

SELECTIONS FROM *MICHIGAN WINTER* AND *LETTERS TO MY FATHER*

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, Michigan
March, 2011

Accepted by the Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies,
Central Michigan University, in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the master's degree

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This is dedicated to my wife,
my parents, and my brother
for all their support
throughout this project.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my Thesis Committee: Matthew Roberson, Darrin Doyle, and Jeffrey Bean. These faculty members all provided valuable feedback on my writing and allowed me to continue to grow as a writer. I would also like to thank all of my friends and family for supporting me as I worked on this project: my wife, Joy, for being a second pair of eyes for all of my writing and always encouraging me; my mom and brother for supporting my writing and reading habit; Sandra Russell, Julie McDiarmid, and Caitlin Thelen for keeping me sane; Brandon Burford, Leigh Gardner, and the rest of the GAs for the laughs; all of my professors for their insight and guidance; and the rest of my friends, fellow writers, and family who have inspired me along the way. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the support of Central Michigan University in producing this work.

ABSTRACT

SELECTIONS FROM *MICHIGAN WINTER* AND *LETTERS TO MY FATHER*

by Paul Morin

This is a creative text that combines both creative non-fiction and fiction writing. The creative non-fiction elements are short pieces from a larger memoir titled *Letter From My Father*. These memoirs explore my experiences watching my dad die from cancer when I was ten years old. They explore how that loss affected me and my family, and they explore how different people deal with grief and death. The time frame of the stories vary greatly: the first story takes place when I was six years old, and the last story occurs when I was eighteen. In them, I also examine how the ripples of his loss play out in my life now.

The second section is a selection of stories from a larger work titled *Michigan Winter*. These stories focus on characters who are young adults (high school to late 20s). All of the stories take place in Michigan, with many of them occurring in the same town. The characters all experience a significant loss of some kind: abandonment by a parent, death of a mother, and divorce. My fiction explores how people react and cope with those types of loss.

By mixing both fiction and creative non-fiction, this project explores how different mediums can examine the same issue. Creative non-fiction takes a more direct approach by stating what issues the stories is examining. Fiction, on the other hand,

explores an issue by depicting a situation while never directly stating what the issue is.

This project demonstrates how each genre provides the option to explore different sides of the issue.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

<i>Michigan Winter</i>	1
I. INTRODUCTION.....	2
II. HANDPRINTS IN CEMENT.....	10
III. MINTY FRESH.....	26
IV. SHAPES ON THE CEILING.....	40
V. MORE THAN PONIES.....	57
VI. INVISIBLE INK.....	74
<i>Letters to My Father</i>	85
VII. TRAINING.....	86
VIII. NOTHING WILL EVER CHANGE.....	89
IX. TO ME, THEY WERE JUST WORDS.....	93
X. THE CANCER CARD.....	97
XI. NECESSARY DRIP.....	100
XII. THE HEALING BENEFITS OF POISON.....	104
XIII. NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS.....	107
XIV. CARTOON REALITY.....	110
XV. YOUR DAD’S REALLY TIRED.....	115
XVI. MY DAD’S DRESS.....	119

Michigan Winter

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Michigan Winter

The stories from *Michigan Winter* depict teens and young adults from small, middle-to-upper-class towns in Michigan. The work is a collection of short stories that take place in the 2000s. “Shapes on the Ceiling,” “Minty Fresh,” “More Than Ponies,” and “Invisible Ink” focus on the same group of characters and occur in chronological order, but they are intended to be able to stand alone. “Handprints in Cement” is a short story that relates thematically to the other stories in the collection but focuses on a different group of characters.

The stories that take place in the town of Salt Water give a glimpse into the lives of two high school kids, Emma and Justin. Emma’s parents are going through a divorce, and she is considering participating in a sex club at the high school. Justin is struggling to take care of his little sister, Maddi, as he tries to find a way out of Salt Water. The character’s stories intersect in “More Than Ponies,” and Justin and Emma attempt to pursue a semi-awkward relationship as they also try to deal with the “everyday” issues in their life.

“Handprints in Cement” follows Phil and his wife, Carol, as they travel back to his hometown, Bamf, Michigan, for his mom’s funeral. They have been estranged from his mom ever since they were married six years ago. When they reach Bamf, they are forced to make a difficult situation.

When I first started writing this collection, I wanted to explore some of the less public aspects of high school life. In the school district where I grew up, something similar to all of these events happened during my tenure as a student. For the most part, they were kept quiet by the parents, administration, or the students themselves—the only proof remaining were the rumors. Most parents were in denial. When sex clubs and drug use were discovered, the parents and their lawyers denied that there was a problem, sweeping everything under the rug. I wrote this collection as an exploration of those controversial topics and to try to gain some insight into why high school kids do some of these things even within a community that seemingly provides such an advantageous environment: wealthy, suburban, and mostly white.

Then, as the collection progressed, the stories became less about the issues and more about the characters who I was depicting. In “Minty Fresh,” the sex club plays a central role, but Emma and her reactions and motivations became the focus of the story. Then, the sex club becomes more peripheral in later stories. The rest of the collection depicts kids and young adults in controversial situations, but the stories are always more about how the characters react to those situations than the situations themselves.

Another theme that I wanted to explore in this collection was how people respond to loss. All of the characters in these short stories have experienced a significant loss in one form or another. For Justin, it is his father’s abandonment of him and his family. For Emma, it is the divorce that her family is going through. For Phil, it is the death of his father and brother.

This collection was mainly influenced by two authors: Hemmingway and Dickens. While I did not copy either of their styles of writing, I borrowed what I see as

their writing philosophy. Hemmingway tends to write image-based stories with sentences that are clear and to the point. This collection takes that to the extreme. It shows instead of tells, with almost no interpretation. The reader is left to surmise what the character is thinking based upon what is described and how it is described.

Dickens' stories are very detailed oriented, and they capture complete characters, while also exemplify a specific time and place. This collection attempts to replicate that. I intend to create a picture for the reader that both captures the culture where the stories take place as well as the individual characters. Towards that end, like Dickens, I spend quite a bit of time describing the setting as well as the characters.

This collection changed from my original intentions to become a collection of stories that are character driven. All of the stories are told from a limited omniscient viewpoint with the narrations linked to the main character's point of view. They are told as if the reader were seeing the story through the lens of a camera. There is little to no interpretation presented in the story. The reader is allowed to view what the character is seeing, but they are not allowed to see what the character thinks about what they are seeing. How images are described, and what the character looks at and chooses to focus on, allow the readers to gain insight into the character. This point of view also forces the reader to place themselves in the story and experience it for themselves.

All of the stories are also told in a similar tone: with choppy, direct sentences. This creates a staccato tone within the prose at times. The purpose of this is to imitate how people actually view the world. The human mind absorbs a lot of details that we normally classify as meaningless and then forget. Our eyes are always jumping from one thing to the next, and then we forget what we just looked at because our mind's focus is

elsewhere. This prose is supposed to emulate those jumps of the eyes. This style draws attention to the spastic nature of human attention. It draws attention to the things that people see every day but never remember.

In this collection, there are a number of things that I think are working well. I think that the character development is one of the strengths. The characters are individuals and unique. They have their own lives, motivations, and dreams. And, I think that comes through in most of the stories. While it is not always as clear to the reader as it could be, the actions of the characters are consistent and make sense for the situations that they are placed in. They have flaws, and they have their own strengths.

Another thing that is working well is how the stories fit together. There are thematic similarities that connect the stories and characters: the main characters are all broken in some way, they all have a life changing decision to make, and they are all semi-obsessed with the past. Then, there are certain objects that work to create links between the stories. Cars, cell phones, and clothing are some examples. Finally, the style of writing is pretty consistent throughout the stories.

The writing style is, I believe, both effective and ineffective at times. The choppy writing style makes the reader pay attention to certain details and helps draw attention to how distracting modern life can be. In that sense, it is effective. It is also effective at conveying a lot of information in a short amount of time and space. However, in large doses, the choppiness can be grating to read sometimes. That style could be off-putting and limit the audience.

Another thing that is both effective and ineffective is the amount of detail. The details effectively create a setting and give insight into the characters. However, they also

can be overwhelming and slow down the stories. This leads to passages that linger a little longer on a certain event than they need to. Also, it might cause the reader to become overwhelmed by the amount of information, therefore negating their effectiveness at conveying information.

Along similar lines, one of the biggest problems with these stories is the lack of movement. The camera lens tends to get stuck in a certain spot and focus on a narrow event. This creates situations where the characters are standing around and talking for long periods of time. I wrote “Handprints in Cement” in order to practice inserting more movement. It condenses some situations where I might have lingered in the past, and has the characters traveling from location to location. More of that in the rest of the stories would probably help engage the reader a little more and keep the story line fresh.

As I continue working on this collection, I plan to try to cut down on the amount of detail and cut down on the length of various scenes. Shorter scenes would allow the readers to see the characters in different situations and allow for further accelerated character development. I will also experiment with smoothing out the language further. Upon revision, I tried to vary the sentence length more than I had in earlier drafts. I would like to continue to do that and see if I can make the language flow a little smoother without losing the effect I am trying to create.

I would also like to write more stories from Emma’s perspective. I am hesitant to write stories from a female’s perspective, so I only have one story from Emma’s point of view. More of her story needs to be told from her perspective. Also, that would allow the readers to see Justin through another character’s eyes as well.

Letters to My Father

The selections from this memoir incorporate short texts, with mixed-genre interludes, about the effect my dad's gradual death from colon cancer had on my family and I. In this work, I am both the narrator and one of the main characters. The text depicts my experience of watching my dad get sick and eventually die from cancer. This selection chronicles the initial discovery of the cancer, the treatment, the failure of the treatment, his death, and a short venture into how it has shaped who I am now.

When I started writing this collection, I intended it to be an examination of grief and loss that an audience could hopefully learn from. This collection was also intended to examine how grief can play out over time—how a significant loss in childhood echoes throughout life. For me personally, it was also a chance to commemorate my dad and my memories of him into a written text. I was careful to make sure that this was more than a glorified diary. I wanted there to be a purpose to all of the texts.

By biggest influence for this work was *A Heartbreaking Tale of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers. His book taught me that writing about loss a tragedy can be more than simply *sad*. It can be meaningful, heartfelt, and even funny. Also, his book is told in such a unique voice that it is clear that he owns his own story. This collection does not copy Eggers (sometimes overly) clever tone, but it does attempt to recreate the caring and honesty with which he tells his story.

This collection ended up being a hodgepodge of short texts mixed with other genres. The reason for that was that I wanted to allow the readers to see other sides of both me and my dad than they could get by simply telling the stories. The bulk of this

collection is memoir where I recount the stories from both my perspective then and now. These texts are broken up by poems, short essays, letters, etc.

The unity present throughout the collection. Not only are the stories connected chronologically, but there are certain symbols that appear in multiple texts that also help to create a larger significance. One example of this is our dog, Tilly. She is a common element that appears at multiple points throughout the collection, which provides a touch of humor at times. Then, there are connections between the short interludes and the memoirs, which help connect the then to the now. Also, for the most part, the voice is pretty consistent between the different texts, which helps to build trust by adding authenticity and also helps to connect the collection.

Another thing that works well is the honesty and the meaningfulness of the texts. They are not just sad stories. They have taught me something, and I think the texts can also teach my readers something. Stories written with the intent of generating sympathy often fail to connect with the readers.

One area that could be improved is the distance in some of the texts. There are instances where the texts shy away from saying what I was feeling. This can help keep the necessary distance so that I can tell the story, but taken too far, it also can prevent the reader from connecting as well with the story.

Another weakness is the stream of consciousness voice that sometimes intrudes. Sometimes, the story slips into a stream of conscious mode that includes inner dialogue, and is a distinct shift from the rest of the essay. Those instances might distance readers from the text because it is such an extreme shift in the description.

Going forward with collection, I want to add more texts about the “recovery” process that I went through after my dad’s death. I would also like to add more stories about how I can see my dad’s influence in my life now. I would also like to go back in time and add more fleshed out stories from before my dad got sick, in order to show a more complete picture of him.

For this work, I chose to include selections from *Michigan Winter* and *Letters to My Father*, two very different mediums, because I was interested in exploring loss in both fiction and non-fiction. The fictional stories are my attempt to understand how people deal with loss and how they move forward. It allows me to see how a significant loss plays out in different stages of life. The non-fiction sections allow me to explore how the loss of my dad has played out in my own life. I also included these two different mediums because I was curious about what connections readers may be able to see between the two collections that I am too close to see.

CHAPTER II

HANDPRINTS IN CEMENT

Phil hadn't seen his mom in six years. He rolled his shirts into tubes and stuffed them into his duffel bag. Carol sat on the edge of their bed and looped the strap of the duffel around her foot. "They're going to wrinkle, you know," she said, staring at his rolled clothes. Her suitcases were already packed and lined up against the wall. She had insisted on packing them last night right after Phil's sister, Suzy, had called and told him that his mom was dead.

Phil stood up and pulled the pillowcases off the pillows on the bed. He didn't know why, but he couldn't sleep on hotel pillows if he didn't have his own pillowcases. He crammed the cases into the side pocket. He said, "I can't believe she's dead." The wall clock, above the door, warbled. It used to chime at the top of the hour, but it warbled ever since he dropped it last year while changing the batteries.

Carol kicked the strap off of her foot, walked to her makeup desk, and opened her jewelry box. She rummaged through the box and pulled out a pair of pink-pearl studs. Phil watched her hold them up to her ears and look into the mirror. She turned her head from side to side and said, "What do you wear to the funeral of someone who called you a whore?"

Phil zipped the duffel and looked out the window. A squirrel walked on the telephone wire that ran in front of the window. It had a donut hole in its mouth. "She's still my mom," Phil said and dropped his duffel on the corner of the bed. "Squirrel," he said. He turned around and saw Carol shut the jewelry box and walk over next to him.

She pressed her shoulder into his and slipped her hand into his back pocket. Phil grabbed a pillow so he could take off the case before he remembered that the case wasn't there.

They loaded the suitcases into their Sebring and drove the four and a half hours to Phil's home town: Bamf, Michigan. In Bamf, they pulled into the parking lot of the Motel 8. Carol rubbed her knees as if she was trying to start a fire. "Are the lice complimentary, or did we have to pay extra for those?"

Phil backed into a parking spot in front of a room with the plastic white number 12 nailed to the door. When he was in high school, after his dad and younger brother had died in a car crash, he would stay at this motel for a day or two after his mom would beat him. When his sister had found out, he had told her that he stayed in the hotel so mom wouldn't hit him anymore, but the truth was he had stayed in the hotel so that he wouldn't hit her back. Phil didn't take his eyes off the steering wheel when he said, "We haven't paid for it yet. Besides, it's either this or we stay at Old Chris's Bed and Breakfast, and he's the nosiest person in town. I've heard he doesn't put locks on the rooms he rents so he can walk in whenever he wants."

A car with a smashed hood was parked across the street in the Family Fare parking lot. There were three plungers stuck to the doors of the car, and Phil couldn't figure out why they were there. They looked like udders.

"Do you remember when we told your mom we eloped?" Carol scratched her leg just below the cuff of her capris. "After we stayed in the Bed and Breakfast in Ohio for our honeymoon. The one with the two-person hot tub in the bedroom."

Phil engaged the e-brake with his foot. He had wanted to call his mom and tell her they were married over the phone, but Carol had insisted on driving up and telling her

face to face. She had wanted to make a good first impression. His mom had answered the door, after they rang the doorbell four times, and said, “What the hell you want? I’m busy.” Carol had introduced herself and held out her left hand, wiggling her fingers. Phil told his mom that they had eloped the week before.

When Carol blurted out and asked if she could call her mom, Phil’s mom had taken another swig of her beer and said, “No son of mine would marry a bitch that wears perfume like a whore.” Carol was allergic to most perfumes; she never wore any.

Phil had tried to grab the bottle from his mom and said, “Maybe you’ve had enough of that.” His mom splashed them with beer and had thrown the bottle at them as they left. Phil still had the scar on his elbow from where it hit him.

One of the plungers fell off of the car across the street and rolled underneath it. Phil cracked the window an inch, pulled the keys out of the ignition, and squeezed Carol’s thigh. “I remember the hot tub.” He smiled and sawed his fingers over the teeth of the car key, as if it could shave away his last memory of his mom. “Let’s go check in. Then I’ll call Suzy.” Suzy was Phil’s older sister.

When Phil and Carol walked in the office, a middle-aged man with a Michigan State baseball cap sat in a chair behind the counter. There was a TV on the counter, angled so both the man and the customers could watch. A bowl of red-striped mints sat next to the TV.

Carol stared at the ceiling, as if it might fall and crush her at any moment. When Phil looked up, he saw a yellow Pennsylvania-shaped stain above the counter. Someone had thrown a green colored-pencil and it had stuck in the yellow tile. “I called last night about a reservation for a few days.” Phil slid his finger along the edge of the counter.

The man didn't get up from his chair, but he looked at the clock on the side wall.
"You guys from out of town?"

"Funeral," Phil said. "So can we check in?"

The TV was showing a Tiger's game. The announcer said that Magglio hit a pop fly to second and stranded two runners. The man slapped the arms of his chair and threw a pen at the TV screen. "Check-ins not 'till four." It was 3:25.

Phil heard the zipper and turned towards the sound. Carol pulled a pack of gum from her purse. "There's only two other cars in the parking lot," she said. She ripped a piece of gum in half and put the other half back in her purse. Phil never understood why she did that, but he had never said anything about it.

"I know things in my job." The man rolled his chair to the TV and changed the channel. "Like the mayor's husband. He comes in every few weeks. Pays cash, like in the movies. Pays a little extra, like shut-up money or something. I take the money. Be crazy not to, but I didn't vote for that bitch."

Phil tapped his wallet in his back pocket, as if he wished it were an Easy Button's from the Staples' commercials. He had taken five days off work to come up here. Two years ago, Phil had bribed a hotel clerk in London for reservations at the hotel's restaurant. The clerk had taken the money and said, "Everything will be taken care of." But they hadn't gotten their reservations.

Phil reached over the counter and unplugged the TV. "Right. Look," Phil said. "I haven't seen her in six years. But she's still my...something. And now she's gone." Phil rubbed his hand along the edge of the counter as if it might be a genie's lamp.

The man stood up and stepped on an empty bag of Doritos. “I was watching that,” He said and reached behind the TV and plugged it back in. The screen flickered and turned back on. A voice announced, “You can clean it with Oxy-Clean.” It seemed to Phil like the clerk was avoiding looking at them, like maybe if he ignored them they would disappear.

Carol grabbed Phil’s belt loop and tugged him backwards. A fly landed on the bowl of mints. Carol said, “We’re going to come back later.” Phil grabbed a business card of the counter and used it to scratch the stubble on his neck.

The man stared at the TV, bent the rim of his ball-cap, and said, “I know things. Check-ins at four-thirty.” He locked his fingers behind his head and stared at the TV. Phil set the business card on the edge of the counter. He might have unplugged the TV again, but Carol gave his belt loop another tug.

Phil called his sister as they walked back to their car. She told him to come over to their mom’s house; there were things to take care of. When he pulled out of the motel, he noticed that another one of the plungers had fallen off of the car in the Family Fare parking lot. Back in high school, Phil and his friends would park behind the Family Fare and smoke and throw fireworks in the dumpster. His junior year, they had set the trash on fire. They all freaked out and had pissed on it to try to put it out. They had ended up making an anonymous call to the fire department from the pay phone in front of the Shell gas station.

Phil and Carol drove to his mom’s house and parked alongside the road. They got out of the car, and Phil stopped walking at the edge of the curb to stare at the house. The siding was off-white. The second floor looked pitch black, even at four in the afternoon.

Phil's room had faced the backyard, but Phil was happy he couldn't even see the window; he had locked himself in that room so many times to get away from his mom when she was drunk. He had always told himself that he did it for his own protection, but he may have killed her if she had ever gotten through that door.

Carol linked her arm through Phil's arm. Phil stopped at the bottom of the driveway. There were five sets of handprints in the cement: his dad's, his mom's, his brother Michael's, Suzy's, and his own. His mom has insisted on it when they first moved into the house and repaved the driveway. Phil traced the prints with his foot. "We used to have lots of fun when I was little. You know, before." His dad and younger brother had been killed in a car crash when Phil was fifteen; some guy had run a stop sign.

When they stepped onto the porch, Phil noticed a tomato juice can peeking out from behind one of the white pillars. It was half-full of cigarettes butts. Carol reached towards the door and pulled her hand back. "Do we knock or just go in?" She kicked a pebble off the porch. A dog barked behind them, and, when Phil turned around, he saw a beagle barking at a rabbit, which sat on the opposite side of a chain-linked fence. Phil couldn't remember a dog living there when he was growing up. "Think Suzy would have knocked first?" Phil asked. Suzy was four years older than Phil. She had moved out the year before the crash and hadn't had to live with their mom afterwards. Carol pressed the doorbell.

A sprung mouse trap was shoved in the corner of the porch: rusted and empty. "She used to hate mice. She would make sure all the traps were set before she went to bed."

“Did it ring?” Carol rubbed Phil’s arm. “I didn’t hear anything.”

The door in front of Phil clicked and opened. A bald person stepped through the front door. She had red eyes and tired, clear-pale skin. Carol took a step backwards and yanked on Phil’s arm.

Phil clenched his fist around the bottom of his shirt and said, “What are you?”

The skinny, bald person was his mom. “Eighteen hours,” she said. “It took you eighteen hours to get here.” Suzy stepped into the open doorway, behind his mom. Suzy kept one hand on the door.

“I didn’t want to, but she made me promise,” Suzy said and looked everywhere but at Phil, as if she was looking for some escape.

Phil could see blue veins through the skin on his mom’s head. “You’re supposed to be dead,” He said ground his fists into his eyes and wondered if it all might go away, but when he opened his eyes, she was still there.

“Real people don’t do this,” Carol said. “My mom would never do this.” She had pulled the drawstring out of her capris and wrapped it around her thumb tight enough to turn her thumb-tip purple.

His mom leaned against the siding of the house and pulled the sleeves of her sweatshirt down over her hands despite the 70-degree weather.

“Aren’t you going to say anything? You look like a shrunken Mr. Clean.” She looked so light; Phil resisted the urge to reach out and try to pick her up. She didn’t look like she could hit anyone anymore.

Suzy pulled on a lock of her own blonde hair as she said, “She knew you wouldn’t come. I figured it was alright. I didn’t have a choice, you know. It’s not like I know what to do with her. She wants to make amends.”

Carol whispered in his ear, “Can we go? She doesn’t look too good, but she’s not dead.” She picked at the paint on one of the pillars, crumbled the paint chips, and then scattered them off the edge of the porch.

Phil wiped his hands on his jeans as if he might wipe the whole day away. “What the hell is wrong with you? Why are we here?” Through the door, he could see laundry piled on the stairs. When he was little all three of the kids would race down those stairs in a laundry basket when their parents weren’t home. One day their mom came home and caught them; Phil thought he was going to be grounded, but his mom had made them all put on helmets and had insisted on racing the winner.

Phil’s mom rubbed her arms together and stared at the tomato can full of butts. “I’m cold,” she said. “Let’s go inside.” She supported herself on the doorframe as she turned around and stepped through. Suzy watched her and tried to support her, but their mom slapped at her hand.

“No, mom,” Phil didn’t follow. His mom’s sweat suit looked baggy on her. “Mom. I’m not going in there. Come back.” Carol rubbed his shoulder. His mom didn’t stop; she disappeared down the hall.

The front door stood open. Phil took Carol’s hand and twirled her wedding ring around her finger. “We can just go. Do you want to go?”

“She does look pretty sick. This may be my last chance to get to know her,” Carol said as she bit her bottom lip, glancing from the house to the car as if she didn’t know if

she wanted to stay or go. She had told Phil before that she wished things were different with his mom.

Phil could see the bolts in the porch ceiling where the swinging chair used to hang from. When he came home from his first day of first grade, both his parents had been sitting on that swing, holding water balloons. A brand new super-soaker had been lying on the sidewalk leading up to the porch. His dad had pointed to the squirt-gun and said, “I hope they taught you what to do in this situation.” Phil had grabbed the squirt-gun and had a water fight with his parents for what had seemed like days.

He reached towards the bolt in the ceiling. “Let’s see what she wants, but if she does anything, we’re gone.” They went inside and found Phil’s mom in the kitchen with Suzy.

His mom sat in her red Lay-Z-Boy recliner, which had been pulled up to the head of the kitchen table. “Why the hell am I here?” Phil asked. He smelled vanilla and stale pizza. On the counter was an open bottle of vodka. “Really mom?” Phil took the bottle and poured it down the sink. He ran the cold water and filled the bottle with soapy water, then left the bottle next to the sink.

Suzy took a seat on the far side of the kitchen table. Behind her was the china cabinet with glass doors. She looked at the table, guilty, as she claimed, “I don’t know where she keeps getting it. I looked all over the house and couldn’t find anymore. Then the next day she had another bottle.”

Next to Phil, Carol straightened a pile of papers on the counter as if she hoped she could put everything back in order. She picked up a piece of paper and started reading. “When do you think is the last time she’s eaten? Should I make some food?”

Phil's mom rested her head against the back of her chair and cupped her own chest. "I used to have boobs. Right here. Almost C's when I was pregnant."

Phil walked out of the kitchen and around to the opposite end of the table by the sliding door. "What the hell is wrong with you? You can't do this to people." He turned to face the sliding doors that led out to the backyard. The pine tree in the back-right corner of the backyard had been trimmed. The lower branches that used to hang down and create a tent of needles were gone. He used to play under those branches with Michael when they were little. They would army-crawl underneath the droopy ends of the branches to their fort underneath, where they had squirted squirrels with squirt-guns and thrown pinecone-bombs at each other. Phil remembered some days when his mom had followed them around with her clunky Canon camera.

Phil felt someone touch his shoulder. . He bumped his nose against the glass door and spun around, with his hand up high enough to protect his face as if he expected to get hit like he used to. Carol squeezed his side. "Why did Suzy have to lie to me?"

Suzy picked up a case of fake white flowers from the center of the table, "She made me promise. I didn't want to. She called it a last request." Suzy bent all of the flowers downwards. Looking as wilted as the flowers she bent, she hunched over the vase.

Carol handed him an online article that was titled "Soy and Breast Cancer. What are You Doing to Your Health?" Phil read the title and crumpled the paper into a ball. Carol tapped on the sliding door. Phil's mom leaned forward. Her chair squeaked. "I want you to kill me."

Suzy did a double-take and slammed her forearm into the table. “Ow. Mom!”

Carol grabbed Phil’s elbow. “Let’s go. She’s drunk.” Her fingers were warm and slick. When Phil was in high school, he had imagined his mom dead after she would hit him. She would get struck by a meteor, choke on a steak bone, develop an allergy to alcohol, or he would wish she had been in the accident and not Dad.

“No. I don’t think... Just no.” Phil dropped the ball of paper on the heat vent and kicked it towards the wall.

His mom ripped a thread from the arm of her Lay-Z-Boy and stuck her finger in a hole and pulled out tufts of white stuffing. “I get five more months of this shit.” She stuck her finger under the elastic of her sweatpants and snapped the elastic. “They got me in diapers. I can’t even open those damn childproof bottles to take my medicine. I got a bag of piss strapped to my leg. And I can’t work my damn lighter.”

Phil slammed his elbow into the counter. Suzy plugged both ears with her thumbs. Carol prodded the open vent with her toe. Suzy said, “I’m supposed to be at work. I should go in. Today’s donut day. I was going to bring cinnamon rolls.” But, she didn’t stand.

Phil walked around the table to the cabinet full of china. He opened a door and took out a white saucer with blue flowers painted along the edges. The mini-grandfather clock in the middle of the china cabinet had stopped at 12:24. His mom swiped the pile of stuffing off the edge of the chair. “I’m sorry.” Phil tossed the plate on the ground. It shattered. One piece hit the leg of the table. Another fell into the vent and clanked twice.

“You bastard,” his mom said. “You run away with that slut and don’t see me for years. You hate me.” Her face turned red. Blue veins stood out on her bald scalp. She

threw a puff of stuffing at Suzy. “She doesn’t hate me enough. Not like you. It’s got to be you.”

Carol tucked her shirt into her capris and walked towards Phil. Phil slammed his hand into one of the wooden drawers below the glass display. He yelled, “You beat the shit out of me, remember? Suzy wasn’t here. You weren’t ever here.” He kicked a fragment of china towards Suzy’s chair. I hit a table leg and broke into three. “You never said congratulations when we got married, remember? You threw a beer bottle at us. A glass bottle.” He yanked up his sleeve and walked towards his mom. “See the scar? See it?”

Carol said, “Stop it. When Suzy called last night, you cried for a half hour. You cried, remember?” Suzy pulled her shirt collar up over her chin and bit it. Tears trailed from Phil’s mom’s eyes to her chin. She pointed at Phil. The skin hung off her arm.

“Do it,” she screamed. “I just want to see them. I can’t handle this. It’s your fault they’re gone. I can’t.” Her voice broke on *can’t*. Carol grabbed onto the back of Phil’s pants and pulled on them. Phil dragged her behind him to the corner of the table nearest to his mom.

He pounded his palm on the corner of the table and bent his face towards his mom. “No.” After all she had put him through, there was no way that he was going to help her do that. She opened her mouth and closed her mouth. She started coughing. Her breath smelled of alcohol and ammonia.

Her whole body shook when she coughed. Phil straightened his back and took two steps backwards. He bumped into Carol. She was still holding his belt loop with both hands. Suzy got up and rubbed her mom’s back.

Their mom kept coughing. She pulled a hankie from her pocket and held it to her mouth. Phil hugged Carol to him and whispered, "I always thought, like, a cement mixer or a rabid dog. But not me. You'd think it'd be me." His mom's face turned white. Drops of sweat appeared on the top of her head and her forehead.

After a couple of minutes, the coughing ceased. Phil began picking up pieces of china and set them on the opposite end of the table. His mom wiped her face with her sleeve. "I don't want to die like this. Not like this," She said, "I can't even walk around the block. One of the neighbors had to pick me up and help me get home last time I tried." Phil re-arranged the china pieces and tried to fit them together, pretending he couldn't hear her.

Suzy stopped rubbing their mom's back and walked into the living room. She snatched the remote off the couch, but didn't change the channel on the TV. Carol filled a glass of water at the sink and set it in front of Phil's mom. She had found an orange in the fridge and had cut out a slice and stuck it on the edge of the glass.

Phil tried to fit two shards of the china together. His mom took a sip of the water, then set the glass down and ran her finger over the rim. "I don't have my hair. Five months is a long time. I just want to go see them." Her chair creaked.

The two pieces of china didn't fit together. There was a burr of porcelain along one edge. Phil scraped the two pieces together. The burr chipped the other edge. They still didn't fit. Carol walked to the sink. She squeezed what was left of the orange over the sink. Phil's mom said, "I'm tired. Help me get to the bed." She put her hands on the edge of the arm rests and scooted herself to the edge of the chair. She tried to push herself up, but was only able to rock herself forward. Her thin arms shook.

Phil tapped the porcelain together. He couldn't bring himself to help her out of the chair. He might have been paralyzed.

Carol grabbed her elbow and guided her down the hall to the hospital bed that hospice had placed in the den. His mom leaned into her grip, as if she would fall if Carol wasn't there. Carol whispered something in his mom's ear, but Phil couldn't make out what it was.

Phil opened the center door of the china cabinet. The door stuck and everything inside the cabinet rattled when the door popped open. Suzy walked up and stood next to him. "I just found out three days ago. Hadn't heard from her in months. When I came over she looked like that. She said she wanted to make things right with us. I didn't know what to do. I don't understand all that medical stuff."

Phil reached inside the teacup next to the mini-grandfather clock. It was dusty and empty. He wiped his hands on his shirt and ran his fingers over the top of the clock. He found a small, iron key. When he was little, his mom would hold him up to the clock every Saturday morning and let him wind it up with that key. The key had seemed lighter then.

"I know how she is when she drinks," Phil said. "Remember?"

"She's sleeping, or will be soon." Carol said as she walked past the table to the back door. She tied a bow in the string that lowered the blinds. Suzy grabbed the vodka bottle of soapy water from the kitchen counter near the stove. Phil turned the key ten times and tapped the clock's browning pendulum. It ticked every time it reached the end of its swing.

Suzy opened the sliding door and threw the bottle into the backyard, “See, no more drinking. It can’t be good for her anyways, right?” A robin landed on the fence out back. Phil didn’t remind her that he had already emptied the bottle and filled it with water.

Carol closed the display case door and took the key from Phil. She said, “Are you okay? She still doesn’t like me. Can we go? I don’t want to be here for this.” Carol spun the key between her fingers.

Phil stepped on a piece of china. He kicked the fragments on the ground into the open vent by the door. Suzy closed the door and locked it. The linoleum was more scratched than Phil remembered. “We have to go not here, okay?” They left for the motel.



That night in the motel room, Carol perched on the edge of the bed in front of the TV. There were only two and a half channels: CNN, C-span 2, and an adult channel that flickered and cut-out to static every couple of seconds. Phil stood by the windows. The drapes matched the floral pattern of the bedspread. Phil closed his cell phone and tried to put it in his pocket, but he missed and it dropped to the floor.

Carol un-muted the TV and turned it off. She said, “So, what did she want? Phil?” Phil walked to the door and took a painting of an orange off the wall. A moth flew into the light fixture overhead. It dinged.

He said, “I think Suzy’s drunk.” He walked across the room to the sink outside the bathroom door. The top of the mirror was a half inch apart from the wall. He draped

a hand towel over the mirror to cover it. “She’s dead. Again. OD’ed on sleeping pills. With all the alcohol, she didn’t have a chance.”

“Did she?” Carol stood up. She had refused to take off her shoes in the motel room. She walked over and gave him a side-hug but wouldn’t look at him. She stared towards the door, as if she might run out it at any second, or as if someone might come bursting in.

Phil turned on the hot water. The faucet didn’t have a smooth stream. When it hit the porcelain, it splattered drops on the front of his shirt.

CHAPTER III

MINTY FRESH

Emma and her mom pulled away from Salt Water High School. The car seats were warm. Emma's skirt stuck to the back of her thighs. She tugged at it. When she stopped, the skirt restuck to her legs.

"Why do you always have the seat warmers so high?" Emma pinched the skin on her knuckle. The skin stuck for a moment and soaked back into her finger; Emma had heard that meant she was dehydrated.

Her mom flipped her head towards Emma, and then turned back to the road. "Because it's cold out," she said. Her left hand clicked and unclicked the 'Window Lock' button. "You should be happy I have the seat warmers. When I was a kid, your grandpa--"

"I know, I know," Emma plucked at the ceiling fabric, and a piece of fuzz drifted down. When Emma was five, her family had a mini-van with a bubble on the ceiling. She would press her finger into the drooping fabric and be transported to a spaceship made of pillows. The bubble grew until her mom couldn't see out the review mirror. Her dad had gone out to the garage with a box cutter and the bubble had been replaced by gray metal covered with sticky, yellow glue. Emma blew at the fuzz. It spiraled towards the windshield.

"Your Grandpa," her mom said and sprayed washing fluid on the windshield. "Would pick me up in his ugly truck with a broken heater. I had to cover myself with a blanket so I wouldn't freeze to death."

“Yeah,” Emma said. She flicked her wrist. It cracked. Ever since she broke her wrist jumping off a swing at Curtis Park, her wrist cracked when she moved it quickly. “Remember our old van?”

They drove past the city-owned gas station where the police filled up. The cops sat in the parking lot and waited to see if anyone would speed around the corner. They sat in the same spot everyday and usually pulled someone over after school let out.

“Your dad’s old van?” her mom said. She looked at Emma. The car jerked to the right, and Emma grabbed the door handle and bit the inside of her cheek. “I hated that thing. When we got married, I begged him to get rid of it. But he had it since high school and said he would drive it till it died.”

Emma crossed her legs and leaned towards the window. She said, “I loved that van.” When she spoke, a cloudy film appeared on the glass. She had told Greg about the van ten months ago, when they first started dating. He had smiled and put his hand on her thigh. He said, “It sounds great.” Then, he had kissed her.

“What’s that?” her mom asked. The car hit a pothole. Emma’s nose hit the white film on the cold glass. She flinched back into her seat. A peach-shaped smudge was in the center of the white film.

“I said,” Emma said. “Your hair looks nice.”

Her mom ran her fingers through her blonde-streaked hair. Roses and cigarette smoke. Her mom sprayed rose water on herself after she had a cigarette. She thought roses could cover any unpleasantness.

“Do you really?” her mom said. “I had Linda do it during my lunch break.” She went to see Linda every-other Tuesday to get her hair re-dyed and styled. Emma went to Grondins over by Country Market once a month and had them get rid of her split ends.

The car stopped at Industrial, next to the bread factory that smelled of burnt sugar. The left turn lane was backed up past the train tracks, over twenty-five cars deep. Her mom’s right blinker click, click, clicked.

Greg used to run his fingers through her hair and say how beautiful it was. Two months ago, they sat on his parent’s couch and he had said, “You know, I’ve always kinda had this thing for blondes.” She said, “I’m not dying my hair.” He had kissed her on the forehead and said, “It’s okay. I love you just the way you are.” Then, he had turned on the TV and remembered that he had work to do. When he broke up with her three and a half weeks ago, Emma had grabbed White-Out from her backpack and painted it on her hair. It had crusted and clumped. The next day, she had to rinse her hair with conditioner eight times before she got it all out.

The car turned right towards the Rec Center. Emma brushed the ends of her hair with her hand. It tickled her palms. Her mom said, “How was your day?”

Emma put her hand in the pocket of her sweater. She rolled the crumpled piece of paper between her finger and thumb. She scratched the fuzzy spot on the side of the leather seat. Emma slid until her legs angled away from her mom. She opened her mouth, but didn’t say anything.

“Well,” her mom said after a few seconds. “Mine was horrible. Remember how I told you about that lady at work who died in an accident? Well her son came in today and...”

The car drifted onto the shoulder of a turn. Gravel rattled against the bottom of the car. In kindergarten, Emma and her mom would do their hair together before school. Her mom would sit Emma on the counter next to the bathroom sink. She sprayed puffs of mouse onto Emma's hands. When Emma finished brushing the mouse in, her mom would run her hands through Emma's hair and smooth down whatever she had missed. Emma would slap the puff on top of her head and run her fingers through the ends of her hair until her mom had helped her. Her mom steered the car back into the center of the lane.



Earlier that day, in the High School hallway, a kid in front of Emma tried to skate through the crowd on shoes with wheels on the soles. Emma pulled at the corner of her lip. Alison smiled and waved at the black globes on the ceiling.

Last year, the police busted a transfer-kid from Florida for selling Vicodin, Prozac, and pot in the hallway between classes. The teachers had complained that the new building was too big for them to monitor the classrooms and the hallways. Over the summer the school board had ninety-eight globe cameras installed. Now people bought pot in the bathrooms.

“Come on Emma,” Alison said. She rolled the black strap of her purse between her pinkie and her thumb. “We’re gonna be late.”

Emma finger-walked her hand down her skirt and back up the waistline. “Who runs it?” Emma asked. “The head cheerleader, whats-her-face?”

They passed the two, blue fire-doors that slammed shut every time there was a fire drill and at 9:30 every Tuesday, a glitch in the system. Alison tossed her blonde hair

over her shoulder. “That Tramp?” She said. “She’s not even part of the club. Dana runs it.”

“Student vice president, that Dana?” Emma stopped and someone ran into her backpack. Last semester, Greg had a government class with Dana. Sitting on his parents couch after debate day, he had put his hand on Emma’s knee and said, “I love it when you wear a skirt.” Greg had argued against stricter dress codes in school, and Dana had argued for.

Alison said, “I know right? Who would believe it?” She twirled her finger in the fabric of her shirt. A poster for Mock Rock XII was taped to the wall. “She picks the guys and everything.”

A half-circle of girls stood next to the blue lockers across from Mr. Heslip’s room. The hallway crowd shifted to move around the girls, most people ignoring them. The girls faced inwards. Emma stuck her thumb underneath the strap of her backpack, nervous.

Emma remembered that her Aunt Cassie, who had four boys between seven and fourteen, had told Emma’s mom last year at thanksgiving that she preferred having boys. She had carved the turkey and said, “A group of boys can cause mischief, but a group of girls will cause trouble. Remember the things we used to do to mom?” They had both smiled.

Alison grabbed Emma’s hand. “Come on. Class is going to start in a few. We have to hurry.” She pulled Emma into the group of seven girls.

Emma yanked her hand away. She pressed her shoulder into a locker. She hadn't used her locker in two years, choosing instead to carry everything in her backpack. Emma flicked her dangling earring, and it hit the inside of her ear.

"Hey Alison," Dana said. She pulled the bottom of her purple sweater over the waistline of her khakis and turned to Emma, "Alison said she was going to bring you." Her eyes moved up and down Emma, "But I didn't think you would actually show."

Emma crossed her arms, pinched the skin on the inside of her elbows, and didn't open her mouth. Dana walked to her backpack. She unzipped it and rummaged inside.

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Emma had first learned about the club a week ago: nineteen days after Greg had broken up with her. She had sat on the edge of Alison's bed after school. The bedroom walls were painted pink with pictures of Abercrombie and Fitch models taped on the walls.

Alison sat at her desk checking her email on her laptop. She double clicked. Alison and Emma had been friends since fifth grade and Alison had never mentioned the club before. But Alison said, "You gotta get over this whole Greg thing."

Emma listened and folded the edge of the white comforter. After Alison finished, Emma said, "Does anyone ever start dating afterwards?" The computer beeped. Emma cracked the fingers on her left hand.

Alison slapped the side of the computer and spun in her computer chair. She twirled her finger in her shirt, revealing her belly button. She said, "Nah, not really. Scott Lewis and Alexis Debeau started dating after they got paired. And Susie K. and Donny Lundenberg dated for like a week, but that's about it."

Emma leaned forward and kicked her legs against the bed. Alison's soccer trophy from seventh grade was on the bookshelf above her computer. It had a golden soccer ball on top. The engraved nameplate was turned towards the wall. Greg had a shelf with nine trophies in his room. He had shown them to Emma the first time she came over. He had said, "Yeah. You know, they're nothing much, but I kinda like them." Then, he had handed them to her one at a time. None had been more recent than middle school.

Emma grabbed a white pillow from Alison's bed. She put it in her lap and punched in the corners of the pillow. She said, "Scott and Alexis? Really?" Those two had been dating longer than anyone else at school: over two years. Their nicknames were 'Mom and Dad' and 'Boring as Fuck.'

Alison kicked off her ankle-boots towards the closet. The right boot knocked a purple dress off its hanger. The left boot landed on top of the hamper. Alison pumped her fist. "Gooool!" she said. "I know it must have been amazing, right?"

A blue bra with lace trim hung out of the hamper. Emma squeezed her hands together with her thumbs caressing each other. "Yeah. Two years," she said. Alison's white bichon, Katie, ran into the room. Her pink tongue hung out of her mouth and she jumped on the bed. "Okay. I'll do it."

Alison had smiled and turned back to the computer, "Okay great. Katie wagged her tail and bit Emma's finger.

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Dana dug through her backpack. Alison elbowed Emma in the ribs. "You're not scared are you?"

Emma spun the lock on the locker next to her. In middle school, Emma's locker combination had been 27-56-14. Her old combination didn't work. Her nose tingled. Every time she blushed, her nose felt like it did right before she sneezed. "Of course not," Emma said.

Alison snorted. Emma pretended not to notice and watched a blue paper airplane glide down the hall. It missed the back of a girl's head by less than an inch and crashed into the wall. "Liar," Alison said. "What's there to be scared of? You did it with Greg right? What's the difference?"

"Sure, but I was dating Greg, for one."

Dana pulled an Altoids tin from her backpack. She walked up to a girl on the other side of the circle: Rachel. She was in Emma's science class. Last week, she had told the girl next to her, "I can't wait to get out of this boring-ass town and model in New York." She reached into the tin and pulled out a piece of paper.

"This is so much better," Alison whispered to Emma. "None of the awkward fumbling. No 'Oops Sorry.' No 'Please! I love you.' And no painful breakup after he gets it. Just good clean fun."

"Clean," Emma muttered. She watched a kid with spiky, brown hair dropped a book stuffed with papers down the staircase. He smiled and walked away from the stairs, his hands in his pockets. "How many times have you done this?" Emma asked.

Dana offered the tin to the girl four down from Alison: Carly. The punkess. Last week, she had refused to dissect a mink in Anatomy class. She had called it a conscientious objection. Emma thought she was full of shit. Carly grabbed a piece of paper with grey-painted fingernails.

“Nine,” Alison said. With her eyes unfocused, she drew circles with her fingers on her hip. Wistful, Emma thought, or numb.

Emma jerked her head towards Alison, tweaking her neck. “Nine,” she exclaimed while she raised her hand and massaged her own neck. “I thought you had only done this a few times.”

Alison turned her eyes towards Emma without moving her head. “That is a few times. See Michelle?” She nodded at the girl next to Carly. Michelle wore skinny jeans and had a bright orange purse. “She’s been in the group since middle school.”

Emma shivered. She wrapped her backpack strap around her thumb. Greg had been her first and only. Three and a half weeks ago he said, “The only consistent thing in life is change.” He had worn his shirt with Snoopy catching a Frisbee on the front. The same shirt he had worn on their second date, to Pinball Pete’s. He had said, “I really do love you, but it’s just too much sameness. You know? I need something different for now.” Something Different was a freshman from Lincoln.

“Don’t be such a prude,” Alison said. She snapped the black hair-tie she wore around her wrist, annoyed.

“You’re up Alison,” Dana said. With both hands, she presented the tin to Alison like a jewelry box. Alison adjusted her bra then grabbed a piece of paper. Alison didn’t smile or read her paper.

Dana swung the box in front of Emma, “Now the new blood.” She stood on her tip-toes, lowering her left foot, then her right.

The tin had ‘Spearmint’ written on the side: little, white mints were mixed in with the bits of folded paper. Emma’s Grandma Great always carried pastel mints in her

pocket and gave them to anybody who came to her condo, including the mailman. She said, “A fresh mouth is a fresh mind.”

Emma’s hand shook as she plucked out a paper square, and the mints rattled in the tin. A guy somewhere behind Emma yelled, “Madden Football, Baby!”

“Not getting cold feet are we?” Dana asked. She snapped the tin shut. Emma crushed the paper.

“No,” Emma said. She stared at her leather boots, and Alison elbowed her. When she looked up, Dana had already walked away. Emma rolled the piece of paper between her hands.

Mrs. Hill waddled towards the staff-only elevator, carrying a blue Nalgene. Emma was in Mr. Hill’s English class and was jealous of the way he smiled when he talked about his pregnant wife.

“Well,” Alison said. She leaned into Emma’s shoulder. “Who’d you get?” Alison weight pressed Emma against the locker. It took Emma two tries to uncrease the paper. Scrawled in blue-cursive: Geoff Pewterson.

“Cross Country Runner. Nice,” Alison leaned back. The hallway smelled of pizza.

Emma wrapped the strip of paper around her pinkie. “But he’s dumb as a brick,” Emma said. She spun the paper around her finger.

“So what?” Alison said. She scraped her teeth with her fingernail. “It’s not like you have to marry him or anything.”

The school security guard strolled by in his blue uniform. He had a cell phone clipped to his belt. He flipped it open and closed and he walked. Emma thought he was going to bust them, but he didn’t even look their way.

“Moment of truth, ladies,” Dana said and held a green-spotted notebook braced against her forearm. She bit the cap of her pen and pulled it off. She flipped the pages in her notebook.

“Scott Wheatholder,” Alison said. She reached across Emma and slipped her piece of paper into the locker vent. Her hair tickled Emma’s cheek, like an ant crawling across her skin

Dana wrote down the names as the girls announced them. She twisted back and forth and didn’t look up until after Emma finished them off with, “Geoff Pewterson.”

Dana said, “No one got Brad this time? He’s going to be pissed.” She smiled and twirled her pen between her fingers. “Oh, well.” She slipped the notebook into her backpack and zipped it.

The three-minute-warning bell rang over the intercom. Emma ground her toe into the linoleum. She erased a black shoe-scuff. The hallway crowd started to thin.

Emma crumpled her piece of paper and shoved it in the belly-pocket of her sweater. Alison opened her purse and pulled her cell phone out. She pressed a side button on her cell and the faceplate lit up.

Dana threw her backpack over her shoulder and said, “See ya all Saturday.” Her shoulder-length hair bobbed as she walked away.

The other girls paired up and merged into the crowd. Emma twirled her finger in her hair. Her mom used to tell her she would go bald if she didn’t leave her hair alone. As Alison dropped her cell back into her purse and tugged on the strap of her backpack, Emma said, “How does it work?” She pushed off from the lockers and headed towards the stairs. Her French II class was on the first floor, two flights down.

Alison walked with her to the stairs, “Don’t look so worried. It’ll work the same way it did with Greg.”

“You’re hilarious, you know that?” Emma said. She slipped her thumb under the waistband of her skirt. Their first time, Greg had stolen a bottle of wine from his parents. He made her wait in the living room while he decorated her bedroom with green ribbon, her favorite color. He had even burned her mixed CD, which Emma thought was lame and sweet, but her CD player didn’t work. Greg had held her for two hours after their first time. Her parents had to work late and he held her on the living room couch while they washed her sheets. She had never been warmer.

Alison stopped at the top of the stairs. “Relax. Dana emails the guys and gives them our names.” She scratched the back of her hand.

Emma stepped down onto the first stair and turned around. The stairs were empty. One kid speed-walked down the hallway with a stack of four textbooks cradled in his arms. “Do they take us out to dinner or something?” Emma kicked the top stair.

Alison said, “Not usually. This time I think we are all meeting at Brad’s party this Saturday. It will all be in the email.” Alison spun her hair-tie around her wrist. The stairway darkened. A cloud half covered the sun shining through the glass-wall of the staircase.

Emma squeezed the railing. “I think dinner will be nice.”

Alison looked down the hallway. “Yeah. I gotta go. If I’m late to Avery’s class again, I’ll get detention.” She snapped her hair-tie and said, “I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Yeah, me too,” Emma said. There was a line of light on the wall where the half-covered sun reflected off the stainless steel handrails. “See ya.”

Alison walked down the hallway. Emma's boots clicked and echoed on every step. The bell rang when she was between the second and first floors.



The car hit a pothole, and Emma jolted against the seatbelt.

“Emma,” her mom said. “Emma. Are you listening to me?” She rubbed the cruise control button on the steering wheel.

They drove past the Rec Center on the right. When Emma was nine, she used to watch her dad play softball on the baseball diamond next to the brick building. After a game, her parents would take her out for ice cream at Mickey's Dairy Twist. Her dad got promoted five years ago and didn't have time for softball anymore.

“Huh?” Emma said. She stuck her hand in her sweater pocket and rolled the piece of paper between her fingers.

“What are you daydreaming about now?” her mom said. “Greg again? When are you two getting back together?” She tapped her finger on the steering wheel. She didn't take her eyes off the road.

When Greg had broken up with Emma, she didn't have her car and Greg had to drive her home afterwards. She had told her mom that Greg wanted to experience new things. Her mom had left her crying on the couch and went upstairs. She brought down a Meijer's grocery bag full of pictures of ex-boyfriends. She had set the bag between them and dug out a stack of pictures with a tan rubber-band around it. She had shown Emma the pictures of her first boyfriend, Mark. Mark had broken up with her mom four times. Her mom had smiled and said, “See. Things get better.” Emma shot the rubber-band

across the room and tore up three pictures before her mom had yanked the rest away. Her mom made her tape the pictures back together before she could get off the couch.

The car coasted to a stop at the three-way stop just past the Rec. Emma dug her thumbnail into the leather of the passenger seat and scratched at a quarter-sized hole. She said, "I'm daydreaming about ice cream and the boy I'm supposed to sleep with this Saturday."

"Don't be a smartass," her mom clicked on her right blinker and looked both ways. "Can't you at least pretend to be interested in my day?"

"Sure mom," Emma said. The car turned right on Lohr. A tailless possum lay on the side of the road. Emma wondered if it was faking. She rolled the ball of paper between her fingers and pressed the down arrow for the window.

CHAPTER IV

SHAPES ON THE CEILING

After school, in Salt Water High School's parking lot, Justin traced his fingers around the "B-I-T-C-H" that had been keyed into the hood of his '76 Camaro. His finger melted a circle in the frost covering the hood. Justin had spent three weeks during the past summer fixing the rust spots and painting his car a metallic green at the body shop where he worked. The scratches were deep enough that they wouldn't buff out.

A group of runners in blue "Salt Water CC" sweat suits walked past the back of his car, but no one turned to look at him. He had spent half his paychecks fixing up the Camaro. His friend, Chris Perkins, had told him after first period that Riley Evans had been the one who keyed his car; they had him on the surveillance tape. Chris had said, "Yeah man, they didn't even suspend him or anything; it would have messed up his basketball eligibility."

Justin snatched his finger away from the car and threw his backpack on the ground. The mechanical pencil Justin had clipped to his backpack broke. A white eraser rolled underneath the silver Civic parked next to him. Justin kicked the front rim of his car. He considered beating the shit out of Riley, but Justin didn't have basketball eligibility. He had been called into the councilor's office earlier that day, and the councilor told him that three colleges had offered him full academic scholarship if he were willing to take one more semester of Spanish. He knew that a scholarship was his best chance to escape. He kicked his rim again, and then his backpack. A girl in a pink coat with purple flowers embroidered on the sleeve, in the next row over, was talking on her cell-phone and watching him.

Justin stared back at her, but she didn't turn away. He picked up his backpack, opened up his door, and threw his backpack into the passenger seat. The plastic end of the shoulder strap rapped off the passenger window. He got in the car and started it up. The seat vibrated as the car idled. Cold air blew out of the heat vents onto the steering wheel. Justin pulled out of his parking spot and navigated his way out of the lot. He kept an eye out for Riley, but didn't see him. He wasn't sure what he might do if he did. He turned right onto Campus Drive and then left on Industrial Road.

Justin hit second gear on Industrial, and the car didn't shudder. His mom had taught him to drive stick four years ago, right after his dad had walked out. She had said, "Every man should know how to drive stick." He had been thirteen. He turned right onto Michigan Ave. and headed towards Maple Road, towards home and away from work at the shop. The tires squealed when he pushed the car through third, up to 65mph. The limit was 45.

He had some sick days saved up at the auto shop. He could have called in and picked Maddi, his younger sister, up from school. The clock on his car said 5:47am, which meant 2:47pm. He had gotten a new CD player four months ago and had never figured out how to switch the hours. Justin let off the gas.

His car hit a pothole and shivered. It drifted and slowed. Fifty-five. Forty-seven. Thirty-three. Justin drove past the Country Market that went in two years ago. He never went there for groceries: Maddi liked the free donut holes at Busch's too much. The car slowed to twenty-two before Justin flipped his blinker on and turned right into the Shell gas station.

Justin stopped next to a pump, but didn't shut off the car. The tank was half-full. A blonde woman in a navy suit stared at the hood of his car. She put her hands in her coat pocket and shook her head.

A pea-sized, black spider crawled across the dash of Justin's car. He punched his horn. The woman's head whipped up and stared at him. He pressed his fist into the horn again and again until the woman hurried back to her SUV and drove away. He grabbed the spider off the dash and cupped it in his hand. He opened his door, set the spider on the cement, and closed his door. A strand of webbing stuck to his palm; he wiped his hand on his backpack. He pretended not to see the gas-station attendant walking towards his car.

He shifted into first and eased off the clutch. He pulled onto Michigan Ave. and headed away from Maple Road to the shop.



Later that evening, Justin sat on the grey carpet of the living room. His high school biology book parked on the floor in front of his crossed legs. His notebook, exploding with papers, was perched on his lap. The floor lamp made everything yellow and shadowy.

He had finally gotten Maddi to fall asleep, two hours after her bedtime. She had made him read *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* four times before he had stashed the book on the top shelf of her closet. She had whined, "One more time, one more time." He had yelled from the doorway, "Shut up, just shut up." She had pulled her pink comforter over her head and trembled beneath the covers. Justin twisted her door knob, "I'm sorry Maddi. I'm sorry. I'll read more to you later." She had tossed beneath the covers when Justin left the room, but so far she hadn't gotten up.

The digital clock flashed 11:13 from the scratched end-table next to the couch. Earlier, some jerk had pulled into the shop right at 6:57 in his Lincoln LS and had demanded an oil change with that new synthetic oil for high performance vehicles. It had taken Justin fifteen minutes to find the oil, which had pissed everyone at the shop off. Later, Maddi couldn't find her left shoe at their aunt's house. They searched twenty minutes before Justin carried her to the car. At home he made pasta, helped her with her letters, and tried to get her to bed. He hadn't even had time to pick up the living room and didn't get to start his homework until now.

A high-pitched squeal came through the wall to his right. She needed new brakes, Justin knew. Light shone in the window next to the front door. She never got home this early on weeknights. Justin sprung to his feet. Papers flew everywhere around him. Justin grabbed his bio book and his now-empty notebook and shoved them in his backpack. He grabbed as many papers as he could and crammed them into his bag. They crumpled, but Justin didn't care.

Last time she had come home early was two months ago. Justin had already finished his homework and was watching Law and Order reruns on TV. His mom had started screaming about the electric bill and slapped Justin. She had left him in the living room and had tried to make scrambled eggs. If the batteries in the smoke detector hadn't been dead, Justin was sure she would have set it off.

Justin slung his backpack over one shoulder. He didn't zip the main pouch. He took four steps towards the hallway that led to the bedrooms, when the door clicked. The front door opened; the bottom rasping across the blue linoleum. Justin froze just before

the hallway and stared at the door. He could have tried to run through the living room and hide in the kitchen, but he couldn't move.

His mom stepped through the doorway. Her heels clicked on the floor, echoing. When she slammed the door, she jumped. Maddi's baby picture, hanging on the hallway wall across from the front door, swung back and forth, but it didn't fall this time. She dropped her purse next to the door and kicked off her pumps.

Her burgundy manager's nametag was still clipped to her shirt, Justin noticed. His mom worked the 12-9 shift at Kohl's, but usually she took off her nametag before she went to TGI Friday's after she got off. She kicked off her heels.

"Justin," her voice echoed off the walls. "What the hell are you doing up?"

"It's only eleven, mom," Justin's voice rasped as he tried to whisper. He shifted his backpack behind him and forced his heavy body to take a couple steps closer. He made sure his work boots didn't smack against the linoleum. He didn't look away from his mom. "Maddi's sleeping."

"All that brat ever does is sleep. I never get to see her anymore." She rubbed her nose on her pudgy arm. "She's almost as lazy as you." Last Saturday, Justin knew, his mom had spent the entire day playing with Maddi after his mom had slept off Friday night. She had taken Maddi to Chuckee Cheese's and over to the petting zoo at Domino Farms. Justin knew that they didn't have the money for that, but he had worked on his English project and didn't mention the cost.

She smelled like smoke, grease, and something cheesy: Doritos? Cheetos? The lamp in the living room flickered and the shadows shifted for a second. "Maybe you would see her if you weren't out so late all the time," Justin said.

“What kind of bitch never sees her own mother?” She yelled over her shoulder towards the bedrooms. She stomped her stockinged feet and would have slipped if she hadn’t steadied herself against the wall.

“Shut up, mom,” Justin said. Maddi was five years old. The strap of his backpack dug into the palm of his hand as he gripped it. Justin could hear a police siren racing past their house. His mom’s head whipped towards Justin. The heater kicked on with a dull rumble. The air didn’t seem any warmer.

She moved: one, two, three steps. Justin dropped his backpack as she pushed him backwards into the wall. His head slammed next to the picture of Maddi. Her hand pressed against her throat. Her hand was sweaty and cold.

“You bastard,” she said. “You son of a bitch.” Her eyes widened, and her lips parted to reveal her teeth not six inches from Justin’s face. It had been a whisky night.

Justin tried not to gag. Her arms were round, but her hands were plenty strong. He could breathe, but couldn’t swallow.

“Don’t tell me to shut up.” She pressed harder. Her cheeks reddened. Her stockinged feet slipped on the linoleum. “Only I tell me what to do.”

Justin wrapped his hands around her wrist, but didn’t struggle. He could have broken her wrist and shoved her into the front door, but she had stayed when his dad left four years ago. She had taken the job at Kohl’s and made sure that she was home when Justin got out of school for two years after. He was bigger, but she was mom.

Justin pulled a breath down his throat and looked at the ceiling. It was textured like the inside of a cave or something. When he was Maddi’s age, he and his mom would

lie on their backs and search for shapes in the bumps. He searched for t-rex; she found roses.

“I’m sorry, mom,” he forced out and let go of her arm. He stared over her head at the window next to the door. He saw his reflection. His reflection looked tired.

His mom held her hand up for another second, and then Justin could swallow again. Her breaths came out short puffs that shook her entire body. He massaged his neck and watched her walk away.

She swayed into the living room, towards the burnt-orange couch with the remote balancing on its arm. The floor lamp turned half of her dirty-blonde hair pure white as she walked past it.

Justin knelt and zipped up his backpack. Halfway to the couch, he watched her foot come down on the chest of a topless Barbie, which was missing half its hair. His mom jerked her foot to the right and fell to the left. She landed with a boom that shook the floor. Her shadow danced as the lamp wobbled.

She picked up the topless figure and held it in front of her face: turning it back and forth. Justin remembered when she came home with that Barbie one Sunday last month. She had found it at a garage sale and had come home smiling, with her arms behind her back. She asked Maddi to pick a hand. Left had a giant Hershey’s kiss. Right had the Barbie.

Justin might have laughed, but his mom pushed herself to her feet and whipped the Barbie at the couch. “Maddi,” she screamed and took three uneven steps towards the hallway before she started tip-toeing on her bad foot.

He stopped rubbing his neck and glanced to the left, to the right. Nothing but walls. He wiped his shaking hands on his jeans and stepped in front of his mom.

She stopped and pushed the hair out of her eyes. "Move," she said. She stepped to the right. Justin stepped to the right.

"I like it here." He stepped to the left when she did. "Maddi's sleeping." She had never gone after Maddi before, only Justin. She stared past Justin and tried to take a step forward. Justin slammed his hand into the wall hard enough to make his whole arm tingle. His mom glanced at the arm in front of her face, looked at Justin, and smiled.

Justin pushed harder against the wall until every muscle in his arm felt taut. Her hand shot forward. She scraped her nails along the part of his arm left exposed by the too-short sweatshirt sleeve. Justin jerked his arm away, cradling it against his chest.

"Damnit," he hissed as she stepped past.

She stomped down the hall, past the hallway door that led to the kitchen. She had two shadows when she passed the light from the kitchen. Her feet boomed against the floor. Justin's dad had bulled down the hallway calling his mom's name the same way she was calling Maddi's. When their dad had done it, Justin had pulled the covers over his head and hugged his pillow. His mom had worn long sleeves over her arms for two weeks in the middle of June. Even in eastern Michigan, the temperatures were in the high 70's that week.

His mom's footsteps vibrated in the soles of Justin's feet as she screamed for Maddi again. Justin pulled in a breath and moved. He had two shadows when he wrapped his arms around his mom from behind: pinning her arms to her side.

“What the hell are you doing?” She thrashed her body back and forth. Her head flung backwards and smashed into Justin’s chin. Black starbursts flashed in his eyes, but he held on. He more than held on. He squeezed his arms around her round stomach until she oomphed.

“You bastard,” She spat. “You’re like your father. Let go of me.” Her hair smelled like tangerines and smoke. It tickled Justin’s nose as he half-lifted her off the ground, but she was too heavy for him to carry far.

“Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.” He pushed her down the hallway; her stockinged feet slipped across the scratched linoleum. The wind rattled a window somewhere behind them. He pushed her past Maddi’s door on the right.

His mom lunged towards the door. Justin staggered and pulled her back. The both hit the opposite wall hard enough to make Justin’s shoulder throb. His mom whipped her head back and forth. Her hair stung Justin’s nose.

Maddi’s door opened. Hers was the only one in the house that didn’t squeak. His mom screamed, “Come here Maddi. Maddi, help me.” She kicked Justin in the shin. “I’m going to kill you.” Justin didn’t know if she was talking to him or Maddi.

“Mommy, why do you smell like campfire?” Maddi said. She clutched her brown and black, stuffed hotdog-dog, Toby. Justin turned away from her. He could feel the heat from her room flowing out into the hallway.

“Go back to bed sweetie. Everything’s alright.” Justin puffed, looking above Maddi’s head. He strained his arms and back until his mom windmilled her feet above the floor; the toes of her nylons couldn’t touch. She might have been a cartoon running off a cliff. She swung her forearms, but Justin only hissed when her nails connected.

“Why are you hurting Mommy?” Maddi yanked on the pocket of Justin’s jeans. Her other hand stroked Toby’s back. Her fingers traced the bald spot from the time when Maddi had decided that Toby needed a haircut.

Justin push-carried his mom further down the hallway, away from the kitchen and living room lights, towards her bedroom door. More shadows appeared and all of them flailed and lurched across the floor and walls.

“I’m helping Mommy get to bed.” Justin swiped his elbow towards the light switch. He missed and scraped his elbow along the wall. “Go back to bed, Maddi.” His arms felt like they would fall off if he had to hold his mom much longer.

His mom said, “I hate you. I hate you.” Justin pushed her to the last door on the left. His mom stopped struggling. She bowed her head and said, “Please. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” She lifted her face towards the ceiling. “You little bitch.”

Maddi swung Toby at Justin’s leg. “Let her go. Let go,” she said every time the stuffed dog connected.

“Shut up,” he tightened his grip. “Just shut up.” Maddi stopped hitting him, but didn’t go to bed or even move away. She held Toby to her chest. His plastic nose pressed against the bottom of her chin. Justin looked away. A picture hung next to his mom’s door. Justin was twelve and held his newborn sister. Their mom was dressed in a hospital gown and sat in a wheelchair. Maddi had been wrinkly; Justin remembered being grossed out.

His mom’s foot shot back and connected with his shin. He uttered a word he would have to talk to Maddi about later. His mom kicked him again and Justin rammed his shoulder into his mom’s door. It rattled in its doorframe, but didn’t open.

The floor shook as a semi must have driven past on Maple Road. Maddi crouched on the floor next to Justin and their mom. She covered her eyes with Toby. If it weren't for her shaking arms, she might have been playing hide and go seek.

"You can't do this to me," his mom screeched. He tried to shake her, but his arms and back were too tired. He couldn't tell if it was her heartbeat or his own that he felt pounding in his arms.

Justin released his mom and flung one hand towards the tarnished door knob. He tried to push his mom towards the door with his other hand. He twisted the knob and shoved it open. His mom pushed through his corralling arm, and he stumbled. His leg clipped Maddi's knee, and she sprawled onto the linoleum. His mom tripped over Maddi and slammed into the opposite wall. She stepped on a heat vent and Justin heard a metallic snap, like when he broke an exhaust support at work.

Justin rushed across the hallway and grabbed his mom again. She pressed both hands to the left side of her face. There was an indent in the wall just above shoulder height. Maybe she hit the wall harder than Justin had originally thought. He guided her towards the bedroom. Maddi crawled out of the way. His mom tried to twist out of his grip when they got near the doorway, but Justin held on and shoved her towards her bed. He grabbed the door. The springs in the bed squeaked right before he slammed the door. Justin wrapped the cold doorknob in both hands and braced his boots against the floor.

His mom pounded on the door. Justin saw a blob moving across the floor to his left. He didn't recognize the blob as Maddi for a few seconds. "Maddi," Justin yelled over the pounding. "Maddi." She turned towards Justin. Her eyes were half-closed and something dark trickled from her nose: blood. Justin called again. His voice wavered.

The doorknob tried to twist. He had to squeeze tighter with his sweaty hands to stop it. The whole door shook and Justin wished there was a lock on his side of the door. When he looked back at Maddi, she was gone and her bedroom door was cracked open. She had left little dark spots on the linoleum. Justin didn't let go of the door. He held the door shut until the pounding stopped. He held it shut for a few minutes after that, just in case. Then he stopped holding it. His fingers were blocks of lead that didn't want to bend.

He forced his fingers to bend. He saw Toby lying on his back with his stubby feet in the air. Justin shuffled towards the front door and grabbed his backpack. He had been called into the councilor's office today and told that he had been offered academic scholarships from the University of Miami and Michigan State University. He opened his backpack and grabbed his bio book. He headed to his room.

He could hear his mom's snores as he walked down the hall. He pretended not to see Maddi's open door or the stuffed dog against the wall. His door was the last door on the right. He walked faster into the darkness of the hallway.

He flicked on the light of his bedroom. His dirty clothes were piled in a blue hamper in the corner of his room. His bed was neat, but not made: the brown comforter was crooked and both pillows were half-crammed between the wall and the bed. Justin shut his door and sat on the bed with his biology book.

One of Maddi's Barbies laid on the edge of Justin's pillow. He picked up the doll and shoved it underneath his pillow. He opened his biology book and grabbed the first page, with Salt Water high school stamped in the middle, and ripped it out. His vision shook. He wanted to rip out every page in the book, but he didn't. He ripped out thirty-

seven pages, the entire section on classification, before he threw the book against the wall. He couldn't study.

Justin left his room and walked down the hallway. He picked up Toby, his fingers shaking. He brushed off the stuffed animal and rubbed its ear. "How ya doing, boy?" He asked the stuffed animal, which he thought was great, just great.

A trail of iron-scented splotches led to Maddi's room. Justin wiped his eyes with Toby's brown ear. Maddi's room was quiet, but Justin followed the splotches. "Maddi?" He twisted Toby into a ball. A Maddi-sized lump hid on her bed, underneath the peach comforter. The Winnie the Pooh nightlight, next to the nightstand, cast a yellow half-circle of light around the bed.

"Maddi," Justin dangled Toby in front of him as he made his way through the layer of clothing and stuffed animals on the floor. "I know you're not sleeping. You never sleep without Toby."

The blob didn't move. Justin couldn't see even the rhythmic up and down of breathing. The heater clanked twice and buzzed to life. Justin put his hand on the peach blob. Maddi let out an explosive exhale and started breathing in short, sharp breaths.

"I'm sorry," Justin peeled back the comforter. The peach pillow, which Maddi clung to, had four dark spots on it. One looked like California. Toby's nose was cold against his forearm. Justin ran his fingers through Maddi's hair and placed the stuffed dog next to her arm. Her upper lip and chin were covered with dark, drying blood.

He could have picked her up and carried her to his Camaro; they could have gone south, away from the cold and the snow. They could have gone to Disney World or

Myrtle Beach, or to a peach farm. Or they could have gone to Arizona, to the desert to play in the sand.

Instead, Justin grabbed a Kleenex from the night stand and stuck the corner of the tissue in his mouth until it was wet. He wiped underneath her nose. She tried to turn away, but he put his other hand on her cheek and guided her face back towards the Kleenex.

“W-why were you and Mommy fighting?” Maddi said as Justin grabbed another Kleenex.

“What?” Justin looked back towards the cocoon on the bed. “Oh. We weren’t fighting.” He wet the Kleenex. “Sometimes mommy gets sick and I have to help her.” This had been one of the first times Maddi had ever seen her drunk. Usually Maddi was asleep by the time their mom got home.

A rumble drove past their house and a light shone through Maddi’s window. Probably another semi. Maddi’s teddy bear was lying face up on her white dresser. Justin had given Maddi the bear for protection back when she was having feverish nightmares from the flu this past summer.

Justin cleaned Maddi’s chin. The nightlight flickered twice. Justin sometimes worried that the electricity would go out, but his mom always paid the bills on time: the mortgage, electric, water, even the cable. She just forgot to save money for new clothes for Maddi and for groceries.

Maddi turned her face away from Justin when he finished cleaning her chin. “Is Mommy sick like Daddy?”

“What about Dad?” Justin crushed the Kleenexes and crammed them in his jean pocket. Maddi had been only two and a half when their dad walked out.

“Mommy said Daddy was sick and that’s why he went away.” Maddi folded Toby in half and squeezed him to her chest. “Is Mommy going to g-go away? Maybe Mommy has what Daddy had.”

Justin grabbed the green cowboy hat off the floor and spun it in his hands. He tossed it towards the closet and hit the giant teddy bear Maddi had won in a raffle two years ago. Justin looked at the ceiling. He found a turtle with three legs and no tail.

“Mommy doesn’t have what Daddy had. She’s only sick at night.”

His dad had been drunk almost every day, all day. The last time their mom caused a scene, two months ago, she had broken a vase full of flowers. The next morning she had been in the kitchen cooking eggs and sausage, smiling the entire time. She had even busted out her ancient “Kiss the ook” apron, which had lost the C sometime before Justin was born. Their dad had never made them breakfast.

“Promise?” Maddi looked at Justin and wrapped Toby’s tail around her finger.

“I promise.” He pulled the blankets over Toby, up to Maddi’s chin. He swapped the bloody pillow with a clean one from the floor. “Now go to sleep.” He ran his fingers through her hair until she drifted to sleep.

Justin side-stepped the Polly Pocket picnic-car, which Maddi had gotten from their cousins, and walked out of her room. He walked through the kitchen into the laundry room, set the washer dial to delicate, and threw in the entire pillow. The microwave flashed 12:03 as he left the kitchen. Justin rushed to the front door. He

ignored his backpack. His mom's purse sat next to the door. He had helped Maddi pick out the purse last Christmas: \$24.99 at Kohl's.

Justin kicked the purse. It slid across the linoleum floor and stopped when it reached the grey carpet of the living room. He walked towards the purse and started stomping. Something crunched and metal clinked together inside. He imagined he could activate an undo button, but when he stopped everything was the same.

He walked out the front door. His eyes watered in the cold air as he stepped onto the porch. A white cop car drove by towards the library, past the trailer park, which was hidden by a hedge of tall evergreens. Justin pulled his keys out of his pocket. His fingers played with the keychain of a golden orange his uncle had brought back for him from Florida. Justin got into his car and disengaged the e-brake. He pressed the clutch and rolled down their slanted driveway into the street, where he started his car with a smooth roar.

He drove out of Salt Water, towards Lincoln, on Lohr Road, where there were never any cops and the road was straight and even for a little over a mile. He stopped his car on the first bridge, which was over a small creek. Sometimes he would drag race other kids from Mr. Tomosic's auto class on this road. The distance from the first bridge to the second small bridge was about a quarter-mile.

The heater blew hot air in his face. He gripped the steering wheel with sweaty hand. "One. Two. Three," he said, then popped the clutch and pressed down the gas. The car shook and jolted forward with a roar. The tires screamed and Justin could smell burnt rubber. He raced through the dark tunnel of trees and shifted through second, third. He

could have driven to Mexico, or Canada. He had never been to either. Fourth. The trees on either side rushed past.

He glanced down at the speedometer: 98. He had been told in school that some scientists believed if you moved fast enough, you could travel back in time. He passed the second bridge and didn't slow down. His steering wheel shook. He had been getting college brochures from Miami University and scholarship offers from Grand Valley State University. He was almost to the bend in the road. He could have kept going straight, through the trees, but he hit his brakes. He stopped and did a U-turn before the bend. He was breathing hard and his heart beat in his fingers, which gripped the steering wheel. He headed home.

CHAPTER V
MORE THAN PONIES

A raccoon ran into the street. Its eyes flashed green in the headlights. Justin hit the brakes but couldn't stop. Maddi, his younger sister, said, "Don't hit the kitty." The raccoon stopped at the yellow lines and turned back towards the woods. The Camaro passed over the raccoon, but there was no bump. Maddi crammed her hands in her eyes, "Did you hit it?"

Justin wiped his hand on his jeans. He turned down the heat. They drove past the unfinished construction site where Justin and his friend, Eric, had off-roaded Eric's Ford Escort until the car got stuck on top of a dirt pile. Justin said, "No. It wasn't a cat. It was a raccoon."

Maddi uncovered her eyes and picked up her stuffed hotdog-dog, Toby. "Toby says you're right. It wasn't a kitty. He would have smelled it," Maddi said. Justin unscrewed the head of the chrome shifter. Three pairs of headlights were in the review mirror.

Justin said, "Thanks Toby." He rubbed Toby's fuzzy head. The car coasted to the Eisenhower intersection. Maddi wrapped Toby's tail around her finger. She opened the glove box. A blue flashlight fell to the floor.

Maddi said, "Would it have died if you hit it?" There was a 'No Turn on Red' sign next to Maddi's window. A red blob reflected on the hood of the car. Justin flicked the right blinker. The 'No' on the sign had a white, spray-painted X over it.

Justin said, "I don't know. Probably not."

Maddi grabbed a Michigan road map from the glove box. Justin's boss, Tim, had given Justin the map as a welcoming gift after his first day at the shop. There had been a bottle of Miller Lite wrapped in the map. Justin had drunk half of it on the way home and poured the rest out of his car window. When he had gotten home, there were streaks of beer down the side of his car.

The red blob slid off the hood as Justin turned the car right onto Eisenhower. He shifted into second, then third. Maddi draped the map over her knees. She sat Toby on the Upper Peninsula. "Why were you and mommy fighting?" Her finger traced Lake Michigan. Their mom had only worked a half-day at Kohl's as part of employee appreciation week. She had been home when Justin got off work and had already picked Maddi up from their Aunt Jill's.

Justin swerved to the right. His back tire still hit a pothole. Justin said, "We weren't fighting." Maddi stared out the window. They passed the airport where the Goodyear Blimp stays when there's a University of Michigan game. Justin fidgeted with the driver's side lock.

Maddi said, "You were both yelling." She pulled the seatbelt a few inches off her chest and let it go. When he got home, their mom had smelled like Jack Daniels BBQ sauce: the kind TGI Fridays served. Justin sent Maddi to her bedroom to change out of her Blue's Clues sweatshirt with mustard stains on the sleeves, and their mom had said, "Why the hell are you so late?" Justin had pulled on his ear and said, "It's only six." Their mom had said, "It's dark out you bastard. Don't lie to me." She had tried to slap him, but had hit the doorframe of her bedroom. She said, "Bastard." She kicked her remaining shoe at Justin and hit him in the chest with the heel.

Justin merged into the left lane. He changed the radio station even though the volume was at zero. “Sometimes adults just talk loud,” Justin said. Maddi drew a frowny face in the white breath-clouds on her window. The runways were lined with hundreds of red and green lights.

“They’re so pretty,” Maddi said, looking out the window. “What’s a bastard?” She gave her portrait eyebrows. Justin punched the steering wheel. The heel of his hand engaged the hazards.

“We weren’t fighting, Okay?” Justin said. “We weren’t.” Maddi covered her face with the map and pressed both hands over her ears. Toby fell to the floor. Justin’s mom had held her hand to her chest and screamed, “You’re just like your father.” Justin had dug his thumbnail into his finger, leaving a purple line. His mom had slammed the bedroom door.

The hazards click, click, clicked. The car hit another pothole. Justin slammed the brakes, and the car shuddered. The seatbelt pressed into the bruised spot on Justin’s chest. “I’m not,” Justin said. “Right Maddi? I’m not.” They stopped in the street in front of the Mercantile Bank. The map crinkled out then in over Maddi’s mouth. A car honked and sped around the Camaro.



Later, in the children’s section of JC Penny’s, Justin twisted his thumb in the belt loop of his jeans, scared. A couple minutes ago, he had turned to grab a sweater off the wall for Maddi. When he had pulled it down, Maddi had disappeared. Her new favorite game was hide and seek, which was easier on his back than the piggy back rides from her cowgirl stage two months ago.

His elbow brushed a row of pink sweatshirts. He walked across the linoleum pathway, towards the pants. His shoe squeaked. He flicked the hoodstring of his grey sweatshirt. He could feel his heartbeat pounding in his temple and thought he would have to ask a manager to page the store. He scratched the skin on his knuckle until it was raw-red, terrified Maddi wasn't in the store anymore.

"If you pick up another pair, you can't watch Kung-Fu Panda for a week," said a blonde mother to a little boy that held a pile of socks in his arms. She wore high heels and a white floral dress that showed her belly. The boy dropped the socks on the floor and said, "Uh-oh."

Justin stepped onto the carpet and looked behind the display of jeans. There was a red starburst wrapper. He had talked to Maddi last month about only playing hide and seek at home. She had smiled and chewed on the ends of her hair. Justin walked towards the sign hanging from the ceiling that said 'Customer Service' in large, white letters.

"Justin," his sister's voice called. Justin stopped next to a table full of khakis with purple flowers embroidered on the leg. Maddi held the hand of a girl from Justin's composition class, Emma.

Maddi held a blob of blue fabric and her stuffed dog in her arm. She said, "Look what I found," and held up the blue blob. The black and brown, stuffed dog fell to the floor. "Can I get it, Justin. Pleeeeeease?"

Justin watched Emma and Maddi and stuck his thumb in his jean pocket, trying to look relaxed. Emma flicked the zipper on her purse. She stopped five feet away, next to the display of miniature ties and let go of Maddi's hand.

Maddi bounced in front of Justin and shook the blue dress, “Emma helped me find it. It’s my favorite.”

“What have I told you about running off?” Justin said as Maddi hugged the dress. Justin put his hands on Maddi’s shoulders. She stopped bouncing.

Emma stepped next to Maddi and handed Toby to Justin. “Aren’t you in Hill’s class with me? Jay something right? I’m Emma.” She put her hand on Maddi’s brown hair.

Justin pulled his hands away, took the dog and scratched its ear. A grey, plastic bag dangled from Emma’s other hand.

Justin let his sweatshirt sleeve fall over his hand. “Um, yeah,” he said. “Justin. I know.”

Maddi found the straps of the blue blob and held them in front of herself. A blue dress with purple, sequined flowers on the side covered her face. Justin ran his fingers down the smooth fabric. It looked expensive, but Justin had saved half of his paycheck. His manager, Tim, had said, “What the hell are you gonna buy your sister clothes for. Get a spoiler for that sorry excuse for a Camaro.”

“Look what I found. Isn’t it pretty?” Maddi pushed the dress closer to Justin. “I wanna wear it tomorrow.” Tomorrow was Saturday. Their mom never worked on Saturdays. She never went out on Saturdays either. Last Saturday, their mom had cooked spaghetti and challenged Maddi to a game of Monopoly. She had given Maddi Boardwalk and Parkplace for Illinois Ave because she said, “I like yellow better.” She hadn’t cleaned the dishes.

“She’s the cutest thing,” Emma said and tousled Maddi’s hair. “I had just checked out and she came right up to me and asked if I knew where to find a dress.”

Justin crouched and pushed aside the dress until he could see Maddi. She chewed on a lock of her hair. Two months ago, Maddi had run down the frozen food aisle at Busch’s while Justin had tried to un-stick two carts. When Justin had found her, a middle-aged lady had been saying, “It’s too close to dinner time for ice cream. You should ask your mommy if you can have some for desert.”

Maddi gripped the dress to her chest and stared at Justin. She reached for Toby. Justin turned and put the stuffed dog out of reach. “Maddi, what have I told you about strangers?” The intercom crackled and a woman said, “Additional cashiers to Men’s. Additional cashiers to men’s. Thank you.”

Maddi looked at Emma. Her right hand smoothed the blue material against her body. “She’s not a stranger, she’s Emma.”

Emma pinched her own waist, and Justin thought he saw her looking at him. She snorted and covered her mouth with her hand. The plastic bag crinkled. Justin didn’t smile. He rested his elbows on his knees and held Toby with both hands. He said, “Did you know her name before you ran into her?”

Maddi turned away, so Justin put his hand on top of Maddi’s head and guided her gaze towards his own. He took the dress from her, her eyes looking off to the side. Justin said, “Maddi.” She blinked. “Madison Montgomery,” he said. She chewed the collar of her green sweatshirt and said, “No.”

Emma stood next to Maddi. She massaged Maddi's shoulder. Emma had long legs. Really long legs. "Oh, it's okay," Emma said. She patted Maddi's head. "I don't mind. It was fun."

Justin cracked his pinkie and stood up. He might have said, "Well, I mind." But Emma ran her fingers through Maddi's hair and smiled. Justin said, "Um. Yeah. Okay." A boy Maddi's age weaved towards their group. He held a nerf-gun box above his head. "Ashton, get your ass back here this instant," said a thick woman with highlighted hair as the kid cut through two racks of jeans.

Maddi pointed at the woman and said, "Ohhhh. She used one of Mommy's words. Justin says you're not supposed to use Mommy's words."

Emma laughed and said, "Your mom must be so cool. Mine kinda sucks most of the time."

A few months ago, Justin's mom had come home late. She had kicked off her shoes and knocked over the vase of flowers that Maddi had picked from the neighbor's garden. Their mom had cursed at the vase for fifteen minutes after she cut her finger on one of the pieces. Justin had put Maddi to bed four hours before their mom came home. The next day, Mrs. Williams sent home a note about language, and Maddi said, "Mrs. Williams was mad at me today." Justin had talked to Maddi about mommy's words. She had grabbed his shirt and nodded, then Justin had signed his mom's name on the note and put it back in Maddi's backpack.

"Not really. No." Justin said. He went to the display of children's jeans and picked one up. There were two buttons on each pocket. Emma held her hands in front of her. Her thumbs caressed each other. Her white purse spun. Justin said, "Well. I mean.

You know parents, right?” Maddi grabbed Toby’s tail, so Justin squished Toby tighter to his side.

Maddi held the dress to her chest and bowed to a rack of khakis. Emma said, “Yeah. Tell me about it. My mom’s a-” She looked at Maddi. “A pain.”

Justin rubbed the top of Toby’s head. Maddi clutched the dress to her chest and spun. The dress blossomed outwards. There used to be a picture of Justin’s dad twirling Justin’s mom on their wedding day. It had hung in the hallway until his dad had left, four years ago. Maddi stopped twirling, stumbled a step, and shook her head “Whoa,” She said.

Justin said, “I know the feeling. Here. These are your size.” He tossed a pair of children’s jeans at Emma. She caught them, but her purse slipped off her shoulder and swung from her elbow. The jeans might have reached Emma’s knee if she could have gotten them on.

Emma rotated the jeans. “Really? You think so? They might be a little tight.” She bit her bottom lip.

Justin tapped the tip of each finger with his thumb. “They wouldn’t be--” The jeans flew into his face. A button hit the bridge of his nose. The jeans fell to the floor and Justin leaned against the table. He jammed Toby to his face and rubbed the stuffed dog across his nose.

Something brushed Justin’s elbow. Emma said, “Oh my god, I’m so sorry. I thought you’d catch it.” Justin’s hand slipped along the edge of the table. Cold fingers grabbed his wrist and pulled Toby away from his face. “Are you okay?” Emma asked.

Justin rubbed his right temple with a fist. “Yeah. Yeah. I’m fine.” The corner of his eye burned. He blinked. Emma still held his wrist.

“I’m really sorry. I thought you were watching.” She spun the grey bag around and around. The handle tightened and dug into her wrist. Maddi held the blue dress and took a step to the right and then a step to the left. She said, “One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three.”

“You got one heck of an arm,” Justin said. Emma’s hand was warm. “Don’t worry about it. At work on Monday, the airbag in an Impala went off and broke Tim’s nose.”

“Oh.” Emma said. “Yeah, well I was just you know. Making sure that it wasn’t hurt or anything.” She let go of Justin’s hand. The grey bag untwisted from her wrist. Her purse slid down her arm and crinkled against the grey bag.

“Mommy and Justin got in a fight earlier. She threw a shoe at him,” Maddi said. She stood on one foot and flapped her arms.

Emma scratched her calf with the toe of her shoe, uncomfortable. She looked from Justin to Maddi.

“Come here, Maddi,” Justin said. “Show me your dress again.” He ground his left heel into the carpet. He let go of his wrist. Emma’s phone vibrated.

Maddi bounced over and spun in a complete circle. He held the dress to her body. The skirt of the dress hit Justin’s jeans. Emma pulled her phone out of her purse and flipped it open. She pressed a button and closed it.

Maddi held out the dress. Justin rubbed the silky-blue material. It rasped against his fingers. He said, “It’s beautiful. Do you like it?” A man in a white button-up held two

identical looking sweatshirts. His head swiveled back and forth between the two. He tucked them both under his arms and marched away.

Maddi nodded her head. Her brown hair flew. "It's my favorite," she said. "More than ponies and watermelon. And almost as much as candy." She counted off each favorite on her fingers.

Emma picked at her thumb with her finger. "She was so excited when we found the dresses. She kept making her stuffed dog bark at the dress she wanted. So I helped her find one that fit." The last time Justin bought a dress for Maddi, last spring, the dress wouldn't stay on Maddi's shoulders. Justin had to use ten safety-pins to keep it on her.

Justin ran his finger over the inside of the dress's collar. There wasn't a tag. Emma had smooth legs. "Um," he said. "Thanks for helping her." Emma's purse fell to the floor. She bent to pick it up. Justin scratched the soft spot underneath his chin.

Emma put her purse back on her shoulder. "It was actually kinda fun," she said. "I never had a sister." Static burst over the intercom and the same lady said, "Additional cashiers to Men's. Additional cashiers to Men's. Second call. Thank you."

Justin said, "Okay. Let's get it." He took the dress and draped it over his arm. He handed Toby to Maddi.

Maddi wrapped her arms around his leg and said, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." She pinched Justin's leg. Maddi let go of Justin's leg. She scratched Toby's brown and black ears and stuck Toby's nose up the leg of a pair of black jeans. She said, "Any alligators in this one?" Justin kicked the jeans underneath the khaki display.

Justin said, "Well, um. Maddi and I haven't had dinner yet, so we better go check out. Sorry she bothered you." He grabbed the ends of his sleeves from the inside so they

made a cocoon over his arms, and then realize that he probably looked weird, so he popped his hands out of his sleeves.

Emma flicked the pendant on her necklace. It hit her shoulder and bounced back to her chest. "I'd better go with you to make sure you don't get lost or lose Maddi again," she said, checking the time on her cell phone like she didn't want to go home.

Justin and Emma walked down the linoleum pathway towards the 'Customer Service' sign hanging from the ceiling. Maddi walked between them. She held both of their hands and slammed them together in front of her face. She said, "Clap. Clap." Emma's purse was on the arm that Maddi clapped and it kept falling off her shoulder.

Justin said, "What's in the bag?" The thumb of his free hand was shoved in his pocket. They passed an elderly couple that was holding hands. The old man held his wife's cream colored purse and stared at Maddi.

The old man said to his wife, "They're too young." He leaned closer to his wife and said, "What?" He looked at them. "No they can't."

Emma said, "Just some clothes. Nothing special." She pulled on her bra strap, and Justin thought she might be blushing. Maddi stopped walking. Toby had fallen out from underneath her arm. She let go of their hands, but when she bent over the blue dress started to slide off her shoulder.

Justin snatched Toby off the ground. He dusted off Toby's side and his feet. Maddi stretched her arm up towards Toby. She said, "She got a bubble holder. I saw it."

They walked past the shoe section. A woman wearing grey sweatpants tried on a pair of white heels that may have been four inches. Justin plopped Toby on Maddi's

head. His feet stopped just above her ear. Emma spun the silver watch around her wrist. Justin said, “What’s a bubble holder?”

“I don’t know,” she said. The bag bounced against her arm as she walked.

Maddi said, “It’s a thing that holds giant bubbles. Mommy has one too. I’ve seen it.” Maddi hopped from linoleum square to linoleum square, never touching the lines.

Emma sneezed. Justin kicked the back of his own heel and stumbled. His mom had blown bubbles for him in the living room, when he was Maddi’s age. He had jumped off the couch and tried to pop the ones near the ceiling. She had never held the bubbles in anything. “What is she talking about?” Justin asked.

Maddi held Toby’s fuzzy ears in both directions and said, “Super puppy attack.” The blue dress flew behind her. She rammed Toby’s nose into Justin’s hip. Maddi sent Toby’s nose careening into Emma’s stomach. Emma put her hand on Maddi’s shoulders and looked at Justin.

Emma said, “It’s a thing that holds giant bubbles.” She smiled. Her purse vibrated. She lowered the bag and unzipped her purse, but Emma didn’t pull her cell phone out of her purse. “It’s a bra. You know, for bubbles,” she made a cupping motion over her chest.

Justin said, “I’m sorry. I had no idea.” He wanted to say something smooth, or clever. He thought about saying, “That’s cool. I’ll have to see that sometime,” but instead he felt his face get hot and sweat form just below his eyes. He couldn’t tell if she was flirting or making fun of him, so Justin grabbed Maddi’s hand and said, “Come on. We have to go.”

Emma opened her mouth, but Justin spun and pulled Maddi towards checkout. Maddi pointed towards the suit coat on the floor and said, “But he’s my dress’s best friend.”

Justin dug his fingernails of his free hand into the heel of his hand. His whole arm was tight and shook. They passed a table with argyle socks. A yellow sign stuck out of the pile and said ‘Buy two pair, get on pair free.’ Justin would have to skip Hill’s class for the rest of the year.

Maddi squeezed Justin’s ring and middle fingers. Justin stepped on the cracks between the linoleum tiles. Maddi said, “Can I get a bubble holder?” Justin squeezed her hand with his two fingers. Maddi carried Toby by his ear.

“It’s not a bubble holder,” Justin said. He bit the pinkie on his other hand. Shoes click, click, clicked behind them.

Maddi said, “It’s not?” Justin draped the blue dress over his shoulder. Emma clicked next to Maddi.

She said, “I’m sorry about that,” and flicked her silver chain earrings. Justin picked up a penny off the floor.

Maddi wrapped her arm around Emma’s leg and pressed her cheek against Emma’s skirt. Emma rubbed Maddi’s earlobe. Toby hung by his ear and spun. His tail brushed against Emma’s leg. Maddi said, “What is it, then?”

Emma shivered when the stuffed animal rubbed against her. “What’s what?” she said. Justin scratched the spot where his jaw met his neck.

“It’s a,” he said. “It’s an undershirt for big kids. Don’t be. It’s cool. Not a big deal.” He pulled his hood string until the end reached his waist.

Emma said, "I know, but I shouldn't have said anything." She smiled and chucked the grey bag at Justin. Maddi bobbed her head, eyes wide, and said, "Oh." Her thumb traced small circles on the side of Emma's leg. She chewed on a strand of her own hair.

Justin bobbed the bag and caught it. A couple walked towards the appliance section. Each had a small boy sitting on their shoulders. Both kids had two fistfuls of hair. When they pulled the hair, their parents turned in that direction. The boy on the dad's shoulders yelled, "Now!" He tugged to the right. His brother tugged to the left. Their parents ran into each other.

Emma said, "Relax. Seriously, it's not a big deal." Toby slipped out of Maddi's fingers and landed nose-first on the carpet.

Justin handed the grey bag to Emma. Their fingers touched when she took it. He said, "Okay. Well, thanks for helping Maddi find her dress. It would have taken me hours." Maddi crouched and picked up Toby.

Emma said, "I had a lot of fun." She ran her hands down her skirt and bit the bottom of her lip. Maddi brushed off Toby's back. Justin shoved his hand in his pocket and yanked it back out.

Maddi whispered in Toby's ear, "What's an undershirt?" Justin crushed the edge of the blue dress. He forced his left hand to hand at his side. His sophomore English teacher, Mrs. Kreple, had told his class last year about body language. She had said, "Crossed arms and crossed legs make you seem hostile."

"Okay," Justin said. "Well there's the checkout. We better go. We still have to eat." A lady pushing a stroller pulled a binky out of her purse and tried to give it to the baby without stopping the stroller.

Emma said, “Yeah. Me, too. If I don’t hurry, my parents will probably change the locks.” She put her hand on Maddi’s head and said, “Bye, Maddi.”

Maddi wrapped both arms around Emma and locked her fingers behind Emma’s legs. “I want to stay with Emma,” she said. Toby hit Emma’s knee.

Justin held out the blue dress, “So do I, but don’t you want to try on your new dress?” He smiled and shook the dress. Spots of blue light danced on the linoleum path. Maddi released Emma and grabbed the dress. She held it to her chest and spun on the walkway.

Maddi said, “Yeah” in mid-twirl. Emma smiled and turned.

She scratched the strap of her white, leather purse and said, “I guess I’ll see you on Monday.”

Justin stuck both thumbs in belt loops and said, “Yeah. Monday. Thanks again for the dress.” Emma took a step. She paused then continued walking. Justin said, “Bye,” loud enough for only him to hear. Maddi pirouetted at the edge of the linoleum and grazed a display of winter boots with her foot. She had been begging to take ballet lessons ever since Amy Krebbs brought in ballet slippers for show and tell last month.

Justin held his hand towards Maddi. The intercom crackled, but no words came out. Emma stopped walking. She unzipped her purse and rummaged through it. Maddi spun around three more times and then sat on the linoleum. She grabbed her ears and said, “I’m dizzy. Can we get some ice cream?” Emma pulled out a blue pack of Orbitz gum and a pen. She popped the cap off a pen with her teeth.

Justin waved his fingers at Maddi, “Come on, Maddi. It’s time to go.” The cashier at the checkout folded a pair of boxers and put them under the counter. Emma scribbled

something on the Orbitz box. Maddi closed her eyes and rocked back and forth. Emma ripped the flap off the box and dropped the pen back in her purse. Justin still had his hand extended when Emma walked back over. She tapped her fingernail against her thumbnail and handed Justin the piece of folded cardboard.

Justin put his arm down and pinched the cardboard. Emma said, "Here's my number. Just in case, you know. You need help shopping for Maddi or something." She zipped and unzipped her purse.

Justin ground his toes into the floor and said, "Yeah. Yeah. I'll do that." The cardboard in his hand said 'Wintermint, with whitening power.' Emma waved and walked towards Women's. Justin said, "Bye."

The last number Justin had gotten had been last month. A woman in her late fifties and an old Ford Escort came to the shop three times in one week to get the car's oil changed. She requested Justin every time. The third time, she had said, "I only live five minutes away." She had handed him her receipt for the previous oil change. Her number had been written on back. She had said, "Think about it." Justin had given her the bill and said, "Have a nice day." She had left. Armond, in the oil pit, laughed his ass off and yelled, "Score!" Justin had crumpled the old receipt and threw it away.

Emma walked through the Children's department and disappeared around the block of changing-rooms in between Children's and Women's. Justin put the number in his pocket. He scooped up Maddi and ran to the checkout. He plopped Maddi down on the counter and said, "I want the Troll and the dress."

Maddi said, "I'm not for sale. I'm not for sale." But she lay flat when the cashier with grey hair scanned her forehead and then the blue dress spread across her lap. Toby was draped over Maddi's shoulder: rear end facing forwards.

CHAPTER VI
INVISIBLE INK

Justin sat down next to Chris in the cafeteria. The blue table squeaked. At the end of the table, Eric and Monica were flicking a paper football. Eric's football teetered and fell off the edge of the table. Chris had a copy of Auto-Trader in front of her. He circled a picture of a Corvette Stingray.

Justin said, "Gotta love the classics, right?" He dropped his backpack on the table. The tabletop bounced. Down the hallway that lead to the reception desk and principal's office came a chant of "Hell, no, we won't go."

Chris dog-eared the page and put the pen in the crease between the pages. He said, "Yeah. Like that piece of shit you call a Camaro?"

Justin punched him in the shoulder, "You drive an Escort." He unzipped his backpack and pulled out his composition book and said, "What's going on over there?" Eric flicked the paper football hard and it spun into Monica's chest. She threw the football at Eric's head.

Chris said, "The Seniors are striking." Two girls Justin didn't know walked past. The taller one had a teddy bear tucked underneath her arm.

Justin twirled his pen between his fingers. He drew blue circles on the inside of his sweatshirt sleeve. "What do you mean they're striking?" Someone had etched 'Tonka' into the table top.

Eric spun the paper football on the table. He said, "You know. Carrying signs. Chanting. It's not just seniors either." Monica leaned across the table and blew. The football glided off the edge of the table.

Monica said, “You didn’t hear about it? The new Superintendent they brought in to be a hardass. L-Something. She came up with a bunch of new rules for the winter formal.” Eric flicked the football at her knuckles.

Justin closed his composition book on his fingers. Shanon, on the cheerleading squad, and a guy Justin didn’t know carried a banner and spread it out on an empty table. The guy dumped Sharpies from his backpack on top of the banner.

Justin said, “Yeah I heard about the rules. Random breathalyzer tests, no low cut dresses, no visiting guests from other stores, and no rap songs.” He drew a square on the table with his pen and stuck the tip of the pen in his mouth. The ink tasted metallic and oily.

Chris said, “Yeah. And no ‘Suggestive dancing’ or you can be suspended.” He rolled up his magazine and shoved it in his backpack. “Where were you this weekend? The bonfire at Eric’s was sweet.”

Eric blew a bubble with his gum. He said, “Yeah, man. You just disappear after school gets out. It’s been years.” Justin rubbed the square he had drawn. The ink smeared and disappeared.

Justin said, “It hasn’t been years. I’m just busy with work and stuff.” Last weekend, he had worked eight hours on Saturday and Sunday and had taken his little sister, Maddi, to Brenton Park while their mom slept off her hangover. Maddi had scraped her elbow climbing on the giant, cement mushroom.

Monica pulled her hair back into a pony tail and tied it with a hair-tie from around her wrist. She said, “‘And stuff.’ How mysterious.” The school security guard walked towards the offices. He rubbed his hands on his shirt. Justin had been stopped by him a

few months ago, when Justin had the flu and was leaving school three hours early. The guard hadn't let him leave until he threw up on the carpet near the gym. Then, the guard had stayed three steps away and said, "Aw man, you weren't faking huh? Well, uh, have a nice day."

Eric pulled a Starbucks Frapachino from his backpack and smashed his gum onto the lid. He said, "Yeah man, you're always vague. I heard that a bank got robbed on State Street last Saturday. What are you? Six-one, 180? Kinda suspicious." He popped the lid off and chugged half of the coffee drink.

Justin ripped the corner off an old composition worksheet about comma usage and stretched across the table. Eric pulled the Frapachino out of reach and shook his head. Justin whipped the paper down on the metal cap with the blob of green gum. The paper flattened the blob and stuck to it.

Chris said, "You know how they always know the exact height of bank robbers? There is a measuring tape painted next to the door. Then, whenever a guy leaves. Bam!" Twelve kids with picket signs marched up the stairs to the walkway overlooking the cafeteria. Their signs had 'Tyranny' in black letters with a red 'X' through it. The girl on the end, Shawna had been kicked off the softball team because of the no-tolerance policy when she was arrested for drinking at a party. Her dad was suing the school because she had been of campus on a weekend when she was busted.

Justin said, "Well, that's interesting." He dug in his notebook for the bibliography worksheet that was due for Composition. Monica took out her cell phone and snapped some pictures. Her mom was a writer for *The Saline Reporter*. Last month, one of Monica's photos of a car crash had made it into the paper.

The sign carriers shouted, “Hell no, we won’t go.” They walked in a circle, and three kids from the cafeteria joined them. One of the three was a guy Justin had sat next to in his freshman Spanish class. The five minute warning bell rang.

Last Friday, he had gotten a girl in his composition’s class, Emma’s, number, and every other week Mr. Hill let the class choose new seats. He wanted to get to class early enough to get a seat next to her. Justin said, “What’s the difference between MLA and Chicago Style?”

Eric said, “More letters. How come that kid spelled tyranny with two r’s?” Monica got up and walked towards the stairs. She held her phone forwards.

Chris rolled up the Auto-Trader magazine and shoved it in his backpack. One of the teachers came into the cafeteria and stood behind the tables. Chris said, “Catchy protest.”

Justin closed his composition book and crammed it under his arm. He said, “Isn’t that an old Vietnam chant?” He stood and swung his backpack over his shoulder. “I can’t concentrate here. I’ll see you guys at lunch.”

Eric raised his frappachino bottle in Justin’s direction. He said, “Yeah. I better go make sure she doesn’t get in any trouble.”

Chris said, “Yeah. See yah.” Justin walked through the main hallway and down the stairs.

In Mr. Hill’s classroom, the tables were arranged in a horseshoe. Mr. Hill ate pancakes at his desk. The countdown on the chalkboard said there were fifty-three days until Mrs. Hill was due.

Emma sat at the table on the far end of the horseshoe. Justin set his backpack on the table next to Emma. Justin had run into Emma last Friday when he had taken his little sister shopping, and she had given him her number. He had called three times on Saturday, but she hadn't picked up. There had been one missed call from her when he woke up Sunday morning, but her phone had gone straight to voicemail when he called her back.

Emma smiled and brushed her hand across the cover of her notebook. She said, "Hey Justin. How's the puppy?" Justin squeezed the back of the chair. There was a chip on the top right corner.

Justin said, "Um. Well, what puppy?"

Mr. Hill cut up the last two pancakes. Emma pulled on a lock of her hair and said, "Sorry. I think I was talking about Toby, but I meant Maddi." Toby was the stuffed dog that Maddi took everywhere. Justin sat down. His hand left damp imprints on the black tabletop. He wiped the imprints with the sleeve of his sweatshirt, smearing the damp imprint. The smear shrank and evaporated quickly.

There were six other kids in the room. Rob Something had a copy of Sports Illustrated in front of him. Justin had sat next to him a month ago. Rob had only spoken to the girl that had sat on his other side.

Justin rubbed his neck. He said, "Well the puppy is fine. He got dropped in the snow on accident yesterday. I had to throw him in the dryer." Emma drew circles on the back of her hand. Justin unzipped a pocket on the front of his backpack. He re-zipped it without taking anything out.

The bell rang over the intercom, and a woman said, “Classes have now begun. We ask all students to go to their classrooms or they will be marked absent.” Mr. Hill threw his plate in the trashcan next to his desk. The plate still had two squares of pancake left on it.

Mr. Hill said, “No social protesters here, huh?” The over-head projection turned half of his face blue. Justin set his backpack on the floor between him and Emma. His elbow brushed her forearm.

Carly, on the opposite side of the room, said, “It’s not a social protest. It’s a bunch of kids that want to get drunk at the school dance.” She jammed her pointer-finger into the table trying to look serious, but Justin thought she looked like Maddi when she was pouting. Justin slid his composition book to the far edge of the table.

Emma spun her pen on the table. She said, “Maybe, but that woman had treated us like criminals since she got here.” Justin picked at the seam of his jeans. Last September, Mrs. Rankle had met with each grade in the auditorium. Justin had sat in back. Mrs. Rankle had said, “This class has been causing trouble since middle school. It’s time for you all to grow up and learn some respect.” A kid a few rows in front of Justin had raised his hand. He waved it back and forth. After he had been ignored for five minutes, he stood up and said, “Excuse me. We are a class of 480. How many of us, exactly, have been causing so much trouble? 20? 40? Less than ten percent?” He was seventh in their class. He had gotten in-school detention for a week.

Mr. Hill held up both hands. He said, “Whoa there. That’s my boss, and we’re not going to talk about her in this classroom.” He walked to the side of the room and pulled

the door shut. Justin pulled the fine hairs on the back of his neck. Emma drew curly-cues on a piece of paper.

Snow blew sideways past the window behind Justin. He said, “Has anything like this happened before?” The only thing similar that he could think of was when he was in fourth grade and the fifth grades went on strike for an hour because they didn’t want to do homework, but that had been more of a joke than anything else.

Mr. Hill said, “Not since I’ve been here. Mr. Frederick said there was a sit-in thirty-some years ago, but that was a war protest and the teachers joined in. It made the news and everything.” He sat on the edge of the table at the front of the room.

In the corner of the room, Carter leaned back in his chair and rested his head against the wall. Last week, he had gotten in-school suspension for sleeping in his algebra class. Then he got another day of in-school suspension for sleeping during his in-school suspension.

Somebody knocked on the door. The office secretary with blonde hair opened the door and poked her head inside. She said, “Mr. Hill, can I speak with you outside please?” Mr. Hill slid off the edge of the table and walked to the door.

Justin rolled his pencil off the end of his desk. Mr. Hill shut the door behind him. Emma held a paper balloon with curly-cues drawn on the outside. She said, “I made this for you.” She handed it to Justin. He dropped it on the table and picked it back up.

He held the ends of the balloon with two fingers and spun it. He said, “Thanks. Thank you. I love balloons. Ever since I was a little kid, whenever I walked past a balloon I would throw a fit until I got one. My parents started avoiding stores where they knew there were balloons.” Emma smiled and undid the clasp of her watch.

Marge in the far left corner said, “Why don’t we just bail. We can go home or whatever. Everyone will think we are protesting.” She twisted in her chair until her back cracked.

Mike said, “Yeah. Great idea. And how long do you think the strike will last? Past lunchtime?” He opened a piece of gum and threw the crumpled wrapper at the trashcan next to the door. It bounced off the wall and went in.

Emma set her watch on the table face down. Justin bounced the balloon in the palm of his hand. Emma said, “I just don’t care. What’s your excuse?” The corner of a “Got Milk?” poster flopped over.

Justin said, “Um, what?” He stretched his leg towards the pencil on the floor. He scrunched down in his seat. His thigh rubbed Emma’s leg. When their legs touched, Justin felt like his thigh was on fire, but he was too afraid to look at Emma to see if she had noticed. Instead he kept staring at the floor as the pencil rolled towards him underneath his foot.

Marge said, “Hey you two. Emma and Justin. What do you think? Wanna go protest?” She grabbed the edge of her table. Justin rolled the pencil back and forth on the ground. He picked up Emma’s pen off the desk.

Emma said, “Nah Mags. I think I’m good.” She said, quieter, only to Justin “Protesting. Why aren’t you protesting?” She rubbed behind her ears.

Last Wednesday, Mr. Cobb had told Justin, We can get you a scholarship at any college you want. Justin took the cap off the pen and put the cap in his sweatshirt pocket. He said, “Give me your hand for a sec.” Emma put her hands on the table and caressed them with her thumbs. Justin said, “I’m on my feet all day at work after school.”

Justin wiped his hands on his jeans. He slid Emma's hand towards him. He drew a smiley face on the back of her hand. His hand shook. The mouth was wavy. Emma pulled the tips of her hair with her other hand. The classroom door opened.

Emma jumped and pulled her hand away. Justin drew a line on her thumb when she pulled back. Marge shoved her backpack behind her desk and sat down in her chair. Mr. Hill walked through the blue projector screen. He said, "Mrs. Rankle, in all of her wisdom, has decided to suspend anyone not in their classroom in five minutes. Looks like you guys are the lucky ones."

Justin set the pen on the desk. Emma wiggled her drawn-on hand. She whispered, "Thank you," and picked up the pen.

Marge said, "What? She can't do that can she?"

Mr. Hill looked at the clock. Emma pulled up the neckline of her tank-top. Mr. Hill said, "I didn't say this, but you might want to text you friends and warn them. Any suspended person on school grounds is technically trespassing."

Justin bent his left thumb as far back as it would go. Monica had run after the protestors to get pictures. Eric might have followed. The same woman's voice came over the intercom. "Class has begun. All students are to return to your classrooms now." Justin traced the outline of his cell phone in his jean pocket. Eric didn't have a cell.

Emma said, "A lot of my friends are out there. This sucks. I broke my phone this weekend." Justin stood up. The chair caught on the carpet and the seat pressed against the back of his knees. He tried to pat Emma on the shoulder, but his hand stopped two inches above her head. Mr. Hill swiped his hand across his forehead. Emma had shed a brown hair on the back of her white sweater.

Justin plucked the hair off her sweater. Last week at lunch, Eric had told Justin that he had been offered a full-ride, academic scholarship to Western Michigan. Emma scratched behind her ear with the screen of her cell phone. She looked back at Justin, “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Justin ran his finger across his teeth. He said, “After this, do you wanna go get a coffee or go sledding or something?” Mr. Hill took a drink from his water bottle. Emma set her cell phone in her lap. Someone on the other side of the classroom dropped their backpack on a table.

Emma spun her watch on the table. She said, “Um, yeah. Yeah. But no sex.” She whispered. She wrapped both arms around her stomach. Justin looked up in time to see somebody in an orange shirt walk past the classroom door.

Justin sat down in his chair. He scooted the chair backwards and sat on the edge. He said, “Really? You’ll have coffee with me?” Emma laughed. She held her silver rose pendant in her fist and pulled the chain tight against her neck.

She said, “Yeah. It will be good after last weekend.”

Tyler, the kid sitting along the back wall, pounded on the table and said, “This sucks.” Justin smoothed the sleeves of his sweatshirt. Emma pulled her sweater down over her pantline.

Mr. Hill said, “What’s the goal of the strike?” Drops of water clung to the bottom of his goatee. Maggi’s phone vibrated on the table in front of her. She snatched it up and flipped it open.

Justin scratched his kneecap. He said, "Okay good. Get ready then." He grabbed the handle on top of his backpack. The main pouch of his backpack clicked against the chair as he walked towards the door.

Mr. Hill put down his water bottle. He said, "Don't be stupid Justin. Anyone not in the classroom is going to be suspended." Justin swung his backpack over his shoulder. A paper flew out of the open pouch. He stopped at the door. The classroom was reflected in the window. Everyone was watching him. He opened the door and reached around the corner. He grabbed the red fire-alarm latch next to the classroom door.

Maddi had asked him this morning, "Can we have pizza for dinner tonight? Pleeaase?" Justin pulled the lever. Something crunched beneath his hand. A white strobe light flashed above Justin's head. The fire alarm went off in the classroom and echoed in from down the hall. His third grade teacher, Mrs. Finch, had warned his class that the fire alarms sprayed ink if you pulled them. The fire alarm hadn't sprayed anything.

Letters to My Father



CHAPTER VII

TRAINING

I remember once, when I was five or six, helping my dad play a practical joke on one of his friends at work. My dad was a computer programmer and liked to work at smaller companies. We went into his work on a Saturday with my dad's friend Sam and another guy I didn't know. Sam seemed like a giant to me. He was at least eight inches taller than my dad's 5'8. When we walked into his work, there were rows of cubicles in the room, with beige, textured dividers.

One of my dad's friends at work was going to have a baby soon; my brother had just turned four, and he had outgrown all of the baby stuff. So my dad gave decided to give his friend all of our baby stuff.

Everyone in my family tells me what a practical joker my dad was: how he would grab a large rock and jump into my grandparents' pool, pretending to be iron man; how he mixed Jell-O into the soup when he was in middle school; and how he would answer the home phone, "This is the Moron residence, which idiot would you like to speak to?" But I think this was the first time I had seen him in action.

We snuck into his friend's cubicle with all of the baby stuff. I carried the blue, plastic training potty. My dad and his friends all had bags full of stuff in their arms.

"Can I have a CD, dad," I asked when we walked by my dad's desk. My dad started bringing old CD's home for us when they first came out, and my brother and I would toss around CD's in the backyard like Frisbees. We threw them shiny-side up and pretended they were lightning bolts.

He shifted the bags in his arms. “We’ll grab some on our way out. Maybe I’ll let you take the rubber-band ball home too.” The building was quiet. Only half the lights were on. I kept looking around, expecting to get caught by someone.

At his friend’s cubicle, we set all of the stuff down. Sam grabbed a couple diapers out of one of the bags he was carrying. “Did we bring pudding?” The other guy tossed him a single-serve cup of chocolate pudding.

“What can I do?” I still held the training potty.

My dad pulled “It’s a Boy” stickers out of his bag. He tossed a bag of Peanut MM’s into the plastic potty. “Can you pick out all the brown ones?”

“Can I eat the rest?”

“Sure, just not the brown ones.”

I set training toilet down and took out the bag of MM’s. Sitting on the floor, I ripped open the bag, picked out the brown MM’s, and set them on the ground. I popped the other colors into my mouth. The guy I didn’t know loaded little jars of baby food into the desk drawers. Sam draped what I now know to be a breast pump over the computer screen—I thought it was some kind of weird toy at the time. My dad posted the “It’s a Boy” stickers inside drawers, on the desk, over pictures, and on the walls.

I could only find five brown MM’s. “I got all the brown ones.” I held them out in my hand. “What do I do with them?”

“Drop them in the toilet,” My dad said and dug in another bag. He pulled out a naked baby doll and handed the doll to me. “Now see if you can get him to sit on the toilet.”

“Where’s his clothes?”

We stayed and decorated the whole cubicle with all of the stuff. By the time we left, there were stacks of clothes covering the desk, a MM poop filled potty on the swiveling computer chair, “It’s a boy” stickers on all surfaces, streamers hanging from the ceiling, pudding filled diapers on the floor, a row of baby toys lined up on top of the cubicle walls, and more which I can’t remember.

I remember him telling me the next Monday how all the guys in the office had laughed at the decorating job, and how no one would eat the brown MM’s. “Did he know it was you?” I asked.

My dad smiled at me. “Sam couldn’t stop laughing, so he got the blame.” Whenever anyone tells me about my dad’s practical jokes, they always say how he could keep a straight face no matter what. In school, he never got in trouble for his jokes because none of the teachers ever thought it was him.

CHAPTER VIII

NOTHING WILL EVER CHANGE

I was seven when I was first introduced to cancer. In the waiting room, I sat next to my six-year-old brother, Kurt, and played Go-Fish and War with him. The chairs were hard purple plastic with metal legs. My mom sat on my other side and stared at the door which led to the operating rooms. She was a nurse and had seen her share of surgeries. I can't remember how she acted in that waiting room, but I imagine she had a magazine open on her lap, never flipping the page.

"Do you have any eights?" I asked my brother. He picked up the cards from off his lap and flipped through them one by one.

"Go fish." He put the cards back in his lap and stuck his thumb in his mouth. My parents had bought this bitter flavoring to put on his thumb, but it didn't bother him. He wouldn't break the habit. Not even bribery with Toys-R-Us could get him to stop.

I drew a card off the pile, a ten. The wall behind my chair was off-white and rough, like the inside of a cave. I remember the clean smell, as though the carpets had just been cleaned. Only, the floor was tile. "How much longer?" I poked my mom.

"Don't worry. Your dad's going to be alright," she tilted her face towards me, smiling, but didn't take her eyes off the door for more than a second. She had hundreds of surgeries; she knew what to expect. She also knew what could go wrong.

I don't know how long we waited in that room, but it must have been over an hour. An eternity in kid time. After a while, the doctor walked through the door. He wasn't anything like the doctors on TV: no blood on his scrubs, no beads of sweat on his forehead, he wasn't even that tall, shorter than my mom.

“He’s in recovery. Everything went fine.” He was young, with brown hair. My mom stood up, the magazine dropping to the floor. Making a fist, the doctor held his hand between my mom and himself. “We removed a mass the size of a baseball, along with several smaller ones.” I didn’t know what that meant.

That was all I heard. My mom and the doctor stepped out into the hallway. I’m sure it was so my mom could ask nurse questions without scaring us. I don’t remember being scared. I was bored. And I got to skip school. I wasn’t scared until later.



When my dad woke up, we were able to visit him. He sat propped up in a hospital bed, smiling when we came in. I noticed that his skin was grey, like my grandpa’s had been after he died. I had stood at the edge of my grandpa’s coffin and reached in to touch his cheek. His skin had been firm and cold and loose somehow.

I walked around my dad’s hospital bed and touched his hand, the one without the IV. His skin was warm and he smiled. I can’t remember what he said, but his voice was raspy and he spoke softer than usual. His skin seemed loose somehow, and he didn’t move, but he told jokes and asked for a hamburger when the nurse brought him Jell-O and juice. I didn’t think the whole surgery thing was too bad. I didn’t recognize the vulnerability. Children see their parents as invincible, and they are pretty sure nothing will ever change.

Smiling by Candlelight

You dress up in your blue princess dress or green wizard robe, arming yourself with a magic wand. It is two hours before the tornado siren will wail for trick-or-treat time. You run around the house, living room to kitchen to family room, looking out the windows at the empty street and asking your mom what time it is. She yells back from the kitchen, "Eat your dinner" and "Hitting the clock with your wand doesn't make it go faster." You also discover that hitting your little brother and your homework doesn't turn them into jolly-ranchers.

My dad's favorite holiday was Halloween; every year we would help to decorate our house, inside and out. A light up witch. Fake tombstones. He had them all. In early October, we would drag them up from the basement and decorate the yard. On Halloween we hid a tape player playing scary music behind the dried cornstalks, which rustled and shed golden debris. My brother and I would try to convince our parents to let us jump out of the bushes and scare people into dropping their bags of candy.

My dad should have spent his last Halloween in the hospital bed, which had been transplanted into our living room. Instead, he spent the night handing out candy with my mom and stealing Snicker bars from my candy stash, until he was too tired and had to go to rest. His cancer had metastasized. His hair had thinned. His skin had turned jaundice yellow. He had lost close to fifty pounds off his already skinny frame. That Halloween my dad wore a glow-in-the-dark skeleton costume and joked with the neighbors that the chemo and radiation was finally getting to him.

My mom still has the Halloween decorations in her basement: four full-sized, light up creatures; boxes and boxes of fake skulls and cauldrons; rubber tombstones;

strings of pumpkin lights; and a ghost which hangs from the ceiling and shrieks at movement. My mom stopped decorating the lawn when my brother and I started moving out, but she has kept the decorations for over twelve years. I think she is holding them for my brother and me, so one day we can stake the witch next to our garden and boil dry ice in the cauldrons on our own porches. I want the plastic, light-up ghost; the one with rocks in the bottom so it won't blow away.

In Mexico, Halloween is The Day of the Dead. Families honor their dead relatives with candles burning in their houses and around the graves. Kneeling on the soft ground. They bake food. The whole family. In Michigan, kids dress up in costumes, and adults party or pass out candy. Here, Halloween is a celebration of life, of fun, of charity. In Mexico, it is a celebration for relatives and friends who have died. For me, now, it is both.

CHAPTER IX

TO ME, THEY WERE JUST WORDS

A couple of weeks later, after my dad had recovered enough to come home, my mom and dad sat down in the living room with my brother and me. I don't remember much detail from this meeting, just bits and pieces. But this is what I picture.

I sat down next to Kurt on the love seat. We had been building a fort at the end of the driveway, out of the huge piles left by the street plow and snow blower. We had hollowed out the snow mountain and covered the top with an old white sheet. My mom had called us in as we were stocking up on snowballs to fight off the neighbors.

My mom sat in one of the blue metal folding chairs we used for company. My dad rolled the computer chair over from his desk. The screensaver was grainy stars flying towards the screen.

"We should build tunnels under the snow." Kurt sat cross-legged, his arm hugging the throw pillow, twisting the corner of the floral fabric. He rubbed the tag with his thumb. When he was younger, he had walked around all day with a stuffed koala bear, and he had been obsessed with the bear's tag. He would rub the tag for hours. One day, when he did something to annoy me, I had snuck into his room and cut the tag off the bear. I had to sit in the same spot on the couch while my mom made me apologize and then sent me to my room.

My mom and dad looked at each other, neither one wanting to start talking. I pressed my pointer fingers to my temples and stared at the wall to my right. "The snow's not deep enough." I turned back to Kurt. "You'll see." I wonder sometimes if making my brother think I had x-ray vision is the reason why my vision is so horrible now.

My dad's arm laid on the armrest of the computer chair, and my mom held his hand. "We need to tell you something." My dad's voice was low; his other hand massaged his side, where the stitches from his surgery were. His fingertips rubbed his gray t-shirt, bunching the fabric to stop himself from scratching.

My parents felt, from the very beginning, that they shouldn't keep secrets from my brother and me. I learned later that my mom knew firsthand how observant kids could be in situations like that, and she didn't want us to guess that something was wrong before they could tell us. Still, I sometimes wonder how different things would have been if I hadn't know. Would I have been happier for longer? Would the depression have been worse? I think that my mom and dad did the right thing, but, still, part of me wonders.

"When your dad had surgery last month, the doctors found colon cancer," my mom said. She split her gaze between me and my brother; her voice was calm, but I am sure my mom squeezed my dad's arm hard enough to leave a bruise. Giving bad news as a nurse can't prepare you for giving bad news to your own family. "There are some treatments, and the doctors think there is a good chance they could work."

"What's cancer?" my brother or I must have asked. My mom and dad looked at each other. I sat still on the couch, my hands at my side. Our dog, Tilly, dragged a knotted rope into the living room with us. She chewed as she paced the room, trying to find somewhere to hide it. The rug in front of the fireplace, where she normally hid things already had a rawhide underneath.

"Cancer is something that grows inside of you and can spread all over your body, but there is medicine which can stop it." My mom nodded as she spoke. My dad twisted the T-shirt. I wonder, now, if he imagined all the lumps that could have been growing

inside of him. I wonder if he felt his arms and his face just to make sure it hadn't spread there yet.

“I don't want you guys to worry,” my dad said. “We are going to do everything we can.” He looked at my brother and me, and leaned forward as he spoke, but I don't think he was talking to us. I knew enough to know that we were having a serious conversation, but I didn't know what cancer was, or a colon for that matter. To me, they were just words that kept me from my snow castle.

According to Dale, my dad's friend from childhood:

When he and my dad were freshman in college, they took a drama class together. One of the assignments was to act out a 1-Act play. Most of the class put on a play that was already written, but he and my dad choose to take a different route: they wrote their own play. They spent a week writing a short play that they then performed in front of the class. Dale doesn't remember much about the play, but he does remember one scene. He and my dad were eating a steak, and he asked my dad, "How's the steak?"

My dad said, "I need some A-1." Then, he poured on some steak sauce.

"Well, how's the steak?"

"I don't know. I need some more." And, he poured more sauce on the steak.

This continued for three or four more times. Finally, Dale asked again, "How's the steak?"

My dad said, "I don't know. I can only taste the A-1."

Before the performance, they had also taped something above the stage where no one could see it. They tied a string to it, and throughout the play, they would periodically reference the object as "It." At the end of the play, the pulled on the string and revealed that "It" was a box of Cracker Jacks.

CHAPTER X
THE CANCER CARD

Not long after that conversation, there was a game night at my school. In the gym, the school set up a bunch of carnival-style games, with prizes. In order to play the games, you had to have tickets which you could buy in advance or at the door.

My parents had bought the tickets in advance. The ziplock bag of red tickets sat on the counter for a week. The day of the game night, the bag of tickets disappeared. I had been playing with a kid from the neighborhood, Jimmy, all afternoon. After he left, my dad sat me down on the couch. He stood over me, instead of sitting next to me. “The tickets are gone. Did you take them?” He used his you-better-tell-me-the-truth-mister; a button up, short-sleeved shirt.

“No. I didn’t take them.” I had teased Kurt the other night that I would take the tickets so he couldn’t play any games, but I hadn’t taken them.

My dad walked around the couch, over to the counter. Pounding the empty corner of the counter, he said “Then where are they?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t take them.”

“Don’t lie to me. We paid twenty dollars for those and now they’re gone.”

“I didn’t take them, I swear.”

My dad walked over to the couch and sat down next to me. His face was red. I had never seen him overreact like that before. He had never had much of a temper. He draped me over his lap and gave me one spanking. Two. Three. He didn’t say anything while he did it.

“I didn’t do it. I didn’t do it.” I wiped my cheek with my arm. Crying, I stood up, refusing to look at my dad.

“Go to your room. You can come out when we get the tickets back.”

I’m not really sure what happened after that. I think my mom probably told him that he had overreacted, because I remember going to the game night later. This does not stand out in my mind because it was a traumatic event for me. I don’t think a spanking constitutes physical abuse, and this event didn’t fracture my psyche. No. The reason this stands out to me is because it was so out of character for my dad. He rarely yelled, and never without reason. Usually, my punishment was being sent to my room to clean.

A couple days later, the next time Jimmy came over, the tickets magically reappeared behind one of the couches in the living room.

I realize now that the stress of my dad’s cancer and chemo and worries was wearing on him. And maybe he had a rough day at work, and he was already frustrated. Either way, after that, he was careful not to let his worry get the best of him again. I can’t remember him losing his temper again after that.

Sometimes it takes something to jolt us back into place; something to make us wonder what in the world are we doing? I think that could have been that moment for my dad, when he realized that he couldn’t let the cancer rule his life. He couldn’t let his worry change who he was.

I Believe....

*that everyone should have a cat that weights over 30 lbs
in something that some people call God
in chocolate, and sex, and artichoke hearts
in writing by hand
in having more books than I could ever possibly read and trying to read them anyways
that maybe, just once, I can fly by flapping my arms
that trash-bag parachutes are a bad idea
that if you run down a hill fast enough you can become a blurr, and injured
in fishing
that decaf is nothing but dirty water, and cream and sugar should be punishable by death
in clutter
that money sucks
that whisky on the rocks is not my only vice, but it is my favorite
food feeds the stomach and cooking feeds the soul
in midnight coffee and noontime naps
in family
in ink
that chocolate is the food group
in pain and pleasure
that my dog might be smarter than me
in trees and vegetables and lined paper*

CHAPTER XI

NECESSARY DRIP

I went with my dad once when he had to get chemo. I think it was supposed to show me that it wasn't a big deal. My dad and I walked into the building. The lobby had a ceiling that was three stories high, and the entire front wall was made of glass to let in the sunlight. The walls and floors were white with blue trim. Miniature palm trees grew next to the waiting room chairs. It still smelled of that same disinfectant smell; despite all the attempts to make it seem more homey, it still smelled like hospital. It had to, I guess. Chemo patients are much more likely to get infections than the "normal" population.

My dad led me to the hallway filled with leather reclining chairs along one side of the hall. A nurse with brown hair smiled at us. She knew my dad by sight and led us to an open chair. "How are you two gentlemen today?" She looked at me as she said it, as if she didn't want me to be nervous.

"Just showing my son what it's like." My dad smiled, placing his hand on top of my head as he sat down in the recliner. "What's on the menu for today?"

I sat in a purple, plastic-backed chair. The nurse listened to my dad's heart with a stethoscope, and checked his blood pressure. "Everything looks good. I'll be right back with your chemo." She pointed to an empty recliner a couple feet to my left, "You can sit in one of those if you want. No one's using it for a couple hours." Then she walked down the hallway through a door which said it was for hospital employees only. I stayed in the chair next to my dad.

"What do you think?" my dad rubbed the crook of his elbow. Leaning back in his chair, he put one arm behind his head. "Could get used to this, right?"

“Everyone else looks so old,” I leaned closer to his chair, looking around. Five other people sat in leather recliners along the wall. Three old men and two old women. Two of the men were bald, and one of the women wore a scarf over her head. They all looked straight ahead or at magazines draped across their laps, IV’s dripping into their arms. They all must have been at least twenty years older than my dad’s forty-six.

The nurse carried two IV bags when she came back. She hung them from a steel hook attached to the chair, wrapped a rubber tube around my dad’s upper arm, inserted a port into his elbow, and connected the IV’s. My dad told me to look away. I didn’t.

Once the IV was connected, she clicked a little white clip on the tube. Clear liquid started to drip into a little chamber below the clip, and then into the tube. “I’ve started the drip a little fast so you can get out of here earlier.” She pointed at a silver button on the arm of the chair. “Let me know if there is any discomfort and I will turn it down.”

When she left, I stared at the drip, drip, drip of the liquid. My dad closed his eyes, forming and unforming a fist with his IVed arm. “Doesn’t the needle hurt? I wouldn’t move my hand until it was out.” I said.

“Your dad’s superman, remember?” He smiled as he said it. He and I had started watching superman together every Wednesday night. The first time we had watched it, after the intro, he asked, “Do you know who else is faster than a speeding bullet and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound?” Then, when I said Superman, he said, “No. Your dad.” Next time he asked, I knew the right answer.

I was pretty sure one of the old guys a couple chairs to the right had fallen asleep. His IV bags were almost empty, and his chin rested on his chest.

I don't know for sure how long we sat there. I know it was around an hour before the little bags ran dry. Then we had to wait long enough to convince the nurse my dad wouldn't be sick. When the nurse unhooked the bags and drew out the needle, my dad said, "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" He held up his arm and twirled it back and forth. The nurse grabbed his arm and put a small cotton pad and piece of tape over where the needle had been.

It wasn't a big deal. I don't remember being scared or worried. I was just a little bored from sitting in a hospital for so long. I hadn't made the connection between that hour and the tiredness my dad felt for days after he came back from his chemo. The clear liquid would kill the cancer cells, but it also would kill the fast growing hair cells, the fast growing energy cells, and the fast growing stay-up-late cells. Chemo is a poison, a game of chicken; you inject the poison and hope it kills the cancer faster than it kills you. But this time was near the beginning of my dad's treatments; I didn't know that yet. For me, then, it wasn't a big deal.

According to my mom:

After my mom and dad had been dating for nine months, my dad bought her a ring. Now, my dad was not a man of many words, so he hadn't told my mom yet that he loved her.. When my mom asked what the ring was for, my dad got flustered and said that it was an "I like you a lot" ring. A little over a month later, he asked her to marry him.*

*Interestingly enough, apparently my dad's dad, Grandpa Morin, bought my grandmother an "I like you a lot" ring before he had the nerve to ask her to marry him.

CHAPTER XII

THE HEALING BENEFITS OF POISON

A year after my dad was diagnosed with cancer, when I was nine, my mom got a call from my dad's doctor. I was upstairs, in the den watching Looney-Tunes on TV. My mom and dad's room was right next door, connected by a door in the wall. The phone rang while Wile E. tried to strap rockets to his roller-skates. Before the coyote could slam into a boulder, my mom burst into the den from the door in the wall. She was smiling like I hadn't seen her smile in a while. She still clutched the cordless phone, pressing it too her leg.

"Guess what?" She turned off the TV. "We're going to go out to dinner as soon as your dad gets home. That was the doctor. The chemo's working."

I lay on the couch, my thumb just above the power button. My mom paced the room. I had never seen her do that before. Her brown hair lightened whenever she walked past the window. She almost seemed like she was glowing.

"Um, okay," I said. But my mom held up the phone and said, "I've got to tell people." She walked out without saying anything else. I wasn't as excited as my mom. Until that point, I had never considered that the chemo couldn't work. Seeing how happy my mom made me realize how scared I should have been.

I only have vague impressions about the celebratory dinner, but I imagine it went like this. We would have gone somewhere that served hamburgers and steaks. My dad was a picky eater, and hamburgers were one of the only things he would eat. But only if they were well-well-done, without a pickle anywhere near it. I remember once when the waiter brought him a hamburger with a pickle on it, and my dad told him to take it back.

When the waiter brought back the hamburger, my dad could still see the rings of pickle juice on the bun and refused to eat the hamburger. He sent the hamburger back and ordered a steak, well-done.

My mom would have held up her water glass, and would have waited until we all did the same. “To medicine,” she moved her cup towards the center of the table. “Skhol,” she said, clinking her glass against each of ours. She squeezed my dad’s arm with her other hand.

“What’s skhol?” my brother held his glass in front of his face, spinning it and squinting at the water, confused.

I scrunched the wrapper off my straw and set it in between my brother and me. Sticking my straw in the glass of milk, I pressed my thumb over the top of the straw. “Kurt, watch. It’s a worm.” The straw was half-filled with milk.

“Don’t make a mess, use water,” my mom said, holding up the menu. My dad ripped the end off his straw cover, put the straw in his mouth, and tried to shoot the cover at us. There was a hole in the paper; it only made a whistling sound.

“Is the chemo gone?” I asked, wiping condensation on the wooden table, drawing a snake.

“The cancer has shrunk,” my mom said, setting her menu face down. “But he still needs to stay on the chemo until it’s all gone.”

I remember how happy my parents were. They called everyone in the family and let them know that the doctor had said. I think they both knew when he was first diagnosed that things weren’t good. They never really expected for things to get better, so when things finally turned around, they couldn’t stop themselves from celebrating the

good news. I knew that everything would be all right, seeing them both smile like that.

We wouldn't learn for a few more months that the cancer hadn't been dealt a death blow;

the chemo had only beaten it back.

CHAPTER XIII

NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS

Six months later, I sat in the living room with my dad. I watched the news, and he worked at the computer. The TV anchor listed the upcoming news stories before a commercial break. I don't remember what all of them were, but one story I will never forget: "Also, researchers have found that colon cancer is officially the deadliest cancer in the world, with over half the reported cases proving terminal."

I looked over at my dad. His hands on the keyboard, he snapped his gaze away from the TV and back to the computer screen. His hair had thinned, and he had started drinking protein shakes to prevent any more weight loss. The chemo he had been on had stopped working, so the doctors had switched him to a more aggressive kind. He looked at the computer screen, but he wasn't typing.

"Dad," I twisted the corner of the throw pillow lying next to me on the couch. "Did she just say colon cancer?"

"Yeah," he moved the mouse around and clicked, but wouldn't look at me.

"Don't you have colon cancer?"

"Yeah," he stood up and walked through the doorway and turned right, into the bathroom. I don't know if he suddenly had to do to the bathroom, or needed a minute to collect his himself, but he needed something.

I must have either stared at the TV or at my hands. I don't remember. I do remember that being the first time I actually felt scared. I could hear the news lady saying "deadliest cancer" over and over again. I remembered my dad coming home from work

and being too tired to walk up the stairs. Before, cancer had meant hair loss and tiredness; the news story made cancer something more sinister.

My dad came out of the bathroom a minute later. The TV was still playing commercials. He pointed, “Why don’t we turn that off?”

As I hit the power button on the remote, he grabbed a barstool from the kitchen and set it next to his computer chair. “Want to see what I am doing?” He rapped his knuckles on the stool. I sat on the stool, and he taught me how to play solitaire and minesweeper. I remembered that my dad was superman. Faster than a speeding bullet. I knew no matter what the news said, nothing could hurt him. But I started paying more attention when he and my mom would update me and my brother about what was going on. I think that somewhere, deep down, I knew that my dad’s fight with cancer was no longer looking promising, but I never admitted that thought to myself.

According to Grandma Morin, my dad's mom:

Most children in our family figure out pretty quickly that our last name of Morin looks pretty close to the word “moron”. Instead of being offended by people slighting the family name, my dad decided to make a joke out of it when he was a kid. My grandpa was a pretty prominent doctor in their community, so patients would call their hour on a regular basis. Whenever anyone called the house, my dad would rush to answer the phone and say, “This is the Moron residents. Which idiot would you like to speak to?”

CHAPTER XIV
CARTOON REALITY

I sat on the green couch in our living room. The TV in the corner of the room, but turned off. My brother sat next to me, I think. My parents pulled up the computer chair and a footstool and sat on those facing us. They wanted to have a ‘talk’ with us. As any child can tell you, one of those talks is never a good sign.

My dad looked older, and yellow, and tired. My mom just looked tired. Our beagle played with a stuffed tiger with a broken squeaker. My brother and I sat on the couch and fidgeted. I poked him in the ribs when my parents were looking at each other. My mom held my dad’s yellow, veiny hand in hers. I remember always being surprised whenever I would see my dad stand next to someone who wasn’t sick. His skin always looked so different in comparison. I would wonder why I didn’t notice it all the time, but he was dad. He was the norm. Everyone else’s skin was messed up. At least that’s what I told myself at the time.

“Your father and I have to tell you both something,” my mom said, squeezing my dad’s hand. She took a deep breath before she spoke. My dad squeezed her hand back. There must have been a deep sense of pain in those eyes. My dad would have hated what was going to happen. I don’t think I saw that when this story took place. Ten-year-olds aren’t known for their observational and interpretational skills.

“What?” my brother and I said. We looked at each other. We looked at our parents. We hoped it was good news like when my parents had sat us down and told us the chemo was working and the cancer was shrinking. That had been a year and a half

before. Before my parents started flying around the country looking for experimental treatments. My mom and dad had smiled when they told us that, they had spoken quickly.

They weren't smiling. They didn't speak fast; in fact, my mom seemed to take longer to speak than usual. "The chemo and radiation has stopped working for your dad," my mom said. They both watched us. My mom's shoulder length, brown hair looked the same as it always did. Tilly, our dog, growled at the tiger and tossed it into the air.

I don't think my brother or I said anything at that point. You only hear what you want to hear. You only understand what you want to understand. We probably just sat there and looked at each other, or at my parents or at the floor. We probably sat there.

"The cancer has spread too far, into too many organs for the treatment to work anymore. The doctors have told us the cancer is terminal. You're dad only has a few months left." My mom said, her eyes were shiny, so were my dad's. They squeezed each other's hands. They didn't cry. I don't remember them crying about it in front of us.

I remembered going to the hospital with my dad for his chemo treatment. We waited in a white lobby and then were lead back to a chair and a doctor that knew my dad's name. There was an IV stand next to the chair and my dad sat in the chair and had the drip attached to his arm. His chair was padded and comfy. I had sat in a plastic, maroon chair. The medicine would make everything better, how could it not?

"What does that mean?" I asked. My hand scratched the green fabric of the couch. I looked from my mom to my dad. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to die in a few months. There is nothing the doctors' can do," my dad said. He spoke in a matter of fact tone. He spoke quietly. Around his eyes were wrinkles. I can hear all of his hopes crumbling in my head. I heard nothing then.

“You’re wrong. They’re wrong. You can’t be dying. You can’t.” I said in a high-pitched voice. I clenched my fists. My parents looked at me and then looked at each other. My mom gave a small nod. Denial is the first stage of grief.

I got up off of the couch and ran out of the living room. My mom started to stand up, but my dad put his hand on her arm. I ran up the stairs and into the den. I locked the door behind me and laid down on the futon-couch. The wooden supports pressed against my back through the mattress. I wiped my cheeks with the back of my hand and grabbed the remote. I turned on Looney Tunes and watched Bugs Bunny avoid Elmer Fudd, and watched the roadrunner outsmart Wile. E. I watched them get squished by boulders and exploded by TNT and I watched them always come back right as rain in the next episode. To this day I still love to watch cartoons, the good ones, the old ones, for the same reason.

I stayed in the room well past my designated hour of allowed TV time. I expected someone to knock on the door and demand that I go back downstairs. The house creaked and I twitched and glanced towards the door, ready to ignore any demands to come out. My mom told me later that they knew that I needed some alone time to process. I watched my cartoons for hours and I was never interrupted even once. I told myself over and over that it wasn’t true, it wasn’t. I wiped my nose on the pillow. I stared at my dad’s framed newspaper article from the last time the Detroit Tigers won the World Series. It had a picture of a tiger’s player pumping his fist and yelling and a huge caption saying, “They’re GREEEAAAATTTT!!!!”

I never wanted to leave that room. Never. But I did. I eventually turned off the TV and went back downstairs. The computer chair sat in front of the computer desk. The

footstool stood against the wall. My brother and parents no longer occupied the family room. I remember being surprised that they hadn't waited for me, even though it was over two hours later.

I didn't know it at the time, but my response would characterize how I would later handle my dad's death in the months, and even years ahead. I ran from it, tried to hid from it, finally emerged from my little bubble and was surprised that the world hadn't stood still waiting for me. But in the end, I did emerge from the den.

According to my Uncle Mark:

My dad was a notoriously unhandy handy-man. One summer, shortly after my mom and dad were married, my Grandpa Vos needed to re-shingle his roof. He asked his son, Uncle Mark, and his sons-in-law, my dad and Uncle George, to help him. My dad was alone on a section of the roof for a couple hours, hammering away. When my Uncle finally made his way around to that side of the house, he yelled and called my grandpa over. My dad was halfway done with his section of the roof, but he had nailed every single shingle on backwards.

CHAPTER XV

YOUR DAD'S REALLY TIRED

I remember, sometime after my dad was diagnosed as terminal, asking him to play catch with me. I walked into the family room, wearing my green, leather baseball glove. My dad was on the couch watching the news. He had lost half his hair, but it only looked thin, not bald. He had been getting tired more and more quickly. He almost never went in to work anymore, instead working from home via email. A yellow, inflatable donut covered the computer chair; it was too uncomfortable for him to sit there for too long.

Standing next to the couch, I asked, "Dad, can you play catch with me?" I hadn't expected him to say yes, but Kurt wasn't home, and my mom told me to ask him when I complained that there wasn't anything to do. My dad loved baseball.

He smiled when I asked. A big smile. It almost made the lines of his forty-seven-year-old face disappear. I couldn't stop looking at his bloodshot eyes. I opened and closed the green glove over the armrest of the couch.

"Yeah, just let me get my glove," He turned off the TV and pulled himself off the couch. Tilly, our beagle, carried a rawhide bone into the room and lay down next to the fireplace. Her tail swiped the basset hound statue, which watched over the room.

While my dad searched for his glove, I sat on one of the bar stools next to the kitchen counter. My mom was doing some paperwork on the counter; papers were spread everywhere. "Your Dad's really tired, so he probably can't play long, okay?" My dad probably wasn't supposed to exert himself at all if he could help it. The doctors said he had a couple months left, at the most, and stressing his body couldn't help that diagnoses.

I don't know how long it actually took, but in kid time, my dad took forever to find his glove, get his shoes on, and slip on a coat, even though it wasn't cold outside. He moved slow then, in pain and tired. I grew bored waiting for him. I almost told him that I didn't want to play anymore, but I didn't. I sat at the counter and watched my mom write on some of the papers.

Eventually, my dad walked into the kitchen. His black glove on his hand, a blue jacket, and a Detroit Tigers baseball cap on his head. I remember that he didn't look tired to me then. Pounding his fist into his glove, he crouched and pretended to be flashing the pitcher signs. "What'da you think? Should I try out?"

"I don't think you're tall enough to play catcher," My mom set down her pen. "Maybe ball boy." Growing up, both of my parents had listened to the games on the radio, whenever they could. They each had written down any stats they heard in a notebook and memorized them, parroting them to whoever would listen. My mom told me this years later.

"Can I try out, too?" I grabbed the salt shaker with my glove. It spilled white crystals onto the green leather. Tilly abandoned her rawhide and ran into the kitchen when I dropped the shaker back on the counter, hoping there was food to be stolen.

"Sure. Let's go practice." He clamped his glove over top of my mom's head as he walked by.

I don't remember how long we played for, but I know that I was the one who grew tired first and wanted to go back inside. My dad knew that he wouldn't be able to play catch much longer, so he never complained, even though it must have been painful

and exhausting for him to play that long. When we went inside, he had to lie down and recover.

My dad understood the importance of spending time with family, even though it was rough on him. There are some things that are more important than doing what is easiest for yourself. The most meaningful, and probably memorable, actions you will ever take will probably be inconvenient for you in some way.

My dad taught us all that lesson. That is why, after my dad died, my mom quit her job as a nurse and took a job as a part-time teacher, allowing her to be home when my brother and I were home. That is why my brother helps my mom install kitchen cabinet handles after he has been at school and work from 8:00am until 9:00pm, and he lived fifty minutes away. That is why I will hold and talk to my wife for three hours when she becomes overwhelmed by a particularly bad day, even though I have a paper due the next day, and it's already 1:00am.

According to my Aunt Pat and Aunt Pam, my dad's sisters:

When my dad was in his early teens, his family moved to California. The house they moved into had an in-ground pool in the backyard. Whenever my dad would get really frustrated with anyone, he would grab a large rock and jump into the pool with it. The rock was heavy enough to hold him underwater, so he would run laps around the bottom of the pool until he couldn't hold his breath anymore. Then, he would surface and act like nothing had happened.

CHAPTER XVI
MY DAD'S DRESS

Four months after my dad was diagnosed as terminal, when I was ten, he still fought. He got tired easily, but he was still able to get around the house a little. It was Thanksgiving, and everyone knew it would be his last. No one knew how much longer he had, but knew it couldn't be more than a couple months. My dad wanted to see everyone in our family, but he didn't want it to be a sad thing. So, my mom planned a roast of my dad and invited our entire family.

We met in the event hall at my Grandma and Grandpa Morin's building. We formed a circle with the couches and folding chairs. My mom and dad sat next to each other at one end of the oval. My brother and I sat on the floor in front of my dad. Our aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, from both sides of the family, filled out the rest of the oval.

My dad's liver was failing, and his skin had a slight yellow tinge at that point, but not nearly as bad as it would become. He sat in one of the Lay-Z-Boy style chairs and tried not to talk too much, but he smiled a lot. I remember that he was so skinny that it seemed the chair could have swallowed him up if it had wanted. My mom sat next to him; she held his arm as people spoke, watching him to make sure he was having a good time and wasn't too tired.

I can't remember a lot of the jokes told about my dad, but I remember a few. My uncle Mark told a story about when my uncle, my grandpa Vos, and my dad were re-shingling my grandpa's house. My dad, a notorious handyman, nailed all the shingles on his side of the house on upside down.

When it was my mom's turn, she stood up and read her roast from a script, like she always does when she is afraid she will get too emotional and forget. She told everyone how after five months of dating, my dad gave her a ring. He didn't, however, tell her what the ring was for. When my mom asked him, he became flustered and told her it was an "I like you a lot" ring. A month later, he asked her to marry him.

We went around the circle and every aunt and uncle, grandpa and grandma, and niece and nephew shared a story. But I didn't. I sat at the foot of my dad's chair. Every so often he would reach forward and scratch in between my shoulders, not saying a word. The carpet was grey with flecks of color. I ran my fingers in slow circles on the floor. The carpet was rough.

My mom leaned forward in her chair so that she could see me. "Paul, do you want to share something?"

I shook my head, watching the carpet fibers bend and spring back into place as my fingers dragged over them. The rest of my family murmuring among themselves, waiting.

"It doesn't have to be a funny story." My mom touched my shoulder. "You can say anything you want."

Her hand was gentle, warm, and annoying on my shoulder. I twitched hard enough to knock her hand off, and then I relocated to the armrest of my dad's chair. Balancing out of reach of my mom, I refused to look at either of my parents. My dad must have been hurt, I imagined for years afterwards. Sometimes, after he was gone, I would think back to my refusal to speak. At first, I would cry into my pillow, missing my dad and upset that I hadn't taken the opportunity to let him know that I loved him. When

I was no longer able to cry, I would remember refusing to speak, and I would hate myself for being such an ungrateful son.

I vividly remember my refusal to speak; I can still see the scene in my head. However, last year, my aunt gave me a copy of the video from the roast. She had the VHS transferred over to DVD. I hadn't known that a video even existed. One night, I watched the video with my wife, Joy, so that she could see my dad. Everything was as I remembered it, right down to my Uncle David's bad joke throwing a lawyer off a train. Near the end of the roast, when we had gone around the circle, and it was my mom's, my brother's and my turn to tell stories, I squeezed my wife's waist. Her head rested on my shoulder; her hair tickling my neck.

I thought about turning the video off so that she wouldn't see me refuse to speak, but the remote was on the other end of the couch. I would have had to push Joy off the couch to reach the remote. Before I could think of an excuse to stop watching, my mom asked younger me if I had any stories I would like to share.

I sat on the couch and watched younger me stand up, with his black sweatshirt and buzz-cut. "I remember when my mom got a dress in the mail, and it was too small for her," young me said. "Dad bet Mom that she could fit into the dress, so he tried on the dress and it fit. He wore my mom's dress." Younger me laughed as he talked. Older me sat on the couch, tracing circles on Joy's side with my fingers, stunned.

When the video was over, and the DVD started showing snow, we sat there on the couch. "I didn't think I said anything. That was weird." Even now, when I think back to the roast, I can see myself refusing to speak. It is strange how memory works, and how emotions can influence what we remember. After my dad died, I spent years feeling

guilty and angry at the world and myself. I spent years keeping people at arm's length, emotionally: refusing to really talk to anyone about anything deeper than the Michigan score, what Pokémon/digimon/beanie baby was the best, or who came closest to dunking on a ten foot rim. I created strong emotional barriers when my dad died, and I reinforced those barriers two years later when my mom almost died from a massive stroke. I guess I extended those emotional barriers back in time, remembering them in some of the memories from before I became so guarded. My feelings of guilt and pain created memories that I could feel guilt and pain about, justifying their own existence within my psyche.