by the standards of the time, illegal. The intimacy of the group allows those characters to act on their attraction with relative acceptance, or at least to maintain a close enough relationship to the desired person that they would not choose to leave it. The only member of the group not to foster such an attraction is Bunny, the ostracized boy who eventually threatens to uproot the group by going to the police with their crime. In short order, they murder him for his trouble. Put in that light, The Secret History’s central group is one maintained maybe primarily by its secret and (sometimes literally) incestuous relationships—a group that is an orgy of desire for itself. In constructing the members of the group as desired objects,
the novel also constructs attraction to them as the ultimate downfall. “Beauty is terror” is, unsurprisingly, one of the book’s most iconic quotes.

This setup is not constrained to *The Secret History* either; *The Likeness, The Interestings, The Shadow Year,* and *The Lake of Dead Languages* all feature either queer characters or sexually deviant ones. The most pointed similarities to *The Secret History’s* tangled relationships exist in Tana French’s *The Likeness,* which reads as almost a direct copy of the former’s spread of characters: an antisocial leader figure, the beautiful girl he’s in a relationship with, the darkly flamboyant queer character, and the straight man engaged in covert, one-sided hookups with that queer character. The narrator of *The Likeness,* an undercover female cop, is the only notable deviation from the theme. Even with a group of novels so defined by the archetype of their groups, that is a surprisingly exact replication.

The rest of the novels mirror *The Secret History’s* complicated and sometimes violent web of relationships to a much lesser extent: the relationship between siblings appears again in *The Lake of Dead Languages,* and the leader figure of *The Shadow Year,* Simon, rapes the narrator’s younger sister Freya under the influence of hallucinogens. The narrator, observing from afar, believes Simon and Freya are engaged in a consensual affair and grows mistakenly jealous. She begins a one-sided campaign against her younger sister in retaliation. As for *The Interestings,* which features only one actually queer character—Noah, the nondescript musician—the trend of sexual assaults continues; as previously described, the central crime in that novel is the rape of one of the group by another.
Taken all together, those circumstances describe a definite pattern of sexual abuse occurring within the insular friend groups. *The Secret History* itself is not free from abusive relationships either. Camilla and Charles, the twins who are involved with each other, suffer a falling out when Camilla begins a romantic relationship with Henry as well. Afterwards, Charles develops an alcohol problem and begins to threaten and even once punch Camilla in frustration over her perceived disloyalty. While the groups function to allow characters with marginalized sexual identities a portion of safety and freedom to explore their desires then, they also function to implicitly permit continued sexual abuse. Whether literally incestuous or not, the people committing abuse in the above situations are always, consciously or not, protected by their friends with a kind of “keep it in the family” mentality; the groups depend on shutting out the world, so reporting a crime to any outside authority would be the ultimate betrayal. Cathy in *The Interestings* learns this when she reports her own rape by Goodman; her friends accuse her of lying, and she is shut out from the group irrevocably. The power her rapist holds in the group—being wealthy, owning the beautiful house in which they all spend their summers, and generally being a centerpiece of power and attraction for his friends—makes believing Cathy’s report too risky for any of her friends. One of the narrators, Jules, has had a crush on Goodman since a young age and is, at that point, sexually inexperienced. Even as she thinks that she doesn’t understand what happened, Jules lets herself fall into defending Goodman because she cannot envision the consequences of condemning him; doing so would threaten her own position in the group, which is by far the most important part of her life. So it goes for the sexual abuses in each of the other
novels: protecting the sanctity of the group becomes more important than any objective moral system.

Interestingly enough, the sexual abuses are also often a direct result of the alternative living situations the groups set up. For Simon in *The Shadow Year*, the group’s post-college graduation plan to make a living off the land and live apart from society is a political plan; Simon is described as a revolutionary figure, a vaguely socialist leader. The communal living situation of *The Shadow Year*’s group is clearly rooted in a philosophical and political belief on the part of the characters—primarily Simon—that they can design a better method of life than their society has designed for them. It is the seclusion of that living arrangement that prevents Freya from feeling able to speak out against Simon after he rapes her; the entire group depends on him, and so he holds power over them all. The characters in *The Likeness* similarly move into their communal house with an explicit promise never to move out or marry; their formation of a new living situation is a definite rejection of traditional living situations. In both cases, the leader figure pioneers the invention of the home and attracts the others to his vision. In the other novels the groups are not explicitly socialist or revolutionary, but it is notable that the couple who run the summer camp where all of the so-called “Interestings” meet are elderly socialists; the idea of improved, communal living situations are central to the structure of these novels. They are, in a way, designed to create the same kind of feeling of difference from the rest of society that binds the queer characters to the group; the seclusion creates a strong group identity.

Clearly, the friend groups of *The Secret History* and its micro-genre can be dangerous for their members. When I approached the task of writing my own novel, I
knew immediately it would be about my high school friends and our experiences trying to save Elise. I also knew I would model that writing at least in part on The Secret History, The Likeness, The Interestings, The Lake of Dead Languages, The Shadow Year, and the many other books that followed in those footsteps. The only question became how I would change the formula those novels laid out. My task would be to keep the archetypal characters that define the micro-genre’s plot while also tweaking their roles and personalities enough to form their relationships on genuine love rather than on abusive power play.

Firstly, I looked to the narrator. The majority of the micro-genre novels are narrated by a character who begins on the outside of the group looking in. This narrator feels alienated from the people around them, and is typically a quiet, reflective person. They look at their respective future groups as the solution to their most pressing problem: a sense of superiority to the mainstream that complicates their need to be accepted and validated. At first, the narrator’s task is to create the value of the group. For my own work, I knew I wanted to give the reader a more holistic perspective of the characters involved; I was fascinated by perspective, and how perspective is easily warped both for very young people and for people enmeshed in closed-off social groups. As a result, I chose to hand over the narration to three characters for the majority of the novel. The Interestings is the only book of the above to employ a similar strategy, with the role of narrator switching from character to character. Cara would be the most immediately recognizable if compared to the narrator archetype, with her insecurities and desperation to please. I thought it was important that Cara’s perspective be challenged, however, because of the essential self-centeredness that archetype depends on. If Cara was a
character that would always perceive events primarily according to their effect on her position with her friends, she needed characters to balance that perspective. Sydney and Lea became her co-narrators, able to judge both the plot and Cara with a bit more distance.

Next, I turned to the leader character. Ultimately, what bothered me most about the plot laid out by *The Secret History* was the precedent it set that the leader must die, or at least be punished and effectively neutralized as a person of influence. It bothered me mostly because the leader figure is often coded as mentally ill or otherwise neurodivergent in some way. Henry Winters, for example, cannot relate to an average person. Tartt portrays him as lacking empathy, callously casting off his friends as soon as they are no longer of use (Bunny, when he became a liability; and Charles, when he developed an alcohol dependency.) Henry also eventually kills himself, turning his life into one of the Greek tragedies he studied. The fact that Henry is portrayed as both neurodivergent and as the mastermind behind the crimes committed by the group is problematic, not only because he carries the most guilt as the person who pushed Bunny off the cliff, but because the very traits that mark him as different—being socially inept, being narcissistic, and lacking emotion—are the same traits that create a need for the murders in the first place. Henry needed an alternative community, needed to make his life as dramatic as the epics he read, and lacked enough attachment to Bunny to be averse to murdering him. As a result, Henry’s death is treated as a just ending. He not only *could* off the cliff, but because the very traits that mark him as different—being socially inept, being narcissistic, and lacking emotion—are the same traits that create a need for the murders in the first place. Henry needed an alternative community, needed to make his life as dramatic as the epics he read, and lacked enough attachment to Bunny to be averse to murdering him. As a result, Henry’s death is treated as a just ending. He not only *could* not have lived in a standard society, the book seems to say—he *should not* have lived, from a moral standpoint. For a book that draws most of the attraction and intrigue its characters inspire from their difference, that moralized ending is damning. In suggesting
that Henry should not be allowed to live, it also implies that the group itself should not be allowed to continue.

I knew I needed to fix that precedent in my own novel. Elise might have been our leader and she might have occasionally been cruel, but she did not deserve to die for it. My main criticism of the micro-genre is its romanticization and subsequent demonization of mental illness through its leader figures. Accordingly, I decided to use my knowledge of the micro-genre to subvert its expectations. I created Jane, a fifteen-year-old girl whose difficulties with mental illness at first appear mysterious and intriguing to her friends. Continuing to explore the warped perspectives of adolescents, I made Jane, like Elise, someone who had no framework for understanding mental illness. To Jane, every depression, manic episode, and urge to self-harm mean nothing but that she is going insane. She does not know the phrase “manic episode,” or any similar terminology. Instead, Jane turns to mystical understandings and wild metaphors to describe what is happening inside her mind. She carves dual masks into a tree trunk and describes being possessed by them. She tells her friends she doesn’t know who she’ll be when she wakes up each morning. To her friends, who are similarly young and inexperienced, those mystical descriptions have the appeal of a fairy tale. They provide the possibility of something greater and more interesting than their small rural town. Cara, Lea, and Sydney follow Jane and the promise of that mysticism just as Richard follows Henry and the promise of epic tragedy.

I built a world for Cara, Sydney, Lea, and Jane in which they could both make horrific mistakes and be redeemed. In attempting the overwhelming task of keeping Jane alive on their own, the three former characters choose to let her friend Ryan die. They
become, at the age of fifteen, partially responsible for a death. They also leave Jane feeling culpable; after all, she is the leader. Unlike Henry Winters, however, Jane does not find control and satisfaction in the lengths her friends-as-followers are willing to go. Instead, she is her friends’ victim as well in many ways. I wanted to highlight Jane’s vulnerability as a mentally ill teenage girl; she is afraid of being dismissed as insane, of her struggles being dismissed altogether, and mostly of finding out that she is irreparably damaged in some way. Without context for mental illnesses, Jane cannot comprehend or approach her own mental health. She also cannot defend herself against her friends’ misguided attempts to help.

At the same time that I hoped to convey Jane’s vulnerability, I also planned for her to meet a much better end than Henry Winters did. Most importantly, I knew that in my novel Jane had to transcend her initial role. She begins as Henry begins—admired and studied, but not understood. Her friends, particularly Cara, fall into viewing Jane as fascinatingly incomprehensible. Even if it is in admiration, they mark Jane as other. Partially that is a result of Jane’s limited ability to describe what is happening to her, and partially that is a result of Cara, Sydney, and Lea’s refusal to turn outside of their friend group for help. The latter three narrate the first two sections of the novel. During those sections, the reader gets only a limited view of Jane; mostly, her friends focus on their own reactions to what is happening to her. None of them have anything approaching a clear picture of her mental state. Nevertheless, they decide to help her themselves. In the process, caught up in the mystical metaphors they’ve begun to take literally, they let an innocent boy die. Instead of Henry Winters manipulating his friends into aiding a murder,
my novel has Jane’s friends unwittingly taking advantage of her compromised position to make decisions for her. Those decisions lead to the central death, not Jane herself.

The third section then essentially hands the reins of narration over to Jane, who becomes the primary narrator for the rest of the novel. For the first time the reader gets an extensive glimpse of Jane’s thoughts, and should be able to finally understand her immensely confusing and difficult situation. Along with the narrative reins, Jane also comes to drive the plot more directly than she has before. Where in previous sections Jane set up the conflicts the other girls reacted against, she now finds herself responsible for piecing together what happened the night Ryan died. Jane collects every piece of the story, from her friends’ guilt to Ryan’s part in his own death, and becomes responsible for dispensing justice. In the end, Jane’s dilemma of how to approach her friends’ guilt mirrors my own position as an author writing in the tradition of *The Secret History*: do the characters’ actions warrant the destruction of their friendships and happiness? In the end, Jane and I decide they are not—not because their refusal to save Ryan was not unforgivable, but because they will become better by loving each other. Jane comes to believe, as I do, that the dangerous aspects of her friend group were the results of ignorance. Once the characters find language to describe their experiences, empower themselves, and gain outside perspectives, they should end the novel more—not less—able to form a cohesive care group and support each other. Still, that knowledge comes at the price of living with the guilt of not having saved Ryan. Jane does choose to withhold from her friends that Ryan self-medicated and was likely at least partially responsible for his own death. She does not offer them that chance to dismiss their guilt. Instead, her sentence for her friends is that they be forced to continue learning and growing through
their experiences. It was also a decision of privacy: Jane, as the friend who did not betray Ryan, will be the only one to hold the complete story of his last night. Because of that, she maintains an intimacy and understanding with him even after his death.

The question of public versus private knowledge is also central to the manuscript’s conclusion, as it is central to every aspect of a novel about insularity. While the characters begin as an entirely private group, sharing secrets only between themselves and shutting out other influences, there are challenges to that privacy throughout the novel. Jane, upon realizing other girls have left warnings about Derek scrawled on the walls of the locker room, becomes enraged that none of the student athletes spread that warning to the rest of the school. Her sister Ilene explains that the girls who use the locker room all know Derek and don’t want to create problems. The student athlete culture is the first other insular group Jane encounters, and the consequences of the athletes’ loyalty to each other disturbs her. It also harms her personally, as she had no warning about Derek before he pursued and mistreated her. Lea, for her part, eventually challenges the privacy of her own group when she announces she wants to seek out a therapist for her mental health issues. In both instances, abandoning privacy in favor of openness was the right answer.

As much as I personally believe in the usefulness of publicly shaming sexual predators and in pursuing mental health treatment, however, I also value the sense of closeness that comes with privacy around a group. I am a private person individually, and I believe privacy allows me to reflect on and process my emotions in healthy ways I would be unable to replicate in company. I did not want my ending to assert simply that privacy is bad and public openness is good. Rather, I hoped to strike a balance between
the two in such a way that would be useful to young characters just testing the limits of their previous intense privacy. By the end of the novel, Jane and her friends are beginning to purposefully broach the public sphere. Instead of communicating via faces carved into a tree trunk that only her friends will see, Jane takes to creating her art on the walls of her school’s public bathroom in order to share warnings about Derek with other girls. Her friends join her in scrawling messages, and she feels hopeful about the work. Jane does not sign the walls, and so maintains privacy in terms of her personal identity and relationship to Derek. She also, however, creates a written and visual work that will impact her classmates. That is a highly public interaction.

With my manuscript I hoped to provide a space for both my high school friends and the characters I agonized over in books. It was to be a space where connections are prized and mental illness is understood instead of demonized. Mostly, I hoped to craft the book I so desperately searched for through my high school years: the familiar trappings of *The Secret History*’s micro-genre, without the tragedy.
Bibliography


Creative Project

What We Saw There: A Novel

PROLOGUE

Apart from the commotion of the party—fifty people crammed into one kitchen and living room, playing flip cup and grinding—the strobe light looked like white lightning—apocalyptic. The flashes jumped down the hallway, pushing at shadows like a bulldozer at rubble, framing each step toward the door in snapshot.

Cara pushed forward with it. There was a notch in her throat, like it had been caught mid-gag and frozen.

The music filtered through the walls from the other side of the house: bass and the brief suggestion of a melody.

She walked slowly, the retreating darkness dragging at her feet like quicksand.

A brief, strangled cry pierced the air and Cara, hardly aware of moving, found herself flung against the door.

*I did that*, she realized, and then, *that throbbing is pain, I hurt my shoulder.*

There was no more sound from behind the door.

It was locked.

Cara jangled the knob but it slipped through her hands; her muscles couldn’t seem to grip. She pounded on the door instead—made trembling, weak *thuds*, and her arms fell immobile to her sides like snapped wires.


Of all things, she wondered suddenly if she should pray. If she already was praying. Was that what you did when everything good in the world balanced at the edge
of cliff on the other side of a door—not for religion, but because it was all a brain could remember how to do?

It seemed impossible, ridiculous, suddenly, that Cara could not simply rearrange her skin to pass through a wall, a door. To be held back by something easily breakable to a hammer, to a stronger person with a well-placed shoulder.

Her lack of preparation, her incompetence, was hilarious. She felt her chest heave and it was laughter, her laughter.

Oh God.

“Jane, please.”

The knob cracked, and the door swung open into a room just as dark as the hallway. For a split second Cara saw nothing but the whites of two eyes, staring at her from the bottom of the stairs. The old door swung uselessly on its hinges.

Jane’s eyes.

The eyes blinked, and the strobe light illuminated the rest of Jane on the floor, hands tied around her knees. She was shaking.

“Cara?” she said.

Cara thought her heart might leap from her body ahead of her to get to Jane; the room was so big, and Jane so small, curled around herself like a pill bug. Her voice was so shaken. For there, next to her, was the body of a boy. It wasn’t moving.

There was death, claiming her, just ten feet away.

There was Jane, still in pain and unreachable.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway, and Cara’s first instinct was to close the door and make excuses, to hide Jane. But it was Lea and Sydney, flushed and panting.
Relief: it was only their friends, they would help. Cara wouldn’t have to do this on her own.

So everything would be okay; they only had to figure out what to do.

SECTION I
The last few days before summer break ended felt weighted. Almost *portentous*, Cara thought, twisting the word around in her brain, feeling out its sounds and meanings like it was a hard candy rolled around her tongue.

She had read enough novels, seen enough teen movies, to know the first day of a new school year was supposed to be a transition, some sort of test of friendships and social station. A *coming of*: of boys and cars and drinking and college applications, even though she was still only a sophomore.

But she’d passed the town’s high school most days of her life, and there wouldn’t be many new faces in her class. The rows of square brick houses and gentle green lawns looked the same; the buzzing, vaguely sticky air of summers past still prickled her skin; the cafe owner in his familiar Train Station Coffee apron waved her on.

It was her friends, then, making Cara feed *portended*, like the week was leading up to something important. They’d gathered on Lea’s driveway just last night, talking about their schedules and what AP classes they wanted the next year; whether to stay in orchestra or drop it for a lunch break; when they’d meet up between classes, and pass notes; and how they’d spend their weekends at the park and the mall and that same driveway. The four of them in a circle: Jane, then Cara, then Sydney, then Lea.
It was, really, just one moment that could have been entirely forgettable, except that it wasn’t forgotten.

“We should pack picnics every week and eat them under the willow tree in the park,” Sydney was saying, already turning over visions of fruit and cupcakes and a large blanket smuggled from Cara’s basement. This, she figured, could keep them all together until winter. It would be enough for her, to claim their Saturdays and provide fruit. It would be enough for them and whatever invisible forces held them together, to have a reason to gather and talk.

“I mean, I can’t know I’ll do something every week,” Lea said. Immediately they all froze, and Cara ducked her head to sneak a glance at Jane, who would know whether to needle Lea for reassurance or let it pass, pitiful and unattended to.

But that was not the moment; they all knew how to play with each other, how to bait and reject each other in turn. There was a pattern to these things, after all.

But Jane’s face was blank.

“Jane? Did you hear, Lea’s ditching us?” Cara tried her own approach, and it fell flat and wheedling. When Jane ignored her, they all deemed it fair.

“Do you really all think you can know where you’ll be and what you’ll want to do every Saturday for a year?” She didn’t look at any of them.

“Hardly a year, it’ll get too cold by mid-October, probably.” It was the kind of detail Cara somehow already sensed was superfluous, but what else could she say to that?

“I think I know what you mean,” Lea said. She looked at Jane intently. Maybe, Lea thought, Jane also had nagging, terrible thoughts that her friends couldn’t understand,
that made her say and do strange things. Like doubting herself. Like doubting her own life. Lea had sensed she might. Maybe this would be when she and Jane finally bonded as irrevocably as a chemical reaction, and Lea would never have to worry about falling out of favor again.

Jane looked back at her.

Cara wanted to ask what that meant, but felt demoted: like a little sibling struggling to reach the tabletop and join the game with her big sisters.

“Well, anyway, can we do it next week?” Sydney asked.

Lea wanted to hit her for breaking the tension; something interesting could have been about to happen.

But Jane looked relieved. “Yes, please let’s do that.”

“Okay,” Cara said, and Lea nodded.

“Great, we’re agreed.” Sydney’s voice was cheerful, her face unaware.

So there was something to find out about Jane; that too was not entirely unprecedented. One of them would be off, and give vague hints of some problem. It would culminate in one of many possible late night conversations and all would be revealed.

Just a few months ago Sydney had begun showing up to their houses more often, always overtired. “Love makes you more likely to hurt people, not less,” she took to saying, and, “Love is a terrible emotion.”

The truth came out in a matter of weeks: her parents were fighting, badly. Her parents were throwing things. Her parents were getting divorced.
“What I meant was, it’s worthwhile to decide to love someone and treat them well. It’s useless to feel love and act on it and not think about it, and end up throwing plates against the wall.” They all nodded, not because they understood but because they had wanted to know what she meant.

The same would happen with Jane. It would only be a matter of time.

-CARA-

Vernon High was a ivy-coated brick building perched on top of a hill, which was covered in old trees. The branches unfolded like umbrellas, forming their own canopy. In the shade the school felt like its own citadel, slightly removed from the rest of the town: cooler, protected from the rain, greener. Life science and astronomy were taught in a side building, a converted old church with stained glass windows that cast rainbows on notebooks filling up with dates and facts about cellular respiration.

Cara felt guilty bringing her thoughts into the building, like she was driving away the rustic atmosphere with nagging thoughts of her friends and her anxieties. Petty things.

For the first day of high school she’d carefully chosen high waisted jeans and a striped shirt: casual but themed, vaguely nautical. Now in the fluorescent lights the stripes seemed too bright, like a costume. The jean’s buttons dug into her stomach, which pushed outwards as if in protest against the bagel she’d had for breakfast.

If Sydney or Jane or Lea were there, Cara would all right. But they were nowhere to be seen in the long hallway.
It was the end of summer, which meant the weather was still warm but the nights started coming sooner. And when the nights came sooner, it meant going home and staying home. A town as small and Midwestern as Vernon didn’t offer many alternatives.

That morning it was hazy out with heat, and everyone clustered under the shade in small groups, the welcome back chatter buzzing like insects in the air. Cara realized that even if she knew most of the people around her, it didn’t matter; her world was as small as her group of four, and without them she was effectively lost.

*Do you really all think you can know where you’ll be—*

Jane’s words echoed in Cara’s head. It seemed like it might not be so strange if Jane didn’t appear at all, but had vanished out of Vernon altogether. Maybe that was what was *portended*, after all.

Strangely, the first face Cara was happy to see was Ryan Porter’s, a boy who had spent the better half of middle school trailing, puppy-like, after Jane. That meant Cara had seen a lot of him, but mostly when she didn’t want to. He was a solitary, well-pressed boy who looked not like he was anxious to be included but like he was dressed too nicely not to be.

Vernon, a small town walled in by farms and more small towns, didn’t know what to do with him and so mostly ignored him anyway. Cara had sympathy for Ryan, before he attached to Jane. And then suddenly he was just there, quiet and servile, bringing Jane snacks and letting her grab answers off his math homework. Then over the summer he’d disappeared again.
And now there he was, in a sweater over a collared shirt, seeming impervious to the heat. He sat by himself, scribbling in what looked like a leather-bound planner on a tree stump in the shade. He was familiar; he was nice.

“Hey Ryan,” Cara said, slinging her backpack down next to his tree stump. She didn’t normally speak to new people, but Ryan was so far removed from her definition of most people that she felt an unfamiliar confidence.

He looked up, wide-eyed. “Hi, Cara.” The blonde curls on top of the raised eyebrows made him Bambi-like. Cara wanted to pat him on the head.

“You seen Jane or anyone around?” she asked, guessing he hadn’t.

“No, not as of yet.” Cara wasn’t sure if he sounded sad or she just wasn’t used to his demeanor anymore; Ryan was always hesitant, and formal. “Have you spoken with Jane recently?” he asked.

“I mean, of course. We talk every day.” She didn’t mean it to sound defensive.

“How is she?” It should have been the most expected first day of school question imaginable, but it sounded anxious, urgent.

*Portended.*

“Fine. We just hung out yesterday. Why?”

“Nothing,” he bowed his head and fished for something in his backpack, pulling out a pristine, crisply folded note. “Cara, I know this is strange, but you’re a good friend to Jane. Would you give this to her?”

Cara hadn’t known Ryan thought of her as a good friend to Jane. Around him, she’d mostly felt like a Jane accessory—around, but not vital. Never focused on.

“Uh, sure, of course.”
When he thanked her, it was infused with the same urgency he’d had asking about Jane. Inside the tiny bubble of their shadowed tree stump, removed from the throngs of unfamiliar students, Cara felt, just for a second, entirely seen.

Even though Cara waited by her locker after first and then second period, even sweeping by the art hall on her way to biology, she didn’t see Jane to give her the note until right before her lunch period. Just as she entered the cafeteria, the smells of rice and fries and plastic tables hitting her nose, Cara caught a glimpse of Jane headed up the staircase in front of her.

Jane was wearing clothes Cara didn’t recognize: a drapey, off-the-shoulder top and combat boots.

_Dressed like her sister_, Cara thought. Ilene, Jane’s only sibling, was only two years older but came off more like an idol to be admired from afar. Although Ilene was rarely actually at Jane’s house, sometimes she would breeze through the door on her way from track to her friends’, sweaty but luminent, aloof but laughing, and Cara would imagine popping the older girl into her purse like a tiny golden relic for good fortune.

The clothes were almost definitely stolen from Ilene’s closet, and they worked: Jane looked diminutive, diminished. Cara pulled her own stomach in reflexively.

And then Jane was gone in the post-first lunch rush, leaving Cara stalled near a pillar and the other students like a parted stream around her.

“Yes! Second lunch?”

The hand that suddenly appeared on her shoulder belonged to Sydney.

Recovering, Cara hugged her. “Yes, please tell me you’re with me.”
“I most definitely am, and Lea is joining us no less. I’d say poor Jane, but wasn’t that just her leaving with Brian and Derek and all of Ilene’s football friends?”

On the basketball team herself, Ilene often met up with the football team after practices. Cara and Sydney and Lea could sometimes hear them from Jane’s basement while they all waited in Jane’s room: thuds and yelling laughter they all instinctively avoided, feeling intruded upon, and feeling younger for it.

Cara had never seen Jane speak to them before. She felt the smooth edges of Ryan’s note pressed into her skin by her jeans’ pocket, but didn’t take it out. She’d give Jane until the end of the day before she read it herself, Cara reasoned. Jane, her best friend, would have to talk to her before then.

Lea appeared behind them a few minutes later in line for pizza. Sydney jumped.

“You are so very short I can’t even see you coming”

“Imagine Lea at night,” Cara giggled. “Black jeans, black cardigan, black hair. She’d be invisible.”

Lea rolled her eyes. “Yeah, my superpower is being the approximate height of a Cheeto.” She spread her hands wide. “Invisibility.”

“Uh, excuse you,” Sydney gestured generally to her black hair, dark skin. “I think I’d have you beat.”

“You might have a point there,” Lea looked pointedly towards her shoulders, which tinged pink. “This happened literally just because I walked to school today.”

Cara and Sydney snorted.
“So did you know Jane’s been hanging out with Ilene’s football friends? We just saw them all leaving lunch together.” Sydney was focused.

“Thank god she has people she knows in her lunch, I was feeling so bad.”

And just like that the room paused, sighed. It was normal, and good, and fine. There was nothing dangerous or even strange about Jane being with people she knew, about looking like her sister, whom they all admired. It was lunch, and that was no more interesting a topic than Lea’s height. They were laughing, and Cara didn’t miss Jane at all.

Just like that it was the end of the day, and Cara emerged into the shady afternoon heat no more changed than any other day. There were new people she hadn’t spoken to and new assignments she wouldn’t look at yet. A new bus trawling dusty and congested to her stop, no more or less exciting than it had been last year.

And yet, something prickled. She was on edge. Waiting, she realized, to hear from Jane and see what happened when she read Ryan’s note.

When she was home Cara took the note out of her pocket before she even sat down at her desk. Scribbled words shone through the blank outer face, but nothing she could make out.

_I won’t open it if Jane texts me_, she thought, but Jane didn’t. By evening, she was ready to call it the first day they hadn’t spoken in years. Suddenly, high school scrawled out before her like an immense maze, alien and frightening.

The note felt like a connection to Jane, like maybe it held the answers to every weird feeling Cara’d had that day, a tiny key. It was white and luminescent under her
lamp, too perfect to open. With a jolt, Cara realized she might not know how to refold it convincingly. She left it alone, wishing it was for a nobler reason.

*I’ll have to see Jane tomorrow, to give it to her, and she’ll tell me what it says,*
she promised herself.

So when her phone *dinged* under her pillow, just after she’d turned off the light, Cara didn’t check it. She was thinking other things, storing her anxieties away like a dark cloud mashed to the crown of her skull, and she wouldn’t worry too much.

-SYDNEY-

The first time Sydney remembered her parents fighting was the day she graduated from fifth grade, as she was driven away from her elementary school for the last time.

“Well, that ceremony took forever,” her mother said. “Did that principal have to include *every* corny cliché he knew in his speech?”

She could see her father’s shoulders tense in the seat in front of her. “Jesus, Grace, lighten up. It’s Sydney’s day. *You* liked the speech, didn’t you, Syd?”

Sydney, who had passed around an enormously successful doodle of the principal literally reaching for stars and falling off the school roof, shrugged.

“Don’t bring her into this,” her mother had said, and that was when Sydney knew it was over. She shrank into the backseat like ducking out of a game of dodgeball. It took her parents three years to catch up, but they’d made it there in the end. And they’d kept trying to bring her into this.
Now that the word *divorce* had been spoken by her mother and printed out by a lawyer, the air in Sydney’s house wouldn’t settle. Sydney would walk through the door and be convinced the tension would split the beams of her house, a wide crack through the middle. The furniture and the photos and the silverware would all fall in, every object whose ownership was now thrown into question—like Sydney and her siblings themselves—would fall, and they could all rest, two separate lives at last, a crater yawning in the middle.

The worst part of that word (*divorce*) floating through their rooms was that Sydney could never feel alone. She sat with her back against her wall, listening to the small sighs and creaks of her mother at home. Her brother and sister, twins and geniuses, already spent extra hours at their middle school for band and academic clubs and chats with their teachers.

A car crunched gravel on her driveway and the door opened, then slammed closed. No words were spoken as she could hear her father walking past her mother on the couch and into the kitchen.

Sydney stared at the first line in her first assigned novel for English.

The blender turned on downstairs.

(*Mom hates that sound.*)

The couch creaked, rising back into place and sending Sydney’s mother off. The stairs creaked—no, the living room floor.

(*Are they in the same room?*)

Sydney read the first sentence again: *I went back to the Devon School not long ago—*
The blender turned off. A glass clinked into place on the counter.

—and found it looking oddly newer than when I was a student there fifteen years before.

(Will my house look newer, if we sell it and I ever come back?)

The blender turned on again and someone raised their voice—

I went back to the Devon School not long—

Something crashed against the wall.

I went—

Sydney’s mother shouted—not fear, but anger.

(She threw it.)

I—

(I need to get out of here.)

She needed her friends, who never yelled or threw plates. Her friends who argued, over cancelled plans or lost books or test scores, but who viewed such rifts as means to an end. They were shortcuts to hanging out or returned books or shared answers, a part of their own shared, patchwork language. They did not live in a house subject to breakage.

Sometimes when they were all together it was so peaceful that Sydney had nothing to watch for, nothing to do, and she could sense herself fading away, loosening her limbs, her thoughts deliciously blank. It was even better than being alone.

Guys, she texted, I’m moving Saturday up to tonight. Meet me at the tree.

-LEA I-
The worst thing about Lea’s day was that she never saw him—not in her classes, not by her locker after school let out.

*I can’t wait to actually see you tomorrow.* The text was stored *(locked)* in her phone. But he hadn’t.

No sign of Ryan Porter. Strange how a name could hold such weight, like the letters and sounds of it had sunk into her grey matter. To her pronounced horror, Lea had taken to writing poetry about it over the summer as they’d talked. It was there in the composition notebook in her desk, feet away from her bed. Thirteen poems, ready and eager.

*(He didn’t come find me, so he should text me first).*

She raced through her homework, leaving math problems unchecked and barely absorbing a sentence of *A Separate Peace.* School was only beginning, and the work piled high. It was exhausting. Trying to write a good poem was enough work. Trying to become a person was enough work.

*(Especially when he won’t text me).*

“Are you making dinner tonight?” her brother Matt called up the stairs. “I’m heading to band practice soon!”

“Make it yourself!” she called back. Her dad hadn’t come home yet and Lea hadn’t heard her mom since she got home from school; she was probably asleep on the couch, staring at Netflix on her computer screen. Lea could picture her mom easily, probably drooling and snoring—there was a reason she didn’t check.
“Fuck you,” he called back, but that was Matt’s emotional equivalent of “bye,” so she didn’t take it to heart. He’d grab some Cheerios off the shelf and be fine. She’d follow suit. The first day of sophomore year would be no different from other days.

Lea was waiting for her phone to buzz and inject some color or warmth into the evening, but when she finally heard it buzz against her desk the text was only from Sydney. Her friend’s name on the phone screen looked pointed like an insult. The absence of Ryan’s name picked at her.

She clicked her phone silent for the night, still feeling on the edge of waiting. Lea thought of the razor tucked under her bed and her skin itched, absurdly blank in waiting for summer and shorts and the first day back, the first real meeting with him. But that was over now, and it hadn’t mattered so much after all.

_I’d like to get to know you._ That was the first thing he’d sent her, on the first day of summer, all the way from New York City where his mother was doing research.

_I thought you liked Jane_, she’d texted back.

_I did, but it wasn’t reciprocated. We’re just friends._

And so it began. Lea told herself she’d ask Jane if it was okay as soon as there was something to tell, but with him away for the summer nothing was certain. Still, they talked every day. Still, his name and his oddly formal texts made her smile. She learned that Ryan loved Quentin Tarantino and Wes Anderson, both, that his favorite book was _American Psycho_ and that he was an only child. She learned that he loved sushi, which she had never tasted.
He learned that Lea loved spoken word poetry and harbored a still-breathing love of pop punk. He learned that she hadn’t spoken more than a few words to her mother in months, that sometimes she forgot her mother was alive to speak to or was more than a snoring presence on the couch, a thing that would finish off her leftovers if left in the fridge. She told him she missed Matt, who was three years older and spent most of his time at his wannabe-Radiohead band practices or at his girlfriend's place. Mostly he learned that she loved her friends. *I wouldn’t be alive without Sydney and Jane and Cara,* she told him, feeling like a liar because she’d never said the same to them. *But sometimes I need my own space. They get too heavy, you know?*

Ryan didn’t, said that he’d never been in a group long enough for the weightiness to settle in him like that. That he just came and left, light like a leaf, and talked to his parents, both college professors, when they weren’t doing research. *At my first two schools I didn’t have many friends at all. Everyone thought I was gay, and they were small towns.* She felt safer with him then, that he would share such a vulnerable image of himself.

Still, she’d never touched him. Still, when Lea thought of him it was mostly as a glowing name on a phone screen or as his Facebook profile picture (a close-up of himself, holding a coffee cup and grinning, wearing black earmuffs.) Still, she didn’t know what would happen when they finally came face to face. But it was only a matter of time.

-SYDNEY-
“Feeling lonely?” Jane asked, ducking under the branches of the willow tree. They were behind the high school and it was getting dark already. The sun slanted under the leaves and stretched Jane’s shadow up the side of the trunk. Caught in profile by the light for a second, Jane’s messy hair and smudged makeup gave her an otherworldly quality.

Sydney sometimes caught herself thinking as if Jane was moments away from being reclaimed by the woods around them, like a displaced nymph returned home: beautiful and other, something only afforded to her friends for a brief moment. Jane seemed so removed from their ordinary concerns, like she could never be so typical as to have parents who divorced.

Sydney sat in a fork in the branches, peeling its bark in strips. “The opposite.” She yanked one off with a flourish. “Some asshole left his initials here. On our fucking tree.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “It’s not like you’re being very nice to it right now.”

“Yeah, well, it’s our damn tree.”

“Is it?” Jane hoisted herself up onto the lowest perch, climbing until she was resting on her favorite branch, which was wide enough to fit three of her. “Don’t you ever think about who else will find this tree after we graduate and meet here like we do? Like if they’ll be as good friends, or better, or worse?”

“No.” Sydney stared at the trunk, away from Jane and her new clothes. She felt small suddenly, like Jane was accusing her of being too self-absorbed to see the world clearly and complexly, of not having a shred of empathy. Just like yesterday.

(Do you really all think you can know where you’ll be and what you’ll want to do—)
As if Jane had better plans, Sydney tried to comfort herself. But then, Jane probably would; the specter of Jane’s eminent likability hung over them.

“I don’t wonder because they won’t be as good of friends. What’s with you and questioning the future lately?” Sydney asked, giving up her tree skinning and turning to her friend. “I know it’s a new year, but Jesus, it’s not really that different.” The last part rang false.

“Uhm, I don’t know.” Jane answered in sing-song, and didn’t give any indication of having heard Sydney’s faith in their friendship. Sydney was deciding whether or not to answer when Jane continued, “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.” Jane’s words were like currency, and she bartered them well.

“So you remember Ryan Porter?”

“Mm-hmm,” Sydney ticked the facts off with her fingers, “Moved here a couple years ago, dresses like some rich kid from New York, smart recluse, was desperately in love with you for a year while you treated him like a quiet puppy?”

“How do you treat a quiet puppy?”

“You forget it’s there when it’s not bringing you things, mostly.” Sydney only meant it teasingly, but silence stretched taut for a minute before Jane answered.

“I did not forget about Ryan. He’s my friend.”

Sydney heard a sniff, and realized Jane was crying. The moment crystallized, cemented itself in her mind: the first time she saw Jane cry. More uncharted territory.

“Jane, hey, I didn’t mean it like that. He was just into you, you know? It was cute.”

“Yeah, and I ruined it.”
“What? How?” It was hard to believe Ryan would give up on Jane after the devotion of last year.

“I told him we should take a break from each other, and he promised, promised, he’d check in with me today, but he didn’t, because he doesn’t care anymore, and I ruined it.” Jane was crying in earnest now, gasping for breath between words.

“You never told us you were actually dating him,” Sydney didn’t try very hard to keep the note of resentment out of her voice. Sydney, after all, hadn’t ever cried this much about her parents.

“It wasn’t—it doesn’t matter. I just thought he’d text me at least, you know? We used to pass each other these notes all the time . . . ” Jane trailed off.

“Okay.” Sydney had no idea what to do with that.

The sounds of crying quieted, and Jane’s voice floated up to her with renewed strength. “Don’t be a bitch just because you don’t get it.”

That was the worst part of Jane: how she’d let you get away with anything for a while, and then cut you down so small you had to relearn the world: everything looming taller than usual, everything you thought you’d hidden ripped open. And Sydney could never predict what would set it off.

“Fine then.”

They sat in silence for a while and Sydney resumed peeling the tree bark. Eventually, just when she started to wonder if Jane might have fallen asleep, a hand rested on her shoulder and stilled her anxious bark peeling. It was felt warm against the chilly evening air.

“You came here to talk about something too, didn’t you?”
Just like that, a broken plate in her kitchen paled under the specter of Jane’s tears, of her mysterious dramas. Sydney felt how entitled Jane was, to come when needed but talk about herself first and know she took precedence. By now it was clear the others weren’t coming. It was depressing, like Cara and Lea were avoiding making the same patterns now that high school started. The wind blew and Sydney felt truly cold outside for the first time in months. She shook off Jane’s hand.

“Nah, I’m just gonna head home.”

“Oh, uh, okay.” Sydney was pleased to hear surprise in Jane’s voice as she lowered herself off the branches, taking pleasure in the soft squish of mud that greeted her feet back to the ground: a whole realm of leaves and bark and dirt that wouldn’t say the wrong things.

She waited for Jane to call her back, but she didn’t.

Sydney took the long way home, moving through the trails like a shadow, feeling connected to Jane at the willow tree like she was a glow on Sydney’s back. Jane saw her so easily, like everything Sydney built around herself was hollow and transparent, her control no more than costume.

At home Sydney showered and sank into a warm bed, ready for sleep. Just as she turned off the lights, her phone went off, a bright buzzing flurry of texts.

_Shit Syd I’m sorry._

_I didn’t mean to make this about me I didn’t mean to do that._

_I just decided that Ryan was a thing I need and freaked out because of all this shit that happened last year._

_Like I can’t fucking think about anything else and I start crying and I’m sorry._
I am really fucking awful right now and I don’t know what to do about it or how to stop it.

This was something new to add to Jane’s strange behavior; Jane never apologized, just like she never cried. But it was leverage, and Sydney was in need of some. She decided she’d let Jane wait, and clicked her phone off before she went to bed.

-CARA-

Cara had been afraid she’d forget the note in her jeans pocket, and it would be whirled into mush by her washing machine, or that it would fall out on her walk to school and be read by someone, not even her. But it was her first thought when she woke up, and she could feel its presence in her backpack with the same kind of sixth sense that prickled her neck if someone stared at her.

The morning was quietly sunny and chilly, a few birds singing in the trees but most gone now, headed farther south. The air was like a continual spritz of mist, pleasant but bracing. As she walked up the hill to the high school, a bit early, Cara imagined herself among the trees as a timeless wanderer, connected to the air and the birds, an idea, with no specific friends to meet or thoughts to have: only the quiet shivering acknowledgement of fall in the morning. The note was barely important.

“Hey there,” Jane called, a voice from behind, then sprinted to fall into step beside her. Cara’s peace slid away easily as a rubber band snapping back into place. Forgetting the note now seemed impossible, not caring what it said ludicrous.

“You look tired,” Cara said, at a loss for how else to begin. But it was true; Jane’s hair was in straggles, and a pale overcast hung on her skin.
“Didn’t sleep last night. Pork floss?” Jane held out a tub of what looked like grainy brown cotton candy.

“Uhm?”

“I know, it looks gross, but I didn’t have time for breakfast and this was easiest to grab. Also, it’s like my favorite food and it’s delicious.”

Cara took some tentatively. It looked like orange hair clippings on her fingers.

“How have I never tasted your favorite food?”

Jane rolled her eyes. “I never bring it out because no one’s ever had it. But my mom blames my dad when I eat a lot of it, so she doesn’t yell at me for being fat, so . . . here we are.”

Cara gingerly lifted the pork floss to her mouth. On her tongue, it melted like cotton candy but tasted like roast meat. A bizarre experience, but not unpleasant.

“I like it,” Cara tried.

“Congratulations, you’re the first non-Asian person to say so. My mom packed me some in second grade and Ben Robertson stole it and passed it around,” Jane snorted.

“He told everyone we made it from pigs we kept in the basement.”

“Racist assholes.” Cara noticed suddenly that Jane was no longer beside her. She turned around and found her was a foot behind, blinking rapidly. “Jane, are you okay?”

(Stupid, stupid, stupid question).

“Yes, I’m fine. This isn’t like, repressed rage at Ben Robertson.” The words sounded like hiccups, rising and popping out above the ebb and flow of tears. “This is just a thing that happens sometimes.”
Cara had seen Jane cry before, over tests mostly, but never like this out of the blue. First her favorite food, now this. “Why have I never seen it happen before?”

“Because you haven’t. You’re not with me every waking second.”

Cara felt like she’d been slapped. It shouldn’t have been such a dramatic thing to say, she knew—after all, it was true. But most of the time, Cara might as well have been with Jane that often. Cara was entrusted. Or had been, before this year started. She wanted to say something just as callous and hurtful back, and ended up on a lie.

“Ryan Porter gave me a note for you, by the way. I read it.” Half a lie, at least.

“You LOOKED AT IT?” Jane yelled, rounding on her. She was suddenly no longer crying.

“I—”

“What did it say? Why did you not—” Jane’s eyes widened, “You didn’t give it to me yesterday?”

“I. Didn’t. See. You.” Cara spit the words out, her only defense without telling the truth: Jane hadn’t made any effort to see her yesterday.

“Because I was worried about Ryan.” Jane stopped, suddenly: Cara could see it happen. The anger fell out. She deflated. “Sorry. You didn’t know that. I just need to see the note so I can know what you think of me now.”

Her voice broke on the last word, and just like that Cara’s anger vanished. Jane’s cheeks were flushed and her brow furrowed, de-aging her. Cara felt a surge of a protectiveness so fierce and innate she thought for a moment of a mother looking at her newborn.
“You know I would never think less of you, not for anything.” She needed something better than the Hallmark phrase, something deeper and truer, but found nothing. She ached to reach out and hug Jane, but sensed her touch might be unwelcome—stifling, somehow.

“I know.” Jane didn’t look up.

“I didn’t read it,” Cara added, having almost forgotten what started the fight.

“Oh.”

She knew Jane didn’t need any more explanation and loved her for it. She dug the note out of her pocket and handed it to Jane, who slid it into her purse without a glance. Cara thought she herself would never be forgiven so easily for an outburst, but couldn’t quite find the energy to be angry about it. Where Jane went, she followed.

“Will you tell me what it says?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Jane said. “I just have to read it first.” She turned back towards the school and resumed walking up the hill. Cara followed.

It was disconcerting walking into English and finding Ryan Porter there, next to Cara’s seat. After talking to Jane she felt almost like she’d seen him naked somehow. Nevermind she still didn’t know what he had said in the note; Jane cared for him somehow, and that was somehow a strange intimacy between them.

“I moved my schedule around this morning,” he said by way of greeting. Ryan’s blonde curls were mussed, sticking up from his head at odd angles, and he had a smudge of what looked like toothpaste on his chin. It was endearing after seeing him so polished usually.
“Oh really? What’d you drop?”

He screwed up his lips and looked upwards, looking with his hair like an imitation of one of those classroom Einstein posters—a caricature of eccentric genius. “I didn’t drop anything so much as picked up jewelry making to force all my classes around. It’s the hardest thing to schedule, you know.”

“And when did you discover a sudden passion for jewelry making?”

“This morning. I became . . . resolved, to some things.”

It was the toothpaste; he couldn’t be irritating, even being that vague. “I hope this English class doesn’t make you regret that. It was pretty dull yesterday.”

“Really? What texts are we reading?”

“The, uh, *books* we’re reading are your standard British lit staples, with some recent stuff too, I guess. It’s the teacher though, she drones.”

“That sucks. We should sneak out some days just to read by ourselves, it’s way more fun. The transcendentalists especially.”

Someone who said *texts* wanted to talk about books with her. Nevermind that Cara had never skipped a class. “You’re on.”

The teacher came in then, a thirty-something woman with dull, frizzy hair. “This is honors English with Miss Frank. If you’ve made a second day mistake and this isn’t where you should be, that’s your cue to leave.”

Miss Frank wasn’t able to capture the genial, conspiratorial way teachers were supposed to deliver that line—absolving anyone who gathered their things and ran to different room of their mistake. Cara thought of how much value there was in letting embarrassments slide by, how selfless a service it was and how hard to pull off. Above
Miss Frank’s capabilities, clearly, and maybe above her own: she fully planned to interrogate Jane about Ryan’s note as soon as she got the chance.

*Meet me after school by the tree?*

The text came just after lunch. It was the first Cara heard from Jane since the morning.

*See you there.*

A minute later her phone dinged again: *Bring your notebook.*

The last few periods of the day crawled by as Cara stared at the clock.

*Bring your notebook.* She had no idea what that meant, but saved a new spiral bound from her locker in case. She took notes in the margins of her geometry textbook instead, letting the equations and corollaries devolve into cubes and scribbling. It would be a long night of catch up, but focus was out of the question.

When the bell finally rang on eighth period, she waited for the crowd to clear out before heading to the bathroom. Her face in the mirror was expressionless, but she felt vaguely nauseated. There was too much unknown, which was wrong when she thought about Jane. She should know her best friend.

But it was larger than that (*portended*), like their friendship and their group was larger than that. It felt, fairly, like the price for such friendships. And Cara would do the best she could.

Although the sun was bright the weather was still turning cold before its time. The wind picked through the trees and raised goosebumps on Cara’s arms as she hugged a
sweatshirt around herself. Leaves had begun to coat the ground, pale yellow and mottled orange, which she kicked along the way. The tree was only five minutes from the school, but her backpack weighed her down: three textbooks and binders, and more homework besides. She’d woken up at 5:30 a.m. to get ready for school and knew she’d be up until twelve at least, and it was only the first week of classes.

*If I didn’t have friends, I wouldn’t be so behind,* she thought. But she didn’t know how not to choose them, these three fascinating people who had plucked her out of her terror-induced silence starting at a new middle school. Right when every other sixth grader had been learning how to be cruel, there came three girls who actually seemed to love each other. And most astoundingly of all, Jane had invited Cara along—right to this tree after school.

Whatever strange sense of change might have followed the group for the past few days, at least the tree looked the same. It stood proudly, branches splayed wide across the sky like gesturing arms, leaves falling from them in elegant green sheets not yet touched by fall.

It made sense, Cara thought as she approached, that Jane was just beyond those branches. That thought more than anything calmed her, because Cara belonged there too.

“Jane?” she called, pushing aside a string of leaves and ducking inside. The trunk, a pale, smooth monolith, rose too high for her to see the top.

“I’m here,” Jane called.

Cara walked around the trunk and came upon Jane crouched on the ground, just on the other side. It felt oddly significant. “Why aren’t you on your branch?”
Jane shrugged, staring at her hair as she twisted it into black spindles, then letting it fall back. “I mean, you wanted to read the note, right? Like, you can’t do that if you’re ten feet above me.”

“Fair enough.”

“Well, do you want to read it or not?” Cara was taken aback; Jane had jumped up and was pacing back and forth like an animal in a cage, buzzing with energy. Jane wasn’t usually so intense.

“Are you . . . angry at me?” Cara tried.

Jane stopped pacing to stare at her. “Not everything is about you.”

Before Cara could gather herself enough to respond, Jane handed her the note.

“Just read it.”

Cara unfurled the white page, noticing the deep, wrinkled creases. Jane had opened this a lot over the day. Inside was Ryan’s handwriting, clear and looping in blue pen.

Jane,

*I think what you said was right; it isn’t good for us to be around each other, and we should take responsibility for that and take a break from each other, at least.*

*I’m sorry for not seeing that earlier. I wish you the best of luck, of course.*

*Your friend,*

*Ryan.*

“Why were you so upset he didn’t contact you if you’re the one who wanted distance?” Cara squinted at the writing, so much less revealing than she’d hoped. “And why aren’t you good for each other?”
Jane sighed, impatient. “First, because I thought that was a good idea and didn’t realize that I really fucking needed him and now I miss him and I can’t do anything about it because that would be selfish. And second, because we are. But that’s not what we’re gonna talk about.” She had resumed pacing.

“What did you call me here for then?” Cara hated feeling like she was still trying to catch up, and she could see Jane grind her teeth as she said it. *Just tell me what you want*, she wanted to scream. She waited for instructions instead.

“Get out your notebook. It means you’re gonna write, and I’m gonna draw, and we’ll make something useful out of this.”

Cara wrote sometimes—short poems scribbled on the edges of her homework, or pages of story ideas that would never see more than a page or two—but it wasn’t typical Tuesday night practice.

“I don’t know what you want me to write.”

Jane’s fist connected with Cara’s arm in a dull thud.

“*Shit.* What was that for?”

“Stop making everything about me. Write whatever you want.”

“*Why did you hit me?*” she said. I *want to do what you want me to*, she thought. “Shut up, I didn’t even hit you hard. Write about whatever makes you cry, and then we can, like, share it.”

“I don’t have anything that makes me cry like that.” It was the truth: Cara hadn’t truly cried in years. She felt this must be a result of her own dull mind.

“Really? Nothing?”
Jane’s intensity quieted a little and she regarded Cara as if appraising her. Cara met her gaze, and they quietly agreed: Cara couldn’t do what Jane wanted her to. If she was a stronger person, Cara knew she would leave it at that, and pack up her things, and leave. But she wasn’t, and she wanted to pass the test too badly.

“Tell me what I can do and I’ll do it,” she said, but Jane didn’t answer; she was too busy scribbling in a sketchbook, green colored pencil in hand, pressing hard. Cara left a few minutes later, walking slowly through the trees and waiting to be called back even as she knew she wouldn’t be.

-LEA II-

Ryan Porter was standing at her locker before school the next day. Lea saw his sweater first, a thick, fitted grey v-neck that looked like something out of Harry Potter. She liked it. She took one last sip of coffee from her thermos, had a brief moment of regret—*what if he kisses me?*—and dismissed it. Lea was in the process of gearing herself up to say hi when he turned around and took her off guard.

“Lea! Hello.” Ryan paused and then stuck out his hand self-consciously. “I suppose we’re just meeting, sort of.” His voice, she had forgotten, was clear, and nice.

She grinned back and shook his hand with a mock grave air. “I suppose so, my good sir.”

“It’s been quite a summer hasn’t it?” His cheeks tinged pink, which made her feel bold suddenly. It was an expected sensation.

“It has. And still no word from you yesterday?”
Ryan ran a hand through his hair, leaving some in the middle sticking up. “I had a few things to clear up with someone. I was waiting for them to get back to me.”

“Wait. You mean like . . . another girl?”

“Uhm—”

“Wait. You mean you were finishing things up with Jane?” For the first time, Lea was afraid the last few months might have been a betrayal. She wondered if she might have done something unforgivable without even noticing. She had assumed there was nothing to finish up, that it was an unrequited crush and nothing more. “You know Jane and I are best friends, right?”

“Yes. I mean, no, no it’s not like that,” Ryan paused, and in the interim Lea thought she might want to punch him. “It was just that Jane and I decided we should keep some distance and I wanted to make sure that was still in effect. So that this wouldn’t be a problem for you.”

“For me?” She was skeptical.

“Yes, for you. I’d like to take you out sometime this week, if you’d like.”

Lea’s skepticism vanished. This was moving so much more quickly than she’d dared to hope. “Yes, yes please. Just one thing.”

“And what would that be?”

“Let me wait to tell Jane. If you say the situation is okay I believe you, but I want to get a chance to talk to her myself.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll text you later and we’ll figure out a time and place.” Ryan moved as if to hug her, then held back and waved instead. Lea thought for a second that
he looked sad, but decided to ignore it. He would hug her next time. And then, maybe, more. Everything was going as planned.

Everything, that was, until she tried to talk to Jane. Lea held the phone cradled against her head with her knee and held a sterile razor in her other hand, staring at the blank inch of skin below her hip bones. This was her reward: she had waited until she first talked to Ryan, and now that was over with.

There was an awful energy around the idea of telling Jane and disappointing her that spewed from Lea’s chest like a geyser, rushing through her system. At her desk during school that day Lea had itched to get out of her skin, practically shook her desk apart in class. She wanted that energy gone, and cutting herself was like a doctor leeching out bad blood. It wasn’t the first time she cut, nor was it the first time she’d felt such pointless, awful urgency.

The phone rang once before Jane picked up.

“Lea?”

“Hi, Jane?”

“Yeah, it’s me. What do you need?” Jane’s voice came through the line softly, as if she was sick. Well, Lea felt sick too. She brought the razor down once, with barely a yelp, and her smooth, dry skin parted and flushed red.

Lea sighed in relief. Let it out. Okay. I can do this now. “I need to talk to you about something,” she said. “About—about Ryan Porter, actually.” A faint groan filtered through the line. Lea thought it was static at first. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Just let me get this out while I feel okay, she silently begged.
“Can we please not talk about Ryan Porter for one day?” Jane eventually answered. The phone picked up a toilet flushing.

“Are you talking to me while you’re going to the bathroom?” Lea didn’t know what to do, if Ryan was off limits.

“No,” Jane left a long silence that Lea had no idea how to fill, then said, “And I know what that sound was earlier. You yelled a little and then you sighed.”

Lea froze, staring at the trickle of blood still winding its way down her leg. If she didn’t stop it soon, a drop would fall on the carpet. But she couldn’t quite bring herself to move.

_This was what Jane’s hesitance the day before school was about. I was right._

Lea was sick of being the only member of their group who craved attention, who cried about boys, who needed to run and yell and hit things. Cara and Sydney were so self-contained it was like their emotions couldn’t find a way to drip out. She used to think that about Jane too, but lately Lea wasn’t so sure. Jane was erratic, Jane was confused, Jane was _like her._

“Do you ever think everything would be better if it just _stopped_?” Lea asked, aware she was breathing too close to the phone. She still hadn’t moved. The first drop of red blood fell to the carpet and sat there, beading.

“Yes. Everything happens all at once now. And I can’t predict what I’ll do about it anymore.”

Lea slid the razor diagonally across the last cut, exaggerating the hiss she let out as it made contact with her skin. Then sighed again. The blood on the floor had soaked into the carpet now, spreading out into a tiny, distinct stain.
Jane didn’t respond, but Lea could hear her breathing through the phone. It was intensely intimate, hearing her breath so close, like they were naked in the same room, watching each other. Looking out for each other.

“I want to try something,” Jane murmured, and then let out a small gasp.

Lea realized she was copying her. Like Lea had started something useful. “Did it work?” she asked, barely breathing.

“Yes.”

They stayed on the line like that for a while longer, just listening to each other, Lea feeling calmer than she had in weeks.

“The others wouldn’t understand,” Jane eventually said, and Lea felt a warm glow sprout in her chest, where before there had been panic, where just then she had felt, deliciously, nothing at all.

“No, they wouldn’t,” Lea agreed. They each hung up a few moments after that, secure.

-SYDNEY-

*You have to explain that if you want it to mean anything,* Sydney eventually texted back to Jane. It was the next day, on her bus ride to school. She wouldn’t have left it so long, but she wanted to be out of her house before she answered; her house made her angry.

It was her bus passing under the shady canopy of trees that let her send it. There, Sydney was serene. Practical.

As soon as she stepped off she saw Cara and Jane sitting side by side on the brick ledging by the stairs, swinging their legs in tandem. Cara hunched over a textbook,
scribbling furiously, and Jane had small, bright white earbuds poking out from under her black hair. They could have been on an advertisement for a scenic boarding academy, perched together right by a reflection from the red stained glass window on the ground. They were also ignoring each other, which meant Jane was acting strangely towards everyone, not just Sydney. Jane wouldn’t have had to say much to cause this; Cara was the most sensitive person she knew. If Jane had so much as raised her voice, Cara might be afraid to speak for days. Sydney didn’t have the patience for it.

“Wow, you guys look like my family at Thanksgiving,” Sydney said as she approached, slinging her backpack on the partition next to Jane.

Cara fixed her with a venomous glare.

“Wow, rude much?” Jane lifted an earbud and raised an eyebrow. Sydney recognized her I’m handling this voice.

Fair enough.

“I texted you,” Sydney said, changing the subject.

“I know, I got it.”

“And?”

“I will, I’ll tell everyone.” Jane stared at her, and Sydney understood this was a promise.

“Tell everyone what?” Lea appeared behind them, in baggy sweatpants and a t-shirt, with her dark hair curled meticulously around her face. She didn’t look tired, but Sydney could see faint creases in the concealer spread under her eyes. “No, seriously, what are you telling everyone?”

“Nothing,” Jane sighed, frustrated, and stood up as if to stalk off.
“What are you guys even talking about?” Cara broke in, looking if possible madder than before.

The scene froze for a second and spread out like an illustration for Sydney: the four of them in front of the old brick school, one small group of many. Jane, one earbud dangling down the front of her shirt, arms crossed and hugging herself.

_She feels attacked. Everyone wants something from her._

Then there was Lea, eyes wide, posture stiff, one hand rubbing the back of her neck.

_She’s scared of what Jane will say._

Cara was last, sitting on the partition still, leaning towards Jane, imploring.

_She’s terrified of being left out._

It was a perfect tableau of a failing family, frustrations finally burbling over and out. If it went on a second longer, someone was going to break.

“Everyone stop,” Sydney said, and the scene unfroze as the three of them turned to stare at her. Their eyes were thrilling, like they awaited instructions, just from her. She had them.

“Stop fighting. I don’t know what’s going on with us since school started, but it stops now. Sleepover this weekend. No questions. We do not pull this shit with each other.”

Jane was the first to move, bending down to grab Sydney’s cell phone, which she hadn’t even noticed falling out of her pocket. The screen was cracked, but only slightly, in one corner. Sydney took it and they all filed into the school in a line, still not meeting eyes. She began to wonder if they’d even acknowledge her plan.
But just as they were about to split off into different hallways and rejoin the throngs of students headed to homeroom, Cara turned to wave. “I’ll see you guys Saturday,” she said, and the others nodded.

That was not, however, the last disturbance of the day. Midway through fifth period, when Sydney sat in the back of a history classroom taking notes about ancient Mesopotamia, a brown-haired, mousy looking office aide appeared in the open door with a green slip.

“I’m looking for Sydney Dickerson,” the aide offered, tremulously, when the teacher—Mr. Mann, a tall, jocular, balding man with a great passion for early agricultural technology—paused mid-lecture to stare at her. He motioned for her to go, so Sydney gathered up her books and followed the girl to the office, sure she was about to hear her parents had set the house on fire or at least broken a window. But instead, when she arrived, there was only Brian Walker sitting on a bench outside.

He was one of Ilene’s football friends, a nicer guy than most. He tended to hang back, and Sydney suspected he was included mostly for his folk band good looks: most days he sported plaid and a man bun. That in combination with a strong jaw was enough to make him stand out in Vernon, which trended preppy enough and was small enough to make him an anomaly. He looked particularly attractive and stoic against the wood paneling of the office, head bowed against a fist. He also looked ridiculous.

“Practicing for your album cover?” she asked.

He looked up and grinned. “Nah, I’m just not having the best day.”
Sydney snorted. “And what did they call you down here for? Smoking in the bathroom for angsty affect?”

“Mmm,” he folded his arms behind his head and leaned back, looking pensive.

“Nothing so glamorous. Can’t say more, I’m afraid. What’d they get you for?”

“Why is everyone being so evasive lately?” Sydney wondered out loud. “And I have no idea, actually.”

“Ah shit, I might know actually.” Brian looked like he was about to say more, but just then Mrs. Sage, the guidance counselor, walked out.

“Sydney?” she called.

“What am I here for?” Sydney asked, looking between her and Brian, not liking being the only one in the room not in the loop.

“Just come into my office.” Mrs. Sage was smiling, but Sydney suddenly didn’t trust her.

“No, seriously, tell me what’s going on. Is something wrong?”

Her smile started to look a bit plastered on. “You’re not in trouble, dear. But I have to talk to you in my office; it’s confidential.”

And just like that Sydney was no longer sure what she had been paranoid about. After all, the last time she’d been called to see Mrs. Sage, it was to resolve a scheduling conflict in the computer system. It wasn’t like she’d broken any rules in the few days since school started. She didn’t sneak out to smoke or cheat on tests.

As she sat down in the rickety wooden chair in front of the counselor desk, Sydney couldn’t help focusing on the motivational posters lined up on the wall: 30 years
from now, it won’t matter what shoes you wear or what your hair looks like. What will matter is what you learned and how to use it.

And how am I supposed to envision what will matter thirty years in the future that’s twice my age? she wondered. And better yet, since when was disparaging what matters to people “motivational?” She was feeling less threatened by Mrs. Sage and her stupid posters by the second.

“You are good friends with Jane Huang, no?” the counsellor cut in.

Confidence banished. “Um, yes?” A horrible panic struck her then: What if something had happened to Jane since that morning? What if Jane was upset enough about whatever was happening with Ryan Porter to hurt herself? “Did something happen to her?”

“You know I can’t discuss other students with you. What anyone says here is confidential. I just wanted to remind you that if you’re worried about anyone, my door is always open.”

Sydney waited for her to continue, but Mrs. Sage just sat at her desk, hands folded in front of her, looking at Sydney expectantly.

“You . . . you want me to talk to you about Jane?”

Mrs. Sage waved her hand, shooing away the name. “About anyone, dear.”

Sydney hated being called “dear.” And she knew there was no reason she’d be called down in the middle of class just to be reassured the door was open.

“You brought up Jane specifically, and now I’m concerned. Please tell me what’s going on.” The counsellor didn’t look concerned enough to fuel Sydney’s worst fears.
“Nothing to concern yourself with. Just let me know if you need to talk.” Mrs. Sage turned away at the last word, clipped, as if Sydney had disappointed her somehow. “You can go back to class now,” she added.

In the place of panic, Sydney began to feel rage: the white, creased cheeks that hung around Mrs. Sage’s red lipstick-lined mouth took on the appearance of excess, of greed. Who was this woman, to taunt Sydney with information about a friend who was more family than her own parents, to look sternly at Sydney for failing her when Sydney wouldn’t share Jane’s secrets with her? Who was this stranger?

Sydney meant only to get up and leave, but found herself stopping at the door. Jane’s face that morning, looking right into her eyes, promising to make everything up to them, came back to her. The fact that this woman thought Sydney would be a tool to spy on Jane wasn’t just ludicrous, it was offensive. It was condescending. As if Mrs. Sage and her motivational posters knew what Jane needed better than them. As if they could understand the tension and the loyalties and the give-and-take of a decade of friendship.

“Don’t ever try to invade my friends’ privacy like that again,” Sydney said.

If Mrs. Sage began to respond, Sydney didn’t see it. She had already slammed the door on her way out.

-CARA III-

*Gravity has been cancelled.* Cara scribbled the phrase all over her science notes. Gravity being cancelled seemed more important than the biodomes that day. She’d been trying all through English and history to settle on the right phrase, and finally she had found it.
Gravity has been cancelled. If Cara’s friends were her constants, the most defining parameters of her life, then their transparency with her was her ground. She always, always knew what was going on with them, even if it was only so vague as to know they were struggling. She didn’t feel lost when they talked to each other.

Feeling so disconnected to Jane that morning was bad enough, but now she thought that unease was a seat of privilege. At least she had thought Jane would tell her eventually. At least Cara thought she was in the inner loop, the first line of defense against whatever Jane was going through. But evidently Sydney and Lea had their own secrets with Jane, and Cara didn’t know enough to even begin to suspect what was happening. Hadn’t even thought to consider such secrets might exist.

But they did. Gravity has been cancelled.

When the last bell went off, ending the final period and sending everyone streaming out to the busses, Cara went to the bathroom and gave herself ten minutes. This was an allowance she gave herself: ten minutes where no one could see her, so she could process. Usually Cara tried to avoid doing this in school, terrified someone would walk in and wonder who could possibly be taking too long and recognize her shoes, her backpack propped against the walls. But even walking home in the open air, being seen by the town, seemed like far too much for her just then.

The school bathroom on the first floor, the largest, ran in a straight line of four sinks to ten stalls. The walls were a dark, dull yellow. It was said the color was chosen for looking the most like urine, but Cara had always thought it was more like earwax. She liked the appliances though, the sinks with levers to press down with her feet and the
half-circle hose of water that came out. It made her feel like she was in one of her favorite old novels, a character in *Matilda* or *Harriet the Spy*.

But when Cara slumped her backpack—bulging, again, with textbooks and binders that would need attending to before the day was up—against the first wall and looked towards the stalls, it was she who caught someone hiding.

Sniffling filtered under the last stall door, and a pair of Converse were just visible.

“Jane?”

The sniffing stopped.

“Cara?” The voice who called her name wasn’t Jane, but Sydney.

Cara ducked her head and peered under the doors to the last stall, and realized it contained not one, but two pairs of shoes: Jane’s Converse and Sydney’s TOMS.

*Of course.*

“Do you guys want me to leave?” She could have tried not to sound bitter, but she didn’t quite want to. If they wanted to keep secrets, they could at least feel bad about it.

“No, of course not,” Jane called. “What are you talking about?”

And just like that Cara fell off balance again.

*Have I just been imagining feeling left out? Was anyone even crying?*

“You know, everyone’s pretty much left. You guys can come out.” she called.

The door creaked open and Sydney and Jane stepped out. Sydney’s jaw was set, and Cara thought for a moment it was in defiance against Cara herself. But when Sydney fixed her gaze on Cara it was inviting, not angry. “The most fucked up shit happened today,” she said. “Just wait until we fill you in.”

Jane nodded, silently, next to her.
All is forgiven, Cara silently promised them. “I want to hear this, but shouldn’t we wait for Lea?” she said out loud, feeling suddenly magnanimous.

“Whatever, Lea’s been MIA recently,” Sydney said. Now she looked angry. “I texted her two days ago and she still hasn’t responded. She skipped out on lunch and didn’t even tell me why.”

“Me neither,” Cara said, wanting to agree with her.

“No, she’ll find out eventually,” Jane said, and met Cara’s eyes for the first time, red-rimmed and tired.

Cara was pleased, she found, that it was someone else who was not vital to this conversation. It was surely more than chance, her walking into the bathroom, that ensured her inclusion. It was something no less than fate.

“Okay, follow me,” she said, and led them out of the bathroom, her own shoes keeping steady pace on the ground.

Cara led them through the main hallway and pushed open the heavy door that led to the vast, echoing gym, empty since sixth period. The shiny linoleum was scuffed from a day of basketball and drills. The pads on the walls caught the sound of the door thudding shut.

“No one comes here after hours,” Cara said, glancing around. She’d meant to keep this fact to herself—it was Ilene who had told her, after catching Cara hiding in the back of the auditorium once in middle school. “There will be better places for this next year,” she’d promised, running a hand through Cara’s hair.

“I feel watched,” Jane said, glancing around the wide, open room.
Cara was about to agree, glancing around at the basketball hoops and folding tables stacked against the wall, when Sydney cut in. “Of fucking course you do. Fuck all of them. That was so messed up.”

“It’s just, why is it any of their business?” Jane gestured her confusion, arms wide. Once again Cara lost the conversation.

But Sydney hadn’t. “It isn’t, of course not.”

Fearing a repeat of the morning, Cara stepped between them. “What is happening?” she asked, looking from Jane’s raw, open face to Sydney’s cold fury.

“Did anyone call you down to the guidance office today?” Jane asked, looking, Cara realized with a pang, afraid. The question opened up whole new imaginings, away from Jane’s strange emotions and whatever was going on with Ryan Porter: those were their things, theirs to deal with. Other people shouldn’t be involved.

What could the school have to do with this?

“No, I haven’t heard anything.”

“Good.” Sydney said, tapping a foot on the ground anxiously. “I think it was just me because Brian knows my name.”

Brian. One of Ilene’s friends, the one Cara always said she’d date if she had to choose. Of course he wouldn’t remember her name.

“Who does Brian think he is?” Jane yelled.

“Some overinvolved, moronic savior.” Sydney said.

Jane ran to the back wall and punched one of the mounted gym pads. She turned back to yell, “Cara, some fucking woman called me down to the office because fucking Brian saw a cut on my wrist.”
The words barely registered in Cara’s brain—*is Jane hurting herself*—before Jane continued, “And now he’s probably told my sister and Derek and everyone will know and fuck him.”

“Fuck him,” Sydney agreed, “for getting me called down to spy on you. *As if.*”

“Fuck him,” Cara echoed. “Is there a cut?”

Jane and Sydney fixed her with blank looks that said, plainly, *that is entirely besides the point.*

“The point,” Sydney said, “is that we can handle ourselves and just because we learn about math here doesn’t mean they have some kind of claim on our personal lives. Which are *ours.*”

“It’s no one’s fucking business,” Jane added, arms crossed over herself.

“Except for ours?” Cara tried, needing someone to tell her. The thought of Jane’s arms marked with scars was horrific, sickening: Cara knew those arms, knew their exact olive shade, dark in the summer and pale in the winter, had traced patterns on them with sharpies. A scar was permanent, a permanent change.

“Well now it’s everyone’s,” Jane said, not meeting her eye and not answering her question.

“Wait, who is Derek?” Cara asked, still trying to catch up. “Derek Sanders? Ilene’s friend?”

“What?” Jane’s face went blank.

“Yeah, you said Derek,” Sydney added.

“He’s no one, he’s Brian’s friend,” Jane mumbled, looking away, miserable. “I just didn’t want him to know.”
“Are you . . . are you into him?” Sydney looked baffled. “I thought you wanted Ryan.”

“Yeah, me too,” Cara echoed, glad at least that she wasn’t the only one confused.

“I don’t know, it’s not like that,” Jane was gearing up to tears again, Cara could tell. “Everything’s over with Ryan, okay?”

“But how do you not know?” she asked, knowing as she said it that her question would set Jane off again: it was too invasive, it was deliberately obtuse. Clearly, Jane didn’t know because she didn’t know how into her Derek was. An image of Jane, undressed and uncertain, being touched in the back of some football player’s car, came unbidden to Cara’s mind. She imagined a rough hand on Jane’s back. But Cara and her friends didn’t do things like that.

“Because I don’t, and you’re going to have to take my word for it because it’s not like you have a shred of experience to go by.”

Cara mentally corrected herself: she didn’t do things like that, because she was quiet and weak and forgettable. She shrunk away from the idea of the rough hand. She had nothing to say to that.

“Whatever. We just have to make sure Lea doesn’t say anything.” The jibe at Cara seemed to have shaken off Sydney’s confusion, putting her back in business mode.

“She won’t.” Jane said it shortly and certainly. Cara realized she’d misread Jane wanting to keep Lea out. Judging by Sydney’s expression, she had as well. Whatever was going on between Jane and Lea was still one more mystery unsolved then, one more understanding Cara wasn’t privy to.
Jane hopped down from the stage and headed towards the back door, hands in her pockets and arms hidden from view. Cara knew she was leaving without saying goodbye, and that they would have to let her. Jane might be headed towards Derek and there wasn’t a single thing she or Sydney could do about it.

When the back door had thudded closed behind Jane, echoing down the aisle of a now eerily silent church, Sydney turned back to Cara.

“We have to get her back with Ryan,” she said.

Just like that, gravity righted itself. Jane would be all right. And Cara had a purpose. She had no idea how she couldn’t have seen it before: Jane was upset about losing Ryan. That’s all that was happening. And it was fine, because Ryan still wanted her. Jane just couldn’t see it; Jane was insecure, just like Cara. So Sydney and Cara would get them to talk and make up, and then Jane’s new, ominous, erratic behavior would be things of the past, condemned to stay forever in one strange week.

“We can do that,” Cara said.

-LEA-

Jane called her again that night, but instead of the quiet intimacy of the last night there was a frankness Lea hadn’t expected.

“Brian Walker saw my arm and turned me into the guidance counsellor,” Jane said as soon as Lea picked up. “And now Sydney knows about it. And we kind of told Cara.”
There was the last of of their understanding, then. It had been ripped from them, by prying people. Brian. He was friends with her brother. “Do they know about me?” Lea asked.

“Of course not, I wouldn’t do that. It’s not them I’m most upset about though.”

Lea almost forgot to be offended that her own privacy was afforded only that small aside. “It’s that Derek might find out,” Jane continued.

It look Lea a second to realize she was referring to Derek Sanders—a friend of her brother’s, and Brian’s. A part of that glamorous group they all watched from afar. If it was Brian who called the counselor it seemed likely Derek would find out—and Ilene, for that matter. But Jane was trying to tell her something bigger than that.

“Are you and Derek a thing?” she asked, realization dawning.

“Sort of. We’ve been meeting up after school and hanging out.” Jane’s voice caught on the last word, and with a sick jolt Lea realized something else.

“Are you guys having sex?” None of them had even come close before. That world seemed at least a couple years away. Sixteen, maybe. Seventeen. There was a type of person at their school who had sex at fifteen, and they weren’t those types of girls. Or so Lea had thought.

“No.”

“Oh. So . . .”

“But we’re doing other things.”

“Oh. Okay.” Lea didn’t know what to ask next—is it good?, or was that a childish thing to ask? What is ‘other stuff?’ , or was that invasive? She settled on, “Why?”
Jane made a low whine through the phone, a kind of sing-song consideration.

“Because he wants to.”

Lea’s fluttery feelings about almost hugging Ryan that morning suddenly seemed like the height of childishness. Here was Jane, making such adult decisions. Lea felt afraid, like maybe Jane had given up something irretrievable, like maybe she was changed, but she didn’t know what it was. None of them were Puritans, none of them believed in guarding their virginity. So she couldn’t place why exactly her vision of Jane with Derek was so sickening.

“And because . . . ” Jane was continuing, still. “Because it’s kind of like on the phone. What it feels like, with him.”

Lea couldn’t sleep that night for wondering if the only reason Ryan and Jane weren’t dating was Jane’s need to hurt herself. She tried to picture them last year, and found an image of Jane, hanging out of the car on one of the county fair’s roller coasters, mouth open wide in laughter. Triumphant. That had been when her seatbelt broke, and she held on to the car in front of her to stay in. It was stories like that, that made Jane who she was. Lea knew if the same thing happened to her it wouldn’t be a cool story; it seemed, against all reason, the sheer force of Jane’s personality that kept her safe from harm and safe from puking.

Ryan had been sitting behind Jane. It was him who cried, not Jane, who had ridden high on the adrenaline for at least an hour after. It was Ryan who went pale and had to sit down for an hour, anxiety-ridden.
What that told Lea was Ryan might have been in love with Jane, but she wasn’t in love with him. She didn’t even look after him then; she’d run off with Brian and his friends instead, riding high on the mania and going on even more rickety-looking rides and scarfing down funnel cakes.

_It wasn’t reciprocated_, Ryan told her. And it wasn’t like Ryan should be marked undateable, should be mired in his middle school crush forever, right? No matter how hard she tried to imagine it, Lea couldn’t picture Jane being in love with Ryan. She felt off about the situation, but not because she was betraying her friend in that way. She couldn’t place her discomfort.

Lea thought again of what Jane said, that being with Derek was _like on the phone_. Like an illicit thrill, but deeper—not just transgression, but taking pleasure in hurting her body, which was something Lea hated. Something that was supposed to be beautiful. She was supposed to love her body, and sex was supposed to be about love. Choosing pain instead was the same thing in both cases after all, wasn’t it?

When her hand reached under her sheets to touch herself that night Lea thought not about Ryan, as she sometimes tried to, nor the pleasing blankness of sensation that took over, but instead imagined something hurting, imagined herself helpless. She imagined how profane and how sickening that would feel, if it hurt like hurting herself did. She came harder than she ever had before.

_Would you like to go out to dinner tonight?_
It was the first thing Lea saw when she opened her phone to shut off her alarm the next morning. The formality, the normalcy of it brought her crashing down from any residual thrill of her discovery the night before.

*This is what my life is like.*

It was oddly disheartening, considering that all Lea had thought she wanted for an entire summer was for Ryan to take her out to dinner. It was a bland wish.

*He’ll pick me up, and we’ll eat pasta, and then he’ll go home. Maybe, maybe there will be a brief kiss. But that’s all, because that’s all my life is, compared to Jane’s.*

*Things don’t happen to me.*

Lea’s thoughts caught on the kiss. She’d assumed she wanted that, but in the face of it actually happening she felt something in her stomach settle and then go dead, cold and grey. Not exactly the butterflies she’d wanted.

*I’m probably just nervous.*

Her phone alarm, which she’d snoozed, rang again and set off a new flurry of concern: what would she wear? what would she look like? Her cuts from the other night had scabbed over, leaving mottled brown and red flakes stretched across her thighs. It would have to be something long, something that would cover them, but not something that would hug them too tightly and break the scabs after she’d bandaged them. (Lea pictured herself getting up from the table and finding blood soaked through her jeans, trying to excuse it as her period, having to clean it up off a restaurant’s chair.)

She would wear a dress then, though Lea rarely wore dresses. Swishy skirts felt frilly and ridiculous, but she wasn’t skinny enough to pull off anything tight. After rifling through her closet she came up with a black corset top and ruffled black skirt.
The clock said not enough time to curl her hair, so she stuck it up in a ponytail and curled just two strands around her face. More time to focus on painting on her makeup, blending the tubes of colors patting them down with powder. Refining, defining.

At the end of it, with just five minutes left to run down to the bus, Lea looked in the mirror and examined her face. All her efforts, she felt certain, had failed. Her cheeks bulged out of their contour and her eyes disappeared into the thick swipe of black eyeliner. At one section of her neck, she could see where the foundation ridge ended. The effect was Jabba the hut trying to escape a bodysuit—her body, which she could not escape.

She thought about punching the mirror and feeling the satisfaction of glass crunching, reflection disintegrating, but the cliché of the idea sapped its strength before she could. It was better after all; how would she get ready for future dates, if she couldn’t see how bad the end result was?

When she slipped into her seat on the bus Lea let her cheek fall against the window and smear her blush; she had failed already. The date would go badly and then it would be over. She would be awful, and she wished she herself could be over.

It wasn’t until Lea got to school that she realized she never even texted Ryan back.

Yes pls. She still couldn’t comprehend turning him down after all this lead-up.

His reply came seconds later: *I’ll be at your place at 6.*
Lea never saw Ryan during the school day, making her morning routine useless. She did it all again when she got home, but to the same effect: too undefined of a person trying to look definitively pretty. It didn’t work.

Six o’clock rolled around and Ryan, to her surprise, rolled to a stop in front of her house in a shiny silver minivan.

“Since when are you old enough to drive?” she called out her front door, confused momentarily out of her general dread. She’d expected they’d walk to one of the two restaurants just ten minutes from her house.

Ryan poked his head out of the driver’s window and raised his eyebrows. “Since negative one year, about.”

“Smartass.”

“My parents taught me how last year since we travel so often. I’m not technically supposed to take the car without them, but . . . they’ll be at a fundraiser for at least the next few hours, so they won’t get a chance to notice.”

What if we get pulled over? she wanted to ask, but Ryan, from his vantage point on black upholstery, looked more worldly than she had ever before bothered to notice.

Right. I do like him, she reminded herself.

She clambered into the passenger seat and looked back at her house, separated by the faintly grubby windshield. If she was a stranger seeing her house through this glass—paneling appearing brownish and dappled—she would have, she thought, a better idea of who lived there than someone seeing the gleaming white it sported unobstructed. Her household had a trade system: her dad took care of the outside, and her mother neglected
the inside. No one ever brought it up, and Lea assumed that was because it made sense: trash from whence trash came, and all that. They were all just waiting to leave.

“So where are we headed?” she asked. “Somewhere far away from here to justify the car, I hope.”

“Never fear,” Ryan grinned. “I’ve got a plan.”

The first part of that plan involved getting to Columbus, which wasn’t too difficult. Ryan handled the freeways steadily, reading road signs Lea had never paid attention to and merging with ease. They talked about school and their classes—everything, Lea thought, they would have talked about if they’d be texting like usual.

Eventually Ryan pulled off into an exit and emerged into a crowded section of the city filled with squat buildings and fairy lights, following a small park in an oval.

“There’s a parking garage just over this way,” he explained, “and then there’s a really cool gallery just a block away. I figured I might as well give us something to talk about over dinner. Speaking of which, how do you feel about sushi?”

*Am I going to have to have smart things to say about the gallery?* The car, and the city, and Ryan’s words came together to tell Lea one thing: she was not in Ryan’s league. Maybe in Vernon they could be friends, when there weren’t many other options, but having stumbled out of that small space Ryan seemed to have grown in stature while Lea fell flat on her face. Lea’s idea of a night out was a concert and pizza. Her parents were not professors who talked about politics and ate sushi. She was not equipped for this.

“Never had it,” she answered.
“That’s exciting,” he smiled. “I picked out a great sushi place, but they have a whole Japanese menu so worst comes to worst, you can grab some teriyaki chicken.”

*Worst comes to worst.*

The gallery was nestled in a two story red building with a balcony and pillars that made Lea think of colonial times. It was pressed between a print shop and a coffee shop, and to her surprise was full of people.

She and Ryan entered and the room swung into darkness as soon as the door shut behind them. The walls were black, with the only light coming from installations behind the art. All of it seemed to be photographs, many of them dark. They reminded Lea of X-rays.

In the few minutes it took her eyes to adjust to the dimness, Lea felt heat radiate from the fuzzed lines of Ryan’s sweater, the sleeve just a hair beyond her own arm. It was almost touching, but not quite. He held still, and she wondered if he was about to make a move, to touch her arm or her waist, or if he was waiting for her to move. This was a date, after all. Wasn’t that what they were leading towards? But neither of them moved before their eyes adjusted to the darkness, greyed shapes of other people and sculptures coming into hazy view, and the moment was broken.

Lea wandered over to what seemed like the first display: a long row of photographs pinned up and lit from behind running along the far left wall. The first showed a woman strung up on a pole with her back to the camera, almost like she was about to be burned at the stake. A man in an old fashioned waistcoat examined her from the side.
“Sorry if this isn’t your thing. It’s a weird balance with these, like being critical versus exploitive?” Ryan had appeared beside her once again.

“What?”

“I mean, I didn’t want you to think I was creepy. I just like this gallery and hadn’t checked out the exhibit yet.”

Her gaze shifted down the long row of photographs and saw they all involved similar elements: dark shadows, lurking eyes. People trapped.

“No, I like it.” she said, a realization slowly piecing itself together in her mind. What had tied Ryan and Jane together, at least for a bit. Why Jane was avoiding him, and why she reacted so strongly to his name on the phone the other night. Jane and I decided we should keep some distance, he said. Not that he wanted distance, because he had been rejected, but that they decided, the wording more like separated parents making a custody agreement than a middle school couple. Like two people attracted to things that were bad for them in some way, in a way that misfired for Jane. Not that they were dating, but that they were united in something else: the closeness of being somewhere alone and dark together, what she had just felt as Ryan stood next to her.

It wasn’t attraction, but for now it might be better.

“Do you?” she asked, needing to be certain.

“Yes, honestly, I’m drawn to morbid things—”

“Like Jane is,” she asserted, cutting him off.

He paused. “Like Jane is a morbid thing, or like she’s drawn to morbid things too?”

She stopped to consider. “Both, probably.”
“Yes.”

“And you guys broke things off because she was trying to be healthier.”

“Yes.” Ryan’s shoulders were slumped forward and his mouth screwed up in a frown. He rubbed a hand along the back of his neck. For a second Lea left herself and saw him as she might as a stranger in passing: as a young, anxious boy, who was trying very hard to present himself well. He bit his lip and continued, “I was just trying to move on, I wasn’t trying to draw you into something—”

Lea cut him off with a kiss, right in the middle of the gallery. The relative darkness afforded a kind of privacy; though she sensed the grey outlines of people moving back and forth around them, they weren’t quite real. Ryan’s mouth, opened by instinct, moved against hers after just a second and she found to her surprise that kissing came easily, made a kind of sense. She would move her lips in one way and he another, and she would mimic him. His lips were chapped, she noticed, and he tasted like nothing more or less than saliva—recognizable but still new, somehow.

“Let’s find someplace and park your car,” she said.

“Okay,” he said, catching his breath.

Someplace ended up being the parking lot by Garfield Park, one of the fields and forests clustered between the city and their home.

Lea played catch and hide and go seek with her parents and brother there as a child, but she hadn’t been in years. The parking lot was empty.

There was a second after Ryan turned the engine off where they both sat in silence, waiting for the other to do something, when Lea thought that might be the end of
it, that they’d sit there for a minute and he’d drive her home, and found herself thinking that might be easiest after all. That she wasn’t ready.

But then he got out of the driver’s seat and opened the door to the back, with a creak as loud as a gunshot, and Lea thought about herself inside the car and him outside. Then she moved to the back over the console and felt the surprising weight of Ryan Porter settle over her, still breathing heavily, too warm in some places and too cramped in others, the smell of spit back in the air as they started moving against each other. She thought about how she knew what to do more than she thought she would. She thought about how that was all she was thinking about.

“Do you want to?” Ryan asked. Lea was furious to be brought back to her own headspace of relationships and preferences and choice. She wanted to focus only on the panting insistency of being in the back seat with a body on top of hers, almost knowing what to do next and letting it happen. But not because she wanted it.

“Harder,” was the only thing she could think of to say, because she knew it was something she was supposed to say, even though nothing much was happening yet. But then she stripped off her shirt, forgetting for a second to care about the way her skin rolled out or how pasty it looked in the low light, so off came her pants too before she could remember to worry about that. She went for his belt buckle first so he might not bother fumbling with the button up shirt, and to her relief he didn’t. And then he paused, like he wasn’t sure where to go next, and Lea knew there was supposed to be more to it than this. There were supposed to be more steps, and easing, and time. But that was exactly what she didn’t want, so instead she guided him into her and then it—sex—was happening, and at first it did hurt, almost in the way she’d hoped, but then the sharp
pressure faded to a low, uncomfortable friction, which was when she remembered it wasn’t supposed to be this dry and realized why that mattered, and hoped he couldn’t notice, and she found herself thinking that even though he was the only boy she’d seen even halfway naked in person, she couldn’t muster a reaction, and that she had to focus on panting like he was, so he wouldn’t get worried or stop, and she didn’t want to look him in the eye. But it didn’t take terribly long to be over and then it seemed best not to anyway, so she rolled back over to the front seat and focused on the sweat cooling on her skin, like an afterthought from her body, and thought how awkward it would be to maneuver her clothes back into place between the seat and the dashboard.

They drove back to her house in silence, Lea curled into a small apostrophe away from him in her seat as she thought how she didn’t feel so much different after all. She was almost satisfied in a way that had nothing to do with pleasure, but when she turned to look at Ryan, whose eyes were trained steadfastly on the road, she felt whatever had gone grey and dead inside her stomach earlier that day cement; no matter what she did or tried, she would not want Ryan like she was supposed to. She knew that now.

He pulled into her driveway and shut the lights off. “Can I call you later?” he asked.

“Do whatever you want,” Lea said, and slung out of the passenger’s seat, slamming the door on her way, not bothering to look back at what she knew would be a hurt face and hating herself for it.

From inside her house she watched him idle in the driveway for a couple minutes before backing out and driving off, and found pity but not longing, not even for the idea of who he’d been to her over the summer. But she also didn’t want to cut, and that was
good; she was drained. Being despondent after disappointing sex was grown up and worthy of sympathy, she felt. Being a fourteen year old girl who cut herself was nothing more than desperate.

She wondered if she would tell Jane about this.

-Sydney-

On Saturday morning Sydney woke feeling optimistic. Everything was under control. Not the slamming cabinet doors downstairs or the anxious chatter of her brother and sister in the room next door, but everything with her friends. She had Cara to help her set up Jane and Ryan, no matter if Lea wanted to run off and leave them all hanging. She could ignore a lot of text messages, but Lea would never ignore their first sleepover; it was at her own house, after all.

Sydney made sure to show up first, at least ten minutes ahead of time. They always gathered at Lea’s place because her parents would never yell at them for making noise; Sydney wasn’t sure they noticed the girls were there at all. Lea’s mom slept on the couch and her dad floated through the house like a ghost, fixing things and disappearing to his woodworking studio in the basement. So she knew it would be Lea opening the door.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” she decided to start with.

Lea’s face barely registered the jab. “Well hey to you too,” she said. Now that she wasn’t wearing any makeup, the dark circles under Lea’s eyes were clearly visible. “I’ve got a bag of oranges in the kitchen, want one?”
Sydney nodded and followed her back to the wooden kitchen table, a red netted bag ripped open with fruit falling out. Lea picked up the orange she’d been eating and returned to it, licking the juice off her fingers and staring out the window. After not speaking for so long, her silence was grating.

“I’ve never seen you so contemplative,” Sydney said, raising an eyebrow.

“Mm?”

Sydney wondered briefly if Lea might be one more addition to the list of friends to be concerned about, but decided against it. There was a cushion around Lea acting out: it was predictable, like it couldn’t go too far. Sydney didn’t have that sense about Jane.

“So, you hear anything about Jane and Derek?” Sydney tried.

Lea’s eyes widened, as if surprised by the question. “Yeah, and it’s none of your business. Don’t do your meddling thing.”

Sydney thought she should be taken aback by that, but found herself smiling. Sometimes it was nice to be known, to not have to do all the knowing. “Fuck you, my meddling thing got you your last homecoming date.”

Lea smiled too. “Yep, Aaron Russo. No points though, he was such an awkward dancer.”

“True. Fair. I cede.”

“You know, you didn’t even get yourself a date that year. Were you just pushing the bad dancers onto me?”

Sydney shrugged. “I didn’t like anyone.”

“I didn’t like Aaron Russo. Since when was that the point?”

“Of dating people? I thought that was kind of a prerequisite.”
It was Lea’s turn to shrug. “I was just kinda trying to get someone to like me, you know?”

Sydney didn’t, but then she thought of Jane and Derek she thought she might understand. She could tell by Jane’s face that there was something driving her far removed from liking him.

“Have you liked anyone recently?” Sydney asked.

Lea looked away. “No. I guess not.”

Cara showed up right on time, followed by Jane ten minutes late.

“I got in a fight with my parents,” Jane said by way of greeting. “The school called them. That counsellor, Mrs. Sage.”

“Fuck her,” Cara and Sydney said in unison. Lea only watched her, warily. Whatever hidden understanding was going on between Lea and Jane was seriously starting to get on Sydney’s nerves; they were all out of sync.

“My parents said people who need counselling are weak. We all get sad sometimes.” The last sentence was clearly mimicking her mother’s voice. “Stop eating so much food and you won’t be sad all the time. Don’t spread your personal problems around the school, it’s embarrassing to us. They almost wouldn’t let me come over here tonight.”

“Why . . . how do any two adult people think that?” Cara was incredulous. “My mom makes me take a depression screening test every few years. Which I think is excessive, but still.”

“They didn’t grow up here, you know? It’s just the way they see things.”
“So . . . what did you say?” Lea asked.

“I told them I didn’t talk to anyone and I wouldn’t.”

“And that made them happy?” Cara’s surprise had shifted to outrage, and Sydney sensed Jane flinch away from it.

“It’s just who they are, okay? Drop it.”

“It’s so messed up that they have the right to call your parents. It’s like tattling on you. As if they know anything about your life or your family. Like, for some people that call could have put them in real actual danger, you know?” Sydney was trying to divert attention away from Cara and the tension building there, and it worked.

“Right? How dare they,” Lea spit out. “If I was going through something I wouldn’t want some old counsellor who’s never had a problem in her life knowing about it.”

“But . . . “ Sydney could see Cara struggling with wanting to do the right thing and wanting to go along with them. “Don’t counselors help with that sort of thing? Like, if someone’s going through that, they might need help whether they want it or not.”

“So you think that person doesn’t have a right to privacy,” Jane said, quietly.

Some change took over Cara’s face then; her features relaxed and whatever anxious vibe she was giving off stopped. “No, I guess they do.” she said.

“But at least,” Sydney finished for her, “to choose where they want to turn.” She turned to look at Jane meaningfully: don’t forget, you promised to tell us.

Jane nodded back.

-CARA-
A right to privacy. They’d all moved outside after Jane finished telling them about her parents, and were sitting munching oranges on Lea’s driveway. The house was part of a cul-de-sac, and identical to the other bay window-filled two-stories around them: white with blue shutters and a straggling but green lawn. The driveway fanned out at the end to accommodate the sweeping circle of dead-end road. The sun was just starting to tilt down to sunset.

That made sense, Cara thought. She hated when her own jealousies and insecurities shone through, and knew she was a much less likeable person in her head than outside it. Jane had the right to that privacy as well. Especially if she was right, and the look Sydney and Jane traded meant everyone would know what was going on by the end of the night. Jane got to choose who would know her enough to help her.

As long as I’m part of it, she amended. Cara knew her better than anyone else, and would do more for her than anyone else. It didn’t make sense for Cara to be excluded, and she wouldn’t be, for Jane’s sake.

Feeling resolved, she turned back to the others. “You know, I don’t even like oranges that much.” She squinted distastefully at a stringy line of pith she peeled off her slice.

“Treason,” Sydney said; they always had oranges around at Lea’s house. If their group was a state it would be their official food, signed and passed. “But not as treasonous as whatever the hell Jane does to them.”

They all looked over at Jane, who was about to take a bite out of her fruit instead of pulling apart the wedges like the rest of them.
“Why would anyone eat an orange like that?” Cara asked, configuring her features into the most exaggeratedly judgmental expression she could manage.

“You guys are rude,” Jane whined. “You yell at me every year.”

“No, but seriously, why do you do that? Doesn’t the juice get all over your face?” Sydney asked, peering at Jane like she was a difficult math problem.

“Not if I’m careful . . .”

“I don’t think it would be possible to bite carefully enough to avoid that,” Cara said, settling next to Sydney to watch Jane, still poised with orange in hand.

“I don’t know, it’s just what my parents do,” Jane muttered.

Sydney shrugged and turned back, but Jane’s habit niggled at Cara. Why can’t Jane just do what’s easiest, do what the rest of us do? The thought came to her, with a spark of rage. Everything would be fine if Jane wasn’t making everything so difficult for herself.

“Weeeird,” Cara said, waggling her eyebrows in a way she knew would annoy Jane. She leaned back until her head rested on Sydney’s lap, and Sydney began to pet her hair.

See? We don’t need you when you’re being weird. Cara was sure suddenly that Jane’s problems could be fixed if Jane just wanted to be like them instead of the other way around.

“Would you guys, like, leave me alone?” Jane stared furiously down at her orange, scratching little veins off it one by one.
“Jane?” Cara hadn’t expected Jane to get angry so quickly. She looked to Lea and Sydney for support—surely Jane’s overreacting?—but both avoided her eyes. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Whatever.” Jane stood up, stretching out her long legs. With a violent, jerking motion, she threw her orange into the cul-de-sac cement. It splattered over the ground like road kill. Jane walked towards it and they, instinctively, followed.

“You know, that made a great sound,” Lea said, looking towards Jane, who nodded.

“Try for another?” Sydney asked, tossing an unpeeled orange towards Jane, who caught it roundly in her cupped hands.

“I feel like we’re bruising it,” she said.

“I mean, we are,” Cara offered, testing the water to see if Jane was still angry. Jane ignored her, but it didn’t seem malicious. She was fascinated, staring at the fruit.

Jane tossed it to Lea, who threw to Cara, who passed to Sydney. By the next round it thudded to a halt in Cara’s hands and squished, full to bursting like a new blister. Her hands smelled pleasantly of citrus, which stung her open cuticles. The orange slipped out of her hands and squashed to a pile on the ground.

They all watched the spray of orange guts arcing out on the concrete evaporate away under the sun.

Jane wandered closer to it again and grabbed small pile of orange mush, putting it to her lips silently, like communion. Cara waited for someone to call her on it, to say Jane, that’s disgusting, come back here, but none of them did.
Cara knew then she wanted to be the first to join her. Closer to the orange, the pile looked less like road kill, and the burst fruit didn’t look much different than it did peeled on a table. She dipped her finger and trailed a stringy line of clear orange bits with it, feeling her torn cuticles reignite, and popped it into her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Jane, meaning it more truthfully now.

Sydney and Lea had joined behind them, taking little bits of the orange each, like hunters dividing a kill.

“You know, if this was a faerie orange, we’d all be trapped now,” Cara said, the solemn atmosphere reminder her of books filled with goblins and witches and myths.

“Trapped together,” Sydney shrugged.

“Trapped in the underworld.” Lea spread out her fingers dramatically, like she was joking, but it didn’t quite carry into her voice. Behind her, the sun had sunk just an inch lower, dimming the light and lengthening the shadows. Chills pricked up Cara’s arms.

“I can see why some people choose that,” Jane said, and Cara questioned for the first time whether she actually wanted to know what Jane had to tell them.

They all got cold after that, so they decided to build a fire with the wood from Lea’s backyard. One by one to accommodate the narrow footpath they trudged into the forest and scavenged as much kindling as they could manage. Lea dragged a box of scrap wood from her dad’s workshop in the basement. They each returned—slightly scratched and muddy—with a few handfuls of twigs.
It was Lea who made a passable tent out of them and started trying to strike a
match. “I swear to God my brother does it the exact same way,” she grumbled.

“Probably the fire is sexist,” Cara said, patting her head.

They tried adding chip bags eventually—my brother promised it works, Lea said.

“Could we convince you to call your brother outside for once?” Sydney asked,
eyeing the thin, rapidly extinguishing trail of smoke.

“Any excuse to see my brother,” Lea grumbled.

“You caught me. Matt is the only one.” Sydney deadpanned. “I’m actually only
here as an excuse to leave some calligraphed Neruda poems for him.”

Lea rolled her eyes and glared; Cara knew Matt’s popularity was a sore spot for
her. She could relate to getting left behind.

“You should take that as a compliment,” Jane said, casting a mock-appraising eye
over Lea. “You and your brother look a lot alike.”

Lea snorted. “Which means I have man-features.”

Stop fishing for compliments.

“Nah, it means you’re hot.” Sydney batted her eyelashes and leaned over to rest
her head on Lea’s shoulder. “Verified hotter than your brother by virtue of being a girl.”

“We are all pretty hot,” Jane said, stretching out her legs and settling back on her
elbows.

None of them ever say that about me. Cara found herself desperate to hold onto
the sense of camaraderie they’d had after the orange. Going back to normal only meant
being anxious again. She was sitting hunched over her knees and became acutely aware
of how her stomach molded into rolls over her belly button—one folded over the other, like a fat pair of lips. She didn’t want to move in case she called attention to it.

“Speak for yourself;” she said to Jane, and didn’t even notice she was fishing until she’d already said it, without thinking. It was the natural response, dictated from hundreds of years of girls interacting with their friends: always deflect, because it’s polite to elevate others over yourself. But it was also true: Jane had a kind of self-possession that couldn’t be cultivated. Even if she was messy, it was intriguing; she believed in her own importance and made everyone around her believe it too.

“If you’re all done complimenting each other, we got the fire going,” Sydney cut in. A small but growing tuft of orange had worked its way up the tent of twigs. It was just starting on the wood scraps.

“The sweet smell of ineptitude,” Lea said, shoving three marshmallows on a burnt stick into the fire.

“We got it going, didn’t we?” Cara followed suit.

“I, uh, I might have used the tiniest bit of lighter fluid while you weren’t watching.”

“Shit, you had me thinking we’d moved up in the world of survival,” Sydney said, licking her first marshmallow off the stick.

“Yeah, no. But it’s not even really cheating, because God willing, we will rely on lighter fluid for fires for the rest of our natural lives,” Lea said.

“Yes, let’s take a second to pray to Jesus for lighter fluid and it’s continued accessibility in Lea’s home,” Jane intoned.
“My very Jewish house is going to evict your ass,” Lea said.

They laughed and sat around the fire for a while, listening to the fire crackling and the cicadas humming behind them in the trees. Every few minutes Lea added a new block of scrapped wood to the fire and sparks flew up around them. Sometime without their noticing it had gone almost entirely dark.

Cara’s back was exposed to the cold through her tank top even as she sweated facing the fire. She wondered if she could turn herself, like she was tanning, or if that would be strange; everyone else must have been cold too, but they stayed put.

“This feels nice,” Jane said eventually. None of them answered.

Cara could sense them all invisibly jump to attention, swiftly as soldiers in training. Jane’s soft statement grabbed their quiet and mangled it; for a second they’d all been able to enjoy simply being near each other, like usual. Now Cara remembered it wasn’t at all like usual; everything had been off since high school started. Jane had that cut, and Derek, and Lea was disappearing. They were all on edge with each other.

“Fires are so fascinating,” Lea said suddenly. She was close to the fire pit, gazing into it hungrily. Jane joined close behind her, hovering. From across the fire their faces fell into shadow as Jane reached towards the flame. Her fingers brushed on top of it, brushing the flickers from side to side.

Jane and the cut. Cara felt on the edge of a change, and took a moment of that blankness to wish she felt nauseated; if she threw up, there would be vomit soaking into the ground in testament to her feeling.

“Can you guys stop?” she squeaked out. Jane drew back her hand.

“Leave us alone,” Lea said, and Cara noted the us.
But Jane, blessedly, moved back next to Cara. “Don’t you just need to touch it?” she asked.

Cara tried to look at the fire the way Jane and Lea had: with awe, with need, and a deep-reaching fascination. It was almost small by then, feasting on the burned-out remnants of their kindling and scrap wood, at a stage of staying lit more out of habit than because there was fuel. It was warm, and beautiful, Cara supposed—bright and ever-changing. People were supposed to think fire was pretty.

A memory from last year’s biology sprang to her mind: fire had most of the basic characteristics of life. Fire grew, was hungry for growth. And take a burning stick out of the fire pit—that was reproduction. But there were no cells. All the right functions, but it was made of the wrong stuff.

She thought of reaching out her hand, but her gut squelched down in a deeply ingrained fear response: Do not touch. And she didn’t want to.

“Not really,” she settled on. It was strange disagreeing with something Jane set out for her; Cara never disagreed with a leading question.

“Could you tell us why you want to?” Sydney asked.

“Sydney, give it a rest.”

They all sat in silence for a while until the fire died out. It was Jane who spoke first.

“You know, I bet we could walk to the school from here,” she said, gesturing back towards the woods bordering her yard. They all understood she meant the willow tree: something private, something theirs.

“Let’s go,” Lea said, so they all headed back into the woods.
-Lea IV-

Heading towards the tree was a return, and Lea could sense her friends all felt it too. The woods crowded around them and towered overhead, making them claustrophobic and lost at the same time. They’d never been out so late without real flashlights, and their phone lights weren’t helping much.

“It’s a full moon,” Sydney said.

*Of course it is.*

Lea thought about what she’d said to Ryan: *I wouldn’t be alive without Sydney and Jane and Cara.* It was true, but now they’d never know it. Whatever Lea had to say about feeling disgusting and restless was nothing more than what they’d read in every depressed blog post online since they’d first seen social media. There was nothing interesting about being a teenage girl who hated herself. But there was always something interesting about Jane.

Lea didn’t know how Jane pulled it off. But she did, and now whatever Lea could add to that would lose its potency. Unless, of course, she brought up Ryan. But Lea’s feelings about their encounter were still in too much of a jumble to even begin to unravel. She’d refused to think about it, except to wonder if she had lost something in the dark, undefinable way she’d been afraid Jane had, when talking about Derek.

Maybe, she settled on. *But nothing I would have kept for long.* If Ryan didn’t exist in the world as a person she would have to see again, Lea might have pushed the entire thing out of her mind.
Eventually the tree came into view, its branches hanging in the shadows like heavy curtains.

“Will it be too dark to see underneath?” Cara asked, but no one answered. They’d come all this way, after all.

Jane was the first to dip under the lowest hanging leaves. “You can see enough,” she called. When Lea followed she could see why: the moon was visible, bright and full, between a gap in the highest branches. It cast a pale light on them all.

Lea noticed that when it fell into the shadows, Jane’s face looked hollowed-out, like a skull.

“I feel like we should give the tree something,” Jane said, and Lea nodded; the branches felt like protection against the darkness.

“I still have an orange in my bag,” Cara called. She moved up to the base of the trunk and placed it, gingerly, on the ground. “I almost feel like we should smash it like the others.”

A sharp crack echoed through the branches and a pulverized mess of orange replaced the round fruit. For a second Lea thought, wildly, that the tree had grabbed the offering itself, but then she saw Jane had kicked it.

“Felt right,” was her only explanation, and then Jane continued, pacing around the tree. “So where to begin.” From one side of the trunk her face hit the moonlight and was mostly visible; from the other, Lea could only make out her eyes, like slits.

“You all remember Ryan Porter?” Jane eventually continued, and Lea’s breath caught in her chest. Being pretty sure she’d figured out what happened between them was
a lot different than being told definitively, and if it was different, Lea was screwed. The window of acceptable time to tell Jane had officially closed.

“Yes,” Cara said. “Of course.”

“So we were close last year because we had advisory, and we were friends, and one day he gave me this playlist. And some of the songs were about being wrong. Like, really wrong. And I thought, I thought he’d figured me out,” she let out a dry laugh. “But turns out he hadn’t figured anything, because he was just sharing music. But I realized he felt like that too.”

She paced backwards, so that her face wasn’t less visible. Lea wasn’t sure if she had done it on purpose or not.

“Wrong as in, I don’t feel right. I feel one thing strongly out of nowhere, and then it goes away and I can’t even remember having felt it. Like, I couldn’t if I tried and when I do I’m trying to understand a stranger.”

She stopped again and started pacing, moonlight shifting on and off of her face in streaks, and Lea realized her run of empathy with Jane was gone, their contest finished: this was somewhere Lea had no idea how to follow her. Lea knew why she did everything she did to herself, and none of it was that mysterious.

“I don’t even know how to go on right now because I can’t stand you all thinking of me as wrong like that.”

“We wouldn’t,” Lea said, even though she realized she just had. Unfollowable was a kind of wrong. Then she wondered why Jane could get away with fishing for reassurance so well; none of them could be annoyed at that.
“Like sometimes I wake up and I’m bleeding and I know I’ve done it but I don’t even remember doing it.”

Silently, to the side, Sydney had begun to cry. Lea could only imagine what that sounded like to her, that lack of control. Sydney would rather die, Lea knew it instinctively.

“Come here,” Jane commanded, and they all walked around the willow trunk to the other side, where two faces had been gouged deeply into the wood. The first was a furrowed brow and staring eyes, a grim-set mouth. Lea could imagine it gritting its teeth. The second was staring eyes and a wide-open mouth, like it was screaming. 

Mourning, maybe. It was like twisted version of the tragicomic masks. “It’s this,” she said. “Like they’re just always there, and I don’t know when I’ll be them and not me.”

They all stared at the grotesque slashes in the tree, their tree. Goosebumps spread up Lea’s arms; they were so alien. So this was why Jane wanted them at the school.

“But have you ever hurt yourself on purpose?” Lea asked, desperate to bring the conversation back to a level she understood. Jane locked eyes with her for a second, and they shared a small moment of whatever understanding they’d had on the phone; it was gone now, because Jane had told too much about herself. But it had been there, and they both knew Lea knew the answer already.

*Why?* Lea wanted to ask. *Why are you so badly off when you have everything you could want.* Of course it wasn’t about that, Lea knew better. But still.

“Sometimes.” Jane turned to the others, because she was addressing them now.

“Like it’s punishment, because I did something awful and then I wake up and realize it
was awful. But then that makes me feel better, so then later it’s just to make me feel better.”

With a sick swoop in her stomach, Lea wondered if Jane meant what she said, or if it was one of the things Jane would say and feel, and then forget later. *Jane or the mask?* Lea realized Jane had been right, that they would all view her with some kind of suspicion now; they would never suspect Jane. But now none of them knew exactly who they were speaking to.

“And Derek?” Sydney asked.

“He’s just some guy who knows he’s too cool to date me and so I blow him in the back of his car sometimes and feel like shit about it.”

With a jolt, Lea realized then that she had done *more than Jane*. That she had some claim to experience, finally, that was her own. It was almost worth it.

“So what was Ryan then?” Sydney asked.

“Just someone I talked about this with until I got too disgusted with myself and thought that if I could get away from him, maybe, all these feelings would stop.” Jane’s shoulders slumped down. “It was stupid. I was awful to him.”

“But . . .” It was the first time Cara had spoken, and Lea could practically see the wheels churning in her head, trying to keep up. “But do you really want to die?”

Lea had thought nothing more Jane said that night could shock her, but she knew from the way her stomach dropped and clamped at that last word—*die*—that she had been wrong. If Jane wanted to kill herself Lea didn’t know how to stop it; *how could you possibly help someone who feels like a different person all the time?*
“No.” Jane said. “Yes. I’m scared, death is scary, but I want this all to stop and sometimes I think I need it to.”

“That’s good, be scared of death, please.” Cara let out a short huff of a laugh and Jane gave her a small smile. Cara knowing what to say was the last thing Lea had expected. “Can you promise us you won’t?” Cara asked.

Lea wanted to laugh at how they were all refusing to say the word, but couldn’t quite manage it: suicide. It was too harsh. If anyone said it it’d burn onto their skin.

“Did Ryan help, maybe?” Sydney asked. “I mean, if you’re spiraling when you’re missing him then . . . ?”

*Stop saying his name.* Every time they did and Lea didn’t say anything was an inch deeper her betrayal ran.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” Jane said. “He was better for me than fucking Derek.”

“Okay,” Sydney nodded, as if considering. “God, as if Mrs. Sage could help you with this.”

It was like the dam being broken; they burst into hysterical laughter. With the faces staring down at them it was half absurdity and half fear: those faces were horrifying enough to eat Mrs. Sage whole, so beyond her comprehension they’d be. Beyond theirs too, but less so, and that made them bold. They knew Jane, and so they must know at least a little about the faces. But then there was also fear that the faces were too horrifying, in ways that flooded their imaginations with images of straight jackets and needles and the dim, flickering corridors of hospitals in horror movies.

“We’ve got you,” Cara promised. Sydney and Lea nodded: they would not leave Jane to anyone else, who wouldn’t try to understand. They would handle it themselves.
They all stood in silence for a bit, staring around the little circled they’d formed.

“We should go back inside. I’m freezing.” Jane said eventually, and ducked under the branches, knowing they’d follow.

-Cara V-

Before she bent to follow Jane, Cara fell behind her friends and took one last look at the faces in the tree. Deep gouges in the pale brown, flaking bark carved out a surprisingly light inside. It wasn’t clean lines, but dozens of cuts scored out down the trunk to make their points, hacked out viciously.

Cara wondered absently what Jane had used to make these mark and then realized it with a sick jolt. She knew, intimately, immediately, that whatever razor Jane used to cut her wrist was what had made these faces. A fleck of red caught her eye and Cara was nauseatingly certain she was looking at Jane’s own blood, mixed into the tree, but looked close and realized it was only a trick of the light. There was nothing there.

Still, there was the vision of Jane hacking away at the tree, making her own faces there with a kind of violence she then turned on herself. Jane wanting to cut out her own face.

Cara reached out a hand and ran a finger down each mask, one at a time. It was a promise of some sort, she just didn’t know what yet.

-Sydney V-

They all followed Jane; of course they did. Like children trailing the piper, none of them looking at each other. It was in single file like they’d walked into the woods, but Sydney
knew it wasn’t for anything near so practical a reason; none of them wanted to look at each other and see the suspicion on their faces—suspicion of Jane. None of them wanted to see that. Because they would all have betrayed their promise as soon as they did. But for now, as long as none of them looked, they’d be okay.

-Jane I-

It was like static buzzing in your head, but it was pain, not static, and it never stopped. It was like when someone played music next door, and it was just loud enough that you couldn’t concentrate, but the longer it was there the louder it sounded. It was like drowning, the panic, the kind of panic that numbs—but also like you were underwater, like you were getting everything through a filter, and you couldn’t see past the surface. But you knew it was there. The surface. Your life. Your friends.

And your friends kept talking to you, like you were standing next to them, only why couldn’t they see you were underwater?

It was like pain, but it wasn’t anywhere. It was in you, but it wasn’t anywhere. Nowhere to ice, stitch up, grow a callous over.

It was like waking up all the time in the middle of the day, not remembering why you’d done what you’d done. Not knowing if you wanted what you wanted, or if you’d be able to get up at all.

It was like waking up with the stomach flu, and thinking you’d rather die than live like that, only it didn’t get better.

At least they still followed her out. At least she still had that, for now.
It was like actually wishing one of them would feel it. It was like actually being that horrible, like not being able to love right anymore.
SECTION II

-as combined-

As they passed out from under the tree a wisp of cloud passed of the moon and the night came swooping down on them like a bird of prey.

They came even with each other and joined hands, but Jane stayed walking ahead. She didn’t want to look back at them. They knew this. They kept their faces blank in case she did.

Now the tops of the trees seemed to bow towards them, ushering them quickly out. You’ve seen what you came here to see, they imagined the trees saying, You saw the faces. They had. The faces were why the trees bowing and speaking made sense to them, a reality outside of the daylight. They had seen it. And now they were rushed out like one long, deformed birth back into the world. They were something new now. Charged with a duty. They didn’t know what but they watched Jane’s back for it. Her feet, moving quickly over the ground.

She’s on edge, Sydney thought. The screaming face.

She won’t look at us, Cara thought. The grim face.

I see those two expressions surge and crash across her face, Lea thought.

They knew these thoughts but didn’t speak them. They squeezed hands instead, and felt each other’s goosebumps prickle against their own. They weren’t sure how long they walked back.

At the edge of the trees back to Lea’s house a porch light flickered on.

“Jane?” a deep voice called. The sound was harsh after the long trudge of leaves and crickets and shallow breathing. “Your brother said you were here. Where the hell
“d’ya go?” it called, and Jane walked first into the half-circle of light and showed her face. Her eyes were dry, her expression set neutral, and they were proud of her for that.

The voice called towards them again, closer. “You runnin’ away from me?” It laughed, sharply. Then it was in the light as well, a tall frame and sharp features, grinning sideways. It was Derek.

“Uh, no.” Jane’s skin tinged pink and she looked down, all the terror and fury from the tree folded up and packaged with a bow, shoved far away from her. He could have this effect when none of them could.

“Well come on then, I was just leaving.” He motioned with an arm carelessly and slouched toward his car, a tan Camry in the driveway littered with small dents.

They waited just behind the yard, muscles tensed, waiting for Jane to tell them what to do.

She turned back. “Catch you guys later, I guess,” she said, and followed Derek back. The passenger door slammed hard and the engine roared to life, along with it the lights that flashed on and froze Cara and Sydney and Lea in place.

For a second the light hit them and they didn’t even blink, staring down the car that had just swallowed their friend, the harsh swathes of glare off the headlights crackling on their skin. They were powerful.

Surely now that they were seen, they thought, he would have to stop and give Jane back to them. And they would go out and meet him in the middle of the ring of light and take Jane’s hand when she reached out, and they would usher her safely behind them. And they would throw fists like playing catch, like with the oranges, passing his shoot of spine and juts of elbows and flopping weight of a head from one to the other until he
would fall hard, to bounce and skid and inch down the pavement, and then their kicks would find him and they would mirror Jane’s, and his voice and his smile would mirror the pulped mass of orange fruit scattered around the yard, the driveway, the woods—his gulps of stringy blood would be like pith. And they would stoop down to feel it and taste it, and they would leave the yard with red-stained grinning mouths and blood fresh like juice on their tongues, and then it would be Jane’s turn to follow them, untouched and unbloodied in their wake.

But the car pulled out of the driveway and the headlights swung away from them, unattached, dulling the fantasy, and they were left hand in hand in a row, each letting the feel and the taste of it slip away, swearing they’d be quicker next time.

-Cara-

Cara didn’t sleep that weekend, turning over the night at the tree again and again, examining it from every angle until she could have recited everything Jane said like a monologue. She didn’t eat either, waking up in the morning and feeling a lightness in her skin, in her stomach, that made it all seem more manageable. Then as the day crept on and her stomach started to curdle in on itself, she’d give in by evening and stuff herself with bread and peanut butter, whatever she could secret away in her room from her parents, pretending to have a cold so she wouldn’t have to talk too much. Words filled her up too, the sound of her voice. And by the end of the day, the weight of the food and the words and Jane’s monologue in her head would drag her to the ground, where she’d lie in bed and think some more, trying to imagine the faces on the trees into some kind of sense. She couldn’t, so she started talking to them instead.
Cara had arguments with angry, detached Jane and pleaded with the wild, upset Jane. She told stories to the first and grew enraged at her lack of response. She held the second as she cried and rubbed her back, up and down, pads of her palm brushing lightly over skin. That gave her an idea, and she named them Down and Up. Down for Jane’s unresponsive, irritable face. The grim mouth mask. Up for wild Jane, who was upset and haughty. The mourning mask. She wanted to visit them, but was afraid she’d be seen by Jane on the way there. It would be like getting caught sneaking into Jane’s room and going through her drawers.

Then she was furious with Jane for stealing one of the only places that felt like her own. Then she decided the names were stupid, and abandoned them.

On her desk the pile of textbooks and binders she needed to read and fill loomed, but she tried to crack open her history book and the masks started talking in her head. *What if somehow Jane can sense what I say to them,* she thought, and it didn’t seem any stranger than anything else she’d thought over the weekend, so she couldn’t ignore it. The book went back into the pile. The hours of work she’d accumulated just that week hit the double digits, and neglecting her Monday assignments would turn her beginning grades into sharp, resounding failures. Dimly Cara thought that this weekend might be the point she looked back to in four years as the moment she lost the chance of going to college.

But she couldn’t care about that too much, because suddenly she understood her best friend was in a long process of dying.

Cara shouldn’t have been surprised when the next morning in English her head felt stuffed with cotton. Two hours total of sleep, and a reflection paper that existed only on
crumpled notebook paper she’d scrawled over in the hallways before class. Cara discretely folded it away in her backpack when Ms. Frank came around to collect papers; no first impression at all was better than that mess of a paper. Her teacher pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows but didn’t say anything. Then she moved on and Cara’s eyelids thudded shut like drawbridges clanging into place, and she felt her head fall forward almost against her will. She needed to sleep so badly.

“Same,” someone said next to her, but she wasn’t sure for a second because she thought she might have dreamed it. Either a second or five minutes later, she thought to open her eyes and check.

Ryan was in his usual layered and preppy style, but bags like deep hollow bruises hung beneath his bleary eyes. A pimple, red and angry, poked out of his forehead, and Cara wondered if he usually used concealer.

“Looks like it,” she said, widening her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose, trying to force adrenaline into her system.

“Ouch.” He looked away like he was actually hurt.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m too tired to function.”

“It’s cool.” He smiled back and Cara thought he meant it. “Coffee?”

She grabbed his thermos and took a long gulp. It was still hot, and bitingly bitter. It was also warm and she remembered what being what being alive felt like for just a second until it faded again. “Wish that lasted longer.”

Ryan didn’t miss a beat. “I’d disembowel a man for instantly-acting coffee.”

It was a bit specific, but the actual coffee was too slowly acting for Cara to press it.
“Okay, quiet, we’re going into John Knowles now,” Ms. Frank said, dimming the lights and turning on the projector to a slideshow. The first screen was a blank blue slide with “John Knowles” in big white letters.

“Sleep through this and we can run away to the woods after class,” he whispered over to her.

Her heavy head told her she would most definitely sleep through the class. Cara was awake enough to realize that she wanted the excuse to go though, even if it was just to get a better grasp on Ryan. She’d promised Sydney to get him back with Jane, after all. And maybe that was what she promised the masks. The stakes were so much higher now.

It wasn’t too hard to sneak out of school in the middle of the day, Cara found, although her heart raced and she actually thought she was going to be sick when the back doors slammed shut and a loud voice called out behind them—but it was only someone working on the roof calling out to someone on the ground below them, on the other side of the building and far away.

It turned out that all you really had to do was follow Ryan Porter as he strolled into biology and told Mrs. Weber that he was going to run over to his parents’ lab to work for the day, and was it all right if Cara came with him to work on a project?

“To be fair, it isn’t exactly sneaking out,” Cara said, although she was impressed. She’d never noticed Ryan having a sense of authority like that before. She wanted one herself.

“Yeah, but it worked.”
“Won’t she ask your parents if you were in the lab though?” Cara didn’t want to be so anxious about skipping class, but she couldn’t help it. If her grades were already ruined she didn’t want to sink even further down in her teachers’ estimation.

“She might, but I’ve been there all weekend and I’ve gotten a bunch done, so they’ll think I have been. She’s not trying to catch me out or anything,” he laughed. “Our high school isn’t a prison, clichés aside.”

“Once Lea had detention for a week because she wore a Marilyn Manson t-shirt to school. We’re not all family friends with everyone there.”

“A *Marilyn Manson* shirt?” Ryan burst out laughing.

Cara elbowed him in the side and he hit a tree, not too hard. “Shut up, Lea likes what she likes.”

“Sorry. That wasn’t nice. It’s just been a weird weekend.” He brushed a few dry leaves off his sweater.

Cara realized that even though they were on a more winding path than usual, they were headed towards the willow tree. It was surreal being back in the daylight, taking a different path and taking it with someone who wasn’t one of her friends. It was almost unthinkable that someone else knew about the tree and used it already, before they’d even graduated.

The first time Cara met Jane, Jane had taken her to this tree and read her poetry. That moment was still why Cara liked to write. Sometimes Cara thought she couldn’t even remember who she’d been before they’d met, like she was just a blank territory with Jane’s suggestions mapped on, filled in by Lea and Sydney as they perched around the branches of that same spot.
“Where’re we going?” she asked.

“There’s this willow tree pretty close by I like to read in. It was kind of my thing with Jane last year. I still like to use it sometimes, even though.” He paused and sighed a little, then hit the trunk of the tree next to him. It didn’t look hard, but his fist made a solid connecting sound and when he pulled his fist away it was mottled with scraps of bark. Ryan shrugged as if trying to play off the show of emotion, but Cara could tell he was upset.

For the first time Cara realized she had run away from the school and into the woods where no one knew she was with a guy she didn’t really know. There was no one around them, and he was angry. The idea of danger was unthinkable until she’d thought it, but then every image she’d ever seen of a woman trapped, looking like a deer caught in headlights, flashed to her mind. There were a lot of images. A thrill of fear trickled coldly down her spine.

*But we weren’t deer in Derek’s headlights,* she thought. She remembered the feeling of the light crackling on her skin with her friends warm in hand, remembered staring down the car and knowing, *knowing* there was something they’d be able to do about it next time.

“Watch it,” she said, amazed even by that small instance of daring. *Authority.* Maybe she could have that as well.

Ryan actually looked chastened. “Sorry.”

Cara didn’t think either of them could name precisely what he was sorry for.

They’d come to a spot in the path where the trees thinned out enough to show the willow’s long trailing leaves.
“I don’t want you to think I’d be violent towards Jane.” Ryan continued. “I would never, and I don’t blame her at all for anything that happened. It’s just hard, losing her, you know?”

Now almost at the tree, the skinny trunks of saplings and tall oaks alike parting like guards before them, Cara saw the leaves were tinted and turning yellow. Some had already fallen to the ground, listing on top of the crunchy blanket already there. Summer really was ending.

It was a strange kind of attraction, knowing the faces were there—wanting to look at them again, but alone. Wanting to dip under the soft faerie-like blanket of pale yellow droplet leaves to see something grotesque. For if Cara was being honest, she knew that was what the faces were: abnormal, damaged mutations. Something was wrong with Jane, and it was them.

She and Ryan spread their arms to part the thin vines of leaves like curtains, and then the carvings were staring Cara and Ryan down with their intense, desperate gazes.

In that moment Cara couldn’t quite feel the wrongness of them, though, because they were also, irrefutably, Jane. And Cara loved Jane. She wanted the masks not to have existed, and she also loved them. She didn’t know what to do with that.

It’s just hard, losing her, you know? Cara did. She felt it, just as she felt Jane slip away in the car with a boy who didn’t care about her. In that moment she felt as connected to Ryan as she had to her friends that night, united in purpose. She and Ryan just wanted Jane to get better.

It wasn’t until she reached over to grab his hand, an apology for having shoved him earlier, that she noticed he was staring. Ryan hadn’t seen the carvings before.
“Jesus, those are fascinating,” he said. There was a tiny moment of comfort in knowing that Ryan hadn’t recognized Jane in them, that that much intimacy was with Cara and her friends alone.

“They are,” she said. “I like watching them.” It would be true soon enough.

“Your whole group, huh?” he asked, shaking his head while his eyes remained rooted on the willow trunk and the marks gouged in it.

“What?” Cara thought for a second that she had been wrong, and he knew everything.

“Sorry, just—morbid. You all kind of like this stuff.” He shrugged. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. It’s probably why I get along with you guys—Jane, and you, and Lea. I was kind of trying to break the pattern there but it’s not really any use.”

Cara watched his face screw up, and for a second she thought he was about to scream, or punch something again, but then Ryan’s face smoothed over and the moment ended. For the first time Cara found herself wondering what Jane really meant when she said Ryan was bad for her.

Ryan took off sprinting and bolted up the trunk, feet digging into the bark to the left of the faces and propelling himself up to some of the thicker branches.

“Since when are you friends with Lea?” Cara called after him, taking her time climbing but ending up near him on a lower hanging branch.

“We had a few classes together,” he shrugged, then started rummaging in his messenger bag. He pulled out a thin hardcover that looked like it’d been through a few garage sales. It’s tattered jacket was a grungy white with a swath of mountain cut through the middle. “By the way, I just finished this. I think you’d love it.”
He flipped it open to a dog eared page and read a few stanzas of a poem. As he spoke, Ryan imbued his voice with a deepness and urgency Cara had never heard before in poetry, a far cry from the dry and halting recitations of students reading out loud in middle school classes. She couldn’t follow the meaning exactly, but felt something like it: a low, deep seated sadness flowing like magma through the words, moving her forward with it.

“I love it,” she said, hoping he wouldn’t ask her to explain any further. She couldn’t.

“I’m glad.” He closed the book and passed it over to her. “No rush on that, I don’t need it back any time soon.”

“Why do you like it?” she asked, hoping the question wouldn’t bother him in the same way it would bother her.

It didn’t seem to. There was his authority again, a boy who’d talked about books with people and read the New York Times every morning. “You can’t describe why a lot of things happen. People are complicated. But some people can describe emotions like they’ve photographed them, and that makes sense to me. I’m not good at that—people, interacting. So this helps.”

Cara could see that now: Ryan belonged somewhere, at a university or a publishing house or a film set, making important and educated choices, but he didn’t belong with people really. She wondered if she was the same way, and her body shutting down when she tried to speak to people was just it trying to tell her that.

“How do you accept that?” she asked. “All I do is spend time trying to be normal. I don’t know how to stop trying so hard.”
“I don’t either.” he said. “Honestly, I mess things up a lot and I can’t figure out why. I think it’s just me, not reading things right. I’ve done it a lot.”

She wasn’t sure if she was supposed to ask him what it was he’d done, so she didn’t. Cara just opened the book and started reading, letting herself feel the words like magma again. She wanted the air to open up with the presence of someone else around who was beyond the stifling cluster of her friends.

At one point Ryan left to go pee in the woods somewhere a bit off, and Cara hoisted herself down to look at Jane’s masks in the trunk again. She thought about how to look at a feeling instead of at the logic behind it.

_I promised to protect them that night_, she realized. _Because they’re both Jane, no matter anything else._ And Ryan felt so similarly to her. It was like Sydney said—she would get Ryan and Jane back together, and things would get better. Maybe he could protect Jane, almost like Cara would.

And she could already sense that they would need to, soon.

-Sydney-

The plan to set up Jane and Ron had to start immediately, Sydney knew. The masks in the tree were so entirely out of control, so impossible to predict. Sydney had to act quickly before Jane hurt herself, or before Derek hurt her.

That meant getting Lea involved finally. Sydney had realized being with her friends was lonely without her, whatever Lea’d been preoccupied with the past week. Sometimes Jane and Cara had an intensity that didn’t let other people in. Even if even Cara didn’t see it, Jane depended on her absolutely.
Sydney had just texted Lea to come over when the door slammed. That in itself wasn’t unusual, but the quiet after it was. It was evening, and too late for one of them to leave.

“Dad?” she called down the stairs. It was almost always her mom who did the door slamming and leaving.

“It’s me,” her mom called back, a catch in her voice.

Sydney did not know how to interact with a crying mother. She wanted desperately to stay upstairs and away, but her brother and sister were at a friend’s house and she was pretty sure she couldn’t just leave her mother to cry alone—even if it was about her father.

But when she did her mother was stony-faced. “I don’t mean to put you in an awkward position,” she said, “but I could use your help packing up your father’s things.”

“. . . What?” Her parents hadn’t even talked about one of them moving out, although of course Sydney had wondered how it would end up—who would keep the house, and who would keep the kids. She just hadn’t expected to find out so soon and so decisively.

“Your father just told me he couldn’t live in the same house as such a domineering person for another second, and he left.” Her mother sniffed. “Evidently he already had an apartment lined up. A little forewarning might have been nice. At least to you.”

Sydney leaned against the bannister and stared around, taking in the knicknacks—wooden bears and the minty candles, the landscape paintings, the pictures above the fireplace. She’d marked out months ago what belonged to who. She just thought there
would be more time. She didn’t want to pack away the bears she played with when she was little while her mother sniffed and complained, insulted her dad and then apologized for it. Those apologies always felt more like a rebuke to Sydney for not agreeing with her than an honest apology.

All she could think was that her world had been upended enough this week already.

“Well, Lea’s actually just about to come over . . .” she said, checking her phone to confirm. She almost didn’t expect a reply, but it was there flashing on her screen:

Be over in a few xoxo

“Lea can join us then,” her mom said, clapping her hands and dragging out two cardboard boxes she’d set up from behind the coffee table. Without another word she turned to the mantle and began grabbing frames and dropping them less than gently to the bottom of the boxes.

“Mom . . .”

Sydney watched uncertainly from the stairs until she heard glass shatter and ran over to minimize the damage.

“Jesus, be careful.” But her mom wasn’t listening. She was running from room to room, grabbing objects haphazardly and dropping them towards the boxes where Sydney would catch them. Soon the first box was filled with a pan, an oven tray, two wooden spoons, a candle, and four picture frames with family photos still inside. Her mom was just dropping in the pad of paper stamped with leaves down the side when the doorbell rang.
“I’ve got it,” Sydney said, mostly convinced her mom would break something in her absence but not wanting a crazed and manic parent to scare Lea away; the whole thing was making her think uncomfortably of Jane ranting and pacing by the tree, which wasn’t something she had come close to processing yet.

On the doorstep in the porch light, Lea looked like a painting. Shadows drew in her cheeks and her collarbone, and her black hair framed her face and toppled down just onto her shoulders. Sydney had been too frustrated and focused to remember how much she just missed Lea. She almost reached out to hug her, but they weren’t usually that tactile. Cara and Jane were the huggers.

“Hey,” Sydney said softly, uncertain if Lea knew how annoyed she’d been by her absence and unsure how to act. That feeling was getting distressingly common.

“Hey,” Lea said, just as softly, and Sydney knew they were both uncertain. Right now there was a kind of harmoniousness to the uncertainty though. They each gave the other a small smile. Then another crash sounded from the other room.

“Uh, my mom is redecorating right now,” Sydney said. “She wants us to join her.”

“What for?”

Sydney didn’t want to say it. “My dad just moved out. It was kind of unexpected.”

“Shit, Syd.”

Something heavy crashed onto the floor in the other room.

“Yeah. Sorry to spring this on you, but we should probably get in there before there’s too much damage done.” She was half-convinced Lea would just take off. It was a lot to expect of someone, to help with this.
But Lea just rolled her eyes and grinned. “Well, what else am I for?” Seeing Sydney’s skeptical face, she added, “No, seriously, I want to do something to get my mind off of things.”

Lea ran into the room and started grabbing things alongside Sydney’s mother, who accepted her without a glance. Sydney was surprised to see Lea picking all the right things—obvious ones, the candles her dad loved and his pens from work—but right all the same. Suddenly she felt bad for keeping out of it. Sydney grabbed her dad’s globe off the end table and shoved it in a new box she found in the kitchen.

“That’s the spirit!” Lea yelled, and Sydney’s mom high fived her. “Go Ms. Dickerson!”

Sydney hadn’t seen her mom do something as frivolous as high five someone in years. She realized she might not really know her parents outside of the nettled, exhausted confines of their marriage.

“Call me Julia,” her mom said, packing away the large wooden clock from the kitchen. “Ms. Dickerson doesn’t seem quite right anymore.”

“Can I call you Julia?” Sydney asked, skeptical of this newly open mother.

“No. You can call me mother,” Julia said deadpan, then burst out laughing and doubled over. Lea joined in and Sydney once again stood apart watching them in bewilderment.

“You know, my advice to you girls,” Julia said, straightening up, “is to never settle for anyone too early. Wait for what you want or just let it go.”
Sydney imagined her mother at twenty-four, just out of grad school and married to her soft-spoken father. Had that always been settling, or was there a time when she loved his calmness? How would she even have known?

“What’s so great about waiting, though?” Lea asked, gaze leveled at Sydney’s mom. “What if what you want out of something isn’t perfect?”

Julia straightened up and appraised Lea. Sydney couldn’t remember her mother ever taking her so seriously. “Then maybe you should look at yourself and see why you’re holding yourself back. And make sure you’re not hurting anyone else in the process.”

Lea flushed. “Yeah, about that . . .”

To Sydney’s surprise her mom laughed again. “Everyone has a few screw ups in their life. In that case you’ve just gotten someone’s out of the way early. Don’t beat yourself up.”

“What—” Sydney started, but her mom and Lea were already back to running around the room and scooping up the smallest things now—the leftover pens and magazines.

Of all the things she imagined might be distracting Lea, Sydney never imagined it would be a boy. So many parts of Sydney’s world had changed so much over the past few weeks, but for some reason this of all things felt like the last straw.

Sydney excused herself to the bathroom and leaned against the handle, watching her vision narrow, watching the toilet in front of her go blurry. Her heartbeat shuddered like a deep bass and her breath went shallow and fluttery. Everything was changing around her, and she couldn’t keep up.
Five minutes later with her head lodged between her knees and her back against the bathroom wall, Sydney felt her body settle down again. She splashed some water on her face and went back out, determined to join them.

Instead, she found Lea alone sitting on the floor with the boxes in a ring around her, a few objects scattered around the floor.

“What halted the cleaning frenzy?” Sydney asked.

“Your mom got kind of upset—well, more upset. She wanted to be alone I think,” Lea said, examining the wooden kitchen clock. “She, er, said I should go through and take anything I wanted before he came to pick the boxes up, but I thought I should check with you first.”

Sydney lowered herself to the ground next to Lea and examined the clock with her. It was made of interlocking light and dark wood, with gold roman numerals marking the hours. So much of it reminded her of her father. She remembered him buying it at a museum in Chicago the first time he had taken her with him on a business trip. She remembered begging him to bring it home from his office so she could climb up on the counter and trace the little grooves in the wood where the grain changed.

“Keep it,” Sydney said. “It’s not even from this house really, anymore.”

“I get that,” Lea said, tucking the clock behind her and reaching over to grab Sydney’s hand. She was warm and calming. “I think I’ll keep it for now and then when we go off to college and room together we can put this in our apartment. It’ll be our first decoration.”
“I like that. You have to promise we’ll all actually try for the same school though.”

“Hah. As if we’d get into whatever genius school Cara and Jane end up at.”

It was strange to think about all their rivalries and competitions condensed into that simple outcome: two girls at two schools.

“If we all make it to college,” Sydney said, thinking of her parents fighting over who would pay her tuition and imagining both of them refusing. But the words echoed in the air and became, unmistakably, about Jane.

“What do you think the chances of that are?” Lea asked. She rubbed her thumb back and forth over the back of Sydney’s hand, forcing her heart rate down again. When Sydney answered, “We’ll make it happen,” it was because of that calmness.

“Cara and I have a plan, actually.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Well,” Sydney leaned in and raised her eyebrows, “You know how Jane clearly misses Ryan Porter?”

Lea’s thumb stilled. “Fuck. What are you doing to Ryan?”

“Doing to him is a strong word. We’re trying to set them up again, to get her away from Derek.”

“Do you think it’ll work?”

“I know it will. It has to; anything has to be better than that asshole driving off with her in his car. She’s miserable.”

Lea didn’t look at her. “Good luck then.”
“. . . Do you think there’s something wrong with my plan?” Sydney had hoped Lea would be excited, or would think Sydney was smart for thinking of it.

“No, if you think it’ll work, go for it.”

“. . . Well that’s super noncommittal of you. Speaking of, what was up with Mr. Not Perfect?” She could turn the tables on criticizing, if that was how Lea wanted to end their moment. “Or do you not want to talk about it with anyone but my mom?”

Lea moved her hand away and Sydney missed it immediately. “You know what you said the other day, about liking people being the point of dating?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, for me it never has been. It’s been about needing to feel good about myself.”

“And what makes you feel good about yourself?”

“Uh, being wanted. And having things happen to me, I guess.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Like, wanting to have things happen that make me interesting. To myself, or something.”

Sydney moved her hand back over Lea’s and was pleased to find Lea lean into it.

“I’ve always thought you were interesting.”

“Really? It doesn’t seem like it. You’re always so busy planning everything. I feel like you can predict everything I do.”

“Yeah. I can’t really predict you.”

They like that in silence for a while, enjoying the warmth of each other’s hands and the quiet ticking. “I should get headed home,” Lea said eventually, and it felt more
like a parting than it should have, her gently hefting the clock into her arms as she stood to leave.

Sydney thought about that after she was gone, about how someone leaving meant taking more than just themselves.

-LEA-

As soon as she left Sydney’s house Lea texted Ryan, shifting the wooden clock in her arms like it was a clumsily large infant. It was the first she’d reached out to him since their date.

*I realized I think you should be with Jane,* she wrote. Because if Sydney was right, and he would help, they should be together. Jane was more important. Lea realized she wasn’t even sad about it; she was relieved.

She pictured calling Sydney and telling her story, maybe forcing a hitch in her voice. *Ryan and I had a thing,* she would say. *But I’ll give it up for Jane.* And Sydney would admire her, both for the surprise and for making her perfect plans fall right into place.

*I have something to tell you,* she texted Sydney.

But as she walked home neither of them responded, and a sense of isolation started to creep in on her. It was a stark contrast to the frenzy of Sydney’s: Julia’s flashing anger, the home shaking off her husband’s possessions like dead leaves from a tree, and Sydney quiet and frightened behind her. She missed it, because at least something was *happening.* Nothing was happening at her own house, and if Ryan and Sydney didn’t text her back, nothing would be happening soon.
The clock rested heavily against her shoulder, ticking faintly in her ear. It had looked so inviting and interesting in Sydney’s house, propped near the little porcelain cat tiles that clearly belonged to Julia, the mismatched wood seeming homey somehow—as if it had been cheerfully constructed by the couple instead of pieced together mechanically for a museum gift shop. But the effect didn’t last outside the house.

As she reached her front door though Lea’s phone dinged, and she was disappointed to see that it was Ryan. It felt bizarre to be disappointed by his texts, after looking forward to them all summer. Now his name, bright on her screen, looked flimsy and small—a redundant flag of defeat.

_Do you want to talk about this?_ he had written. She didn’t. What she wanted was for Sydney to text her back, and to make her feel like less of a disappointment than Ryan always would now. Then she realized that if she wanted to claim credit with Sydney later, she would have to follow through.

_Jane wants you too,_ she texted back, not knowing if it was true. He didn’t respond, but Lea sensed that even if Ryan had resigned himself to giving up Jane before, there was no way he wouldn’t respond to new hope. She had set it in motion, and maybe something would come of it.

_-SYDNEY-

_ Ryan and I had a thing. But I’ll give it up for Jane._ Sydney got the texts before she’d moved from the living room floor where she’d watched Lea walk out with her clock.

_You better,_ Sydney thought. If hearing that Lea had an entire relationship behind her back was her breaking point, it should at least have been a more notable one: they
were so ill-suited as to be hilarious. She imagined Lea in her ripped jeans and metal band shirts holding hands with preppy Ryan. Lea trying to feign interest in foreign films, Ryan trying to hold his own in a mosh pit. He was entirely wrong for Lea. Which meant, of course, that it was even more important to make sure Jane and Ryan stuck—so that Lea would never be tempted to go back.

*I was just kinda trying to get someone to like me*, Lea had told her.

Sydney heaved herself off the floor finally and, guiltily ignoring the quiet sniffling she could hear from her mother’s room, headed back up the stairs.

She’d always imagined that Lea experienced entirely different feelings from her when they talked to guys or got texted by guys. That there was something inherently exciting about the experience for Lea that Sydney simply lacked. But she could understand wanting to be wanted. Not like her parents wanted her, to have against each other, but just for herself. It just wasn’t something Sydney *felt*. But it sounded nice.

In her room she opened her closet and grabbed the one dress she’d gotten for dances, a yellow skater dress, and stripped to throw it on impulsively. With her hair wavy from washing it that morning and her makeup from school still on, Sydney looked at herself in the mirror and could see that she looked like someone who could be going out on a date. She just couldn’t picture wanting anyone with her any more than she could picture Ryan with Lea.

-CARA-
It was strange, but Cara’s fasting and fitful sleep after Jane had left in the car with Derek seemed to only get worse after meeting Ryan at the tree. It was like including him in their plans, even only in her mind, upped the level of the game.

_Not, she told herself firmly, that it’s a game._

Because Jane’s safety was sacred, even if the obstacles around it presented themselves like dead-ends and threats in a video game. There was Derek, of course, looming large over them. But there were also school counselors, who walked vulture-like through the hallways, peering at wrists (or so Cara assumed; she’d yet to catch one in the act) as crudely and invasively as college frat boys taking upshots of women’s skirts. There were the parents looming on the edge of that—Jane’s parents, whose reaction to their daughter’s life they could only imagine in shadowy, apocalyptic images, so terrified Jane seemed of their reaction.

What her skipped class with Ryan had convinced Cara of, though she hadn’t been aware in the moment, was the threat poised by other _students_. He was right, she realized, that most people would not be intrigued by the kind of forceful, wild emotion Jane carved into their tree. Most people would not look at that and see something special that needed to be protected. No, most people would react with something akin to the distaste of seeing a particularly large, wounded rat running circles. For that, too, they would call someone to make it go away. Animal control, counselors: these images had started to blend together in Cara’s mind with flashes of cages, of eerie white coats, and of syringes.

She knew Lea and Sydney were feeling similarly isolated: Sydney appeared so withdrawn roaming the hallways that whispers of her parents’ divorce had solidified and become fact amongst the grade. Lea, for her part, was trailing Sydney like a shadow.
Once Cara might have resented their sudden closeness. But now she saw it as an admittance: they were leaving Jane wide open for her.

Which was why, when Jane texted her, *I need you* one evening, two weeks after the sleepover that had gone so wrong, Cara felt like in answering she was accepting some divine but expected duty.

*Where you at? I’m coming,* she replied.

*My parents want me to see a movie with them in the city but I told them we have a group project to finish. Be at your place soon.*

With that Jane left Cara to get ready. Her own parents both worked late and wouldn’t be home yet, so she had only to camp out on the couch by the door and await Jane’s arrival, which announced itself with a rapid-fire assault on her doorbell, before Jane opened the door and let herself in.

“Are you starving? I’m starving,” she announced, and walked straight past Cara into the kitchen.

“Um,” Cara said, peering from the wall at Jane, who was opening and closing cabinets, grabbing salt and pans and a colander.

“Do you mind if I make us some pasta?” Jane asked, ceasing motion just for a second to actually look at Cara. She was feeling wild, Cara could see that much. Uncontainable. Whole other rules now applied to Jane.

“Go for it. I’ll cut up some tomatoes?”

Jane nodded and went back to her work, getting the pot filled and the water salted in no time. They didn’t usually cook in Cara’s house, but every time Cara tried to point
her towards something Jane would already have found it, going back and forth through the cabinets rapidly.

For herself Cara focused on halving some grape tomatoes and plopping them in a pan, figuring they’d go as well as anything. They worked like that for a while, silent except for the banging cabinet doors. Cara was beginning to suspect Jane had only needed this kind of companionable quiet, when Jane, not looking up from where she was stirring spaghetti into the boiling pot, said, “So I think I might be pregnant.”

Cara had thought she wouldn’t ever feel as blindsided as she had when Jane had brought them to the tree, but this was a new level. “No you’re not,” she said. Because Jane told them she hadn’t gone all the way with Derek, and Cara didn’t know much about sex, but she did know that no one got pregnant from giving blow jobs.

“No, seriously, you’re not.”

Jane had finished adding the pasta and was now staring down, focused on making a whirlpool in the bubbling water.

“No, seriously, you’re not.”

Cara looked at Jane’s body, leaning against the cupboards. She was so thin, Cara couldn’t imagine anything as invasive as sex interrupting the slight line of her frame, let alone a pregnancy.

Jane didn’t look different, but Cara felt suddenly unable to reach out and hug her as she should have. Jane suddenly knew so much more about touching.

But still—“Didn’t you use a condom?” she asked.
“We did.” Jane didn’t make a move towards Cara either, and Cara wasn’t sure if that was because she didn’t want to or because she was afraid of what Cara was thinking.

“So—so you’re fine then. I mean, chances are—”

“We used a condom, but he took it off and I didn’t notice.”

“He—people do that? How did you not notice?”

“Well he did, and I don’t fucking know, Cara.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s not your fault.”

“Well, it’s my problem now.”

“Have you taken—”

“No. I don’t want to buy a test in town.”

“I meant Plan B.”

Jane looked at her blankly. “What’s that?”

It had been two weeks since they sleepover. Cara shook her head. “Nevermind.”

Cara nodded. They both knew everyone who worked at the pharmacies in town.

“Well, we should find an excuse to get into Columbus soon then.”

“Yeah, well . . .” The pot started to boil over and Cara had to rush over to turn the heat down, accidentally and finally brushing against Jane in the process. Jane seemed not to have noticed the pot.

Jane’s skin was warm through her shirt though. Her hair smelled, as it always did, like coconuts.

“Can I hug you?” Cara asked, wanting to desperately.

Jane didn’t answer but shifted closer to Cara, who wrapped her arms around her friend protectively. If only I could keep her here, she couldn’t be pregnant. Jane might as
well have discovered cancer, as far as anything Cara had ever seen on teen pregnancy was concerned.

“We’re not going to Columbus,” Jane said, whispering into Cara’s ear.

“Wait . . . where are we getting a pregnancy test then?” Cara asked, finally untangling herself from her friend.

“This sounds crazy,” Jane began, and Cara had to stifle something loud and vaguely resembling a laugh, because how much crazier could this get? “but I just think I know I am. I’m not doing a test. It’s like, I could feel it happen. Does that make sense?”

Cara knew it shouldn’t have made sense at all, but something about that night—Derek in wait, the slow agonizing anticipation of Jane leaving them—threw Jane’s logic in easy comprehension: that was no ordinary night with ordinary stakes. They had failed to keep Jane, and so they had lost her. Derek had some claim on her so far above anything they could fight now.

“Have you told him?” Cara asked.

“No. I can’t.”

“Good. Don’t.” It might have been the first unexpected, assertive thing Cara’d said to Jane in their lives, and Jane turned to her quizzically. “He shouldn’t be any part of this at all after what he did to you,” Cara said. “Whatever you do, Sydney and Lea and I will help you do it. You don’t need him.”

When Jane leaned over and nodded in quiet agreement against her shoulder, Cara felt more even than she had before Jane came over that everything could be all right. They would get money, if Jane needed, to get rid of it. Or, somehow even more unthinkable, they would be there with Jane if she dared to keep it, if somehow Jane’s
child made her stomach and breasts swell, and her feet and back ache: this child, conceived in the headlights of Derek’s car, in the long dark shadows of the forest and the trees.

*Our child,* Cara thought, even as she prayed Jane would choose to abort it.

“Well, at least I can make pasta,” Jane said, staring unimpressed at the full pot she’d just taken off the burner. “That’s something.”

And Cara stared as her friend ladled out the noodles, somehow now a picture of perfect domesticity, small as she was: a beautiful young woman, serving out dinner.

-LEA-

Lea’s plan had worked better than she’d dared to imagine. Ryan seemed to have vanished from her life, ducking around corners and keeping his head down when they passed in the halls. And Sydney—Sydney was so impressed with her for giving him up.

*If she only knew*—but Lea shoved the thought aside. Hadn’t she, after all, given something up in passing Ryan off to Jane? Maybe their date hadn’t felt perfect, but she could have, after all, worked things out with him. She could have had him as a boyfriend. And she chose not to, for Jane. All for Jane.

She and Sydney had been hanging out so often, though, that Lea hadn’t spoken to Jane in—what was it, a week maybe. Last night Jane called her cell, her name lighting up the screen, and Lea silenced it; she was supposed to meet Sydney, after all, to plan out what to do about Ryan.

The truth, though, was that Lea had felt less and less like sharing the quiet, heavy late-night phone calls with Jane. She hadn’t hurt herself at all that week.
And maybe, she told herself, if I don’t pick up, Jane isn’t doing it either.

Which was how she put her phone away and didn’t think about it again.

In the future, Lea would look back on the moment Matt told her about the party and marvel at what a throwaway comment it had been.

“Party at Brian’s place this weekend,” he’d sort of grunted into his cereal one morning before school. “Figure I outta get my little sis invited to some real parties before I leave.”

“Sure,” she’d said, checking her backpack for biology notes. “I’ll see.” Then she headed out to wait for the bus.

A week before and she would have jumped at the invitation, but now she thought of her brother’s friends and saw only Derek. But still, it would be a place for her and Sydney to hang out.

No, that wasn’t right. She’d have to invite Jane and Cara too. There was no reason not to.

But then—that was it. A place where Ryan and Jane could finally work things out. Get them both there, get some alcohol—there was potential in that.

Quickly, Lea texted Matt for the address and sent the details to her friends. Then, to only Cara, she sent, can u get ryan there too?

YES, Cara sent back within seconds.

A plan. They had a plan, finally.
“Do you think it’ll work?” Lea asked Sydney. They were at lunch with Cara, all of them staring at their textbooks and cramming for a bio test later that day.

“It’ll have to, if all three of us are working on it,” Sydney said, raising an eyebrow. “Very nice idea, by the way.”

Lea flushed in pleasure. “We will,” she promised.

“So what’s the game plan?” Sydney asked, finally pushing her notes away. “Cara gets Ryan there, you and I get Jane there, and—what? We get them drunk and shove them in a room together?”

“I don’t really know if drunk Jane is the best idea,” Cara muttered, not looking up from her notes.

Lea couldn’t help but agree. A drunk Jane would be a recipe for disaster, a breakdown pending.

“Oh?” Sydney asked.

“We can’t—” Cara stopped. “I just, I don’t think Jane wants to drink.”

“It’s never seemed like an issue before,” Sydney said, voice gone chilly. Sydney, Lea knew, never liked it when someone had more information than her. And they were all on edge about knowing Jane. And she was right: the few times they’d drunk, it’d been Jane sneaking wine bottles out of her parents’ house. She’d drunk them as easily as the rest of them.

Cara shrugged. “She wants to meet up after school.”

“I’m in,” Sydney said, without hesitation. Lea bit down a flash of hurt—didn’t we have plans today?—and nodded her assent as well.
“Great. Now, I really have to study, sorry guys,” Cara said, gathering her notes and heading to the library.

“I don’t see why Cara suddenly knows better than us about Jane’s drinking habits,” Sydney said, looking unimpressed.

Lea shrugged. “Bummer we can’t hang out later anymore though.”

Sydney looked at her strangely. “I mean, we will. Just with them too. And actually—” she continued before Lea could object— “I think I want to invite Ryan our way as well. We do need a little setup for the party, after all.” Sydney finished talking and watched Lea over the rim of her bottle of tea.

Lea knew Sydney was waiting for her to agree, to say that was fine, and she couldn’t say no to Sydney. But she couldn’t face Ryan either. So, hating herself, she settled for muttering, “Do what you want,” and turned back to her notes. Sydney didn’t bring it up again.

They met at the elementary school playground after classes let out, all quietly agreeing to avoid their usual meeting spot in the woods. That spot carried so much weight now that Lea couldn’t even imagine casually walking to it anymore. She wondered what it would be like if they had all gone there instead, and pictured herself walking up to the two faces carved in the bark.

Lea realized she was afraid of them. She felt . . . shame.

You haven’t done enough for Jane, she pictured them saying, mouths gaping open and mashing shut in time with each other. She also felt, absurdly, like she had let them down for not having cut. Like cutting was some kind of sacrifice to them.
It didn’t help that the sky was grey, and the wind was whipping through the trees like some massive invisible snake. It would start raining soon, that much was sure. Not even the playground she’d grown up on, replete with cherry red plastic slides and climbing equipment, could quiet that kind of atmosphere.

“I just wanted to stop here,” Jane said, appearing behind her. “I miss this place.”

Her mind on the faces, Lea could see for a brief instant what Jane meant in its entirety, like peeking behind the curtain. Jane was speaking to Big Truths, like decay, and aging, and innocence, and how far away the days when they played here felt.

_You’re not too far gone_, Lea wanted to tell her, but couldn’t find the words. They both might have had scars littering their arms, but those would fade. _It doesn’t ruin us for anything_, Lea wanted to say, but there was too wide a gap between Jane and her for that to make sense.

As always, Lea both wondered at and resented the seriousness Jane managed to attach to herself, some regal cloak that Lea couldn’t touch.

“Where are we going after?” she settled on.

But Jane had turned to wave at Sydney and Cara, appearing across the blacktop.

“So what’s up?” Sydney asked

“We’re meeting Derek,” Jane said.

“We’re leaving here? Why?” Sydney asked, and it was only then when Lea heard the panic in her voice that Lea was sure she had told Ryan to come along. _Traitor._

But Jane didn’t answer her, only turned back away from the playground and towards the main street. Jane never checked to see if she was followed—she just assumed.
Lea saw Sydney turn back to Cara, who shrugged. None of them knew what they were in for.

“Looks like you can’t plan everything,” Lea whispered to Sydney as she passed, a bit smugly. Sydney ignored her, turning instead to her phone. *Texting Ryan*, Lea realized, and the thought left her open and exposed.

**-SYDNEY-**

It turned out they were meeting Derek behind the K-mart, off the main stretch of shops.

“Well that just *screams* shady,” Sydney had said, but her friends ignored her— Jane because she wasn’t listening to anybody, Lea because she was mad about Ryan, and Cara just because she was following Jane.

*When are they going to realize that someone has to look out for us?* Sydney wondered. Although sometimes, just to herself, she’d admit it: at times she believed Jane could carry them all on the force of her personality alone, too. No one needed to watch out for Jane, because somehow, despite all common sense, Jane had everything more figured out than they could even imagine.

It was like that, with Derek. A terrible idea. But one that none of the rest of them could have pulled off.

“Are you, like, actually introducing us to him?” Lea asked, peevishly.

“Come on, just go with it,” Jane answered. It wasn’t with the breezy certainty she usually had. It was desperate, pleading. Lea must have sense that too, because she didn’t ask again.
Eventually, Derek came into sight leaning against a burnt-out light post in one of the parking lots to the side of the giant cement supercenter. It was the first time Sydney’d had a good look at him since that night by the tree. He was just as tall as she remembered, which was surprising—a trick of the shadows or something, she’d figured, but no, he was over six feet, and muscular too, with close cropped brown hair and a small nose.

“Hey, Jane,” he drawled, choosing to ignore the rest of them.

_I would say something, if someone I was seeing was so rude to my friends_, Sydney thought. But one look at Jane and she mentally apologized; it wouldn’t be obvious to anyone who didn’t know Jane very, very well, but her whole body had gone taught and rigid. Jane was terrified, but Sydney didn’t think in any way they could use against him—Jane wasn’t afraid of him hitting her, or yelling. She was only afraid of his indifference, or her own ability to cause it.

“Hey,” Jane said. “Did you get it?”

“Yeah, had to make a good excuse to get out of practice though.” Derek hefted a grocery bag up and held it out to her. “Did you a solid.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” To Sydney’s eternal pride, Jane’s voice was flat and wry. Among her friends, in the face of such an obviously douchey statement, Jane still had some defenses. It was a relief. Sydney shifted closer to Jane and sensed Cara and Lea doing the same, all of them closing in like a defense force. From an outside observer, the scene might look like Jane demanding something from Derek, flanked by her loyal followers.

Maybe that was what was happening. Sydney had no idea.
Jane grabbed the bag, gave a short, “Thanks,” and turned away, still closely followed. Sydney wasn’t sure if some of the tension radiating off her back was about her friends, who were close enough to suffocate.

“See you later?” Derek called.

They all froze and were all, Sydney knew, silently praying Jane would just keep walking.

“Tomorrow, I’m busy today,” Jane said, and picked up her pace out of the parking lot. It wasn’t much—it wasn’t a refusal—but it was something.

“So when are you going to tell us what’s in the bag?” Lea finally asked. They’d been following Jane for at least twenty minutes now, having cut through the parking lot and back through the main street, stopping at the small creek that wound through town and following it. Sydney hadn’t said anything, but she was pretty sure they were walking back into the woods behind the high school.

“It’s vodka,” Jane said, curtly. Then added, “Derek got a fake from his brother.”

“And are we getting trashed in the woods tonight?” Lea asked, seemingly oblivious to Jane’s frustration. Sydney loved her persistence just then, because neither she nor Cara seemed willing to risk that just yet.

“No, I am.”

“Jane.” It was only a whisper, but it came from Cara, who suddenly looked paler than Sydney had ever seen her.
Jane didn’t answer, but Sydney could see her thread her fingers through Cara’s.
So it was two of them who knew more than Sydney. Lea, at least, appeared equally confused.

Eventually, Jane came to an abrupt stop almost near their normal meeting place.
“Sorry, guys, I know our tree is weird now,” she said, and Sydney resented her bringing attention to it—the possibility of ignoring the faces and reclaiming it, if that had ever been possible, was now gone.

“Just tell us what’s going on. Some of us have homework,” Lea said, as if Jane wasn’t the first among them to panic about schoolwork.

Just then Sydney felt her pocket buzz. It was a text from Ryan, she knew, wondering why she kept moving the time back. Part of her thought she should finally cancel on him and call the plan off once and for all. No more pissing Lea off and toying with him, no more uncertainty over how Jane would react. Maybe not even Ryan could get rid of the mean, hulking presence of Derek.

“Derek and I had sex,” Jane said slowly. Sydney realized then that none of them could catch up to Jane, and it was clear they should all stop trying. It was strange, because Jane’s face was so round and her personality was, in some ways, so childish:
somehow Jane was the oldest-passing amongst them. She could have been eighteen, could have been twenty, if you looked at her in the right light. It was especially true now that she was so grave and so tense.

“How was it?” Lea asked, sounding flippant. Jane ignored her, and Sydney couldn’t blame that, but something in Lea’s voice made her look again: a small tremor, and Lea’s eyes intent on Jane.
She really wants to know, Sydney realized. Evidently Lea’s frustration with her Mr. Not-Perfect—with Ryan, Sydney mentally corrected—ran deeper than she’d thought. With a sinking feeling, Sydney realized Lea was probably asking out of experience.

“And you need vodka because . . . ?” Sydney asked. At her question Cara let out a small noise beside her, still looking pale.

“Because I need to get rid of it,” Jane said, but Sydney had just figured that out.

“Oh,” she said.

“And you guys need to watch out for me,” Jane continued, pulling the vodka bottle from the plastic bag. It was huge, with a wide base and dark red plastic cap. “I wanted enough, and the liquor store wasn’t open,” Jane said, as if by way of explanation, but Sydney didn’t know what that meant.

“They only sell it watered down,” Jane explained.

There was a part of Sydney’s brain that knew this wasn’t how they were supposed to do things—that there were Planned Parenthoods, and doctors, and—well, not parents or counsellors, but then, something else, surely. Someone who would know better than a tub of vodka in the back of the woods.

“I don’t think it works like that,” Cara said, evidently in agreement.

“Everyone knows you’re not supposed to drink when you’re pregnant,” Jane said, as if that proved something.

“That doesn’t mean getting blind drunk is going to make you miscarry,” Cara said, and Sydney was momentarily stunned that Cara, it seemed, had it in her to grow a spine when the situation called for it.
“Well I’ve got to try something,” Jane said, and uncapped it to take a swig. Sydney watched her start to gag, and force it down anyway.

_There’s no way she can drink much of that_, she promised herself. But Jane went right back to it.

“Jane, _stop._” Cara pleaded, but Jane was on her fourth swig and her face was already getting red.

“That’s it, this is ridiculous. We can’t just carry you home passed out. I’m getting my dad and driving back,” Lea said, shaking her head and turning away.

“No,” Jane yelled. Her face was mottled, already prepared for a meltdown, and it was partly that distress that turned Sydney back to her phone. The other part, the stronger part, if Sydney was being honest, was the deep-seated, instinctual _no_ of her own that came at the thought of bringing someone else—someone not _them_—in to see that distress. To take the decision out of their hands. Because Sydney knew that was exactly what would happen.

“You can’t,” Sydney said calmly, staring right into Lea’s eyes. “Because I already called Ryan here to come get her.” She’d meant it as a slap, and judging by Lea’s face, she clearly took it as one.

“I thought you’d get it,” Jane said, now staring at Lea too. To Sydney’s relief, Jane hadn’t reacted to Ryan’s name at all. “Just _go away_, Lea.”

The height difference between them was thrown into sharp relief, with Jane’s scrunched, red face staring down at Lea’s small, pale one. Lea’s eyes flicked between Jane and Sydney, and finding sympathy in neither, she turned to walk home.
“I’m sure she didn’t—” Cara began, but Sydney shushed her; she would only make it worse.

Jane turned back to the bottle, and now Sydney knew neither she nor Cara would speak up to intervene.

_After all, it might work_, she told herself.

Ten minutes later Jane had finished what Sydney guessed was the equivalent of a large glass, and began to throw up. Cara rushed to pull her hair back as she retched into the bushes, and Sydney dropped their location to Ryan’s phone.

_Come_, she texted him.

He was there within five minutes, pulling his silver car up as far as he could get it off the road.

“Do you have a towel?” Sydney started to ask, but he waved her off, face pinched and serious, as he grabbed Jane’s feet and, with Cara holding her shoulders, maneuvered her into the backseat of his car, towel already laid across the back.

“You don’t have to—” he gestured at his car once they had finished, Jane soundly passed out and a hair tie keeping her face free. Sydney almost agreed—after all, she had a research paper to write that she would already never finish, and Jane was in safe hands—but then she pictured Jane being driven off, away from them, by a boy whose shoulders were after all not so much different from Derek’s, whose voice was was altogether lighter, whose intentions, for all Sydney knew, might not be very different at all.

As one, she and Cara slid into the back, each supporting one end of Jane.
“Can you bring her to your house?” Sydney said, because it was all she could think of to do.

-CARA-

Cara stayed up that entire night watching Jane’s mostly inert, sometimes vomiting form. She brought Jane water, and advil, and a trash can, but Jane was mostly only conscious enough for the latter.

Ryan’s basement, blessedly insulated from the rest of his house, was wide open and dark, with a ring of couches and a flat screen TV, like a personal theatre. There were stacks of DVDs littered over the floor, but mostly it was empty.

Jane took the couch farthest from the flatscreen, with towels down and around her, and Cara kept thinking someone would turn on a movie for the rest of them while they waited, but no one did.

Sydney stayed until late, when she knew her mother would be getting worried. “I’ll come by after school,” she promised, and only then Cara remembered that it technically was still a school night. Somehow, the sense of dread in the woods had placed her firmly back in the weekend. She would fail at least three homework assignments and get a late grade on her English paper, now, but there was nothing to do for that anymore.

“Thank you,” she said to Ryan—possibly the only thing she’d said to Ryan, but she couldn’t be certain, with the night such a blur and her so tired—when he took a turn emptying the trash can and brought a cool cloth back down with him.

“Happy to do it,” he murmured, stroking back Jane’s hair once. “She really is my best friend.”
Even then, in that dire of circumstances, Cara felt her hackles rise in protest. Ryan stroking Jane’s hair became an intrusion, and she wanted him gone.

“Do you know Derek Sanders?” she asked him eventually, at least an hour later.

“I know about him and Jane, if that’s what you mean.” Ryan said. Cara thought for a second that was all he was going to say, but then he swallowed and continued, “I was doing some photography for the school newspaper, and ended up hanging out with the football team for a while. Derek was,” he paused again, “Derek was saying things.”

“Things like what?”

Ryan looked away. “Like that Jane was easy. Standard stuff, I guess. I believe I heard the phrase ‘tight Asian pussy’ once, so racist stuff too.”

There should have been rage towards Derek, but there was none—only a defeated, sick exhaustion. That he would talk about Jane like that, when anyone should have been able to see how vulnerable she was, was so entirely unsurprising. Not for the first time, Cara wondered why deciding to sleep with a boy who was older meant giving up on any expectation of decency. There could be no expectations, lest someone be called clingy.

Because Jane was clingy, and she was anxious and needy and emotional, and those were traits Cara loved. They were also part of why Jane was passed out and vomiting now.

“What did you do?” Cara asked, dully, because she already knew what Ryan had done. And it was the same as what she would have done, pressed against the cold, smooth tiles in the sweaty locker-room, watching Derek and his friends laugh, raucous and unafraid, from afar.
“Nothing,” he said, and then he laughed, shortly. “Derek was helping me out with the shoot, making sure everyone cooperated. Didn’t want to mess it up.”

Cara was about to gag at the thought of Derek, in all his high school sports glory, shaking his head out of his helmet after a game, flushed and pleased, spotlights on him, shutter flashing—the adulation of it—when Ryan continued, “He knew Jane and I had been a thing. Slapped me on the back once, tried to compare notes.” He shook his head and turned back to face the wall, away from Jane.

Cara knew that what he’d just said disgusted Ryan, sickened him to his very core. She knew that he cared about Jane, and saw her as a person, which had somehow become synonymous statements. She knew that Ryan would never talk about Jane like that.

And yet. He had been complicit in it. He was someone Derek would still slap on the back in the hallway—aggressively, sure, in a way that knocked him over, made him stumble, but still in a way that meant something good to the people around them. Ryan had been there in the room when Derek had said tight Asian pussy, and he’d been there by invitation, and he’d gotten something from it. Something unasked for, but not something turned away.

“I have a whole daydream about killing him,” Cara said quietly. “Something violent, you know? Like a hammer or a mace. Medieval.” She waited until Ryan spoke again. He looked glad to be broken from that unhappy reverie.

“I always thought something more like ebola—”

“Him and everyone who lets him do it,” she cut him off. “Everyone who lets him be just an average person.”

When Ryan didn’t answer at first she knew he’d gotten the message.
“You’d have to kill the whole world,” he said eventually, not sounding defensive, just resigned.

“I would,” she said, looking at Jane’s grey-tinted face, sleeping soundly then, at least for a bit.

“And yourself,” he said, calling her on what she’d already known: she wouldn’t have said anything, either.

_But I’m not part of this_, she wanted to say, meaning someone who could be intimidating, someone who could shove her in the woods and make her afraid and then slip into locker rooms where Dereks said what they did. But she couldn’t say that to Ryan, because he was. She could tell he was waiting for an answer, though.

“Flaying holds promise,” she settled on.

“Sticking with the medieval,” he nodded.

They both turned then as the first few rays of sun slipped into his basement window, falling just short of Jane. An alarm started to go off upstairs—his parents, they knew—and the rest of the day started to begin. They were both going to stay right there.

His parents turned out not to be too difficult to deal with. Hers were a different matter.

Ryan’s mom and dad both got up at the crack of dawn to go jogging, apparently, and left him to fend for himself. He was free to get up on his own and get to school on his own time. It was a kind of trust Cara appreciated—something, she thought pleasantly, that reminded her of her own parents.
It wasn’t until then that Cara remembered she hadn’t called them, and it wasn’t until Jane woke up and headed to the bathroom that Cara felt able to dig her phone out of her bag and check it. She had fifteen missed calls.

Cara clicked the missed number and listened to the long dial. Her mother picked up on the second ring.

“Cara?”

“Hi, Mom, I’m all right, I’m sorry I didn’t call—”

“Where have you been?” Her mother’s voice had the kind of frozen fury that would make greater souls than Cara’s blanche, and usually it did. But somehow the lie came easily to her.

“I was finishing a group paper at my friend’s house and I fell asleep, just woke up—his parents were there the whole time, so was Jane, you can ask her—I’m so sorry, you know how tired I’ve been.”

The line was silent for a long second, and then her mother unfroze. “Try to get home early tonight, all right honey? I worry about you working this hard.”

Cara felt a twinge of horror at the thought of her mother seeing her report card after this. “All right, mom.”

Tucking her phone back away, Cara was struck by nice it was to have forgotten that she had people she was responsible to in a more obvious way than she was responsible for herself, or for Jane even. It was nice just to be in control of her night, even if she wasn’t really at all.

“Oh, shit.”
“What?” Ryan asked, blinking owlishly as he checked his reflection in his phone and winced.

“Jane’s parents.”

“Fuck,” he said. “Wait, they were going to let her go to that party on the weekend, right? So they can’t be too strict.”

The idea of the party sounded like something from another life, but he was right. Partly. Jane’s parents had a habit of not looking too far into anything they might not want to see. But Cara doubted that extended to not being curious about a one night disappearance.

While Jane was still in the bathroom Cara dug her phone out from where it had fallen into the couch and clicked it on. She, too, had a long log of missed calls from “Dad” and “Mom.”

Cara knew she should do something—text them as Jane, call them herself—to fix the situation before Jane got back. But, as always, she froze at the possibility of messing something up without her friends’ approval.

When Jane came back down the stairs, freshly showered and looking marginally more alive, Cara passed her the phone back without a word and tried to ignore the small, exhausted groan that came as soon as Jane clicked her missed calls open.

-LEA-

Lea supposed that until she and Sydney had reconnected, she’d been slowly growing apart from her friends all year. It was Ryan at first, and then the cutting—only talking to Jane on the phone, neither of them able to vocalize what had happened later.
Which was the rule she had broken, of course. Lea had threatened to tell.

When she got dressed that morning and boarded the bus, Lea wouldn’t normally have had one of her friends to sit next to. She wouldn’t have made a point of texting any of them. She would only occasionally try to stop at one of their lockers before her first class.

But they would have been there, if she’d gone. They would’ve been there immediately if she’d needed them. They were her only ever constant, waiting irritated and grudging but forever waiting for her to come back to them after she did something stupid or lashed out. Because Lea was the one who left and needed to be coaxed back, gently as a wild animal: it’s okay, we’ll give you your space, we forgive what you said to us.

That possibility—forgiveness, wordless forgiveness—had never seemed so closed off before. Not now that Jane might have a child.

She snorted, cheek pressed against the cold bus window, and the sophomore boy on the other half of the seat gave her a look she ignored.

*As if they needed a better reason to cater to Jane, to spend all their time protecting Jane.*

As the school finally loomed into view and the bus stuttered to a slow, bumpy crawl, Lea realized fully that she wasn’t sure she could count on her friends to welcome her for the first time. She was cut loose, adrift.

She got off the bus, feeling both lighter and more scared than she ever had.
Lea’s first couple periods passed in a blur until her lunch, where she would have to see Cara and Sydney. For once, she didn’t see Jane leaving the cafeteria, black hair bobbing up the stairs, messenger bag swinging at her side, and the thought made her stomach turn.

*Ryan would have taken care of it,* she promised herself, just as Sydney came into view. A surge of rage flushed through Lea’s system as she mentally replaced Sydney’s face—blank, tired—with an image of the previous night, without meaning to: Sydney, using Ryan’s name like a slap. Sydney, writing Lea off.

Before Lea was even conscious of having done so, she was striding over to Sydney, rage contorting her face and leaving her steely-eyed.

“We’re eating outside today,” she said, and suddenly Sydney’s arm was in her hand, skin pressed to bone in her grip.

“Ow,” Sydney said. Her gaze was just as flat, but she didn’t protest as Lea dragged her outside.

They were leaving Cara, and Cara would be mad. *If Cara’s even here today,* Lea mentally amended.

Instead of heading towards the woods like she usually would have, Lea strode past the empty baseball field and around the small shed that held the equipment. It wasn’t too cold, but it was windy, and the structure’s dusty wood walls provided some shelter. All the PE classes were held inside by this point in the year, so it was empty. Lea let out an involuntary shiver.

“So?” Sydney asked, finally wresting her arm free. Lea could see the brief indents her fingers had left in Sydney’s arm before the skin popped back to cover them.
“I—” Lea began, and found she couldn’t continue. It should have been fair, after all, what Sydney did. Lea had given Ryan to her like a present. But still. “How could you do that to me?” she asked. “You know what happened with Ryan, and—” Of course Sydney didn’t, at all, know what had happened with Ryan. Lea found herself unable to finish speaking again.

“He couldn’t have meant that much to you if you never even told me about him,” Sydney said coldly, rubbing her arm. Her clear, concise sentence was set pointedly against Lea’s angry fumbling.

There was something about Sydney that seemed to stop Lea in her tracks lately. “I just thought . . .” And she was disappointed but not surprised with herself that she once again couldn’t finish the sentence.

But then, Sydney’s expression had changed suddenly too. She softened and reached out a hand to run over Lea’s arm. “You know we can’t let anyone see what’s happening with Jane,” she said soothingly. “Just promise you won’t do that again, apologize to Jane, and this’ll all be fine.”

The gentle warmth on her skin made Lea, who had felt so strongly that she had only done what any sensible person—what any good friend, really—would do, let her conviction melt away. Sydney was right, in some way that had less to do with making sense than it did with a feeling. Lea did feel too that what they’d all seen in the woods could never be understood by anyone else, not ever, and that if someone else tried, it would do them all some kind of irreparable damage.

Sydney withdrew her hand, and immediately Lea ached for it. “Ryan is the person who’s going to get Jane the fuck away from Derek,” she said, as if that settled it. And in a way, it did.

Jane, however, was a hard person to find that day. Sydney had promised Jane would be in school, said Cara had gotten her there, but Jane wasn’t in any of her usual spots—the patch of courtyard by the art wing, or laughing with her sister by the lockers in the music wing. She hadn’t been at her lunch, and Lea could never seem to catch her at the lockers between periods until once, just after seventh, when she caught the tail end of Jane’s hair whipping around a corner. When Lea tried to follow her, she had already disappeared into history class.

The singular glance Lea got of her friend wasn’t reassuring. Jane’s face was curiously blank and grey, her eyes drooping and her hand massaging her head absently. Lea wondered how much of the vodka Jane had managed to get down before she passed out, and didn’t like what she pictured.

Eventually, Lea had to settle for cornering Jane on the way to her bus.

“Let’s walk home today,” she said, planting herself firmly in front of Jane.

Lea had braced herself for Jane to yell, or hit her, or ignore her. The blank-faced “Fine,” and acquiescence she actually got were far more disturbing. Jane turned away from the busses and towards the trees that led to Lea’s house. They both knew Jane couldn’t walk all the way back to her place, so Lea decided to take it as something of a good sign at least.
I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have threatened you with that. I won’t do it again, was what Lea had meant to say. But without Sydney there urging her on, the desire somehow fled. Once again Lea felt that she had been right not to let Jane almost drink herself to death in the woods. Moreover, she felt that Jane should never have put them in that position. Jane had been selfish, a word that suddenly meant Lea didn’t have to bow to her.

“So Ryan did you a real solid,” Lea said instead of the apology she’d planned out all day. Too late, she realized she had unintentionally echoed Derek.

“Yeah,” Jane said softly. “He really did.”

“You were in pretty bad shape last night.”

“Save it, Lea.” Jane stopped walking, any softness in her voice gone. “I haven’t forgiven you, you know.”

That was fine, because Lea was done making herself soft for Jane. “Forgive what? Not wanting you to make yourself sick? For knowing there’s a Planned Parenthood an hour away?” she rounded on Jane then, cutting her off. “For acknowledging any kind of reality outside of your head?”

“Stop it stop it STOP IT,” Jane yelled, covering her ears. They were just far enough away from the school that only a few people turned to look, but Lea couldn’t believe Jane had taken even that much of a chance. Jane didn’t let her shit leak out like that, until recently.

“What is so wrong with existing in the same world as the rest of us? We have to. I have to.” Some dim part of Lea’s mind knew that Jane was getting out of control, which meant Lea should deescalate the situation. But the words were coming tumbling out of her mouth before she could think about or stop them, and it felt so good she didn’t even
try. “You’re just some teenage girl who cuts herself and you’re nothing more special than me. So why can’t you just admit it?”

“But I CAN’T. I can’t get back there and I can’t figure out why or how or if it’ll ever end and one day I think something and the next I don’t, one day I need something and the next I can’t stand it, but it never stops and that’s not what reality is. I can’t.” Jane was crying in earnest now, the tears messy on her face, her nose running. It was the second time in so many days Lea had seen Jane like that, and somehow the fact that Jane could do this—could lose control, could look so bad and so messy—without losing anything only stood to infuriate her more.

“I slept with Ryan,” Lea said, the most hurtful thing she could think of. Because even if Jane didn’t want Ryan like that, Jane clearly seemed to think she owned him. “It was great,” Lea lied, because that would make it worse somehow: that Lea was normal enough to have it be good—a great first time, with someone who cared about her. Like it was a first time she’d stolen directly from Jane.

“What? He didn’t—but he didn’t say—”

“You were a mess, how could he have?

“He never—you never—,” Jane was searching for words, and the effect was like watching a robot short-circuit, Lea thought. She could see the emotions roaring through Jane’s head and Jane’s brain trying to catch up, to wrangle some of it back with words, and failing.

“I gave him up for you,” Lea said, feeling she was nailing Jane’s own coffin shut as she did. “I did that for you, and now you shut me out.”

“You never said anything.”
And Jane was right, of course: she hadn’t. Lea had been waiting for that first betrayal to come back for her, but now that it finally had she found it couldn’t touch her.

“No,” she said. “I didn’t. But enjoy him now.” She wanted to be able to walk away, but Jane was already stranded. “I’ll call him to come get you,” she added, enjoying the look of panic that flickered across Jane’s face.

*Finally, you have to care that you look like a mess,* Lea thought. She didn’t even have it in her to care that Jane and Ryan would talk, and that surely eventually one of them would come back and call her on her shit. For now, she was clad in indifference, and it was impenetrable.

*And Sydney still needs me,* she thought. *Sydney still needs me because I’ll be at the party.* The party was the center on which all of her friends’ hopes were pinned, where Jane and Ryan would get together and where—though none of them had voiced this—Derek would be drunk. Lea was sure Sydney had plans hatching and developing and growing, but she thought it was nice to look at that from the outside for once; in the place of details was just the feeling of inevitable rush to conclusion, and Lea liked it.

She didn’t leave until Ryan texted that he’d be there, but as soon as he did Lea left Jane in the field behind the school, still shaking and crying. She pictured Sydney’s cold, judging face looking down at her earlier, and somehow leaving still felt right.

-SYDNEY-

The sight of Jane throwing up the night before sent Sydney into a one-track hurtle for Saturday’s party. Once again, she keenly felt Lea’s absence in her life—in the day to day
chores of talking and eating and moving from classroom to classroom—but this time there was something to take her place: planning.

*After all, I laid this out for her. Lea could come back any time she wants.* It did hurt that she chose not to, but all that meant was that Lea didn’t trust Sydney’s planning. The solution, clearly, was to prove her wrong.

*Meet up after school?* Sydney texted Cara.

The response came just a second later: *Done.*

Ever since the night at Ryan’s house, Sydney and Cara had worked together as easily and efficiently as a trained Olympic team, passing off checking up on Jane and ushering Lea away and planning *just the right* things to say to Ryan—“Jane was really grateful you came,” and, “I feel like you understand her better than us.” The last was a lie of course, but a useful one. He looked flattered. He even, Cara had reported, blushed.

After her last class had finished, Sydney gathered her books and walked outside towards the forest, stopping just at the edge and climbing into the lower branches. Over the past week she and Cara kept meeting at the tree line, or venturing a few feet into the shade, feeling drawn to their usual spot but still wary, circling around it like dogs.

She found herself waiting for a long time before Cara’s head popped up next to her. “Sorry, I got held up after class.”

“Oh?” It wasn’t like Cara to let anything come between her and the plan.

“Yeah.” For a second Sydney thought that was all she was going to get, but then Cara’s face burned red and she continued in a rush, “I’m getting C’s in three of my classes right now.”
For Cara, that might as well have been failing.

“Well, you’re doing something more important,” Sydney, too, had watched her grades circle and slowly slip into the drain that semester.

“You’re right.” But tears had started dripping thick down Cara’s face. “Fuck. I never cry like this about Jane. Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” Sydney raised her eyebrow. “But it doesn’t make sense. Just remember that.” She knew grades were important to Cara, but they couldn’t let that affect them now, not when they were so close to actually getting something done.

Cara sniffled a bit and nodded, blinking up at the sky. “So?”

“So we need to hammer down a plan for tomorrow. I texted Jane to make sure she’s coming, and she is—coming with us, I mean. I think she and Derek have been on weird terms since she saw him last with us, but I could tell she’s going to split off from us if he’s around.”

“Why?” Cara gave a long sigh of exasperation.

“Stop being jealous. You know why.” And they both kind of did, in a way neither could explain. “Basically, we get her there. I’ll stave off Derek and make sure we don’t see him—.” Sydney cut herself off and stared down hard at the branch she sat on. They both knew that would have been Lea’s job, if she’d still been around. “—and now, I guess, Lea too. We don’t want her distracting Jane from Ryan.”

“And I’ll make sure to meet Ryan when he gets there, and we’ll both lead them back somewhere alone after they’ve had a couple drinks.”
“And until that point, we’re both feeling them out—seeing what they’re responding to about each other. We can text whenever either of us gets something major.”

“Sydney?”

“Yeah?”

“We can pull this off, right? Planning this much?”

Sydney thought of her father, who came back to the house only once, to leave his wedding ring on the peg for the house key, exactly where her mom would see it after she got back from a long day at work. It had caught her mother’s eye exactly, and she’d cried even after she said over and over again that it didn’t matter.

Sydney also thought of her brother and sister, who had been avoiding the house through an intricate series of club meetings and paper revisions and friend’s houses so well that they’d barely seen their family in a month.

“You can pull off anything if you’re smart enough and you try hard enough,” Sydney settled on.

She woke up early the next day to make herself breakfast, feeling strangely at ease with the world.

_Come over at 6 to get ready?_ She texted Jane and Cara, taking a strange pleasure in how much offense Lea would take to being excluded from that.

After a few minutes neither had responded, and, feeling agitated, Sydney slipped on a soft bathrobe and, for the first time in a long time, willingly left her room to go make food downstairs after slipping on a soft bathrobe. She measured the dark coffee grounds
out into the machine and pressed it to life, enjoying the quiet burbling sounds of coffee
being brewed, and stuck bread in the toaster to smear with avocado, all before realizing it
was still before 9 a.m., and Cara and Jane wouldn’t be up for hours. Cara, especially, had
started sleeping until well into the afternoon. Judging by the dark circles under her eyes,
she needed the rest.

“You’re up early.” Sydney turned to see her mother, also clad in a fluffy bathrobe,
wander into the kitchen.

Sydney shrugged. “Felt like it. It’s actually sunny out for once.” And it was—the
kitchen was already lit up in a soft glow, the first break in Vernon’s rainy weather in a
week at least.

“It is, it is.” Her mother nodded sagely, leaning against the counter. Bizarrely,
Sydney realized she didn’t know what else to say. When it wasn’t an essential emotional
task, they hadn’t had a real conversation in months. Luckily, the coffee machine went off
just then and saved them.

“Coffee?” she asked.

“Oh, yes please.”

Sydney filled the mugs and got a plate for her toast, slowing spreading on the
avocado so she wouldn’t have to look back at her mother.

But her mother, it seemed, didn’t feel the same discomfort. “You know, I’m glad
you have a friend like Lea you’re so close to,” she said. “I know this time hasn’t been
easy for you, and I’m sorry for that.”
“I have Cara and Sydney too, you know,” Sydney said, realizing that at one point she would have told her mother about a fight with Lea. She couldn’t even imagine doing that now, not least because there would be no way to explain what it was about.

“Oh yes, I know,” her mother smiled. “But you and Lea—that’s something special, isn’t it?” She watched Sydney intently over the rim of her mug.

The look was making Sydney uncomfortable. “I guess. I haven’t seen her a lot lately, honestly.” She grabbed her plate and mug and made as if to walk out of the kitchen, hoping that would be the end of it and she could eat her breakfast in her room and enjoy the peaceful morning she’d been planning on.

“Oh no, did something happen between you two?” her mother called, sounding worried enough to make Sydney turn around once again. “You can usually talk these things out, you know.”

Sydney snorted. “Because you’re such an expert at that,” she said, and left her mother standing alone in the kitchen, mouth hung open in shock like a puppet left drooping on its peg.

As it turned out, Sydney’s anxiety was unfounded. Cara and Jane both texted her back by afternoon and seemed excited to get ready. The problem, unexpectedly, turned out to be Sydney’s mother. Usually prone to sitting alone in her room for hours on end or spending her weekends out late with friends from work—friends she’d never seemed to have until her divorce—she instead stayed downstairs. Sydney could hear her footsteps through the floor, and occasionally the beeping of the microwave. Eventually her brother and sister woke up and joined their mother, adding a pitter of smaller footsteps and occasional
shrieks of laughter. Sydney found herself listening through the crack under her door and realized they were doing homework together. If she went down and joined them, it would be the first time they’d all been peacefully together in months.

The threat of her mother’s probing kept her upstairs and away.

It was the leaving she was worried about. Sydney realized she had no idea if her mother would let her go to a high school party. She hadn’t imagined it would be relevant.

Eventually, Cara and Jane appeared at her door, both starting in shock when they walked in to find themselves staring directly at Sydney’s mother in the kitchen.

“H-hi,” Cara stammered, clearly mortified at having been caught walking into the house. Sydney had to go save her.

“Well, hello girls. It’s nice to see you.”

“You, uh, you too, Mrs. Dickerson,” Cara said.

“Come upstairs!” Sydney yelled down, and Cara and Jane quickly obeyed, appearing at her bedroom door in t-shirts and jeans but carrying bags loaded full of clothes and makeup.

“We’re sleeping over after this, right?” Cara asked, eyeing Sydney.

“Yeah, yeah, she wouldn’t say no. I don’t know what she’s doing home, but,” she shrugged. “What’s more important is . . .” Sydney pulled out the yellow skater dress she’d tried on before, the night she’d found out about Lea and Ryan for the first time. It seemed fitting to wear it now somehow. “I’m thinking this and a good jacket. You all?”

Jane shrugged and pulled out a black halter top and black, striped jeans. “Stole it from my sister,” she said to Sydney’s raised eyebrow. It was a more daring outfit than anything she’d ever tried before.
“It is our first big party,” Cara said, casting an eye over the low-cut top. “And you are pretty hot.”

“Thank you, my dear.” Jane blew her a kiss and stripped down, removing her shirt in one fluid motion and wrenching off her tight jeans with a hard yank. As she did, Sydney’s eye was immediately drawn to the raised red lines stitched over Jane’s upper thighs. By the way Cara stiffened beside her, Sydney knew her friend was seeing the same thing. There were easily twenty marks, and they all looked deep.

Sydney wanted to ask how Jane could have had sex with her legs looking like that, like a particularly gruesome crime scene, but the answer was obvious: Derek wouldn’t have asked, and he probably wouldn’t have looked. Jane might even have been grateful to him for it.

The scars were so distracting Sydney hadn’t noticed Jane was struggling to pull on the new jeans. She had one leg up past her knee and the other mid-thigh, but the jeans had bunched tight and immobile in both places despite Jane’s tugging. “Well don’t just stare at me,” Jane said, tugging on them once more. “Fuck. These fit like a week ago, I swear.” She tried again, and the other side popped up to her mid thigh, digging in hard enough to immediately form a red ring of skin.

“Come on, they must have shrunk in the wash,” Cara said consolingly, reaching over as if to help Jane get them off. Jane ignored her though, face turning redder and redder as she tugged ineffectually at the waistband.

“Jane?” Sydney asked.

“What?”

“How much weight have you been putting on?”
Jane’s face was enraged for just a second before understanding dawned. Somehow, Sydney hadn’t thought about the pregnancy since the night with the vodka, somehow assuming that Jane’s relative return to normalcy meant she knew it was gone, somehow.

“A bit,” Jane said eventually.

“Shit,” Cara said. “Do you—I mean, do you want it?”

“I—” Jane started, then stopped to let go of the jeans, which sagged down on her legs, still sticking out of the denim like squeezed sausage. “Of course I don’t want it. I’m fifteen.”

“We need to get you somewhere to take care of this, like, a week ago,” Sydney said, gazing at her friend in horror. “How many weeks do abortion rights last here, anyway?”

“There’s a while, right?” Jane asked, staring at them wide-eyed. “Like, I have time to think about this?”

“I don’t know, but you definitely shouldn’t,” Cara almost yelled, matching Jane for hysteria pitch for pitch. “We need to call someone now.”

“I CAN’T NOW,” Jane yelled. “I AM NOT READY. How do you guys not get that?”

“It’s okay,” Sydney said soothingly, holding out her hands as if in surrender. It seemed to work, because Jane bent down, still breathing heavy but no longer looking like she might start yelling. “We’ll take care of this. Way before anyone else has to know. Hell, we’d help you raise it.”
The idea of them, the four of them—no, the three of them—together, raising something, felt wonderful, Sydney realized, in its own way. It would be good if it was something like Jane. It would be like them giving Jane a new chance at life. A fresh chance. Fresh thighs, unmarked.

“We would,” Cara promised solemnly next to her. “I’d buy all the books it could ever need.”

“You would never be in this alone,” Sydney added.

Jane seemed to deflate a bit. “My parents would kill me. I want to kill me.”

Cara patted her shoulder and bent down to help her pull off the jeans, throwing them into the corner once they were off, where they crumpled in a circle like a poisonous snake.

Looking back, Sydney wasn’t sure how neither she nor Cara caught what that sentence meant. All she remembered was a vague annoyance that Jane hadn’t been more excited about their idea— their idea of a family, all of them, together forever.

Eventually, they recovered enough to wipe off their faces and reapply their makeup. They curled their hair into waves and brushed them out, slathered their skin with lotion until it bounced smooth to the touch, and blotted dark lipsticks off their mouths with Kleenex. They smeared green concealers on their acne, pink blush on their cheeks, and thick clumps of black mascara on their lashes. By the time they were done Sydney’s face felt like a mask on top of a face, a layer that was not constricting but definitely something different.
Sydney ended up in her skater dress, and Jane in her halter top and looser jeans. Cara had a flowy tank top and a tight-fitting black skirt that made her legs move in short, stretched bursts. Looking at all of them in the mirror, Sydney knew Jane stood out; despite the incident with the first pair of jeans, Jane was skinny in a way that left her breasts and curves and let her walk in the tight outfit while looking perfectly in place. A baby couldn’t possibly fit in that stomach, Sydney thought. As she always did lately, Jane looked tired, but it worked for her.

*Ryan won’t be able to resist,* Sydney thought.

*Is he on his way?* She texted to Cara when Jane wasn’t looking.

*Yep. And looking good,* Cara texted back.

Cara should have looked good too, Sydney thought. But she stood too close together, tugging on her skirt and wobbling in her shoes. Cara was out of place no matter how much effort she put in.

They emerged from Sydney’s room like a parade of coiffed actresses, all moving with a purposefulness they hadn’t before, aware of how their legs stretched and what angle their spines slouched to. Just as Sydney was about to say they looked invincible, and mean it, her mom appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

“And where do you think you girls are going?” she asked, arms crossed.

“Uh—”

“Because you all *look* like you’re going to a party.”

“We’re going to a friend’s place. I told you about this,” Sydney said, hatching a plan on the spot.
But her mother’s frown only deepened. “I know I haven’t been around a lot lately, and that’s my fault,” she said. “But you did not, and I cannot let you girls go to some party who knows where on my watch.”

“Mom—” Lea would have convinced her, Sydney realized. But I can’t.

“That’s final, I’m sorry. Don’t even think about trying to leave tonight.” With that her mom padded away back to the kitchen. The smell of brownies wafted back to them.

“What do we do?” Cara asked. They were all frozen there at the top of the stairs like statues.

“We leave through my window,” Sydney said decisively. She’d done it before, and it’d be half an hour at least before her mom noticed. By then, they’d be long gone. There was no way she could explain this to her mom—why it was so important—but that didn’t matter so much. After all, Jane and Cara were her family now. She had a duty to them first. “Well hurry up.”

Sydney ushered them into her room and closed the door, turned her music up loud, and opened the window. The faint bite of fall air blew in her face.

“It’s an excellent night for a breakout,” she said. For the first time that evening, both Cara and Jane smiled back at her.

-CARA-

I’m almost there.

Cara felt her phone buzz and soon as soon as her feet hit Sydney’s garage roof, the smooth, slanted plates sharp on her bare feet. Her shoes—heels—dangled in her hands as she held out her arms for balance.
Her phone was in her hand as soon as she hit the ground, and she knew it was Ryan before she checked it. She wondered what he would do if he knew Jane was pregnant—*might be pregnant*, she corrected herself. After that night with the vodka, who knew what was happening with Jane’s body?

The party was only a ten minute walk from Sydney’s house, a benefit of small town living for people too young to drive. As soon as they were in the driveway they could hear the bass, a beat that they could feel in the ground and that seemed to make Cara stumble in her heels. A few red solo cups scattered the lawn alongside chip bags and one coat. Inside, the lights were flashing on and off.

“Is someone going to call the cops?” Cara thought Jane had asked the question for a second, and felt a rush of relief that Jane still cared enough about self-preservation to be worried about *something*, but then she turned and it was Sydney after all, looking determined and fierce despite her bouncy dress.

“No,” Jane said. “His dad *is* the police, so . . .”

“Oh.”

They stood outside the door in a line, feeling the house tower over them and watching their shadows jump in the light flooding out from the windows. Suddenly they saw Lea’s face in the window, staring out at them, even whiter than usual in the bright glare. Her eyes met Cara’s just for a second, widened, and then disappeared as her hair whipped around and out of the window.

“Don’t worry, we’ll watch for her,” Cara said, feeling decisive. She wouldn’t let someone who betrayed Jane near her, or risk Lea going off and messing up their plan.
Lea was always the unpredictable element. She didn’t know how Lea and meticulous, even-keeled Sydney had been so close for so long.

“I can see Lea. I’m fine,” Jane said, annoyed. “Actually, I want to see her. I’ll meet you guys inside.” With that Jane took off across the lawn, her shoes—Converse—sinking into the soft ground. Cara and Sydney scrambled to catch up with her, trying not to crowd her. They couldn’t afford to lose Jane this early.

“I’ll circle the house to the right, you take the left,” Cara said, and Sydney nodded. Cara took off past the foyer into the living room, which was so dark and packed with so many people that she couldn’t make out a single familiar face. Immediately, the music overwhelmed her senses. The thudding bass was still most of what she could make out, and it shook directly in her ribcage. Past the living room was the kitchen, where—Thank God—she saw Jane bent over, ladling some kind of pink punch into a red cup, with Lea leaning against the counter next to her.

“—wanted to say sorry I lashed out,” Jane was saying. Cara had to lean into the doorway to hear her, only a breath away but saved, she hoped, by the dim light.

“It’s all right,” Lea answered, steadying Jane as she wobbled away from the punch bowl. “I don’t know why I said all that, I don’t care anymore. I want you and Ryan to be together, actually. Really.”

Cara couldn’t make out what Jane said next, but Lea quickly replied, “Not at all! I never even knew him, honestly. I couldn’t—I just never—” and then Lea and Jane were walking away, and Cara had to duck behind the refrigerator to stay in hearing range.

“—think you could be gay?” Jane was saying, and Lea shook her head emphatically.
“No, I don’t—”

Then Jane was patting her shoulder, looking reassuring. “—didn’t mean—”

But the noise from the party was getting too loud, and Cara had to give up following them without being seen. Just then, Lea split off from Jane. “—no, I’m fine, thanks—” and walked quickly into the other room, leaving Jane standing alone by the stove, cup still in hand. She drank deeply.

“Jane, don’t just leave us,” Cara called. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Derek approaching the kitchen, and watched as Sydney intercepted him. They both headed back to the living room. “Come with me,” Cara called, louder, because Jane hadn’t turned around, but she had to get her friend away before Derek came back. For a tense second Jane didn’t move, and Cara was ready to accept that their evening was always going to be this difficult, that Jane would now ignore them all evening, but then she finally turned around and said, “Come on.” Jane poured herself more punch and pushed a cup at Cara, who sniffed it suspiciously. The sharp tang of alcohol came strongly over the sickly, syrupy fruit smell.

“Well don’t just stare at it,” Jane said, taking a long gulp, and before she could change her mind Cara downed the entire cup. It burned her throat and she coughed a little, but it wasn’t as bad as she’d been expecting. It was like juice, mostly. She immediately felt blood rush to her head—but surely she was imagining that.

“So what’s up with you and Lea?” Cara yelled to be heard.

“Nothing. We’re good,” Jane yelled back, leaning against the counter to survey the crowd. “I just—I really wanted to fix things. She was only trying her best, you
know?” Cara waited for Jane to say something else, something that might alleviate her curiosity, but she didn’t. Just then Derek appeared in their periphery again.

“Let’s check out the basement.” Cara grabbed Jane’s hand and dragged her to the door out of desperation, tugging so Jane couldn’t lean back and see him. If Jane was drinking, she’d do whatever Derek wanted. Cara felt it in her bones.

“Is that you—” Derek’s voice echoed just as the basement door shut behind them, sounding eerily in the dark stairwell like a ghost forever just out of range. Cara felt around for a light and hit a metal cord hanging down from the ceiling. She tugged it and a dusty light bulb turned on, illuminating the stained wooden stairs and the grey slab of floor at their foot.

“Not exactly finished, it it?” Cara said, for lack of anything else to say.

“Was that—” Jane had turned around, staring at the door like a sailor having heard just one note of a siren song before moving out of range. The desperation of it was finally too much for Cara, who looked back at her week and saw hours piling up of planning, worrying, and thinking about Jane.

“Why isn’t anything I can do good enough for you—why does Derek have what it takes, and not me? Or Le—Sydney? Why can’t we compete for your time here?”

Jane was quiet for a second. “I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know why I need him to treat me like shit or not call or act like I’m bothering him every time I say hi, but I do. If I could depend on you guys—on you—the same way, I would be happy, right? But I can’t.”
“I don’t know.” Because suddenly Cara couldn’t imagine Jane being happy. Her highs and lows were buried deep in Jane’s neurons, etched fiercely into rivets of her thoughts. Who Jane was didn’t make sense if she was okay, suddenly.

“Yes,” Jane laughed. “Guess I’m too much of a screw up.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

They made their way down the rest of the stairs, and Cara began to feel her ears ringing. She realized she couldn’t really hear the music anymore. “Did you mean that?” she asked once she’d settled onto the grey slab of floor. “That you wish you depended on me?” The concrete had already started leaching the heat out from her legs. They felt like ice.

“Yes,” Jane smiled, taking Cara’s hand and rubbing a thumb over her wrist. “I really do appreciate you looking out for me, you know.” In that second, Cara would have given her arm to do it again, a thousand times over. “But instead, I want ugly things like Derek and cutting and death.” Jane paused, as if to give Cara time to let the shiver that “cutting and death” punched into her. There would never be a time, she thought, when Jane saying those things wouldn’t make her nauseated. “Death is ugly, Cara.”

“What do you mean?” The word death—divorced from Jane, at least—conjured images of epics, of beautiful women frozen and peaceful in coffins, velvet and shrouds. Cara had never known anyone who died.

“It is; bodies are gross. They bloat and slump and dry out into husks of skin. But I mean, we don’t know what happens after that. How are we not more worried about that? It must be so ugly, to make it happen like that.”
Until that year Cara prided herself on being smart. It was the only thing she prided herself on. But Jane’s words soared above her head and she couldn’t bring them down to a place that made sense. “I mean, I’m an atheist, basically,” she said. “Aren’t you?”

“I mean, I thought I was,” Jane said. “But it just dawned on me that, how would I know any better than anyone else? And what if I go all this time acting like there isn’t anything to worry about, but then I die, and it’s really bad because I didn’t think about it?”

“Like Hell, you mean?”

“That,” Jane paused. “Or just, nothing, you know? Like what if it’s nothing but you’re still around. Or what if you can see how ugly your body gets?”

Objectively, Cara could see the logic in that: it was almost insane how everyone walked around all day is if it was fine they were going to die at any moment, and for centuries and centuries of human existence, that death would just as likely mean eternal torment as anything else. But still. “But what can we do about it? Like, I guess you could join a nunnery, you know, but barring that it just seems like there’s nothing to do but wait and see. You’d go insane.

“Anyway,” Cara continued, forcefully, “hopefully that’s a long way off.”

“Mmm,” Jane said.

Cara realized she had never let herself imagine what wanting to die might actually mean for Jane. To her it had been a temporary problem, and one she would fix. The idea now of Jane, terrified of Hell, made her heart ache. “If there was a Heaven,” Cara concluded, “You’d be in it before absolutely anyone else.”
Jane shook her head. “I’m kind of a bad person. If I was good, I wouldn’t spend all my time trying to get Derek. I’d spend it with you. And with Sydney, and Lea.”

“You’re not a bad person,” Cara said. She realized that she’d been thinking that of Jane too, just a bit, but she had to come at it a different way. *Jane is a good person.* It was something Cara knew more intuitively than anything else, so there had to be some way to be a good person who couldn’t choose to do good things. “You’re sick,” Cara settled on. “Not like, sick as in demented,” she quickly clarified, “but sick as in you can’t help it until you get better.” She pictured the faces carved into the tree again, and this time her mind put sap oozing out of the gouges, the tree bark greying around them.

Jane laughed. “I’m *so* sick. I feel decrepit.”

“But you’ll get better,” Cara said, not knowing if it was true.

They fell silent again, listening to the faint music from above, but the pause in conversation was companionable and easy in a way Cara realized their friendship hadn’t been for a while. For once, she wasn’t afraid that Jane would leave her.

Just then her phone buzzed again, and she opened it to find five unread messages from Ryan, who had been wandering the party lost.

“How *do* you feel about Ryan?” It was astounding, Cara realized, that neither she nor Sydney had bothered to ask.

“Ryan, uh. Ryan is—*is sick,* like me, I guess. Which is bad, because it means we make each other worse. But it’s good, because he understands me, and no one else does. I feel like I need him right now, I guess.”
Can’t you see that all I want is to understand you? she wanted to shout. It was like no matter what she did, she would never be cool or smart enough to actually be Jane’s best friend. “But, do you like him? If you were with him, would you be able to leave Derek alone?” she managed to force out. “And Ryan doesn’t come across like there’s anything that wrong with him, either.”

“He’s just hard to read—kind of cold, I guess,” Jane said. “And it’s not like an either/or—do I like him. It’s not like that with him,” Jane said, and Cara felt even more the dorky friend, tagging along behind; she couldn’t know, because she’d never done anything with anyone. “But yeah, I might be able to stay away from Derek,” Jane finished.

Cara realized that would have to be enough.

“I actually—I mean, I asked because he wanted to see you here,” Cara said, rising. “I’m going to go bring him to you.”

She expected some sort of surprise, but Jane only smiled at her and said, “I know. Thank you, Cara.”

Cara couldn’t bring herself to question how Jane knew.

-LEA-

Gay. As if I could be—. But the thought stuck, despite the four cans of beer Lea had mainlined into her stomach. Beer, Lea discovered, was gross. But there were cans of it, everywhere, in abundance. Every time she ran into someone she knew—which was often—they’d try to fill her hands with another can. A sponsored vacation from reality.
Once, Lea saw Ryan and had to duck away behind a china cabinet, but she was pretty sure he saw her anyway. After that, she took another beer. Cara and Sydney, too, were flitting from room to room and ducking around corners, almost comically alert.

*Like ninja butterflies,* her brain supplied. “Ha,” Lea said out loud, but no one was listening over the music. She’d been around no one, essentially, since Jane left her in the kitchen. Her brother was nowhere to be found, and Cara and Sydney didn’t seem to be making the same conciliatory efforts that Jane was. But Lea wanted to see them, if they’d ever be done carrying out whatever plan Sydney hatched this time.

*If only she could focus on anything but her fucking plans.*

A blur of yellow dress and black hair flashed around the corner, and Lea caught a split second image of Sydney’s features arranged wide in panic. Lea followed her on instinct and ended up by the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor, watching from a foot away as Sydney caught the banister in one hand and sagged against it, panting.

“Been racing someone?” Lea asked.

Sydney’s shoulders stiffened before she turned around. She immediately evened her breathing. “Pretty much, actually.”

Facing Sydney fully for the first time that night, Lea realized her friend looked miraculous. Sydney was carefully made up, but it was more than that—she was glowing. Sydney’s hair frizzed around her shoulders in tumbling curls and the dress pulled up far on one shoulder, and a small trail of glitter flashed across the skin it revealed. Her cheeks were flushed, from exertion or blush Lea couldn’t tell. Sydney always looked good, but this was something different. Not better, just different.

“You look great,” she told Sydney, honestly.
“I look like I’m drowning in sweat,” Sydney corrected. Lea wondered if that might be the extent of their interaction before Sydney exiled her again for good. But instead Sydney smiled, slow and exhausted. “This was supposed to be your job, you know.”

“What was?”

“Chasing Derek. I seem to have lost him.” And then Sydney threw back her head and laughed. “What a party trick.”

Lea couldn’t help but join her, laughing at the absurdity of it all, but feeling the ache of looking at that urgency from the outside. Her friends never doubted their own importance, and while it frustrated her, it was also one of the things she missed most.

From the corner of her eye Lea saw Sydney’s gaze travel over her as their laughter faded out, and—she could feel it—Sydney was searching her for something. Sydney was uncertain, Lea realized, about how to act towards her, a hesitancy that was in that moment so clearly ludicrous.

“Well I’ve got some making up to do,” Lea said. “Let’s find the fucker.”

Sydney grinned widely again. “I thought you’d never ask.” She grabbed Lea’s hand and pulled her into the living room, where the greatest concentration of bodies moved and danced and grinded. The music, still faint against the overpowering bass, was something techno. Lea didn’t recognize it. The lights were red, and Lea wondered where Brian had gotten red lights—or if most parties had red lights. She could see the appeal. Being in room with at least fifty people from her high school, most of whom were drunk, many of them pressed together, should have been awful. But the lights weren’t bright enough to make any of that too visible, and the noise crowded out most of her thoughts. It
was all anonymous, all movement, and against all odds Lea wanted to join in. She pulled Sydney over to the wall, where a card table was set up and littered in cups. It looked like a game of beer pong had been set up and long abandoned.

“I haven’t seen Jane in a while.” Lea had to shout to be heard. She raised an eyebrow and gestured to the dance floor. “But Derek’s not in the kitchen and I’d bet he’ll wander in here sooner or later.” She gestured to the dance floor, where she suddenly desperately wanted to be.

Sydney was looking at her almost warily. Lea could understand; this wasn’t usually like them. They didn’t do this. But they’d been doing a lot of things they hadn’t done lately, and it was her turn to grab Sydney’s hand.

“I love this song,” Lea yelled, pulling Sydney towards her. With the beer in her head and the bass tumbling through her body, Lea found that dancing was easy. She just had to move her hips, tilt her head down, raise her arms. Sydney began to do the same, and then the beat felt like more, like something drawing her, and she moved closer until she could feel Sydney against her, in time, and couldn’t remember how they’d ever been fighting.

Then Sydney turned around, keeping close against Lea, still moving with her, and Lea picked up the motion easily,tilting her hips backwards to catch her and around, again and again. It was instinctual, she was pleased to find.

*This is what it should have been like with Ryan.* The thought appeared in her head without her meaning it to, and she froze for a moment, long enough for Sydney to look back at her and shift her hips to turn back to facing Lea.

Lea hadn’t realized until then how closely they’d been dancing.
In a panic she looked around the room, certain everyone would be staring at them and that the lights would turn back on and show a wide circle of disgust. But there were plenty of girls dancing. To her right a tall, athletic-looking girl grinded on her friend, their blonde hair tangled together. They were laughing, all look at what we’re doing self-conscious, but still—the scene was repeated all over the room, and Lea’s breathing slowed again. We weren’t doing anything wrong.

But Sydney hadn’t moved away. And Lea was relieved. She could feel the warm outline of where Sydney’s skin touched her own, and even though the room was heated and sweaty and Lea should have wanted to run out to the porch she just moved closer instead. The song switched and the beat slowed, and Lea found her face tilted up and very close to Sydney’s, whose eyes were closed, whose hand was now on her hip, and Lea thought she wanted to do something she shouldn’t a second before her mouth was on Sydney’s, their lips moving together and apart as their bodies had just a minute ago. Once or twice Lea felt their teeth meet and knew it was clumsy but didn’t care, and then she figured out something else, which was that she could catch Sydney’s lip gently in her teeth, and then Sydney was pulling her back until she bumped into the table, falling against Sydney’s shoulder, eyes jolting open just in time to see a hand pour something clear into a red solo cup, then quickly tuck the flask into a back pocket. Lea’s gaze followed the arm, and realized they had ended up not two feet from Derek.

“Sydney,” Lea whispered, frozen. Sydney turned her head to follow Lea, just in time to see Derek hand the red cup to a girl with a strappy black dress and a short puff of afro next to him. “Sydney, he put something in that drink.”
The girl raised the cup to her lips, laughing at something he’d whispered into her ear. Derek looked at ease. A wide smile took over his face.

In a flash, Lea was out of Sydney’s arms and had fallen into the girl. The cup bounced against her shoulder and the drink, lukewarm, splashed down Lea’s front. A strong smell of alcohol hit Lea’s nose immediately, and her eyes teared up.

“Shit,” the girl said, straightening up. Most of it had missed her, but a spackle of drops glistened on her shoulders where the dress hadn’t covered her skin.

“Shit,” Lea echoed. “So sorry, my bad.”

She had just turned away to melt back into the crowd, when Derek’s voice echoed behind her. “Fucking lesbos.” The girl must have said something to argue with him, because Lea turned to see him raise his hands, all joking defensiveness. “Fine, fine, it was pretty hot.”

It was the most stereotypical sequence of words Lea could have imagined. That should have made it funny, should have made it dismissable at least. But it didn’t, and as the residual warmth from dancing faded out of her, Lea felt sick. As if they’d been performing for him.

Sydney was suddenly at her side. “I grabbed something from him,” she said, dark eyes glinting. His flask, a shiny, industrial grey, peeked out of her dress, where Sydney had tucked it into her bra. “Come with me to the bathroom.”

Lea weaved through the crowd to follow Sydney’s back, striding purposefully across the living room and up the stairs, where the music suddenly seemed less overpowering. They stopped inside a bathroom and Sydney shut the door. Lea understood
that whatever had just happened between them and whatever it had meant would wait until after their mission. She was back in the group, and it felt like home.

Sydney unscrewed the flask and poured some of the liquid into her palm, then held it up to sniff. She wrinkled her nose. “Smells like rubbing alcohol,” she said, and reached out for Lea. Ducking around Sydney’s outstretched arm, Lea grabbed the flask and took a swig. It burned on the way down, but she couldn’t taste anything else.

“That, Lea.” Sydney grabbed the flask back as Lea coughed, and the liquid splashed across the bathroom counter. “He probably drugged that. What were you thinking?”

Lea took a second to try not to vomit as the alcohol hit her stomach. She’d definitely had too much to drink already. “I was thinking,” she said, “that if I pass out you’ll get me help and then hand that flask with Derek’s fingerprints all over it to the police.”

Sydney narrowed her eyes. “That’s actually kind of smart.”

“Thank you.”

“But mostly it’s just absurdly stupid.”

“That’s fair.”

They both paused for a bit, waiting to see if anything would happen, but Lea stayed upright. She felt fine besides being drunk.

“I think it was just really strong vodka,” Lea said. “I didn’t taste anything else.”

“You don’t taste date rape drugs, moron.”

“Okay, well, still. Honestly, I’m fine.”

Sydney didn’t look convinced. “Why was he being so sneaky about it then?”
For Lea, whose head was already spinning and flushed, the answer was obvious.

“Same reason as if it was roofies.”

“Right. Shit.” They contemplated that for a second in silence, both feeling sick for a reason that had nothing to do with the jungle juice. Then Lea remembered the girl in her strappy dress, mouth wide as Lea crashed into her. She remembered the girl defending Lea to Derek.

“We can’t just leave her with him.”

“Lea, it’s okay, we didn’t. Cara’s with Jane right now. She texted me.”

Lea stared Sydney down, wondering if this dance of both wanting back in with her friends and being repelled by their single-mindedness would ever come to a satisfying conclusion. “Not Jane. The girl whose drink he tried to spike.”

Something almost like guilt danced across Sydney’s face. “You’re right. It’s just—”

“You won’t leave Jane.”

Sydney nodded and they stared at each other across the bathroom, wondering if whatever had just happened between them was about to end in an argument. They could both see the other not wanting that, and still they were both not backing down.

Lea never felt so relieved as when Sydney suddenly broke the silence to say, “I have an idea.”

That was how they found themselves, ten minutes later, creeping back down the stairs with Derek—still by the beer pong table—in their sights. He was pushing past people to look under chairs and under tables while the girl—her name was Chrissy, Lea realized,
she was a senior—followed him, now and then placing a comforting hand on his back that he would shrug off.

“I feel really good about this,” Lea said, the second time it happened. Lea clutched the flask tightly to her chest.

The flask contained the remnants of eighteen pills Sydney found in Brian’s medicine cabinet, in a bottle that said to aid in sleep, with a long string of warnings following.

“I should look this up,” Sydney had said, but Lea watched her hesitate and followed her thoughts. The worst that could happen is these do nothing. But if we don’t know how many is too many, we don’t have to stop ourselves. Lea knew: they both wanted something very bad to happen to Derek, and neither wanted to actually stop and think about what it would mean if it did.

Lea grabbed the bottle from Sydney’s hand and poured out all the pills, counted them out small and fat and blue in her palm—sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—and grabbed a heavy bottle of shampoo out of the shower with which to crush them, quickly and efficiently, on the counter.

“They’ll think people are screwing in here,” Sydney giggled after Lea stopped banging on the counter. They both stopped to realize that was something they could technically have been doing, technically.

Then Lea scooped the crushed pills into her hand and Sydney said, “I’ll distract him,” and they were on the stairs once again, watching Derek search for the flask.

“Go,” Lea whispered, and Sydney danced off the landing into the crowd, making a beeline for Derek as her yellow dress swished around her legs. Lea followed at a
distance. She could only just hear them where she stopped. She saw Sydney poke him on
the shoulder and watched Derek set his cup down reflexively beside him.

“I’ve, uh,” Sydney stopped as if embarrassed, then looked sideways to the ground.
“I’ve been watching you.”

Derek looked behind him, but Chrissie was talking to another friend—one of the
blonde girls, from before—and he turned back to Sydney. “Have you now?”

Watching them was like a dream to Lea. The entire summer of texting Ryan and
their singular, awful date together flooded back to her, along with everything she’d
thought and practiced and changed about herself during that time: the bashfulness, the
looking down, the little giggle, and Ryan’s calm interest, which she saw as something to
be courted. Lea watched it all play out in front of her there with Sydney and Derek, in
miniature. She knew Ryan was nothing like Derek, and was conscious that in the end she
had probably hurt him more than he ever could have imagined at the start, but in that
second she could easily have switched the two men, traded muscles for a sweater, and
knew the basic act would be the same. She’d seen people flirt since then, of course, but
somehow with Sydney it was different. Lea wanted to scream.

Instead, she flashed around them and slid the flask next to Derek’s cup while
shielding the motion with her body. She dashed away again as quickly as she had come.

“Oh, I have to go,” Sydney said behind her. Lea darted a glance back and saw
Derek staring after Sydney, confusion etched across his face until Chrissie rejoined him
and he shook his head, his smile reaffixed.

Lea took a place on the wall close by to watch and make sure no one else touched
the flask. Sydney fell into place beside her.
“Good job,” she said.

“And to you,” Lea replied, even if watching it had made her sick.

As they looked on, Derek turned back and noticed his flask. He frowned as he picked it up and turned it over, then gave a little shrug and stuck it in his jacket pocket. Lea wondered if soon something irreversible would happen. She didn’t feel sick about that possibility, though. She felt only anticipation, and edged her hand closer so Sydney, who linked their fingers and sent warm tingles shooting up Lea’s arm. We are making something happen, Lea thought, and that seemed good.

As they watched, Chrissie hugged Derek around the waist, stumbled a little, then grabbed onto the flask with one hand as it threatened to fall to the ground from where it wobbled in his pocket. Lea dug her nails into her palm.

“Drink it,” Sydney muttered under her breath, but Derek didn’t. Just then a string of guys from the football team walked into the room and yelled, “Beer pong!”

Derek looked at his flask, frowned, and placed it on an end table. It wobbled for just a second before steadying.

Sydney let their fingers drop. Something like the well of anticipation surged in Lea’s chest again and froze—it was like the moment of almost watching Derek drink it, but it didn’t stop. The edges of her vision went dark and Lea’s breath starting coming in quick, short bursts.

“What do we do with all of this?” she managed to ask Sydney between breaths, meaning their hope and their daring, all of which had come to nothing. Across the room from them, Derek threw the first ball into a cup of beer, and the crowd cheered around him. A girl who wasn’t Chrissie ruffled his hair.
“I don’t know,” Sydney said, and that was the first time Lea remembered she didn’t know the whole plan, or what Cara and Jane were doing all this time. “We get the cup back so no one else—”

But when they turned back, the flask was gone off the end table. Out of the corner of her eye, Lea saw a flash of curly blonde hair disappear around the corner.

“Where’s Ryan?” Lea asked, a thrill of cold fear running down her spine. She was amazed at how sober she suddenly felt.

Immediately Sydney walked away, peering through the crowd. “Cara just texted and said he’s headed for Jane. Sorry to dash your hopes.” Her voice had gone cold.

“We have to find that flask.”

Lea knew this was the part where she was supposed to say, No, you got it wrong, I don’t want Ryan; I want you. It should have been easy. But Sydney was her friend, had always been her friend, and the moment seemed so absurd and cheesy that Lea couldn’t get the words out. Sydney couldn’t go from friend to more so quickly. Instead, she followed Sydney and checked every table and under every couch.

At one point Lea heard a fight break out in the kitchen and was grateful the room had cleared out a bit, giving her space to move around and see the floor. She didn’t see it.

“I think we checked everywhere,” Lea said eventually. “It probably wouldn’t have done anything, anyway.” Because I can’t do anything right. Lea stole a cup full of something dark brown and downed it. She didn’t even mind the taste so much anymore.

“I haven’t heard from Cara.” Sydney sounded agitated, and Lea could tell immediately that this was no longer about the two of them and what they had done.

Sydney was scared.
-CARA-

Cara left Jane in the basement and re-emerged into the kitchen, the music and lights hitting her full-force again after the quiet of the lower level. She found Ryan waiting by the punch bowl, and was surprised to see he had his own flask, plain stainless steel, in hand.

“Kind of thought you’d only drink red wine or something,” she said, sliding next to him. Now that she’d stood up, Cara could feel her head buzzing and her cheeks flushed, the alcohol working unfamiliarly through her system.

“What? Oh,” he said, looking up. The booze and deepened the pink on Ryan’s cheeks, giving him a sort of cherubic look. “Not half so classy as that. I stole this off an end table. Desperate times, and all that.” He took a sip and crinkled his nose. “Tastes weird, even for that.”

“Desperate times?” The times were Cara’s version of desperate, but she didn’t know what Ryan meant by that for himself.

“Lea’s around, and I just—” he stopped to take another long swig. “You ever think you have a chance at something good and you just, you screw it up entirely? Like, ruin something that should have been good, because you yourself make things bad?”

“Like every conversation I’ve ever been in,” Cara said, the words leaving her mouth before she could think them through. So that is what being drunk is, she thought, and giggled. “Wait, what about Lea?”

“Nothing, sorry.” He drank again, and Cara realized she wasn’t sure he had said Lea at all. She giggled again, then remembered that Jane was upset in the basement.
“Do you think death is ugly, Ryan?” she asked.

“No,” he said, seeming much more sober than he’d been a second ago. “I think it’s fascinating.”

“I don’t think it is either.” Cara shook her head. “Jane thinks it’s ugly though.”

He snorted. “I spend half my time in a biology lab. Jane hasn’t seen much death.”

He looked thoughtful though. “I bet she would think it was very ugly, though.”

“Maybe she just needs to see more death,” Cara laughed, her strange resentment towards Ryan bubbling up. She felt she could have said anything to him, then.

But instead, Derek did. “Hey, asshole, that’s my flask.”

Derek was heading towards them. Cara looked to Ryan, who raised the flask in a mock-salute then tipped it upside-down and drained it. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, working overtime; there was a lot in the flask to be drunk. When Ryan finished he popped the flask from his mouth and tipped it over the ground, all mock-concern. “Oops. I think it’s empty.”

With a roar, Derek lunged for him, and Ryan sidestepped, leaving Derek to hit the table with a sickening crunch. Derek swore, then paused, winded, to catch his breath. As he did he seemed to recognize Ryan for the first time. “The fuck, man?”

“For everything you said about Jane Huang,” Ryan said, then promptly threw up into the sink.

“I barely know her,” Derek glared, swiping his flask back out out Ryan’s hand. “Drink some water and chill out, man.” Derek walked back into the living room and disappeared from view.
Ryan started giggling, a startling high-pitched sound. “B-barely k-knows her,” he laughed, tearing off a paper towel and wiping his mouth.

“Ryan, are you alright?”

“Yes, thank you Cara, I’m fine.” Ryan giggled once more, the gleam leaving his eyes. Abruptly, Cara decided she was annoyed by his drunken giggling, not least because she half-wondered if he was imitating her.

“Jane’s waiting for you, you know.” Cara gestured to the basement door. It was cut off by location from the rest of the party, but the shadows that filtered out from under it made the door ominous. Cara imagined herself as some high priestess, banishing Ryan to the dungeons.

“I know.” He darted away into the living room, and Cara thought for a second he was abandoning them, but then he returned, steel flask back in hand. “Couldn’t let him get away with that entirely, could we?” He grinned, and then opened the basement door, closing it softly on his way down, leaving Cara alone, empty cup still in hand, and her last conversation with Jane still ringing in her head.

-LEA-

“Give her a second, you texted her—what, five minutes ago?” Lea was panicked suddenly, staring at Sydney as though by focusing well enough she could make Jane appear out of sheer desperation.

“More like twenty.” Sydney looked sober, suddenly. “There’s no way Cara would leave me hanging like that unless something was really wrong.”

Fuck.
Before Lea could respond, Sydney was headed towards the kitchen. Lea scrambled to follow, faces blurring around her, just in time to see Sydney fling a door open that seemed to just lead to darkness, until a second later Lea’s eyes adjusted and she saw it was just a basement staircase. Sydney’s back headed down, so Lea decided she would follow.

The first stair creaked when she put her weight on it, and as soon as it did she froze: Just coming into view was a person, eerily still at the bottom of the stairs.

-SYDNEY-

The first thing Sydney thought when Lea asked for Ryan was, *how could I have left them without checking in for so long?* The second thought was, *screw you too, Lea.*

Maybe the pettiness came from the pent-up adrenaline of what they’d tried to do to Derek and the crushing weight of not having done it. Maybe it was regret over what they’d been doing before that, the dancing and the kissing. Most likely, Sydney already knew, it was plain old-fashioned jealousy. She’d just never felt it so strongly before, not even amongst her friends. But she couldn’t let that distract her now.

When Sydney flung open the basement door she braced herself to see Jane’s body.

First, she saw Cara’s body, standing upright with her arm outstretched as if still reaching for the doorknob. She was a statue of a person.

Next, she saw Jane’s body just beyond Cara, huddled close together and staring with dead eyes.

Then, she saw Ryan’s body, stretched out, white, with its mouth open.
It was only minutes later she realized only one of those figures was truly just a body, and then which one that was. She heard Lea shut the basement door behind her.

Then Ryan seized, arms spluttering like terrified animals trying to run away, and Jane screamed. They all—Cara, Sydney, and Lea—hesitated.

-CARA-

As soon as they hesitated Cara knew Ryan was lost. She wrote him off as such.

They hadn’t all moved as one since the night in the woods, but this basement was like the woods. It was dark, and there were two paths Jane could take. This time, they got to choose for her.

Cara was sad for Ryan, in the way she was sad for lab mice.

That is ugly, she thought, watching the last sputter of Ryan’s limbs as he froze rigid once more beside them. A thin trail of pale vomit leaked out of his mouth, and the smell hit her then: there was more vomit around him, she was sure.

Cara was glad Lea had shut the door behind her, so no one would hear Jane screaming. They couldn’t go to her until it was all over, that much Cara knew. Jane needed to see it. It needed to be really, really bad. Bad enough to persuade someone that even living—even that—even that was better than this.

-LEA-

Lea hesitated. She knew that, and then she knew that Cara and Sydney had done the same. She knew that because no one helped Ryan, who was dying, and no one helped Jane, who was screaming. She knew there must be some reason for that.
Then she knew she felt relieved, because she’d never have to confront what had happened that day with him again. She could say, *My first time hurt. I wasn’t ready,* and it would be like anyone else’s story—there would be no one to contradict her.

Then, she knew Sydney and Cara must have a better reason than that, and felt ashamed.

**-SYDNEY-**

Sydney thought, *Clearly he wasn’t the way to make Jane better.* She thought, *And how would Jane ever be better if it was just based in some guy.* She thought, *How do we know he’s even that different from Derek.* She thought, *I should never have let him in. This is me cleaning my mess.*

She thought, *This is fair.* She thought, over Jane’s screams, *this is better for Jane.*

The last two were the same thought.

**-JANE-**

It couldn’t have been real because no one was moving. Her screams echoed around the room until they bounced back at her in piercing, mockingly shocking. Screaming had replaced breathing; it was involuntary, and she couldn’t stop.

*He* was moving next to her; she knew because she could feel the vibrations through the floor each time a hand or a knee struck wildly at the ground. In front of her, stacked like an opened-up Russian doll, were Cara, then Sydney, then Lea. None of them moved. Jane couldn’t say for how long.
It’s a nightmare, she thought. Otherwise, someone would move. Jane tried and found she couldn’t move either. It was the last thing she could remember thinking.
The next thing Jane remembered was being chased, by something that was yelling at her—a strange, looping machine wail. She was running, except, as the sound threaded in and out of her hearing, Jane knew she was also sleeping. Or at least, she thought she’d been sleeping. She shook her head and realized she was lying down and that the sound was far away. Her body creaked grudgingly back into wakefulness, and her head throbbed. She breathed in and no air came—but then, she realized she was congested, and drew in a few frantic gulps of air. As she did, she felt coldness—then she realized it was dampness, that she was on the ground.

She was outside, and there were sirens sounding in the distance.

“Did Jane just move?” someone whispered.

Jane shut her mouth and held still, hoping the moment would pass and the sirens would stop. But nothing answered the whisper and the sirens went on. Frantically, Jane thought that if they didn’t stop, her head would split open—that she’d have to scream, and reveal herself—but somehow, impossibly, she stayed perfectly still even as panic flooded her system. Jane’s breathing accelerated and shallowed, forcing her mouth open in small, desperate puffs that couldn’t bring the oxygen all the way to her brain. But this was a familiar hysteria. At one point, Jane remembered, she had been in charge of her emotions, like they were animals in a circus and she their ringmaster. Now, her emotions were waves that swept her along with them.

But fear was powerful too, and it left her frozen until a hushed, urgent voice answered the last one.

“What are we going to tell her?”
“That there was an accident. It was an accident.”

“I mean, what about—”

“She’d never speak to us again. And she needs us.”

There was silence for a moment, then, “It might have all worked out for the best anyway. I mean—”

“It would never have worked, what we—”

“I mean, I hope it scared her. Maybe that’s what she needed.”

“We have to promise: We’re not telling her.”

“I promise.”—a chorus of voices that time.

A faint rustling sound floated over to Jane, and she realized it was one of the voices, shaking against the dead leaves on the ground.

“It was so ugly.”

Only then Jane realized the voices were her friends, and they were talking about her. They were talking about what to do with her. Abstractly, Jane had expected that was something they talked about a lot. It was something else to hear it out loud while she lay frozen on the ground like a patient strapped to a table.

A brief flash of Cara’s hand clamped tight around her wrist, tugging and forcing Jane’s legs into motion, popped into her head. Jane, come on, we have to go, Cara had said. But where did they go?

“He was so ugly.”

The words echoed strangely in Jane’s head for a second, just long enough for her to think, I’ve thought that, before the image of Ryan’s face, slackened and smeared in
vomit, emerged from the back of her mind like a horror movie monster coming into full frame. Ryan had been dying, and she had been screaming, and then there were sirens.

“Do you think they’re looking for us?”

“No, there’s no reason they would.”

“Sydney—”

“No, I’m serious, I got the fingerprints—” The rest of what Sydney said was drowned out by what Jane knew was a police siren. This one was much closer than the rest. It was coming towards them. The urgency in her friends’ voices said it was coming for them. It was coming for them and Ryan was dead—

Before the wave of hysteria could crash, Jane stretched her arm, miming herself waking up. They have to think I just woke up. They can’t know what I heard.

“Jane?” someone asked.

Jane yawned, then wondered if she was overdoing it. She heard movement, and felt them coming closer to her.

“Jane?”

Jane looked. Cara’s face peered down at hers, shiny with sweat and smeared makeup. For a second relief washed over her: she was with Cara, so she would be all right. Then Cara’s voice echoed in her head—we’re never telling her—and her insides went cold.

“Jane, how are you feeling?”

Her head was pounding still and her whole body felt shaky and weak. She didn’t know if she could stand. “I’m fine.” Just then, Jane felt like a wounded gazelle struggling to hide a limp and keep up with her herd.
“We have to get our story straight and get home, Jane, we have to get home really soon or we’ll be in trouble.” Cara spoke quickly, words tumbling out of her mouth like scattering rocks.

_Surely,_ Jane thought, _if I ask her, Cara wouldn’t lie._ “What’s the story?”

Cara paused, and in the silence Jane noticed for the first time the sirens had stopped. “And what time is it?”

“It’s just past eleven, we left fifteen—no, twenty minutes ago. We have to get home or it’s going to look really bad.”

“Why—”

“Something bad happened.” Cara’s face was all wide eyes staring down with an intensity like she was trying to burrow herself into Jane’s pupils. Then Jane remembered: Ryan was dead. But how had she forgotten that? And why couldn’t she feel it?

“What’s the story?” Jane repeated. Cara paused again, and Jane was just about to call her on it when Sydney’s face appeared, covering the patch of leaves Jane had been staring at.

“The story is, you came to the party with you and Cara and I.”

“Yes.” That much was true, and Jane breathed a sigh of relief: it was something she knew, something she could ground herself on.

“Then,” Sydney continued, “Cara wanted us to meet up with Ryan, but when we found him he was acting crazy—he was on something.”

A flash of Ryan’s pupils, dilated beyond belief—and an echo, his voice saying, _I took them out of my mom’s drawer, here, do you want_—“But you weren’t there.”
“Yes, Jane,” Sydney nodded her head. “Yes, we were. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“No.” Jane squeezed her eyes shut. “You weren’t there.” You weren’t there, you weren’t there. She repeated it in her head like a mantra.

“Jane, we have to have our story straight.” That voice was Lea. Jane cracked open her eyes and found Lea’s face, pale as moonlight, now also stretched across her vision. The top of Lea’s head met Sydney’s, their faces like a bridge over her. “This isn’t about what’s true; it’s about what we tell people.”

Jane understood, but her head was still too muddled; she knew that if she listened to them, she wouldn’t be able to remember what was real. “You never tell people what’s true.” She opened her eyes fully, to indict all of them. She needed to leave. She needed them to let her leave, now, to get away from this awful damp place the sirens had chased them to.

“Neither do you,” Sydney said, her voice level. “It’s your game we’re playing. So what’s your story?”

“Let’s just leave. Please.”

Sydney didn’t even blink. “What’s your story?”

Jane tried to remember what Sydney had just said, and then remembered, because she’d forgotten again already: Ryan was dead, a fact that still seemed more curious than it did tragic. But he was going to go to Brown, Jane’s brain supplied, as if she’d just remembered his enrollment at Ohio State instead of his death.

“I came to the party with you and Cara,” Jane recited dutifully. “Cara wanted to meet up with Ryan, but when we did he was on something—he was acting crazy.”
Sydney nodded. “So we left him in the basement and went up to the living room, where we found Lea.”

It was Jane’s turn to nod: that made sense, they would do that, if that had happened.

“We were dancing together, the four of us, until the cops came. We heard the sirens and we ran because we had been drinking.”

“We left him and then danced with everyone until the cops came,” Jane repeated.

“We left him and then *found Lea*,” Sydney emphasized. “Now we’re going home.” Then she shifted back, followed closely by Lea. Cara’s hand clamped around Jane’s wrist, and with it, a flash of memory: stumbling through the woods, running from shouting and a note of bass still thudding out the walls. Running, Jane remembered suddenly, *from* the sirens.

*It was an accident.*

*I got the fingerprints.*

Those were words her friends had said, after they’d run. Jane’s blood ran cold. *What did you do?* She wanted to scream at them, but was afraid suddenly that if she did they would never let her go, that she’d be trapped in the woods forever and would never know how she’d ended up there.

Then Jane looked up, and saw for the first time the leaves she’d stared at were connected to a massive girth of tree trunk. Carved into the middle of the trunk were two faces, one a dim grimace and one screwed up in a wail. The bark around them had gone grey and remnants of sap coated the deepest cuts.

*We’re still here,* they said. *You did this,* they said.
They went to Sydney’s house first, wondering at what point her mom had realized they were gone.

By the sight of her, she’d known for a while. Julia was waiting on the porch for them, her face a sheen of tears and makeup to rival all of theirs.

“I thought those sirens were for you,” she sobbed as soon as they took the first step onto the creaking wood porch. In a way, Jane thought, Sydney’s mom didn’t know how right she was. Julia hugged each of them tightly—Jane last—and the feeling of scratchy cotton wrap and body heat made Jane’s skin crawl. She couldn’t handle anyone else’s tears just yet.

After that, phone calls must have been made, because Cara’s parents came to pick their daughter up in their silver Toyota looking dazed. Then Lea’s brother came.

“Get in, kid,” he called out of his beaten up brown truck.

“You good to drive?” Lea called back. He nodded and she went to him without so much as a glance back. Then it was just Sydney and Jane, sitting huddled on the couch while Sydney’s mother paced the kitchen and Sydney’s siblings peeked down at them over the top of the banister on the staircase.

“You pulled all of this together,” Jane said, no longer sure if she meant it as an accusation or a compliment.

“I want to talk to you about what happened later,” Sydney answered.

Immediately, Jane knew she had to avoid that; no one who was going to tell her the truth would phrase that request so dispassionately. Sydney spoke like she was trying to soothe a spooked cat.
A furious knocking sounded at the door, and Jane could hear the door swing open even as she refused to look. *Is it dad or mom?* she wondered, but then a male voice unleashed a string of questions, punctured only by frequent “What?”s from Sydney’s mom, who could never understand her parents’ accents. She must have figured it out somehow though, because eventually he came to stand in front of Jane.

“Are you okay?”

She creaked her eyes open to find her dad looking not angry in the least but crazed and frightened, eyes bulging behind his square glasses frames.

“No,” she said, because there was nothing else to say. She waited for him to call her on the lie, but he didn’t. He only stood in front of her, peering down, afraid and confused, as if Jane had morphed into something strange and terrible on her walk home from the party. Then he turned and headed to the car without saying anything more, and Jane was grateful for the brief reprieve. She didn’t know how she would face her mother, but she followed him anyway.

The inside of Jane’s house was cramped somehow despite being large, with tall bulky walls separating rooms into smaller rooms at every opportunity. Jane sometimes wondered if her mother chose the house because walking through it in a circle gave one the impression of having traveled through several different houses, all filled to the brim with knickknacks and decorative fans and old textbooks; Jane’s mother never went outside, and never talked to anyone except her family in China over the phone.

“Why don’t you make friends?” Jane asked her sometimes.
Jane’s mother would shake her head and cross her arms defensively across her chest. “They can’t understand my accent,” she’d say, and if Jane pointed out her dad had made plenty of friends to play golf and go out for drinks with, her mom would only shake her head more and turn away. Jane never brought her friends over and they never asked why, as if they sensed how little of an answer Jane would be able to give them.

Instead of friends, Jane’s mother filled her days with focusing on Jane and Ilene: on what clothes they wore, what their grades were like, and if they knew how very, very bad it would be if they started dating boys. Jane liked to hide in her hole of a bedroom, scurried away like a mouse.

“Why does she spend all her time alone up there?” Jane once overheard her mother saying to her father as they sat down to dinner, voices wafting up through the vents. “It’s not normal.” It was then Jane understood that she was a problem to be fixed. But she still couldn’t come out of her room except for school. Instead, Jane stuffed towels in the vent so she couldn’t hear, and her room grew hot and stuffy in the summertime heat. She told her mother she was tired, that she was doing homework, and that her friends were too. Her mother looked back at Jane a second too long and then nodded, and Jane didn’t hear her parents talk about it again. It was their dance: Jane would give her mother reasonable excuses, and her mother would accept them, and let herself think for just a bit longer that her daughter was normal and all right.

*Where are you after school?* With Cara.

*Why don’t you eat more?* I eat more at school.

*Depression,*” people say. *As if sadness is something to be studied.* Mm.

*Why don’t you smile?* I’m tired, Mom, I’m just tired.
As soon as Jane walked in the door, trailing her father and staring at the ground as if she could avoid questions if she never looked up, her mother flew at her, black hair fanning out behind like a crazed cloud.

“Where have you been? Who were you with? Did you drink anything?” her mother spoke quickly, eyes wide, gesturing widely.

“I was at Brian’s house, with Cara and Sydney and Lea. I didn’t drink anything.” Jane hoped no one could smell the alcohol on her breath, but her mother just nodded, as if that was what she’d expected. And it was: the next step in their dance. “Is Ilene here?” Jane asked.

“Yes. Your sister doesn’t feel the need to sneak out.” And only then did Jane wonder why Ilene hadn’t gone to a party at one of her best friends’ houses. Because it was true; Jane hadn’t seen her there at all.

“Mom, I promise I didn’t do anything. I was just at a party. I’m fine. No one knows what happened to that guy.” Except for my friends.

The storm abated on her mother’s face and she stepped back.

“I’m tired,” Jane said, and walked up the stairs before her parents could decide whether or not to accept that.

Jane still felt numb. As she walked into her room and saw the mess—sheets in a tangle, clothes on the ground, piles of homework strewn everywhere—she realized that nothing was happening to her but a strange lightheadedness. She was still, she realized, in the in-between: between what happened and realizing what it meant. Distantly, Jane wondered if the second part would be as bad as she expected, or if she could maintain this
strange numbness as she reckoned with what Ryan had been to her and she to him, and untangled the threads of guilt from herself and her friends as meticulously and methodically as a surgeon—as carefully as if it was life-saving work she was doing, instead of life-ending—sewing Ryan’s life closed in a way she could live with.

Because Jane had no idea why her friends would hurt Ryan. The gulf between what she thought she knew and what had happened was too wide to traverse.

But there was something else Jane thought she knew: she didn’t want the twitching, foul sack of skin and frayed muscles that Ryan and become just hours ago to be her. There was a vanity about it—a sense of superiority she couldn’t quash; Jane did not want to become that ugly. And in a way, that was like wanting to live.

The next two hours Jane spent lying sideways on her bed, staring down the glowing wall of her Facebook feed. There was one article circulating: ONE DEAD AT HIGH SCHOOL PARTY. The police hadn’t released a name yet, and they wouldn’t say if drugs or alcohol were involved. But everyone knew already. The school plastered his name on their statuses with an alacrity that seemed hell-bent not on breathing some life into Ryan, but on breathing some sort of connection between the dead body and the people whose bodies had sat breathing next to his in a classroom for years now without any other connection between them.

Jane felt no desire to do anything like that. What she wanted, instead, was sleep, her eyelids becoming so heavy and strained that just the act of looking became a monumental effort. So she gave up, and she slept.
Or, Jane thought she slept. When she woke up her clothes had been thrown across the room and her sheets felt sticky on her skin. Jane tore them off and felt the thin fabric suction off of a raw part of her stomach, a sharp pain. She looked: three vertical cuts, perfectly straight, like someone had sectioned off parts of her to eat. She flexed her stomach and the cuts screamed, skin opening deep at the seams.

Immediately, Jane felt like a mass of lava had dropped into her intestines and was eating them up, crawling through them, it wasn’t just pain but knots and fear and she couldn’t take in air and she was going to throw up and—Jane dug a finger into one of the cuts and scraped down, feeling the skin give way to nothing, a nothing that quickly filled with blood, warm and sticky, trailing down her side. It hurt more, and it grounded her.

That had happened a lot, lately—waking up having hurt herself, the last thing she could remember just being upset, like she’d blacked out on emotional overload. Usually the panic after that was panic over what she could have done—could have hurt herself too badly to fix, could have hurt herself in a way others could see, could have done—well, anything.

It was like the last time she’d woken up, with Derek’s name on her phone screen and no memory of what she’d said. That was the first time Jane realized she couldn’t keep what was happening from bleeding over into her life outside her room, from touching the people around her. What if someone had been with me? She’d wondered. What would I have done?

Now, the memory pulled at her. Not what would I have done, she realized, but what did I do.

The thought picked up speed: What could I have done to Ryan?
Surely, surely, there would be something—a mess, a memory, an intent—if Jane, even that far gone, even then, had done—surely her friends would have stopped her—

Unless they were too late, she realized. Unless they came in and he was already dead. They would cover it up, and they would never tell me.

The panic set in again, but behind it Jane thought how pointless it was: she was panicking over something that had already happened. Ryan was already dead, and maybe it was Jane’s friends’ faults. Maybe it was Jane’s fault. Either way, there was nothing left to prevent. Either way, she should have been able to prevent it. What could I have done? She wondered. But Jane knew to figure that out, she’d have to think back to her last conversation with Ryan, and she wasn’t ready to do that yet. She wanted it to bob in her memory, just a whisper she could bring to life one more time. When she did, she’d have to find out what her friends had to do with it, too. And she wasn’t nearly strong enough to look at that yet.

-COMBINED-

Cara and Sydney and Lea needed to be together if they were going to get through this, they knew that. But they knew they needed to prepare, too. So they all met in the woods again, under the same tree, which was no longer a reminder of trouble so much as it was a beacon that told them what they had done was right, had been justifiable and needed.

Sydney and Lea told Cara everything, except that they had kissed. They didn’t yet know what that meant.

“We have to be on the same page here,” Sydney said. She was a wreck, with red eyes and shaking hands, but her voice rang clear.
Is it a hangover, or is she losing conviction? Lea and Cara both wondered, but neither could answer.

They told her about the flask. She told them about Ryan fighting Derek. Two parts that made a whole: one whole death.

“Was it really an accident?” Cara asked.

Sydney and Lea ignored Cara, because they all knew it was and it wasn’t.

“So we’re not telling Jane anything?” Lea asked.

Cara and Sydney both bristled, ready for Lea to question them like she always did, but Lea kept her eyes on them steady and then they understood that it was a real question; Lea was ready to fall in line with whatever they told her.

“No,” Sydney said.

“At least until we see how she’s coping,” Cara said.

They all nodded; Jane needed their protection from the truth. Jane would be a mess until she was not, and by then the urgency and possibility of letting the truth go free would have slipped away from them, become a background noise in the story of that night, which would have by then been told over, and over, and over again.

“We should check in,” Sydney said.

Neither Cara nor Lea moved.

“Whatever,” Sydney sighed, and picked up her phone with a still-shaking hand.

“I’ll do it myself.”

They both let out a sigh of relief.

-JANE-
An hour later, Jane’s phone rang. She picked it up.

“Sydney?”

“The others didn’t want to bother you, but.” Sydney didn’t offer anything else.

Again, Jane felt like a science experiment being checked in on, measured. As a witness or as a murderer? she wondered. “Yeah,” was all she could think of to say.

“You should come over. We should all be together.”

But the thought sent another roll of nausea through Jane’s stomach: all of them not telling each other what they needed to know, all of them sitting around and caring at each other in all the wrong ways. “Maybe later.” Jane hung up as Sydney started to say something else.

As she did, Jane remembered the one thought that pinged her confusion the most that night: Sydney, saying Ryan was on something.

They couldn’t have known that.

Because Ryan told her—promised her—no one else knew he had the pills. He wouldn’t lie about that. But that—Ryan’s goodness, his trustworthiness—was another thing too terrible to contemplate. Instead, Jane texted Cara: Can I come over? Because even if there were a hundred important questions Jane couldn’t ask yet, she could find out how her friends knew about Ryan’s pills. Faintly, she knew that finding out could mean unraveling the whole tapestry of deceptions and missing information, but the one thing she couldn’t do most of all was stay in her house a second longer.

She couldn’t even find it in herself to call down the stairs and break the tenuous silence in the house, like even that would be too monumental a risk. Jane texted her dad
and asked for a ride. She heard his phone ding downstairs, and hear him walk over to check it.

*R u sure?*

*Just give me fifteen.*

Fearing she’d lose momentum if she didn’t act quickly, Jane sprang out of bed even as her head and stomach and muscles screamed in protest. She turned the shower so hot it left bright red patches where it touched, and then turned it hotter. The bathroom mirror steamed over and the air grew thick and heavy, but Jane stayed until the hot water let up. That, too, was a form of grounding.

By the time she went downstairs, her mom had retired to her room. It was a form of sulking, but one Jane was grateful for. She still hated how gingerly her dad treated her all the way to Cara’s house, as if by looking at her like some delicate china he could make her something other than messy and flesh-and-blood and full of feelings. It only served to remind her that everything was wrong.

But somehow, even with all of her questions, seeing Cara was like coming home. Jane felt something break in her chest when she did. Cara was in the doorway, in athletic shorts and a white tank top, hair still damp from a shower, like Jane’s. She looked so comforting, so familiar.

“Hey,” Jane called.

“My parents aren’t home; they’ll be out in the city for a while.” Cara’s parents were lawyers, and spent weekends running from offices to libraries. “They don’t know I really knew Ryan,” she added, as if defending them.
Behind them both Jane’s dad’s car backed out of the driveway, tires crunching over sprays of gravel. Then he was gone. Jane stood facing Cara for a moment, knowing she came to confront her, to get an answer she desperately needed—how did you know what Ryan was on—but perversely, even as Jane worried what Cara would tell Sydney and Lea, what lies they’d prepared together, and remembered Cara’s hushed voice in the clearing, Jane felt for the first time since she’d woken up like she wasn’t running anymore.

Wordlessly, Cara stepped aside and let Jane into her house.

The ceiling over the entryway was high, leading into the massive living room that Jane had never seen Cara or her family sit in. Although the house was empty, they immediately headed for Cara’s bedroom and closed the door.

“Jane, I’m—,” Cara stopped and swallowed. “Jane, I’m so sorry.”

Jane narrowed her eyes. “For what?”

“For—for you having lost someone. I know how much he meant to you.”

So Cara wouldn’t give anything up without a fight. When Jane didn’t say anything, Cara continued, “How are you feeling today? Sorry, not like—I mean, physically. I wasn’t sure how much you had to drink.”

Ryan offered me something, but I didn’t take it. Why didn’t I take it? In a rush, one piece from the night before come shining back into light: Jane turning away from the white pills in Ryan’s hand and shaking her head. I can’t, I’m pregnant. She couldn’t remember if she’d thought it or said it.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Jane said abruptly, and leaned against the white door in relief as soon as it shut behind her. She stripped quickly, staring down at her
stomach, cuts still etched in place. The rolls of fat that marked the edge of her ribcage still hung from under the place where her bra strap left a deep red impression. Then there was her stomach, which hung out too, but forwards, like it was a sack of fat trying to detach itself from her body.

Jane turned sideways and examined herself in the mirror then. From that angle, her stomach didn’t protrude at all. She looked down again. She didn’t know if the difference was angles or self-consciousness or if it was simpler, if she’d just entirely lost her mind.

“Are you alright in there?” Cara called through the door. Jane sensed she’d been in the bathroom for a while.

“I don’t think I’m pregnant,” she called back, and pulled her clothes back on. Jane opened the door to find Cara standing right in front of her, looking almost comically concerned with her mouth hung wide open.

“Did you just miscarry?”

Jane burst out laughing, images of herself hunched in pain over a toilet seat, bleeding, passing from Cara’s mind to her own. *Hysterical over everything*, she thought. “God, Cara, calm down,” she said.

The hurt look came immediately, but so did a raised eyebrow that said: *hypocrite*. But Jane wasn’t being hypocritical, because she wouldn’t be hysterical anymore. She was too good for that. Of course she hadn’t killed Ryan, and suddenly it didn’t matter anymore what her friends had done. What a relief.

“Come on, we’re going to the drugstore,” she said.
Once there, Jane marveled that she hadn’t just done this as soon as she’d been worried. The man at the counter was squat, with wire frames and a long brown ponytail.

“Check that ‘living in my mother’s basement look,’” Jane whispered in Cara’s ear. She was vaguely aware she hadn’t lowered her volume much, but she didn’t care.

“Jane,” Cara hissed. “That’s Joey, you know him.”

_Huh._ Jane did know him—he was someone’s uncle, he’d worked there forever—but she couldn’t remember why his judgment would have mattered to her before. She grabbed the first pregnancy test she could find—a pink box, and not all that expensive after all.

“Do you want me to buy it?” Cara asked, trailing behind her, all uncertain and puppyish.

“Jesus, Cara, I’ve got this.” Jane was on top of the world, and if Cara couldn’t see that, it was her problem. Why couldn’t Cara just _keep up_?

“That’ll be $8.99,” the man—Joey—said, not quite looking at her.

Jane handed over a ten and grabbed the test, then walked out the door without a second glance. She could hear Cara scrambling to catch up in the background, and her frustration grew: _why is she stop trying to drag me back down?_ Because Jane was making progress, and she was doing it _now_. She turned towards her house; it would be a bit of a walk, but she could make it. She had all the time in the world.

“We should use the school,” Cara said, finally keeping pace with her. “You don’t want your parents to find that.”

_Shit._ Cara was right. Jane skidded to a halt and turned around. _It’s only ten minutes to the school_, she told herself. _Nothing’s changed._ But as she began the steep
incline up to the high school, Jane’s calves began to ache, from post-hangover weakness or malnutrition, she couldn’t tell. *When was the last time I ate?* Jane realized she couldn’t answer herself.

And the school loomed ahead, full of teachers’ faces and whispers in the halls. Jane would be trapped in there with those faces and voices no matter what the test said. Jane stopped in her tracks.

“Come on, we’re almost there.” Cara was panting a bit. Then it hit Jane all at once.

“Why am I so stupid?” she asked. Jane couldn’t remember how she’d thought doing this would be easy. And if she wasn’t pregnant, then—*then you should have died with Ryan*, her brain supplied.

“Okay, what is happening right now? First you’re mad at me for not being fast enough, now you look miserable.”

“It isn’t about you.” That much remained true. “And I told you, anyway.” Jane meant the faces in the tree. She meant how she couldn’t decide on anything anymore, because this would happen—she would turn around completely within an hour.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

“Sor—come on. We’re here.”

The metal doors to the back of the gym were surprisingly easy to push open. Everyone knew they never locked, but no one did much about it. Another perk to small town living; Cara suspected everyone made these small allowances to delinquency just to keep them all from going insane—a necessary illusion of freedom and privacy.
Once the doors clanked shut behind them, the sound bouncing and echoing around the gym, the light from outside was shut off entirely and the room descended into pitch blackness.

“Somehow this is still better than being in town,” Cara said beside her.

“What?”

“It was eerie back there. No one looking at each other. It’s like the whole town is feeling last night.” Cara shuddered. “Freaked me out.”

“Guilt?” Jane’s eyes hadn’t adjusted to the lack of light yet so she couldn’t see how Cara reacted to that.

“You didn’t notice?” Cara shot back.

Jane hadn’t. She decided to look for the bathroom instead, and she heard Cara following behind her. The gymnasium seemed to stretch infinitely into the darkness, but eventually they hit the other side and, walking along it with their hands brushing over the sticky white cinderblock walls, found the entrance to the bathroom. A strong smell of body odor and must wafted out as soon as they turned towards it. Behind Jane, Cara found the light switch and flicked it on.

The wall across from them was grey with a thick red band of red blocks running through the middle, which was halfway lined with white urinals half covered in shower stalls.

“Shit, we chose the wrong bathroom.”

“Yeah . . .” It wasn’t so different from the girls’; the smell wasn’t even that much worse. But this—this was where Derek lived after school. “I’m going to throw up,” Jane said suddenly.
“What?!” Cara grabbed the trash can by the door and shoved it in front of her, but as Jane bent over the surge of nausea passed as quickly as it arrived.

“Never mind. It’s just, Derek hasn’t said anything to me since the party. He must have heard by now . . .” Cara’s brow furrowed and Jane could see the judgment parading across her face: you want Ryan’s death to score brownie points with Derek? But Jane did want that. She couldn’t help it.

“Jane . . .” Cara was clearly struggling for words. “Jane, Derek was with someone else at the party. With Chrissie, that senior who’s friends with Brian, you know?”

At once, Jane’s brain went up in flames. Whatever had once been a thought pattern swirled into panic and her lungs forgot to breathe, racing ahead of her at a thousand miles a minute, panting too shallowly to take in air. “Oh God oh God oh God.”

“Jane, look at me.” It took Jane a minute to realize that Cara had grabbed her hands and lightly dug her thumbs into Jane’s wrists. She was staring directly into Jane’s eyes, breathing slowly and purposefully. Almost imperceptibly, Jane’s own breathing slowed to match it.

“Look. At. Me.” So Jane did: Cara’s eyes, surrounded by clumped mascara and so dark brown Jane could only barely make out her pupils. The litany of oh Gods dried on Jane’s tongue.

“No one’s looked at me since the summer,” she said.

“Everyone only looks at you. Do you have any idea what we—” What we did for you, Jane’s brain supplied, and she shivered.

But that wasn’t right. “Everyone looks to me. Like I’m responsible. I didn’t ask for any of this.” I didn’t ask for you to kill Ryan. I didn’t ask for you lie to me, if I did.
And like that, the tide reversed: Jane could not imagine caring about Derek and what girl he was seeing, because Ryan fought Derek for her, she remembered that too. Then the tide came out, in giant, wracking sobs that crested high, forcing her mouth open into a wail, and receded again. It came running out her nose and leaking out her eyes. There was no emotion left besides sadness, deep and aching and unchangeable.

“Ryan is dead,” Jane said, but it felt false even as she said it, like it still couldn’t really be true that Ryan was over, his personality no longer a continuing and comprehensible thread. He had ended, and ended so early it didn’t make sense.

“I know,” Cara said, but Jane could hear in her voice that she didn’t know it either. Maybe that was what people meant when they talked about needing closure: death wasn’t too terrible to be comprehensible, but rather it was too strange. But then the wave resurged, and it was terrible again. Jane almost choked on the next sob that came, and it made a terrible gasping sound, a death rattle.

“I know,” Cara said again, and somehow Jane knew this time that she did.

“You knew Ryan,” Jane said.

“He gave me my favorite poetry book.” Longing covered Cara’s face, and Jane wondered when she or any of their friends had last asked Cara about her writing.

“He talked to me about dying.” And Jane could feel, on the edge of her memory, just waiting to tip over, her last hour with Ryan. She wanted to tell Cara about it too, and she wondered which one of them was the grieving friend and which one was the killer, and how on Earth it could be that she couldn’t tell which.

“I would talk to you about dying.” Cara said, and Jane’s desire to talk clamped up tight. Because Cara wasn’t offering—she was begging.
“You can’t know what it’s like to be this way, so don’t try.” Jane could see Cara struggling not to apologize. “Give me a minute.” Jane walked back to the light switch and flipped it off, shoving the echoing locker room once more into darkness. Now, she could see a single slate of pale light edging its way through a thick glass block of a window at the top of the ceiling.

Jane turned on one of the faucets and realized that she did, actually, have to pee. She left the water running full blast to cover the sound and pulled her pants down, then squatted just by the sinks. Irrationally, she didn’t want Cara to realize when she took the test. That anxiety was hers alone. The reaction when it first came had to be hers.

It was surprisingly easy to aim for the small white stick of plastic, although several times Jane shifted and felt a warm splash on her hands. She washed them when she stood up, then waited.

As she waited, she didn’t care about Ryan anymore. Not a bit. Jane could remember his face and what he said and what he did for her, but the little tugs at her heart that should have come did not, let alone the crushing wave of love and missing she’d felt only minutes ago. It was just gone. Jane pictured Ryan and her body went a flat, numb grey—which made her a monster, she knew that. She poked at a barely-healed scar on her leg to force the feeling back—and it hurt, a lot, but not enough. Because how could she feel nothing for this boy who, by many, unconscious turns, had somehow died for her, some way or another?

“I can’t have a kid, Cara. I can’t pass all of whatever I am onto something, I can’t do that. Ever.” I’ll help you, she expected Cara to say. There’s nothing wrong with you,
but you can do anything you want. Jane was so certain of them, the words practically echoed hers in her mind.

But Cara didn’t say them. Instead, she was so silent for a long moment that Jane wondered if Cara had slipped away from her in the dark, finally called it quits on waiting for Jane and her mood swings and crying and gotten herself out before it was too late. Then Cara said, her voice so soft Jane almost missed it, “You are loved so deeply, no matter what is happening to you.”

The words, quietly, carved their way through the greyness settled over Jane. For just a minute she could imagine Cara understood what she was saying and meant it, that they were both on the same level. “I love you too, even if I’m bad at showing it. I’ll try to be better.” But Jane knew she shouldn’t have promised that, because in an hour she wouldn’t want to try and in a day she wouldn’t remember how trying ever could have mattered.

Jane pulled up her pants and flicked the lights back on. “It’s negative.” A small blue minus sign showed clear in the center of the stick.

“Oh my god,” Cara said.

“I knew it would be.” The idea of a phantom fetus, something tiny coiled deep within her, had felt so clear and inescapable just a day ago.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think I knew I was pregnant. I think I needed an excuse to live.”

“Oh.” Then, “An excuse for who?”
“For Ryan.” Jane answered automatically, then wondered if it was true. She remembered him offering her something, and feeling—feeling like she’d be abandoning him, if she just didn’t want it. “He had something, but I didn’t take it, and . . .”

They both stood there staring at the white stick in Jane’s hand, thinking back to the night with the vodka. Jane knew it could have been so much worse, if she’d been acting out against herself and not against the idea of some thing taking up residence within her.

“What did happen down there?” Cara asked eventually. There was a note of longing in her voice, and Jane understood in a flash of intuition that Cara had not been in on the plan. Cara would resent this. Whatever happened was between Sydney and Lea. I can’t know that any more than I knew I was pregnant. But Jane had those flashes of intuition frequently, and the problem with them was she had to believe them no matter what; it was a cell-deep feeling of truth. Most often, they were right. More often, she buried them.

“I feel like Sydney and Lea are keeping something from me,” Jane said, egging Cara on.

“They are.” Cara said it so quickly Jane knew she hadn’t meant to. “I mean, they’re looking out for you. I don’t know what the point is in saying things if you can’t do anything about it anymore. It just hurts people.”

That came so close to making sense. But still— “But how can we ever make sense of our lives if we don’t even know what they are?” Jane thought back and realized her memory of the entire day so far was blurred in the tumult of her moods, rising and
falling. She couldn’t remember what had happened, only her impressions. Which must have been true for everyone, in a way.

“I have to tell you what happened in the basement with Ryan that night,” Jane said. Because if she didn’t do it now she’d never be able to.

“What happened?” Cara asked, dutifully.

“When he opened the door I wasn’t sure it was him at first—it was the light and the noise, it was disorienting and I was drunk. Right before he came down I’d been staring at the one light bulb in the basement, just feeling my head whirl around.

“He called down to me, but we’d already been texting all night. We’d been texting since the vodka. I was surprised, I guess, because I thought he was done with things where we left them.

“I mean, we left them with us in middle school hanging out too much in that basement and talking about death and dying and how much we wanted those things. Once Ryan said he thought he’d die before being kissed and he thought that was all right, but I kissed him anyway right there, just leaned over the couch and did it. We smiled at each other then, like we shared a secret. We didn’t do it again, even though we could have. It just wasn’t the thing to do.

“Then before the year was over he said, he said he didn’t see a point in it anymore and I asked him to live because I was afraid of him leaving me. And he didn’t, he stayed, but things weren’t right between us anymore, because he wasn’t sure he wanted to live. And I wasn’t sure I should have asked him for that. And we weren’t helping each other anymore. So we called it quits and that was that.
“Or it wasn’t, because after that one night we kept talking and I remembered how nice it was to be loved like that, and I wish I didn’t need that from a boy but I do, I need that kind of validation. And everything’s gotten so much worse lately, I needed someone who understood.”

“So Ryan *wanted* to die?” Cara sounded hopeful.

But that wasn’t right either. No matter which way this story ended up pointing, they weren’t off the hook. “I don’t *know*, Cara.

“What I know is, we talked. And it made everything a bit better, enough that I started to feel like I could never respond to Derek again, just sometimes. So then I’m at the party and I’m hiding from Derek in the basement and thinking about how I wish I could get over myself and just do it already, just get over with it—my life, I mean—and Ryan comes down, like light flooding over him all grand entrance, and I start to think—I don’t know. I started thinking that I was going to get better or die, and now I’d find out which.”

Jane watched Cara nod: this fell in line with everything Cara wanted to believe about Ryan, that he was *useful*.

“But—no. You don’t *get it*. Ryan was—Ryan was on something, like a lot of something, like falling-over-eyes-glazed-big-pupils *on something*—”

“Wait,” Cara interrupted. “Ryan was on drugs, like, *already*?”

“What do you mean *already*?”

Cara just shook her head, but Jane knew that meant something. “Or, he seemed like he was—like he was, getting on something, while we were talking.”
Jane watched Cara’s expression settle, like that was more like what she’d expected. Jane remembered then, a flash—a flask, empty by the end, that Ryan kept out of her sight, like he didn’t want her to look at it. And he had gotten worse—more off the rails, slurring—

“And he had this flask, this flask that he wouldn’t show me—” she cut off to see if there’d been anything to her flash of intuition. Apprehension flickered across Cara’s face before she could hide it.

_The flask killed Ryan._ But he had already been off—he’d told her, he’d taken a bunch of pills—which Cara didn’t know about, Jane realized. So she walked through it in her head: Ryan holding out a hand of white pills, saying, _these make me feel better. I stole them out of the medicine cabinet, they’re Mom’s,_ and Jane thinking, _as good now as anytime,_ but when she tried to take them, all of them, a greedy fistful, she couldn’t make herself put them in her mouth and swallow. _I’m pregnant,_ she’d said.

“And then, he threw up. I thought it was just, was just the alcohol, or just, something that happened. That he would be fine. I thought that even when he passed out, and when there was blood, and he was shaking, and—” The image went blank in her head.

“—and then, you guys were there. And then he was dead.” Jane finished, the chronology clicking into place. “And then we ran.”

“You mean, he was dead, and then we were there.” Cara said, softly.

“No,” Jane said.
Cara didn’t try again. Jane didn’t know if she wanted to ask, \textit{did you mean to do it?} or, \textit{what was the flask?} or, most importantly, \textit{why?} But she didn’t trust Cara to answer her, either.

Jane started shaking, and then her face was wet. The memory, she had realized, was over. \textit{“I didn’t do it,”} she said, and she was so relieved for a second she didn’t care when Cara grabbed her hand.

\textit{“Of course you didn’t, Jane, oh God—”}

Then she realized that all it meant was that \textit{her friends} had done it, and she’d have to figure that out on her own now. Jane drew her hand back. Cara’s mouth turned down, but Jane couldn’t tell if in sadness or consternation. Neither of them said anything.

\textbf{-CARA-}

“Guys, she thought \textit{she did it.}” Cara tried to put all the pathos and tragedy of that statement into her voice, and heard it ring false. When Jane had pulled her hand back, Cara hadn’t even gotten hurt or angry. \textit{I didn’t do it:} it was such a tragic statement. That was Jane, the damsel heroine, in need of protection. Even if she drew back, she needed help, and Cara knew what to do. “We can’t let her think that.” She swung her arms out for emphasis.

Over the arm of a chair in Sydney’s room, Lea raised an eyebrow. Sydney laid at the foot of the chair, chewing on a piece of her hair. Lea’s foot rested on Sydney’s back, and Cara found herself strangely shut out of their easy intimacy.

“So . . .” Lea drew it out, as if Cara was supposed to complete the sentence.

“What?”
“So what did you say?”

“I told her of course she didn’t.”

“How would you know, though?” Sydney asked. “We said we weren’t there.”

“Because—because Jane wouldn’t kill someone. And because, this is about protecting Jane, Sydney, not ourselves.” Cara was furious they would question that. “Or do you not care about that anymore?”

“Of course I care about that, Cara. I killed someone for it.” Sydney giggled just a little, and it made Cara squirm.

“We didn’t kill him.” When neither of them answered, Cara continued, “Or at least, I didn’t.”

For a long moment none of them said anything. It was like a wire had snapped, and there was only the falling left to do—until the crash.

“Then get out,” Lea said.

Cara saw them on the couch and the floor, twined together, and had a sensation like they were zooming away from her, that the room itself was ejecting her. “I—”

“Get. Out.”

Cara left, wobbly on her feet.

-JANE-

Jane’s nightmares involved sirens—lots of them—chasing her down, but issued from the mouths of giant panther-like cats that were somehow, no matter how fast she ran, both always right behind her and always around the corner. Which was part of why, when she
stepped off the school bus and looked up to see a swarm of police cars around the school, her heart stopped for a second.

*I didn’t do it.* But she still ducked her head as she passed them, and steered clear of the gym doors, as if someone would sense she’d just been there. *I left the pregnancy test there,* she realized, and felt her stomach drop out. She didn’t know why it would stand out, but still—it was something they could find, or worse, find and tell her parents.

Jane tried to imagine what would happen if her mother found out she’d been having sex. Nothing concrete came to her, just a sick fear. Her parents wouldn’t beat her, she even doubted they would kick her out. But they—her mother, at least—would look at her as if she were sick, disgusting, wrong. And she was—but that was why they couldn’t know that. That was why Jane spent her late nights bleaching her blood-stained sheets and refreshing her grades online; she couldn’t let anything slip.

For her parents, the sex would be the worst of it. When her mom spoke of sex, it was something that happened to girls. It was the reason Jane couldn’t wear crop tops or biking shorts. The rest of it would just be pathetic—I don’t understand why it’s such a trend for girls to cut themselves. *Everyone gets sad sometimes.* Somewhere outside of her home Jane knew there were people who thought, *depression is an illness,* and had heard vaguely of the term *sex positivity,* but she couldn’t imagine those thoughts becoming part of her own world. She was raised far apart from them. But she’d also been raised far apart from overdoses, and yet here the police were.

In homeroom, Jane found out why: *Several police officers are in the building today to speak with any students who wish to come forward with information that might*
be helpful. Jane breathed out a sigh of relief: they were asking people to come to them, not knocking on classroom doors and taking people.

She looked around her homeroom, wondering if anyone would leave. Jane didn’t know any of them well, but everyone was clustered in groups of twos and threes with their heads together, whispering. One girl’s eyes darted to meet Jane’s for a second, then went back to the boy next to her. It suddenly occurred to Jane that she had no idea who had seen her coming out of the basement and leaving the party.

Then the ancient speaker system crackled to life: “As many of you likely already know, over the weekend Vernon High lost a beloved member of the student body. Ryan Kappos was found deceased over the weekend. If anyone would like to speak to a grief counselor at any time throughout the day, come to the main office. Remember the police officers are here to collect information as well. Now, let’s share a moment of silence for Ryan and his family.”

Jane looked down and bowed her head with the rest of them. When the minute was up the room erupted in a cacophony of cries and whispers, and all Jane could do was keep her head down still.

Jane didn’t actually see any students making use of the main office until, between her lunch and math, she saw the outline of Sydney through the ridged glass panels around the office door. She was gesturing wildly, and Jane could hear voices, deep and male, saying something that sounded like it was supposed to be soothing. Then Sydney rushed out and slammed the door behind her, hair whirling behind her as she turned, as if to glance back at the office, and her eyes caught on Jane’s.
They were red-rimmed and chiseled through with veins, open wide and wild. Then Sydney brushed past Jane in a rush of air and was gone, like a something feral that could have attacked but ran instead. She could have, Jane realized, just confessed. It wasn’t until then that Jane realized she did not want her friends to go to jail. She wanted them to explain themselves, and to apologize, and to make it right. But she did not want them to go away, and her loyalty to the ghost of Ryan Kappos would never take precedence over this group of people she lived her life by. She didn’t know if it was too late to tell them that.

Jane was just about to follow Sydney down the hall when Derek walked by, staring down at his phone and ear buds in place, not glancing at her in a way that made it impossible to tell whether it was intentional or not. Then he looked up, lifted his ear buds, and just when Jane was about to believe that he was actually, for once, about to greet her, his eyes slid past her and onto someone down the hall. Derek’s face relaxed into a smile. He raised a hand.

Jane turned. Behind her was a small, blonde girl—someone Jane had seen around, a freshman, named Sarah or Sally or—. Jane moved for the bathroom before she could cry in the hallway, so quickly she didn’t see the person standing in front of her until she’d already bumped into them.

“Sorry.” Jane tried to move away quickly, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“Jane,” her sister said, holding her in place. “What’s—” But then Ilene stopped and looked around, saw Derek heading for Sarah-or-Sally, and stopped. “Come with me,” she said instead, and marched Jane away from the bathroom and out the door, outside in the crisp fall air.
“Where are we going?”

“We’re getting in my car and leaving.” Ilene was already walking confidently for the car, apparently unconcerned that someone might see them,

“You do this often?” Jane walked quickly to keep up.

Ilene shrugged and looked at Jane. “Sometimes you need to do something crazy just to get away from our house, you know?”

Jane didn’t know how to answer; they never talked about their house, just left it and went different ways. She’d always figured that was why she and Ilene never actually hung out in school; they needed the freedom. “So cutting class is ‘crazy?’”

“Yeah, that.” They’d reached Ilene’s car and she unlocked it, sliding into the front seat. “Or going for people who are really bad for us, because hey, what’s the difference when they’re a secret either way?” Ilene laughed. “I remember starting middle school and being so freaked out when my friend introduced her boyfriend to her parents. It was after this school play. I like, hid behind one of the props. I thought they were going to kill her for sure.”

“Bad for you? Brian is bad for you?” Because even if it wasn’t official, Jane knew her sister and Brian were a thing. She’d watched them enough to know. Brian of the fluffy brown hair and goofy laughs and over-concern for Jane. He liked board games, for God’s sake.

Ilene laughed again, more genuinely this time. “Oh, yeah, that. No, not Brian. Brian’s great. I mean, a couple years ago when I was a freshman, I started dating this senior. I was so excited about it, you know? Like he picked me over all the senior girls or something. But I didn’t know then—like, there was a reason he couldn’t get with
someone closer to his own age, you know? He was really controlling. He gave everyone a bad vibe; I wish I’d noticed it sooner, but we actually dated for—what? Five, six months maybe. By that point I’d ditched all my friends because he didn’t like them, stuff like that. Bad shit, you know. Took forever to find my footing with everyone again.”

Jane felt like her sister was looking for something, but she didn’t know the right response to give. “I’m sorry you went through that.”

“Yeah.”

By now they had left the school behind and were on the freeway. Jane still felt watched even as her sister’s eyes stayed on the road. Minutes stretched by before Ilene spoke again.

“Do you understand what I’m telling you, Jane?”

“Uh, you—”

“No,” Ilene cut her off. “I’m telling you to ditch the sack of shit called Derek Wilson.”

“No.” Jane didn’t know if she meant, no I can’t ditch him or no you can’t know that, but the word came out again and again, her brain looping it endlessly. “No, no, no no.”

“Jane, I know. It’s okay.”

But the words couldn’t get through whatever was happening in her head. “No, you can’t know.” She didn’t know why it was always Derek who made her spiral like this, except that it had something to do with shame that she couldn’t explain.

“Jane, Jane, hey.” Jane hadn’t noticed, but at some point Ilene had pulled off the highway and into a strip mall. She parked in front of a Starbucks. “It’s okay, calm down.”
Jane couldn’t calm down, so she burst into tears instead. She didn’t want to be so incapable of handling this in front of her sister. Whatever happened with that senior, Ilene had never been so out of control. “Everyone knows?”

The look on Ilene’s face said it all, and Jane didn’t know how she could have been so blind as to believe anything else: to have faith that the dark, guarded tone their hookups assumed in Jane’s mind was shared by Derek. It was the most banal and most incomprehensible discovery: that the meaning of things was such an entirely unshared experience.

_I want my friends_, Jane thought. There was something magical about a group of people who would always share meaning. Somehow they always did that.

“Ilene, don’t—don’t think too badly of me.”

“Jane, you shouldn’t see Derek again.” Ilene’s voice was firm. “But that doesn’t mean you were wrong to have sex. And it doesn’t mean anything about you that it didn’t work out with him.”

Ilene’s words didn’t change anything. “Thank you.” She said it anyway, because she was grateful. It should have meant something to her. She knew that.

“Don’t thank me. I’m having sex with Brian, you know.”

“What?”

“It’s a thing people do, Jane. It took me a long time to realize that, and I should have talked to you about this sooner. I’m sorry; I still don’t really know how to get out of our house, you know?”

“Yeah. I know.” But still, she couldn’t get him out of the front of her head. Sometimes Jane felt like Derek was permanently stationed behind her forehead, right
over her eyes, peering out at everything she saw and judging it before she could—her friends, immature; her parents, embarrassing; her body, not exceptional. “You always seemed to like Derek, though.”

Ilene breathed out a long sigh. “Jane, there are Sharpie warnings all over the bathrooms in the girls’ locker room: \textit{STAY AWAY FROM DEREK WILSON}, all that. Like, he’s our friend, but . . . ” she trailed off. “It’s not worth the risk, you know?”

“If it’s all over the bathrooms why haven’t I seen it? I mean, I don’t play any sports, but why didn’t I hear anything?”

“Well, no one knows it it’s true you know? So no one wants to spread it. You’d just look like an asshole for saying it. And his friends would defend him, and—I mean, everyone still likes him, too. He helps his friends out when they need him.”

The idea that she could have avoided all of this if only someone else had just said what was written all over the locker room was unbearable. “But if everyone knows—”

“No one’s going to do anything, Jane.” Ilene was firm.

Jane wanted to argue but didn’t know how. “Okay.”

“Great. That’s about enough feelings talk; what do you say to some coffee?”

Ilene swung open the car door and got out, not looking behind her. Jane still followed, even as she grappled with her sister’s words. Something about the rush of wind from the door opening felt like a whiff of that mysterious world outside of her house and her town. It felt good.
On their way back to town Ilene stopped at a store to grab lunch. She dropped Jane off just a few blocks from the school so she could slip in the gym doors and make it to her next period.

Luckily, there weren’t any gym classes in session, so when the door clanged shut behind her all Jane had to focus on was not letting the echo remind her too strongly of her last time there with Cara. She wanted the feeling of freedom to stay, just for a bit, a respite from the stifling shadowed gym halls she’d been in just a couple days ago.

But when she hurried out of the echoing gym, she was greeted by a worse sound than the heavy doors; a woman was crying outside of the main office, perched on the edge of the wooden bench and held stiffly together as fitful starts of cries wracked her frame. She didn’t look up. Jane thought briefly about slipping by and pretending she hadn’t seen and making it to her next class without incident. She wondered if that would be what she herself would want, if someone caught her at a bad moment. Yes, it would be, she decided. Still, she sat down. She didn’t think the woman would want the same things as her.

For a minute, the woman didn’t look up. Then, after a stretch of silence so long that Jane considered getting up and leaving, the woman said, “I’m Ryan’s mother. Just here to gather his things, sign some paperwork. You know. Or, probably you don’t, I guess.” She gave a small, watery chuckle.

She was short, and rounded, with curled honey-brown hair and a white sweater: homier than Jane would have expected for Ryan’s parent, and sweeter. For a long time Jane didn’t know what to say. Ryan didn’t have close friends at school. For all the time
since the party, Ryan’s death had been her own tragedy. “I knew your son,” she ended up on. “He was wonderful.”

“Thank you. I thought so too.” Ryan’s mother gave a short, watery laugh. “Who are you, dear?”

“My name is Jane.”

“Oh, Jane.” Unexpectedly, Ryan’s mother turned around and grabbed Jane’s hands. “He didn’t have an easy time here. I know he wasn’t good at showing it, but Ryan loved you very much.”

The thought that Ryan might have told his mother about her and never even occurred to Jane. Like with Derek, she considered their talks and meeting so shadowed and undefined that they could never be brought into words. But somehow, now, those talks existed with this woman as well.

“Thank you,” Ryan’s mother said, fervently. Jane tried to look at her eyes, to see if something of Ryan would show itself in her face, but instead she saw gratitude, so fierce and genuine it stopped her gaze in its tracks and curdled the warm feeling of remembering Ryan.

*Your son would be alive if it weren’t for me,* she thought. *Or at least, he wouldn’t have died the way he did or when he did.* Just then it seemed like the same thing. *And I love the people who killed him more than I loved him.* The betrayal was complete and damning.

“I’m so sorry,” Jane said, and watched *for your loss* fill itself in the empty space. She couldn’t correct it.
The bell rang. Jane jumped at the chance. “I have to go,” she said, and wrenched her hands from the other woman’s. She didn’t unclench her fists until she reached the bathroom and let herself into the farthest stall.

The wrongness of how Ryan’s mother saw her was like something fetid coating her skin, like a good person painted over herself and melting off, clumping at her waist, at her hips, hanging below her arms and dragging her down—before Jane knew what she was doing, her fingers had hit the back of her throat and the bile she’d felt all over herself came out, after a few stuttered, airless heaves. It coated her fingers, brown from her mocha and clumped and sticky, falling with a sickening patter into the toilet below.

Looking at the mess, the thin sheen of tan film spreading away from the clumps of half-digested food and around the circumference of the toilet bowl, Jane felt strongly that she was staring at the remnants of that perfect vision, the sloughing off of uncut skin and kind eyes—that it was all lying there, rank and violently abandoned.

Her stomach was empty. It was a good feeling—something almost like purity, like a chance to start over, with new food, with a new life. It was just like the few minutes of morning when she struggled back to consciousness and was still too weighed down by sleep to remember everything she felt and everything she was afraid of.

Outside the stall came a trio of laughing voices, and Jane rushed to flush the toilet, hoping the smell hadn’t traveled. Then it was gone.

-COMBINED-
As it turned out, the next time the four of them were together was at Ryan’s funeral. They hadn’t planned that. Moving to each other now was too much weight to be moved, too many feelings to assess, and too many risks to calculate.

Cara was there first, in a small sheath of a black dress, accompanied by both her parents, looking strained and uncertain behind her. Then out of their car came Jane, dead-eyed and puffy-cheeked, looking half-asleep and sick in a black sheet of a dress. Sydney and Lea walked together without question, part of their strange new partnership none of them yet understood. They came in black jeans and dark shirts, uniform. They made it to the cemetery gates and stood for a second, looking at Cara, and a crackle of tension only the three of them understood flashed in the air.

Cara could have said, *You killed him. You don’t belong here.*

Or Sydney and Lea could have walked past her, threaded their arms through Jane’s, and marched away.

Or Jane could pick up on their tension, and take a side.

None of them were ready to see where that fell, so they let those possibilities fall to the side for the moment and joined in a protective circle around Jane. Jane knew they did, and wasn’t sure she wanted it. The three of them moved ahead of her, steady and even-paced, to where the sloping grass lawn fell sharply and minutely away to the hole in which Ryan’s ashes would be buried.

It was like they had a task, but none of them was quite sure what it was. There was something of duty in it, to see the urn and the pictures and the flowers of the person who could have been alive if they were all different people. There was something of paying their respects, but more an urge to drive the point home fully to Jane: this was
where death lead, to garish bouquets and a hundred frowning people staring at your school picture. Also, it was something of power, in seeing what they had decided, and in seeing what it had done.

The three of them—Cara, Sydney, Lea—not so much walked to the grave as glided to it, like solemn black ships, precious cargo in tow.

Above the hole in the ground was the urn. It was larger than they’d expected, and a bright silver. Jane thought Ryan wouldn’t have liked the rings of flowers etched around the sides—too old, too funeral home. Cara thought Ryan would have liked it for the same reason—found it funny, ironic. Neither Sydney nor Lea thought of it at all.

At the side of the urn was Ryan’s mother, in a black suit. A tall man with a long rectangular face stood behind her, with a palm lightly grazing her back. This was Ryan’s father. Both sported red-rimmed eyes and puffy cheeks, but also a warmness in their bearings that existed awkwardly over all of their memories of Ryan: the aloof, the odd, the scientific curiosity of their high school and of their lives for the past year.

Then a shudder rumbled suddenly through them both and Ryan’s father fell to his knees, clutching his head, and an animal groan escaped for the briefest second from his mother, who covered her mouth with her gloved hands as if they could make that loss something civilized and understandable. They all had to look away as family and friends closer than them rushed to the scene.

“You guys, we shouldn’t be here.” Sydney’s voice shook like a dead leaf on a tree.
“I thought that would look suspicious.” Cara made her voice mocking, clearly quoting Sydney. Only then did Jane realize the question of whether or not to attend Ryan’s funeral was something they’d discussed together, without her.

“We owe it to him,” Jane said.

“To leave, or to stay?” Lea asked.

“To find out.” At first Jane thought she meant, *to find out if we should stay, if we’re doing more good than harm.* Then she realized it was something more, something she was figuring out for herself. It was something like, *I owe it to him to figure it out.*

Almost without Jane’s noticing, Cara and Lea and Sydney had advanced closer to the urn, temporarily cleared of company after the parents’ breakdown.

Cara thought it was the best time to wonder what she’d avoided the past week: was it worth it?

Ryan, her friend, her poet, her confidant, was a pile of ashes being mourned. Jane was devastated. Jane was more coherent, more invigorated, less indecipherable than she’d been all year. Cara turned a fraction to look at Jane looking at the urn. She was steady and determined. *It was worth it.* Cara’s certainty was bone-deep.

The urn was slightly above Sydney’s height; she had to look up at it. The process by which a human person turned into a pile of ash and bone fragments was incomprehensible. People disappeared out of Sydney’s life, but never so irrevocably that she couldn’t move them, couldn't call her dad just long enough to hang up, couldn’t leave
a note in Cara’s locker and apologize, couldn’t keep just enough selective silence towards her mom to be forgiven.

Sydney looked at Ryan’s parents, both standing again now, shaking their heads and waving their hands as if in apology, and wondered what long games they’d played with Ryan. Was it grooming him to go Ivy League, or trying just the right balance of hints and gifts of sneakers to get him to exercise more, overcome the bad heart they feared he’d inherited? Was it trying to get him to like their favorite TV show, or coaching him into opening up sometimes? Either way, game over now. And it was the result of her own game. The consequences had never been so stark before, and her role of silent leadership had never been so damning.

*I shouldn’t have taken that from them.* Sydney took Lea’s hand, and Lea squeezed her palm back.

*Once, I had sex with that pile of ash,* Lea thought. *Some of what is in that urn was inside me.*

She tried to remember the sensation, but the memory was so clouded with what she’d said about it (*it was great*), what she’d written over it (*it was like any other first time*), and what she’d buried under the memory and inadvertently carried with her (*I should have talked to him*), that nothing came to her but brief flashes: lips, and skin, and hands, all disconnected from people or smells or feelings—like a movie of closeups she was watching.

Sydney grabbed her hand and Lea squeezed it back, grateful Sydney had somehow noticed the flood of regret.
Still, the smallest part of Lea was glad he was gone.

Jane thought, looking at the urn and the photos, that if there were a moment in her life she’d be convinced of something after death, it should happen now: if she was going to be so afraid of the afterlife, Ryan should at least give her a heads up.

For a minute Jane stood there and waited for a leaf to fall on her head or for the ghostly sensation of a hand in hers. There was nothing.

_I owe it to him to figure it out._ It wasn’t a realization but it was something more like staring and following her own gaze: it wanted to know who Ryan was, and why he had died. It wanted to reach past the protective barrier of her friends. She looked at Ryan’s parents again and instead of feeling horror or guilt again, she had an idea.

Without a word, Jane tiptoed backwards away from Cara and Sydney and Lea and the grave, then walked away from the funeral and out of the cemetery, then picked up speed and ran down the road, hair flying and shoes slapping hard against the pavement, wind streaming around her, until by chance a bus pulled to a stop in front of her and she boarded, pulling the cord to get off just a block from Ryan’s house.

When they noticed Jane was gone, Cara and Sydney and Lea were each annoyed the others hadn’t noticed sooner. Their sails emptied, their imaginings lost of power and meaning if Jane wasn’t standing behind them, maybe noticing, giving power.

They stepped away from the grave and left to huddle around each other until Cara’s parents returned. Cara got in the car and drove off, watching Lea and Sydney stay behind, two figures gradually covered by the dust from the car’s tires.
-JANE-

It was the smallest thing, a muttered fact from the boy who sat next to her in eighth grade Spanish—“Did you know robbers read the obituaries so they can steal from dead people’s houses when no one’s around?”

“Oh, shiiiiiiitttt,” said the boy across from them.

“Huh,” Jane said.

She never expected to put that fact to use. But here she was, walking quickly with her head down through the block to Ryan’s house. Not Ryan’s house anymore. His was farther from the main part of town than any of Jane’s other friends, in the nicer section where everything was crawling ivy and exposed brick, with large yards and rope swings. The area was deserted; it wasn’t a place where neighbors knew each other only by waving. All of them would be at the funeral too.

Ryan’s parents’ house didn’t stand out; it was the generic mould of the neighborhood, with red shutters and a barely tended garden. Jane flashed briefly to television shows she’d watched, of breaking the side windows and jiggling the lock open with a hand. But on a hunch she tried the front door first, and it swung open so easily she wasn’t sure it had even been shut all the way. Whether the Kappos always left the house open, trusting the neighborhood, or whether they’d simply forgotten before the funeral, Jane didn’t know.

As soon as she walked in, shutting the door carefully behind her, Jane remembered which door led to the basement and a quick wave of nausea flashed through her; the hazy bits of memory she had from that night with the vodka were mostly just the
smell of vomit and the feeling of a scratchy blanket pressed against her cheek, with the low murmur of voices sounding over her. But it wasn’t the basement Jane wanted: it was Ryan’s room.

She found it on the second floor, after every creak in the wooden stairs made her freeze and check over her shoulder; she didn’t know how much time she had left before anyone came back. Jane had been in Ryan’s bedroom once before, when they were doing a science project together. He had old movie posters hung up on the walls, which were navy and gave the room a cave-like atmosphere, except for the row of plants he kept growing on the windowsill.

It had never been so neat when he was alive.

Immediately Jane set to work scanning the room for anything that could be useful: old notes, folded and tucked into dresser drawers; drawings on scraps of paper; books with bookmarks recently placed. She needed anything that could tell her about who Ryan was in his last days.

There were no notes in his drawers, which were so orderly, with notebooks lined up edge by edge, one for each subject, color-coded with a matching folder. There were no drawings, although Jane did find a compass and a set of expensive colored pencils. The only book he’d opened recently was a mass market paperback copy of *The Rules of Attraction*, and she didn’t know what to make of that. What she did find though, tucked into the first drawer of his bedside table and carefully wrapped in a thin sheet of leather, held together with a knotted cord, was better than she could have dreamed: it was his journal.
Jane opened it carefully, and started near the middle. The last few pages were written, judging by the date marked in the top right hand corner, just a day before the party.

It’s amazing how quickly everything can fall apart again; for weeks and weeks I’ll be all shiny and polished and new, a new person who doesn’t remember why I cared so much about the future or getting out or Jane or any of it. Like I’d emerged from a cave and it was as easy as just walking out. That’s what the beginning of this year was like. I don’t understand how a fact: “I am studying to become a doctor one day,” can mean purpose and happiness and interest one day, and nothing-to-exhausting the next. I should be able to control that: figure out what days it happens or what time of day, but there’s nothing. It just does.

And now I’m there again: everything is nothing-to-exhausting. The prospect of studying for another decade makes me want to bang my head against a wall until I die. Every day when my alarm goes off I think, can’t I have a sudden aneurysm before I have to leave this bed? And going to the lab, which Before was my favorite thing to do, now it’s just death, all showcased and cold and pretty. Death is understandable. Right now living isn’t.

It’s strange too that just this time I think there is a cause to the downswing, and it’s someone I barely even knew. I don’t know what happened between me and Lea, but clearly I did something wrong. It was the sex, it has to be, I knew something was off but I didn’t know what to do and I ruined everything. I want to apologize to her but I don’t know what to say.
The journal shut with a soft thud slid out of Jane’s hands as she let out a long breath. First, she felt fury: Lea had stolen something from her, without permission and without consideration. Then Jane thought, *I’ve always known Lea was gay.* Because of course that was what happened, and of course Lea wouldn’t have talked about it; she would have run off without a word.

*How could she have done that to him?*

But the question was pointless; what Jane was realizing she should have been asking all along was, *Are there any limits to what people can do to each other?* She suspected the answer was no: anyone could do anything, given the right context and right inclination.

For a second she saw Ryan and Lea in their intentions so purely: Ryan trying to make himself a better future, but of course being drawn to Lea, the most like Jane in so many ways; and Lea, desperate for experience, rushing headlong into Ryan and ricocheting off of him just as quickly. Jane forgave them both completely, but only for a second.

She picked the journal off the floor to continue reading again.

*Sydney and Cara have been texting me about this party, about setting me up with Jane.*

*It’s like they don’t know Jane and I talk at all, which should be ridiculous; I’ve never met a group of people so intertwined but who never seem to communicate.*

*Of course, Jane isn’t doing well again. She’s texting me all the time and I can’t help but answer. It’s dragging me down again but when I get like this I can’t help but*
think that there’s nothing good left, and when I’m not depressed it’s not that things are actually better, I just can’t see that truth clearly. It’s like this mood is a window to everything true and all of it still means nothing: meaning is an illusion enjoyed only by healthier brains.

One more piece of the puzzle clicked into place: Cara and Sydney, setting Ryan up, encouraging him. He was their scapegoat: an alternative to Derek. And Ryan went along with it because he loved them all, of course he did, their strange intimate group and their deep meanings: a little tribe for him, perpetual outsider, to study and infiltrate. Jane loved him for it. And she dragged him down again for it.

Finding Ryan again had been like a breath of fresh air: Lea had stopped answering her calls, but there had been Ryan, white knight to listen to her dark thoughts and respond in kind. Do you ever think about your body as something decaying already? She’d asked him, choosing her words body and decay to appeal to him as carefully as possible. Did you know oxygen is slowly killing us? He’d answered. I think about it all the time.

Because that was what living was to Jane: slow decay that she was speeding along by cutting and purging and not sleeping, slow decay that she was just too stupid to stop. And now she was desperate to stop it: the sight of the ashes, the garish flowers, the muted, hysterical glimpses of Ryan’s body all screamed at her, save yourself. It should have made her even more eager to drop the mission and give up, that if she lived she would have to carry the guilt of what Ryan’s notebook said with her. But instead, somehow, she thought it might give her a purpose.
Jane ripped those last pages out and returned the journal to its hiding place, slipping quietly out of the house. In the distance, she thought she could hear the distant rumbling of a mourning party approaching.

-SYDNEY-

When she got home, Sydney looked at her mother through red-rimmed eyes. Her mother’s face was more lined than she remembered, pulled down at the corners. It was a weight Sydney could suddenly understand. And still, her mother puttered around the kitchen and cleaned and tried to make food for them all. Sydney walked into the foyer and stared for a minute before speaking, watching the slow, careful attention her mother paid to the spatula she returned to the counter, and the exactness with which she refilled the soap dispenser.

“Thanks for sticking around, Mom.”

Her mother turned to her from the kitchen counter where she’d been chopping vegetables, hair protected by a handkerchief and hands slick with water. “Oh, sweetie, you don’t have to thank me. It’s my job.”

“I know. But still.” Sydney could not remember the feeling of missing someone before, but now it came to her in a deep pang. She hugged her mother and in the middle of it Sydney realized she couldn’t remember the last time she had. Guiltily, she wondered if anyone had.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“I think I might be dating Lea.” Sydney had no idea what would happen next.
“Oh, well, I knew that.” Her mom smiled and wiped her hands on a dish towel, as if they were discussing nothing so interesting. “I’ve been hoping for it for a while now.”

“Oh.” Sydney risked a brief hug again and then, when her mother didn’t say anything more, ran upstairs, pushing her bedroom door shut behind her. She was full of the sudden belief that hugging her mother was the most important thing she’d ever done, and that kissing Lea might be the next. It had never occurred to her before that there was something touch could do that thinking could not, until she saw Ryan’s parents at their son’s funeral and felt the warm pull of Lea’s hand and realized, *they must want to hug their son.*

She had thought, *I don’t think I’ve ever touched Ryan.* She had texted him, talked to him, and watched him twitch on a basement floor. But she could not remember poking his shoulder to get his attention, or high-fiving him after a test, or brushing against him in the hallway. She had caused his death without having done any of that.

She spent most of her life doing a lot without doing any of that.

Sydney dialed Lea’s number, hands shaking only slightly.

-LEA-

“Can we talk about what’s been going on with us?”

It was Sydney’s voice on the other end of the phone, and Lea didn’t want to answer her.

“Please? I know you’re stalling, but I’m not giving up on this.”

*Fuck.*

“Okay, well, I’ll be over in ten.” Sydney didn’t even sound phased.
Lea looked around her bedroom, at the mess of dirty clothes, clean clothes, stray papers, folders, blankets, and plates with crumbs from reheated pizza. Sydney had seen it like this before, because it was always like this.

Still.

Lea waved a Febreeze can around and dumped all the clothes into a pile that overflowed from her hamper, mixing the dirty and clean together until the floor emerged beneath them. The plates she couldn’t bring down all at once—her dad might see her, and berate her for not doing the dishes, as if he was ever in the kitchen—so she stacked them up and hid them in the closet. The papers all went in the trash, although Lea was fairly certain she’d have to dig out a few study guides later. Then she gazed around and gave up on the dirty carpet and grimy dresser; they would have to stay.

As for herself, she knew her hair was greasy and her her makeup was old and mostly gone. She smelled like herself and not like vanilla or flowers or streams. She put on deodorant and thought it would have to do. She was right, because just then the doorbell rang and before Lea could so much as move to open it, and she heard the door open and slam shut again as Sydney’s footsteps pounded up the stairs.

Lea was terrified that Sydney would say, we have to stop. We have to forget this ever happened.

Lea was terrified Sydney would ask, what is this? or worse, how do you feel?

Lea didn’t know what she felt, or it was more like she didn’t have words for what she felt. What she felt was that something was unlocking inside her, but only a few of the levers had been lifted up; the key had yet to turn. But it might.
Then the knob on the door to Lea’s room turned and Lea realized that even though she was sick with anticipation, she was thrilled too. And when the door swung open to reveal Sydney’s long black hair and bright smile, Lea wanted to go to her. The thrill and the wanting had never existed alongside the anticipation before.

“I don’t know a lot about what to do here, or what this means,” Sydney began. “But I know a lot about you, and I know a lot about us, and I think that what I want is more of what’s been happening, to not say stop or try to pin it down or try lay out our feelings like a list, as if we could, as if we could know what any of this means right now. All I want to know is, do you want more of this too?” Sydney stopped talking, out of breath, and lowered her hands from chest-level, where she’d been gesturing as she spoke.

Lea loved watching Sydney’s hands gesture. She always had.

Lea nodded, and then that didn’t seem like enough, so she laughed and said, “Yes, yeah, I do,” and then marveled at the sight that was Sydney walking towards her, coming to her for the first time.

For one sinking moment, Lea was afraid she wouldn’t have the guts to move her face in line with Sydney’s, to do that horribly definitive thing that was pressing lips to lips and hoping she was good at it, without even a drop of alcohol or thud of music or flash of red lights. But then they were kissing, and Sydney’s hip nestled Lea’s hand and it was easy, and tentative, and good—because it was Sydney, someone who would be patient, who Lea knew, even in this way. Then the rush in Lea’s chest was too much, and she had to back away, and Sydney did too, so that their foreheads just almost touched and they could still feel each other’s breath.
The first thing Lea thought, absurdly, was how proud she was of Sydney, her friend who sat in the back corners of rooms and made other people do things. Sydney, who was more shaken to her core than any of them at what had happened to Ryan—because she had planned it. Lea reached out and hugged Sydney to her, pulling her even closer, and for just a minute she could feel Sydney relax against her.

Lea thought, *if I had known about this, I would have known enough to stop with Ryan.*

She thought, *it’s astounding how much I can want something and some days feel nothing at all.*

She thought, *I hope I can keep this.*

“Lea?”

“Yeah?”

Sydney stepped back, more serious for a moment. “I think you should go someplace, to therapy I mean.”

It was like a wall breaking around them, the idea of going somewhere else for help—the idea that other people could hold answers. Their problems were finally too precious and too heavy to hold all on their own.

“Is it because I’m gay?” Lea said, and when she saw Sydney rush to a denial she added, “Just kidding. I know. I will.”

“Good.” Sydney ran a hand through Lea’s hair, fingertips trailing lightly over her scalp, and just for a second it was enough. Lea melted.

-JANE-
The next time Derek texted her was at 12:30 a.m. the next day—a Saturday. It was a week after Ryan’s death and a day after his funeral. It was after Jane had passed Derek in the hall no less than seven times, and after he failed to speak to her at lunch except in passing.

_What are you up to?_ the text said.

Her heart raced and her vision narrowed to the screen. She immediately typed out _nothing much..._, then let the text hang in limbo in her phone. If she sent it, she and Derek would have sex again. It wasn’t as if she’d enjoy it—if she were being honest with herself she knew that. But it was like it would scratch an itch she desperately needed gone. Saying no had never been an option before.

_Sorry to hear about ur friend,_ Derek sent then. And, absurdly, gratitude flowed through her system.

_He cares_, Jane thought, knowing he didn’t, but feeling it so strongly it didn’t matter. She sent her response. Then she sent, _Thanks_. She flushed while she waited for the reply. She hated herself.

_Need comfort...?_ Derek sent, and ruined the moment.

Jane wanted to puke. She wanted to smash her phone. She wanted to say, _Fuck you. I am never touching you again._

_Come over_, he added.

_Okay_, she sent back, even as she thought she wouldn’t.

She went.
But when she got there, sneaking in the basement window of his house as she usually did, the dim lights and steady hum of the heating system didn’t thrill her like they usually did—the idea that she was sneaking into something forbidden, maybe dangerous.

“Jane.” Derek called from the other side of the room, where he had a game controller in hand, stretched out across the futon. She went to him, keeping her footsteps soft; he didn’t like to worry about his parents hearing her. She tried to keep that softness as she lowered herself onto the futon, hating the low creak of springs that marked her movement, as if she were so monstrously heavy the furniture couldn’t support her.

She felt her stomach settle into folds and spill out the waistband of her jeans, and knew she needed to throw up again, but then he put his hand on her. Her skin immediately wanted to shake him off like some particularly large bug, and her vision went black around the edges, narrowing to just his hand: the nail beds were torn and bloodied, the frayed white cuticle skin spread wide around them.

“Something up?” Jane asked.

“Huh?”

“You’re nails.”

Derek withdrew his hand and the rush of cold air on her skin felt like heaven. “It’s nothing. The cops picked me up, they had me for a while—” he cut off when he saw her eyes widen. “I’m not in trouble, nothing like that. It was just, your friend, Ryan. He had my flask on him when he died. I guess he put something in it.” Derek shuddered. “Like, I heard from Brian’s dad—it was pills, you aren’t supposed to mix them. And he took them right out of Brian’s mom’s medicine cabinet, you know? How fucked is that.”

“That was your flask?”
“What?”

“I just—I saw him with it.”

“Oh.” Derek looked like he wanted to say something else, but when Jane let the silence stretch he didn’t speak again.

“How’d he get it? Your flask, I mean.”

“Uh . . .” Derek moved his hand to rub the back of his neck. “He must have swiped it while I was dancing. I kind of, I got in a bit of a fight with him at the party. He was all worked up about you, actually. As if I’d been mistreating you or something.” He let the sentence hang expectantly.

Jane let out a short, disbelieving laugh that sounded hysterical to her own ears, but Derek didn’t seem to mind; she was playing her part like he’d asked. “Weird,” she said, and just like that the truth of how he’d actually treated her faded out of their shared space like water evaporating, and she could pretend it was gone, and she could pretend he believed it was gone. She smiled.

The smile seemed to give him energy. “Yeah, right? So I think I grab it back from him, and then it’s just gone again.” He shrugged. “Must’ve taken it out of my pocket when I wasn’t looking, the little faggot.” A pause. “Sorry.”

“Ryan wasn’t gay,” was all Jane could think of to say. Her mind raced: did she believe him, that Ryan had stolen the flask? Or had Derek planted it, and were her friends, against all odds, innocent?

But why would Derek—he said, over me, what if it was jealousy, or—
Jane looked back at Derek, who was shaking his head as if getting rid of an annoying fly. She knew that in a minute his hand would be on her again. They had never talked this long before, not since before the first time.

*Derek would never be jealous for me.* The knowledge hit her all at once, irrefutable and awful. Derek could not have done it; he had no motive.

But of course, her friends would try to hurt Derek. Her friends had put something in the flask—Derek said it had gone missing—and then Ryan took it from him, downing alcohol and drugs into his already polluted system and ending everything.

“Do you have the flask now?” Jane wanted, absurdly, to see it.

“Nah.” Derek shifted uncomfortably. “It’s evidence. They said I might get it back in a while, but. It’s not like I want it anymore.”

“So you want to see it?” Jane found herself genuinely curious. Grief for Ryan was not something she expected Derek to be able to feel.

“No, shit, it’s giving me a heart attack as it is. I mean, Brian told me, the cops don’t think I did anything—‘Kid takes too much and dies, simplest solution usually’—that’s what they said. But still, going in for questioning. It was fucking scary. And, that poor dude, you know?”

So something almost like grief could exist side by side with something like Derek. She’d almost expected him to say something like, *suicide is for weak people,* or, *couldn’t hold his liquor*—something stolen straight from the mouth of a teen movie villain.

Because she’d always known he was that awful, always. And it was only those brief glimpses of something more that let him stick around everyone. *Redeemable,* those glimpses made him. But he never redeemed himself.
“Did you know they write about you in the girl’s locker room?” She asked before she could stop herself.

To Jane’s surprise, Derek’s face darkened and he edged away from her almost imperceptibly. “It’s dangerous to lie about people like that, Jane.”

“I didn’t write it, I—”

He dropped his gaze and sighed. “I know, I’m sorry. I mean, why would you? We’ve got a good thing here”—momentarily, Jane swelled with pride just as Derek sighed—“It’s just really hard to hear about people thinking that of you.”

Jane could see her motions outlined for her. They were consoling motions. She should pat him, say, there there. She should kiss him and reassure him and then fuck him to reassure him. She could almost watch an outline of Jane pulling ahead of her and following through, carding fingers through Derek’s hair. But there was something about the rush of having put together the detail about the flask that kept her still.

“So you’ve never done anything like that?”

“Jesus, Jane, I’m not a rapist. You’ve always wanted me.”

Jane understood that if she squinted, their relationship was almost like her pursuing him—her first, tentative texts; his first, gentle pushing; and then her first, loathing acquiescence.

“I thought you knew me better than that,” he said.

Again, she saw the scene of reassurance play out. And she wanted it to, so badly.

“Guys who do that—use force—they’re such assholes. It’s awful. There shouldn’t be any excuse for that. The ones who pressure girls or get them drunk, they’re skum.”
Jane felt relief, as if he’d actually never done those things, and to her. *Thank you for not thinking any of this was okay,* she wanted to tell him. *It’s okay that you don’t care. As long as you know.* Him knowing meant she wasn’t crazy, and hadn’t imagined the intricate power-play between them that led to every time they’d hooked up. That dynamic was *orchestrated.*

“Why would you be here if you thought what that locker room said was true at all? You wouldn’t be.”

And Jane couldn’t say anything to that, so finally she leaned into the current, and sunk a hand into his hair and brought her face down to his. She let it play out. But for every second of it she was thinking what a relief it was to give up hoping that Derek was anything more than he was, or that what they had was anything more than this. She was thinking, *I’ll leave and I’ll never let him touch me again.* She was thinking she meant it.

-CARA-

Cara hadn’t heard from Jane since the funeral, and she hadn’t heard from Lea or Sydney either. It had just been two days, she told herself, and she’d only texted them once each, she told herself; she wasn’t desperate. But for every hour that passed without Sydney checking up on their plans for Jane, or Lea wanting to chat, or Jane needing help, the whole sense of them together as a group faded, and when she thought of it, Cara was able to remember less and less of why she’d decided not to help Ryan.

At least once an hour she became convinced Jane had killed herself, and any second now Cara’s phone would go off with the notice. She started making a game of it:
Jane would text her back within two hours if nothing was wrong, she reasoned. Then she extended it to five hours, then a day. Jane still failed to answer.

It was a full three days without word, a fact Cara realized in English class just as she was falling asleep at her desk, the low thrum of her teacher’s lecture on *Lord of the Flies* fading to the back of her mind.

“Cara.”

Her head snapped back up. “What?”

“Pay attention.” Her teacher turned back to the board without another glance, but the surge of adrenaline left Cara wide-eyed. She’d never been called out in front of the class before.

She turned to say that to Ryan.

His desk had been left empty since the party. In a few classes, Cara had heard, the teachers introduced new seating charts in the week following, as if spontaneously, discreetly pulling the extra desk to the back and out of sight. Most classes had a moment of silence and left it at that. Vernon was a small place, but Ryan wasn’t from there, and the town for the most part shed his absence like a failed organ transplant.

*Sure, there were drugs,* Cara had overheard her mother saying on the phone. *But he wasn’t from here, it’s not the same.*

Somewhere in the back of Cara’s mind she knew this was a moment where she should cry—rush from the room maybe, and lock herself in a bathroom stall like Jane did. But the buzzing in her head that meant she’d only had a couple hours’ sleep washed the immediacy of that thought away. What she wanted more than anything, more than Ryan next to her, more than Jane to text her, was to *sleep.*
“Cara, this is not nap time. Please see me after class.”

Her head snapped up again and blood rushed to her cheeks immediately. No one else so much as looked at her, but she felt like a spotlight shone on her for the rest of class. It at least meant she didn’t fall asleep again.

As soon as the last bell rang and the other students filed out, Cara slid out of her seat and approached the desk where Ms. Frank sat, head down grading papers. Cara’s legs shook.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Then, in a flash of inspiration, added, “I haven’t been able to sleep well since the party. Since Ryan . . .” She let the sentence trail off.

Ms. Frank let out a deep sigh and rolled her shoulders back, as if preparing for battle. *I wasn’t arguing with you, Cara* wanted to say, but she sensed it would only make the tension grow. “Cara, you’re failing this class.”

“What.” Surely, Cara reasoned, her teacher had misspoken. Cara could not be failing. *Failing is a euphemism for a C,* she thought. *That’s all right, I can bring that back up.* “It’s all right,” she said. “I can bring that back up.”

“No, Cara, you can’t. The best you can do this semester is a C-, and that’s if you do very, very well on these last few assignments. This started well before Ryan passed, and I’m sorry for your loss, but I don’t want to hear any excuses.”

“I’m not making excuses.” Cara’s anger and frustration was irreversibly tied to her tear ducts, and they betrayed her then by starting to leak.

“You just did, you said you were failing because Ryan—”

“There’s a lot going on.” She hated the way her voice shook. “I can’t—”
“I’m recommending you drop down to a regular English class next year,” Ms. Frank continued, cutting her off.

“No, I don’t need to—”

“Clearly you do. I’ve spoken with your other teachers, and this is a problem across the board. We’re concerned, and I think it might help you to take a step back.”

The weight of disapproval from each of her teachers fell hard on her. Cara imagined herself taking a year in regular classes, with fewer books and not a paper to write every other night. “I can’t,” she said.

“And why is that?”

Cara almost opened her mouth to say that she couldn’t slow down because then she wouldn’t have anything but time to think, and no push to get up and do even a fraction of her work, and there wouldn’t be anything she had going for her outside of her friends. Then she felt guilty, because they should have been all she needed.

Instead she said, “Thank you for telling me,” and walked out the door, already planning how she would hide the news from her parents.

But then, as she walked quickly down the hallway to her locker, already knowing she’d missed her bus and keeping her head low, Cara bumped into Jane, and for a second the relief was so potent she forgot she wanted to cry.

“Jane.”

“Oh, uh—”

Cara looked down to find two Sharpies clutched tightly in Jane’s hand.

“Art project?”
“Sort of. Come into the bathroom, I’ll explain.” Jane turned to walk away.

“Wait. Why didn’t you text me back?”

“Cara—”

“I was worried about you.”

“I’ve had a lot going on.”

“Well so have I. Would it have taken so much for you to just let me know you were okay?”

“I’m sorry.”

But that wasn’t good enough. “Can you promise you’ll answer me next time?”

“I—”

In the space after Jane cut off her response, they both thought of Jane’s fits of hysteria and the memory loss, and they both knew Jane couldn’t answer. Somehow, Cara found herself thinking that if Jane only cared enough, it would be different.

“I was so scared, Jane. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” I don’t know if I’d be able to live with myself without you, she meant. Just once, Cara felt, she needed her own pain acknowledged. Just this once, she told herself, she could need something with the same weight that Jane needed something.

“Cara, I don’t owe you that.” Jane said it quietly, looking at the ground. It was the worst thing she could have said, but as soon as it was out Cara realized she’d been begging Jane to say it.

Cara didn’t respond for a minute, and they stood in silence watching each other. She was supposed to say I know. But that wasn’t true. “Okay” was the best she could do.
Cara realized as she said it that she had no idea how she would manage letting go of Jane enough to actually accept that. “So what about the bathroom?”

Jane turned away and Cara followed her into the bottom girls’ bathroom on the first floor, the biggest in the school. Without another word Jane set down her backpack and uncapped one of the pens, taking it to the wall in a large, messy scrawl.

_DEREK SANDERS PREYS ON GIRLS_, she wrote. Then she ran to the other side, and in even bigger, messier lettering, wrote: _BE CAREFUL AROUND DEREK SANDERS._

“Jane—”

Jane just shook her head and handed Cara the other Sharpie. “Do it with me,” she said. So Cara took the pen and ran inside the first stall.

_DEREK SANDERS WILL TRY TO GET YOU DRUNK_, she wrote. In the next stall she added, _WHY DOES DEREK SANDERS ONLY DATE YOUNGER GIRLS?_

Jane slid through the door next to Cara and examined her work. “Nice.”

“Are you worried someone will catch us?” A second thought occurred to her.

“Will Derek know it was you?”


“Yeah?”

“Do you think this will do anything?”

Cara walked out of the stall and turned fully around the bathroom, spinning through the messages. She counted at least eight, some of them big, all screaming down at her. It was a chorus.

“Maybe.”
When they checked back the next day, the ink around the bathroom had multiplied tenfold. Some people had crossed out their messages, or added *Leave Derek alone!!* under them. But more people had doodled hearts around them, or written *THIS!!!^,* and *This is true, and thank you!* Under *DEREK SANDERS PREYS ON GIRLS*, two new messages read, *that happened to me too.*

By lunchtime the bathroom was closed, and by the next day the walls were clean and blank with new paint.

By the next week, a few of the messages were rewritten inside the stalls. Neither Cara nor Jane knew who they were from.

-JANE-

Jane hoped Ryan would have appreciated what she and Cara had written in the bathroom. She hoped a lot about Ryan, mostly that he wouldn’t blame her for thinking she wanted to stay behind after he had gone.

She couldn’t know what he would have wanted. But as she wondered, a feeling came to her for the first time in a while—the urge to make something. It was a high, and she intended to ride it out, like it was a wave lifting her up, away from the depths of his journal pages and blankness of not seeing Derek.

It was cold outside, the temperature dropping to the midpoint between fall and winter, and Jane shivered through her coat as she walked. Not until their tree came into view did it occur to her to call her parents and tell them she was staying at Cara’s did she realize she wanted company.
Jane texted her friends to meet her at the tree, and she didn’t check the responses; she knew they would come. In the meantime she grabbed an exacto knife out of her purse and started carving, just above the two faces.

By the time Lea and Sydney arrived, holding hands and walking quickly, heads down against the cold wind, Jane had an outline done.

“Holy shit,” Lea whispered.

There, carved into the bark, was the outline of Ryan’s face. It was just barely recognizable, but Jane was still hard at work cutting in the details of his narrowed eyes, the perpetual blush on his cheeks, and the slight lilt of his small nose.

“Jane?” Cara asked.

“What happened to Ryan.” Jane asked. She didn’t pronounce it as a question, more like a statement with the ending left hanging. That was how they all knew she knew.

“We were going to tell you,” Cara said, which Jane knew wasn’t quite true. At the same time Lea said, “It was an accident.”

Sydney took longer. Eventually she said, “I’m sorry.”

“Yes.” That time, Sydney answered first. After a silent minute stretched on, it became apparent Cara and Lea weren’t going to speak.

“Why?” Jane asked eventually.

Lea opened her mouth, then closed it. But Cara never even pretended to start to answer, which Jane knew meant, because we did it for you.
In that second Jane decided never to tell them Ryan had already taken something when he grabbed the flask at that party. As far as Cara and Sydney and Lea would be concerned, they were solely responsible.

“Ryan hated himself for messing things up with you, Lea,” Jane said. “He just liked all of you. He liked me.”

The woods around them suddenly seemed immensely quiet, and empty, and long.

Jane turned back to the tree and broke the silence by sticking her knife suddenly into the wood. It slid a short inch and then stopped, but Jane grabbed it back at an angle so that a chunk of wood came with it. Then she did it again, her muscles immediately feeling strained as if she’d been working at this for hours. She was removing the two faces below Ryan’s. After a few more swipes she gave up, leaving the wailing face with its mouth stretched up in a long empty pit towards its eye.

Wordlessly, Cara took the knife from her as soon as she stepped back, and took at the face until it was nothing more than a pale stretch of exposed wood.

When she was done, Lea and then finally Sydney took to the other face until it too was eradicated. Jane wondered if they’d just effectively killed the tree as well, or whether it would grow new bark over the wounds as easily as she changed clothes. She wondered if the sheer momentousness of the act would stave off her next episode. She doubted it. But this wasn’t about fixing herself; for now, this was about freeing them all.

Silently, Jane resolved to tell the others she needed help the next day. And they would call the school or the hospital and make her appointments and drive her. They would wait with her. She knew that.
Overhead, the moon shone through the branches like it had the night she’d first brought them here, and like it had on the night of the party. Cara and Sydney and Lea were close enough Jane could feel them shivering.

It was still like static in her head, and it was still all the time. But maybe, Jane thought, she could just see the edge of something past it. She could just see it in the moonlight flowing around the huddled mass of her friends.