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Baby Adrian: Not an Autobiography

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Baby Adrian:
Not an Autobiography

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College
by
Adrian Retzl

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

December 2018

*To all those whom I twisted into characters,
to my family, and to Misha Kayne.*

Foreword

The following project is a semi-autobiographical bildungsroman. I've been extremely fortunate to have been granted the opportunity to pursue this narrative and all its subject matter, about which I am extremely passionate. It is an exploration of identity in familial and pedagogical contexts, spanning from first grade through high school. I have to the best of my ability presented this upbringing, however, due to the necessary temporal constraints inherent to the Senior Project, the manuscript submitted here is a slightly reduced version of the novel I had envisioned. I had become committed to the much larger scope—enthusiastic to create what would become my first successful long-form work—and the limitations impinged upon my ability to do justice to the full vision.

When I return to the narrative following graduation, the following elements will be further developed: Adrian's sexuality as it presents itself in twelfth grade, the potential for daydreaming to become dangerous, and a respectful "conclusion" to every arc, which leaves the reader satisfied. In its current form the ending is somewhat abrupt and leaves much unexplored, and the section for fourth grade is incomplete. However, I am proud and grateful for what I have accomplished in this timeframe given the circumstances, and hope one will find it enjoyable to read as I found it enjoyable to write.

Adrian Retzl

Content warnings for sexual activity of questionable consent between children and for self harm.

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First Grade

It was raining—not hard, but enough to produce a dull thrum against the roof of the car as we drove to my new school, and the sound outpaced the thoughts in my head. Kyle, in the seat beside me, hummed out a song I could almost recognize. I tilted my head to hear him better, and then I was looking out the window and watching water droplets slide down the glass. West Elementary came into view, Mom pulled into the parking lot, I eyed the playground. It was much larger than the one at Kindergarten. Far off in the distance, beyond the jungle gym and the swings, was the biggest slide I'd ever seen. It was metal, and looming, and I wondered if I'd ever get up the guts to go down it.

“You'll probably be the first one here, at least today,” Mom was saying, and Kyle had stopped humming. “We won't have to come quite as early tomorrow.” Today was her first day at school, too, but at East—the other elementary school. She was the new secretary. Kyle went to East, had been there for two years already. It was kind of funny, that he knew the school and Mom didn't.

From the passenger seat, Matt said, “Can we go to McDonald's next?” He spoke slowly—we were all very tired.

“Yes, please.” Kyle leaned forward as we parked, like he always did. He was scared of hitting his head against the seat if Mom braked too suddenly. “It’s not far; we could swing through after dropping Adrian off.”

I frowned and crossed my arms, and the edge of my seatbelt pressed against my neck. “That’s not fair. I want McDonald’s.”

“No,” Mom said. “You all need to get used to school food.”

“That’s not fair,” I repeated. Before this year, before I became a first grader and before Mom became East’s secretary, we would drop Matt and Kyle off at school and then go wander around Main Street. Gifted Kindergarten hadn’t started until one in the afternoon, so we’d had plenty of time to get food and window shop. We’d choose between the diner and the chocolate milk place for breakfast. I didn’t actually like the food at the chocolate milk place, but their chocolate milk was really good. Meanwhile, Matt had told me horror stories about the school food, and Kyle had nodded in agreement with wide, warning eyes. I was going to miss those mornings with Mom, certainly.

“Life isn’t always fair. Now put your hood on, and I’ll walk you in.”

“In?” I said, looking at the playground again as I unbuckled my seatbelt. I’d packed an umbrella in my bag, a big red one in case anyone forgot their own and needed to share. It had been a very strategic decision. Offering shelter would easily make someone like me.

Before I climbed out the car door, Matt reached back over the center console and smacked my shoulder. I jumped back and glared at him, opening my mouth to tell Mom that he’d touched me without permission—against our rules—but he managed to speak first.

“Have a good day.” He grinned, and it was really genuine, so I let my glare sink into a grin to match.

“Okay,” I said. “You too.” I supposed it was alright, just this once, that he’d broken the rules.

When Mom and I got inside, I immediately shook off like a dog. Mom hissed. “Don’t do that—you’ll get me all wet.”

“You’re already all wet,” I pointed out.

We went into the office and asked for directions to Kids Club, where students who were really early for school went. Mom had been right—I was the first one there. A man who looked too young to be a teacher greeted us with a big smile.

“I’m Jason,” he said, and I nodded at the sticker on his shirt that said “JASON,” and, smaller beneath it, “Kids Club Monitor.” I wondered if he thought that I couldn’t read yet. He and Mom talked for a bit, and I hovered by Mom’s leg and looked out a big window on the far wall. It opened up to the playground and a drab basketball court. The rain seemed to be picking it up, falling at a slant and beating against the window, filling the pavement with puddles. I imagined, then, a small black cat, shiny from the rain, slinking up to one of those puddles and drinking from it. I kept the cat small, because I didn’t want anyone to notice it.

We had a cat back home. Her name was Floppy, because she flopped over a lot. We hadn’t had her long. She was black too, and I’d wanted to name her Midnight, but that didn’t go over. Actually, she wasn’t all black—she had a tiny white stripe down the back of her neck. Kyle told me that we couldn’t name her Midnight because she wasn’t completely black. Matt told me

we couldn't name her Midnight because it was cliché and dumb. But I could name this cat Midnight, for sure. Matt would never know.

Mom turned to me. "Can I give you a quick kiss?" she asked, and I nodded. Before she left she told me to have a good day, but the way she said it didn't make me want to follow through like the way Matt had said it had.

Jason gave me a blank sticker that matched his, and he made me write my name with "1st Grader" underneath. I didn't particularly want to do that. What did it matter that I was in 1st grade? I figured I was probably smarter than most 2nd graders, having been in Gifted Kindergarten and all. I didn't say that to Jason, but I did say, "What if I accidentally write my name too big and then '1st Grader' won't fit?"

He laughed. "You'll just have to plan ahead to make sure that doesn't happen." Then he took my raincoat and showed me where to put it before pointing me to where all the different kinds of toys and games were located. Once he'd walked off and begun straightening his pile of stickers I wandered over to a lunch table near the center of the room. After writing my name and—begrudgingly—"1st Grader," I sat facing outwards, towards the window, trying to find the best place to put my sticker. After much deliberation Mom and I had decided that I would wear a t-shirt and an unbuttoned flannel over the top, because it was both warm and stylish. She'd said, "You want to make a good first impression today." But the two layers presented an issue: would the sticker be best right in the center of my t-shirt, where everyone could see it, or to the left a little, where the flannel might shield it, or maybe on the flannel itself, in plain view until I shifted a little and the fabric folded over?

I decided on the t-shirt, to the left. If someone wanted to know my name, I could tell them, and if someone wanted to know my grade, I could not tell them.

When I looked out the window again, the little black cat—Midnight—made its way to a section of the building I could see. The brick wall ran perpendicular to the window, and there was a little cranny several yards wide and deep with another entrance into the building inside. Midnight took shelter there and shook off the rain before starting to dry itself with its tongue. Was Midnight a better name for a boy or a girl cat? I decided girl.

Then someone came in the Kids Club door, and Jason sprang into action with his greeting and sticker spiel. He said the same things that he'd said to me, and I scowled.

I had to find something to do so this new person—I didn't recognize her—and any others who came in wouldn't think I was weird. It was tough. None of the games I could see looked good to play alone. I ended up with a small stack of paper and some markers, and I began to draw Midnight.

The girl sat a few feet away on the other side of the table, just far enough that I didn't feel the need to say hello. Except then she reached over and took a couple of my markers—without asking first—and I saw that she was putting a lot of time into her name tag. She wrote "LANA" in big, green bubble letters and filled them in with pink. I considered telling her that green and pink look terrible together, but then maybe she'd ask to see my sticker. Mine was boring black. I couldn't risk it.

More kids started coming in, for which I was grateful. There was an uneasy pressure between Lana and I, to talk or something probably, but the others alleviated it. Another girl came over and spoke to Lana like they already knew each other. They probably did—they were proba-

bly in the Kindergarten for normal kids. They were probably very average. Well, either that or they were in second grade. I couldn't see Lana's name tag anymore to check.

I did recognize one kid who came in—Ray. We'd had a falling out, though, when he hadn't invited me to play tag with his group even though I'd hinted quite clearly about wanting to join. I wasn't surprised when he didn't come over to say hi to me. I turned back in my seat to look outside again. Midnight peered up at me, eyes glistening a bright green, the paw she'd just been licking still raised. I smiled. It almost looked like she was waving at me. I pictured her growing in size, a panther suddenly, and she turned to glare at Ray and hiss. Ray was super scared, and he fell to his knees and begged for my forgiveness. With a deep sigh, I went to draw Ray in on my page beside the cat.

I'd just finished the last strand of hair on his head when I realized that the room was getting fairly full, and from what I could tell everyone was talking to somebody except for me. That wasn't a good sign. Maybe I should have put my sticker on the center of my chest. I looked down at it, considering peeling it up and moving it over.

“What's that?” someone said, and there was a finger jabbing towards my drawing.

“Cat.” I looked up. It was a boy, a little sharp boy. His nose was pointy and so was his chin. Hair all mussed up, and he must not have had a raincoat on because his hoodie was soaked through around the shoulders. He sat down across from me.

“Why are you rocking?”

“What?”

He leaned forward a bit and then tipped back dramatically, a smile growing on his face as he repeated the motion. I froze.

“Oh. I just do.”

His smile tightened into a smirk. “It’s weird. Also, your cat looks more like a goat.”

I wrinkled my nose. “She is not a goat.”

Shrugging, he said, “Okay. What’s your name?” And then, before I could reply—“Wait, let me guess. Mine’s Payton, by the way. Let me guess yours. Can I?”

“Sure.” I tried to smile, but upon glancing down at my drawing I realized the cat really did look like a goat. I’d made the nose way too long, and the legs were too tall. Panthers slunk low to the ground, and that was certainly not what this one was doing.

Payton hummed thoughtfully. “Bubbles,” he said. “No, wait. Definitely not. Buttercup.”

My bad smile vanished. “I’m not a Powerpuff Girl.”

“Buttercup—I’m right, aren’t I? I’m very good at this. You have that whole…” he waved his hand around. “…thing going on.”

“I am not Buttercup,” I said. “You’re the blonde one, anyways.”

“Am I blonde? I didn’t notice. Also, Buttercup has black hair, come on. Bubbles is blonde.” He ran his hand through his hair and then pulled a lock of it down in front of his nose. He went cross-eyed staring at it. “But I’m not Bubbles.”

“Yeah, you’re Payton. You already said.”

He looked past his hair at me, but didn’t let it go. “Can you spell it? It’s tough.”

His sticker wasn’t anywhere in sight, not on his chest or on the table, which seemed miraculous to me because handing out those stickers seemed to be Jason’s only passion in life. I bit my lip and thought hard. I hadn’t been in Kindergarten for geniuses for nothing—I could spell the name.

When I hadn't gotten it right by my third try, Payton spelled it out for me himself. "The 'y' and the 'o' throw everyone off. Heck, they used to throw me off, but then I got used to it. You will too."

"Payton," a voice called softly. We looked over, and it was Lana. "No one cares how to spell your name."

Payton smiled at me. "That's Lana. She's my ex."

"I am not. We did not date." A few of the kids around Lana, mostly girls, snickered.

"Well, we kind of did."

"Holding hands is not dating."

"Well, it kind of is."

"Is not!"

"Buttercup, what do you think? Is it dating if you hold hands?"

I gaped at him, and then I turned to the others. "My name is not Buttercup."

Lana said, "He's just being mean, like always. Ignore it. What's your name, really?" She squinted down at my half-hidden sticker.

"Adrian," I said.

Payton repeated it, and then he repeated it several more times. "Nah," he said eventually, "I don't see it."

"That's what it is," I said, "so... there."

"Hey," Payton said gently, "you're rocking again."

"I can't help it."

“Payton.” Lana’s voice was flat and dry. “Cut it out. You’re so stupid. This is why we broke up.”

He pointed at her. “Ha! So you admit it.”

She rolled her eyes and took it back, and they bantered for a while. I considered making Midnight even bigger and having her break through the window behind me to scratch at Payton, so he’d run away forever. Lana could stay—she seemed nice. Her light brown hair was all tied up in a side ponytail behind one ear, and it draped to her shoulder. I watched her roll her eyes again and take out a little tube of lipgloss. The tube itself was pink, but when it was applied it seemed colorless. The only difference I could see was that her lips were a little shinier.

Their conversation got old fast, so I tuned them out to look at my drawing again. It was truly rather miserable. My fingers tapped the corner of the paper a few times before I crumpled it up. It was a shame that the first drawing of mine Payton had seen had been that one—I was better than that. I could do better than that. I uncapped the black marker and put its tip to a new page before hesitating. I had to slow down—had to think it through.

I took Midnight into my mind, turned her to and fro and tweaked her. I made her bigger, then smaller, and then bigger again, until eventually she was two feet tall in her signature panther crouch. I made her whiskers longer and thicker, and then I lengthened her nose and fur and tail, too. There was a little scar over her eye, but then again, no—a tear in her ear. She was battle-worn. She’d seen things, been through things. Usually, fighting was easy for her, but every so often she’d come against a worthy foe and the fight would be one for the history books. Once, she’d fought off a bear, and that was how her ear got mangled. The bear hadn’t made it out alive.

I had only just lifted my head when Payton was suddenly there, right in front of me and closer than he had been, half-standing and bent over the table. His eyes were wide and a cold grey, and I was so unused to them that I dared not blink. Everyone in my family had dark brown eyes, so dark they were almost black. Could Payton even see out of his eyes? It looked like they were iced over, like their natural moisture had frozen to the point where even the pupils looked bizarre. I wasn't sure why they looked bizarre—they were black like anyone else's, but maybe simply being against the grey was enough to dissociate them for me.

I was looking so deeply into his eyes that I barely registered his hand, but then he was touching my forehead and, though he only gently skimmed my skin, I swore I could feel his fingerprints, grainy and dry. My breath hitched and for a moment I couldn't move, for a moment everything seemed to spin and then collide on the spot where he'd made contact. It didn't last—I threw my arm out and slapped him away. My wrist hit his elbow and the marker still in my hand fell from my grasp—it smacked against the table and left a dot in its wake.

I pressed my palm to where he'd touched me, trying to dull the sensation that still lingered there. It wasn't so much of an aching as it was an anger that happened to somehow be emanating from that spot, sinking down from there and pushing on my brow. It was rarely this bad when Matt or Kyle or Mom touched me, but Payton's status as a near-stranger made it different.

"Your hair looks really soft," he said, and his voice was even more gentle than his fingers had been. He had a calm, kind expression on his face, my blow to his arm not seeming to have deterred him at all, and his hand lingered in the air. I watched to see if he'd move again.

"Don't do that," I said. Several people turned to look at us, then, and I realized I'd spoken louder than I'd meant to.

“Don’t do what?”

“Touch me. Don’t touch me without asking first.” And then I added— “Please.” Mom always told me that people—even her sometimes—tended to get offended when someone asked not to be touched. She said it came across as rude. “Please,” supposedly, helped.

Payton apologized, but he still didn’t back off. “Is it soft? You can touch mine, if you want. My hair. I use conditioner, so it’s really silky. Yours looks even softer, though. Do you want to touch mine?” He edged even closer, only slightly, but just enough that his eyes took my attention again.

At this distance, I could see that there was a little blue in them, blue that shot out in webs from the pupil like thin trees on a tiny planet. Birch trees, maybe. I leaned in, only barely, to get a better look. And then, before I could help it, I took my hand from my forehead and I touched his hair. Petted him on the top of his head, like he was a cat.

“No,” he said, and with one hand he tugged on a lock of his hair while with the other he carefully took mine and guided it to the lock. “Like this, see? You have to pull it out straight, in a clump, and feel it that way. See?”

I nodded. “Okay, yeah. It is soft.” Swallowing, I added, “You can touch mine, too. I give you permission.”

A grin broke out on his face. His motion wasn’t slow like mine had been—instead his hand darted up and separated a lock from just above my ear. He rolled it between his finger and thumb, saying, “*Very* soft.”

“Don’t be a freak,” Lana said, and we startled. I sat up straight again, away from Payton. My hair fell from his grasp.

Luckily, Lana was staring at him, not me. “Why are you such a freak?” she asked him.

Payton sat back in his seat, much more relaxed than I was, and shrugged. He seemed to shrug a lot. That was kind of cool, I figured. He was so carefree. I tested a shrug, the way he did it, by holding up my shoulders for a few moments longer than most shrugs and turning my head a little, but I did it small so no one would notice. I realized I was rocking again and stopped, took a deep breath, and focused on staying still.

So Lana rolled her eyes often and Payton shrugged often. Lana’s eye-rolling looked so deliberate, but I wondered if at this point she even knew she was doing it. At some point, she’d slid closer to Payton, close enough that their arms brushed together. A few times Payton teasingly poked at her shoulder. Considering all the mean things they said to each other, and how heavy their voices were with sarcasm, they looked happy. The kind of happy that made me think they should probably get back together at some point.

I didn’t intrude on their conversation that followed, and neither did anyone else. Instead I went back and forth between listening to them and drawing the more careful version of Midnight. I made a promise to not use anything but the very tip of the marker until I was done with all of the line-work, because I didn’t want to smudge the whole thing up with fat mistakes. I tried to think of it as a coloring book, and planned to fill in the white space with colored pencils later.

When the first of two bells rang, I slipped the drawing into one of my new folders, and we all headed towards our classes. I was glad to know both Payton and Lana were also first graders, but Lana turned in a different direction pretty early, heading down the hall to some other classroom. I’d been expecting Payton to follow her, so when he traipsed along beside me I won-

dered vaguely if he'd decided to walk me to class. We both stepped towards the same door, though, and he shot me a huge smile.

“Same class?”

“Same class.” I smiled back. Of course—the fact that Payton and Lana already knew each other had nothing to do with whether or not they'd be in the same class this year. Where I'd gotten that idea in the first place, I wasn't sure.

Shortly after entering, Payton inhaled in excitement, grabbed the sleeve of my flannel, and pulled me towards the back corner. “Cody!” he said, and a boy looked up from where he was straightening a notebook on his desk. Though his face began as blank, a little smile spread when he saw Payton. While I definitely wouldn't have said the smile was nervous or reserved, it was only slight and showed no teeth. Maybe he was just calm—relaxed but not in the same way Payton was relaxed. I found myself liking him before he even spoke.

Payton pushed me in front of him and held me in place by my shoulders. I held in the gasp, but not the shudder, and the heat from his touch reverberated from his hands through to the back of my neck. “This is Buttercup. Buttercup, meet... Bubbles.”

Cody didn't seem put off whatsoever. I tried to focus on the coolness of his gaze to distract myself from Payton's grasp. “I think I'm more of a Blossom,” Cody said.

“No. I'm the leader, I'm Blossom.”

Cody's gaze shifted to mine. “What's your name really?”

“Adrian.” My voice came out stuttered. “And you're Cody?”

He nodded. “It's actually Kangee, which means ‘crow’ in Lakota. But everyone calls me Cody.”

“Crow,” I echoed. “That’s cool.”

“I didn’t know that,” Payton said, finally releasing and stepping beside me. He was frowning. I ran my hands over where his had been, shaking off the residue.

“No, I told you.” Cody pulled a pencil from a little cup he had on his desk and laid it beside the notebook, neat and even. Was I supposed to have a pencil cup? I glanced over to my desk, which was empty on top but for my little paper nameplate. Lots of kids, it turned out, had accessories adorning their desks. I found myself beginning to shrivel, but then Cody said, “I know I told you, because I tell everyone.” I turned back to the conversation, and everything was fine.

Payton shook his head. “If I’d known, I would’ve been calling you Crowdy all this time. You didn’t tell me, you didn’t.”

Cody’s smile was bigger now, and I got a glimpse of the way his white teeth stood out against his deeply tanned skin. Not even tanned, really, just warmly brown. “You will not call me Crowdy,” he laughed. It was a short and soft sound.

The day went by very quickly, filled with games and laughter that came easier than I’d expected. The rain stopped around two, but the final recess of the day had been an hour before then, so we still didn’t get to go outside. Instead we had free time in the classroom, and I drew cats for everyone who asked for one—I’d surreptitiously pulled out my second drawing of Midnight to start coloring it, but Payton had seen and called attention to it. “This one doesn’t look like a goat,” he’d said. “This one is really good.”

Payton asked for a dog instead of a cat, putting him on thin ice. I did draw it for him, though. Every person afterwards who asked for a dog got something that looked more like a

lizard, because I didn't feel like trying as hard for them. And then a girl asked for a horse, and I outright refused and silently put her on my black list. Cody, I noted, watched Payton and I with amusement, but he didn't request a drawing. For whatever reason, I was a bit let down.

By the time I was on the bus over to East Elementary, I felt confident saying that I'd made at least two friends. I definitely hadn't expected that—I didn't think I'd even be able to make one, given all that had happened in Kindergarten. It also seemed like I'd made a very good impression on the teacher, Mrs. Reader. I had a sneaking suspicion her name was actually a weak attempt at propaganda, meant to urge us to read more, but she was nice enough that I couldn't hold it against her. I mean, my last name was Retzl, and I'd already gotten more than enough pretzel jokes to last a life time. No, I did not intend to own a pretzel shop. If Reader actually was her last name, maybe at some point she'd just given into all the pressure. That wouldn't happen to me, though—I was going to be an artist, for sure.

(Midnight sat on top of the seat in front of me, small again with wide eyes. I admired her torn ear and she meowed at me.)

Kyle met me at the bus lane, grinning wide as we walked towards the main office. East Elementary, unlike West, was several stories high, and it towered over a playground that looked much less exciting than ours. I pitied Kyle and dreaded the years I'd eventually have to spend at East.

Mom looked really busy behind the counter, answering phones and directing people this way and that, but Kyle and I still tried to tell her all about our days. Eventually she told us to go into the conference room and draw on the whiteboard, that she'd be off in a half hour or so. Matt

joined us about ten minutes later, buzzing with energy and yammering on about his classroom's pet snake.

I tried to draw the snake based on what Matt was saying, but then Kyle saw and started doing it too. His was much better than mine. I was turning my snake into a lizard when Matt showed both of us up. His lines were sketchy but purposeful, as they always were, and I silently wished that the next time I tried to use sketchy lines, they'd turn out like his. "She's a python," he said, and he scraped off a bit of black marker from her pupil.

"Why did you do that?" I asked. Now it looked incomplete.

"It's a highlight," he said. "A reflection." And then he made me look into his eyes, and I saw that there were in fact white spots where the light bounced off.

"Whoa," I said.

Matt nodded, watching Kyle add reflections to the eye of his snake, too. "The problem with babies is, you get this idea in your head about what something looks like, and you draw it based on that idea instead of actually looking at the thing."

"I'm not a baby," I said.

Kyle looked at me. "I mean, you basically are."

"You didn't know about highlights either," I pointed out.

"I'm not the one whining, though."

I bit back the obvious retort of "I'm not whining," choosing instead to remain silent and work on my lizard. Its eye was decidedly highlight-less, but I made a point of not adding one. I'd test it out later, when Matt wasn't watching.

Back at home, after a loud and excitable car ride, Matt and Kyle immediately went to the computers to battle out their energy playing video games. Whatever they were playing, I was sure I wouldn't be allowed to join in. I could hear shouting and gunfire all the way from the living room, and Matt and Kyle yelled at each other intermittently as well. After an incident where I'd written some rather gory fan fiction for a different game called, and made a drawing featuring a lovely decapitation, Mom had cracked down on what media I was allowed to consume. What this meant was, I was no longer allowed to play violent games or watch violent movies, but Mom and I watched the romantic movies she liked. I think she had no one else to watch them with. And I wondered if maybe she had hoped to have had a daughter. "Three boys is so much," she said to me often.

Today it was *Moulin Rouge!* which we'd already watched a lot of times, but it was our favorite. Matt and Kyle both liked to pretend they hated it, but they often hovered in the living room doorway and whispered along to the songs.

Mom liked to say that *Moulin Rouge!* portrayed the purest expression of love that she'd ever seen. But then she'd specify, "love... at first." I thought I understood. The song Christian sang to Satine was romantic in all the right ways, from how they looked at each other to the exaggeration of their dance. But things became bitter quickly.

Kyle pointed out to me that if you looked closely when Satine was rolling around on the floor before Christian's song, you could see her nipple for a split second. Since I'd known that, though, I tended to squeeze my eyes shut for that part, partially because I knew I wasn't supposed to be seeing it, but also because it felt invasive.

That night before bed, I put in the mixed CD Mom had made me that had the *Moulin Rouge!* songs on it, and I pushed my pillows onto the far side of my bed and laid down in the opened space.

I always laid on my right side, when I listened to music, with my right arm tucked beneath me and my left ready to move if I needed it. As the music washed me away, my eyes would either close or glaze over on my yellow wall, and before long I would see or feel very little of the room around me. When I rocked side to side, back and forth over my arm, it was rarely in time with the music. The speed at which I rocked tended to coincide more generally with the intensity of the scene I was imagining. And as the daydreams went on my lips would move with the song lyrics or with my characters' dialogue, and my face would contort to match the expressions on their faces, and sometimes my left arm would move as theirs did. My right one was trapped, but occasionally my fingers would twitch.

The bed creaked and squeaked occasionally, and I hated it. I knew that Mom did know that I rocked, but I wasn't overly ecstatic about the fact that she knew exactly when I was doing it. In an attempt to get the noise to cease, I squirmed around into new areas on the mattress, hoping the offending springs would be under less pressure. It didn't help, so I tried to focus on rocking more gently.

That didn't last long. Halfway through the first *Moulin Rouge!* song, I was back to full power and speed. I imagined impressing my whole class, singing and then—at the finale of the song—turning into a black cat named Midnight.

Most of my memories from Kindergarten were tinged in powerful, negative emotions: shame, embarrassment, anxiety. The time when Ray hadn't invited me to play tag, the time a girl named Emily had told me outright that she hated me, the time when Emily's friend Tori had made fun of my hair. There was only one memory from class itself—I had been drawing, and I went to color a bumblebee yellow, only to find the shade was more like a highlighter's yellow. And then I went on to color the flower the bumblebee was sitting on blue, except it was indigo, and showed up purple. I'd crumpled up the page and threw it away, wanting to cry. "You can make it again," the teacher had said when she'd noticed how distressed I was, but I told her it wouldn't be the same, and that it was all pointless anyways.

And then first grade was first grade, and it felt like my life had finally begun. Besides the classwork being more enjoyable, everyone seemed nicer, and I had to wonder if there was something about my fellow gifted peers in Kindergarten that had made them cruel, crueler than most. The first time Mrs. Reader sent me down to the lounge to make copies for her—since I knew how to tell time so well already and had been sitting, restless and bored, as she went over clocks again and again with the others—the teachers loitering in the lounge welcomed me with big smiles and showed me how to work the copy machine. Upon returning to the class I felt a jolt of fear as Payton mouthed, "teacher's pet" to me from the other side of the room, but then he rolled his eyes and gave me a thumbs up. He called me that for the rest of the day, always kindly, and I felt pride in my accomplishments.

There was the playground, too, which was just as incredible as it had looked. Payton and Cody helped me get up the guts to go down the big, metal slide within the first week. Payton walked behind me, miming pushing me towards the sloped hill that led to the top without ever

touching me—once Cody had learned of my distaste for physical contact, he'd gotten on Payton's case about respecting it. So Payton was behind me and Cody was in front, walking backwards and waving me forward. I took deep breaths and focused on his face, on his narrowed eyes and modest smile. And then the ride down the slide was exhilarating, nothing like I'd expected, and we went down a bunch more times after.

Most days during recess we huddled in that sheltered area on the side of the building, the one under which Midnight had taken refuge from the rain. After the first day I'd forgotten to take my red umbrella from my backpack, and it had given Payton an idea. The day after that he arrived with two other umbrellas, and we propped all three up in a half-dome in the corner of the cranny between the brick wall and the door inside. Payton was smart about it from the start, also bringing math flashcards with him so whenever a playground monitor came over to see what we were doing, he could say we were practicing addition and subtraction. "But we don't want anyone to think we're nerds," he'd hiss with wide, pleading eyes. Surprisingly, the monitors would always leave us alone after that. I was ceaselessly impressed with his talent for lying, with how naturally the fabrications fell from his lips and how smooth he kept his face as he constructed them. In reality, at least at first, he and Cody and I were just talking crap about everyone in our class. Especially a chubby boy named Devon, who always carried a piece of wood with a face drawn on it, like Plank from *Ed, Edd, n Eddy*.

My peers supported me in the small business I'd founded, even though they got nothing out of it. To keep me occupied Mrs. Reader would send me to get her sodas from the teacher's lounge, as she didn't know what else to do with me. Sometimes she'd give me two dollars for the vending machine and let me keep the change—seventy-five cents, and that had sparked the inspi-

ration to inform the other teachers that I was willing to do small tasks for them, as well. It didn't happen too often, but every once and a while the classroom phone would ring and it would be the teacher next door, or the music teacher, asking if I could run and grab something for them or pass off a note to another room or to the office. They'd drop me some quarters in return, or occasionally an entire dollar. Afterwards, my classmates would come up to me and ask how much I'd earned. Only Payton would beg me to share, and I usually was one-hundred percent willing to, but Cody would shut it down. "You earned it, not us," Cody would say. "Don't hand it out because you feel bad."

Payton invited me to his birthday party in October, and it was the first I'd ever been invited to. It was a sleepover party at his house, except I'd forgotten to give Mom the invite until that morning. We'd already made plans to go up to Grandma's—up the hill and into the forest. Mom said I could forgo going to Grandma's, if I wanted, that Grandma would understand, but I felt I'd already made a commitment and the same was not true for the party. Payton was really let down, though, when I'd talked to him on the phone.

"I'll bring you a present on Monday," I said.

"You're not allowed to bring presents to class," he replied. That was true. We weren't allowed to bring gifts, food, or invitations if we didn't have one for everyone. Payton had actually snuck the invitations to the few of us he wanted at his party before class, during Kids Club and recess.

I told him that I'd give the present to him then, and he let out a long sigh. "Oh, okay."

"Tell Cody I say hi, and make him say happy birthday to you like ten more times for me."

Before I hung up, Payton said, "We're gonna watch *Spirit*. You're missing out."

“That’s that new horse movie, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t really like horses,” I said.

“You’re missing out,” he repeated. “And how can you not like horses?”

We said our goodbyes, and his disappointment rang in my mind as I put the phone back on its base.

The drive to Grandma’s took about an hour, and while Mom had a CD in the stereo, Matt, Kyle and I had Walkmans with our own mixes. I loved car rides, always wishing they’d last longer, because it wasn’t often I’d get to listen to music for extended periods of time during the day. Instead of rocking side to side, like I did in bed, I rocked forward and backward, which occasionally upset Mom because when I really got into it, I’d slam against the back of the seat with a fair amount of force. She’d flap her arm around to catch my attention, then tell me to calm down. Matt and Kyle often laughed.

Today I tried to imagine what Payton’s house probably looked like. He’d mentioned once that he lived on a farm, and I’d thought he’d been joking. Cody reassured me that he wasn’t. It had always seemed, quite distinctly, that Payton was from a city, New York perhaps. I’d likely only gotten this impression because he was so pointy—sharp-faced people always lived in cities, wearing sharp clothes to match. So it was weird enough, as far as I was concerned, that Payton lived in South Dakota at all.

I tried to envision him out plowing a field, and then riding a horse, and it was so stupid I gave it up and imagined Midnight suddenly growing to over a hundred feet tall. She stood on her

back legs and summoned a thunder storm over the flat plains around Payton's farmhouse, and all the horses ran off.

Grandma's house was the biggest house I'd ever been in, with four bedrooms and four bathrooms and this big, open space right through the front hallways that had a two or maybe three story ceiling with a skylight. When the sun shined through the panels it created golden squares on the floor and dancing patterns across the plants—and there were so many plants. One worked its way high towards the skylight, a banana tree Mom said, but it never had bananas on it. Leaves and vines and caterpillar cacti hung from pots on the edge of the stairs, some browning and dropping leaves or needles. Upon entering, I shrugged off my coat and darted to my favorite plant, the one whose grassy leaves folded up when you touched them. I ran my fingers over each fern until the whole plant was shriveled, and then I watched it slowly unravel again.

The house was situated on the edge of a meadow, and the meadow was in the woods—a little smidge of the Black Hills National Forest that Grandma owned. On the densely wooded hill behind the house was a big rock formation we called the Fairy Circle, because fairies lived there (but there wasn't a circle). Everyone had seen a fairy there except me, though I always kept an eye out. I knew it was a magic place, because once Dad, my brothers and I had been on a walk when it'd started to rain—

“These drops are massive,” Dad had said.

When Matt and Kyle agreed, I frowned. The drops seemed perfectly normal to me. “Massive? Where? Show me one.”

Dad smiled at that, and then a few moments later his hand darted out and he pointed.

“There!”

He and my brothers laughed. I looked in the direction that he’d pointed and gaped at, far off in the woods between the trees, the biggest raindrop I had ever seen. It was as tall as a person and fatter than Devon at school, falling slowly and hitting the ground with a gigantic splash.

And then in the direction opposite the Fairy Circle was the wild apple orchard and river bed, which was typically dry. We hiked up it all the time, hopping over smooth grey rocks, pretending we were this or that. Weeds and wild flowers sprouted between rainstorms during the summer, but they were all dead now. At the first bend upstream from the orchard there were flat, yellow stones spanning the creek’s width, and, on the rare occasions when the creek was running, there were miniature waterfalls there.

Behind that spot was a large cliffside, and it was its colored layers which inspired Kyle to tell me all about erosion. We once discussed how long it must’ve taken for the creek to carve out the cliff—Kyle estimated tens of millions of years.

“Once upon a time,” he’d said, “all of this land was way up there, and dinosaurs ruled the earth.” Then I’d mimicked a tyrannosaurus’ roar.

Today, while Mom and Grandma got to work making dinner, Matt, Kyle and I went to chase the cows away. They came in the summer and autumn, when some farmer released them to graze, and Grandma hated them on her land. So we’d sprint down into the meadow with paintball guns, shooting at them until we’d chased them all the way down to the orchard. Sometimes, though, there was a bull, and Mom said we couldn’t chase after them when he was there. In that

case we would stand on the deck and shoot them away as far as we could from there. There was no bull today, however, so we geared up and followed them all the way down.

Matt and Kyle never noticed that I only shot near the cows' feet. I felt too guilty otherwise. As it were, I was guilty enough watching them rear away from us and frantically scramble away. Matt and Kyle never seemed bothered, though.

At the orchard, we set our guns on a big tree stump, edged around the cows, and then started a game at the dry creek. We didn't have long to play, but we'd make do.

"I'm Legolas," Matt said.

"Aragorn," Kyle said.

"Frodo," I said.

"Of course you are," Matt said with a quick glance and smile to Kyle. Kyle snorted, and I scowled. I'd made the mistake, once, of telling them, "Frodo's eyes are so blue," and apparently my voice had sounded a certain way, because they hadn't let it go. When I pressed on to say that I'd only mentioned it because I wished I myself had such blue eyes, they didn't believe me.

The other option, I thought, was to be Eowyn, but that would've been even worse. I'd never would have seen the end of it if I'd played as a girl.

Dinner was roast with potatoes and carrots, and Grandma told us about a girl in the math class she taught who was being sexually abused by her father. I thought maybe I shouldn't have been listening and shoved a carrot into my mouth.

"There's a boy in my home room I'm kinda worried about," Matt said, biting his lip.

"Sometimes he has bruises, and he's really quiet all the time."

I blinked and said, “A boy?”

“Don’t chew with your mouth full,” Mom chided. But then she said, “It can happen to anyone.”

My eyes widened. Was it common? Should I have been worried?

The conversation died down and shifted out of awkwardness, mostly, and maybe Grandma realized it was scaring me a little, and then we played dominos.

I’d lost three games when I started to drift a bit. What was Payton doing, right then? My only point of reference for birthday parties was Kyle’s last year, which barely counted. Mom had set up a scavenger hunt all around our house, one tiny scrap of paper with a hint leading to another, finally bringing everyone to the present pile and gift bags under Kyle’s bed. Maybe Payton was holding a scavenger hunt. What were he and Cody talking about? What was I missing out on? As if they’d needed to be closer. Every moment they spent together without me was another few steps behind them I’d become.

“Adrian, your move,” Matt said.

I got rid of a ten tile and then frowned. I should’ve gone to the party. No matter how fun Grandma’s house was, and no matter how impolite it would have been to cancel on her, Payton’s was supposed to be my first real party. My first time experiencing friends outside of school. There was always time to spend with family, but something about my friendships with Payton and Cody felt impermanent, like they could and would end at any moment. Perhaps they would end on Monday, with Payton and Cody having talked about and agreed upon how much they hated me while they were at the party. When they were supposed to be sleeping, maybe, tonight.

Kyle made his turn and I imagined Payton on a horse again. His delicate hands held the reins in a loose grip, and he lifted them with a bent wrist. Bent wrist like in those old paintings of naked women—just a slight curve and with careful fingers. He looked noble and suddenly I couldn't picture him as a city kid anymore. He looked dumb in a cowboy hat, though, when I tried that out, so I took it off again. But the boots were fine. He kicked a spur into the horse, hard, and they took off running.

On the drive back down the hill, Mom talked more with Matt about the boy in his grade, and I put my headphones on and returned to Midnight, hailing thunderstorms, because if I tried to picture Payton again I would certainly end up thinking more about the party.

Everything was fine on Monday. I gave Payton his present and he grinned and hopped around, and he told me all about that horse movie and about a small, fluffy bat they had found in the attic. He said, "Wish you'd been there," and he and Cody shared a look.

Halloween came and went—true to form, Payton, Cody, and I were the Powerpuff girls (without the skirts). Even Devon kind of laughed at us, and that made me shake, but Payton and Cody were really lax about it, so I tried to be too. Thanksgiving also came and went—we made hand turkeys, learned about the big pilgrim and Native American dinner party, Cody went to the bathroom and didn't return for a long time. Before we left for the five day weekend, Payton asked if he could hold my hand, and when I said yes he took it into both of his and told me, eyes intense, that he was thankful I was his friend.

It was early December the first time we managed to prop up five umbrellas at recess—Cody had finally managed to smuggle a couple—and we huddled underneath them in puffy winter coats. It was also the first time I saw Payton and Cody kiss.

It was gentle, and Payton smiled halfway through. My shoulder was pressed against his and I shivered, and then he pulled away from Cody to look at me. “You okay?” he asked.

“It’s cold.” Which was true.

Payton smiled again. “We’re practicing, by the way.”

“Practicing?”

“For when we have girlfriends. I taught Cody how.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I’ll teach you too, but not yet, okay?”

“When?” I asked.

Payton shrugged. “Sometime else, when we can do it properly.”

Cody looked less pleased with the kisses. His brow furrowed and he seemed to be concentrating really hard. But his hand would come up and he’d tug on Payton’s hair.

“Good,” Payton said. “Use your hands.”

I swallowed. “They put them all the way around each other in movies.”

Payton looked thoughtful for a second, and then he grinned and nodded. “True. Good work, Adrian. So true. Let’s try it.” He wrapped his arms around Cody’s waist, and Cody bent his around Payton’s neck. And then he shifted, and his knuckles hit the handle of my red umbrella and the whole fort toppled around us.

“Oh, well,” Payton said. “The bell will ring soon anyways.”

On December 17th Cody was home sick. During recess, Payton gave me an intense look, one I was beginning to know very well. “I’m going to go to the bathroom—the one on the far side by the gym. Wait a few minutes, and then do the same.”

I nodded, and then he was off to talk to the monitor to be let inside.

Midnight crept to my feet, brushed against me. I never had any qualms with her touches, definitely because they weren’t real, but I was getting a lot better at imagining what her touch felt like. If I concentrated hard enough, it was almost like she was a physical thing, like I could actually feel her warmth and the softness of her fur. She started purring and I imagined leaning down to pet her, from her ears to just above her tail. She arched into my hand.

The monitor let me inside without question, and I reveled in the warmth as I scuffled to the bathroom. My shoes squeaked on the tile, and Midnight slipped a few times on the wetness they left behind.

As soon as I’d shut the bathroom door, Payton opened the farthest stall, the handicap one, and waved me to follow him in. I swallowed and stepped carefully around him, watched his fingers as he slid the lock into place.

“Can I kiss you, Adrian?” he whispered. “I think you’re ready now. Can I?”

After a deep breath, I rolled my shoulders back and looked him in the eyes. Nodded, waited for him to come closer. And he did, and he slowly put his hands on my neck, and it tingled but it wasn’t awful as I knew it was coming. His forehead touched mine, first, and then he tipped his head and our noses bumped, and then it was our lips. December had chapped them. I closed my eyes when I saw that his were already shut, and I tipped into the kiss just as he had. He was taller than me.

I had thought that, in a kiss, one would know exactly how to move their body, that every gesture was made on instinct and every moment was a movie moment. But when I went to touch his waist, I first had to bend my elbow, then flex my fingers, then put them down one by one. We were still wearing our coats—the polyester on his was scratchy—and I couldn't feel his warmth through the padding. I parted my lips and went to wrap my other arm around his shoulders, and it was the same: lift the arm, and then bend the elbow, and then cradle his neck and pull him closer. And then, and then he backed away.

We were inches apart, I watched him blink. “That was good,” he said so quietly. “You’re already better than Cody, and he started learning in Kindergarten.”

When someone fell in love in *Moulin Rouge!*, there was a little twinkle in their eye, a little sparkling star. I waited to see one in Payton's eyes, and it didn't happen, but their grey color was as pretty as it had always been. I let myself smile as I tried to get a hold on the way my lips felt. It was something like they were up in flames, but then Payton kissed me again, and the flames died into smoke.

“Let's get back before they come looking for us.” His voice, full volume suddenly, made me flinch. He ducked out from under my arm and his coat made a scratchy noise as it slipped from my fingers.

For the rest of recess, and for the rest of school, and for the rest of the day into nighttime, I could feel Payton's kiss like it was still happening. To make the feeling go away, I envisioned Midnight hopping from here to there and back again—desk to desk, chair to chair, table to countertop—never touching the floor. It kind of helped. One thought kept returning to me though,

kept a hand locked over my mouth: what if Mom found out? She always knew when I was lying—could she see secrets too?

But she didn't notice anything. When I put on my stereo and rocked side to side before bedtime, Midnight summoned a snow storm and I trudged after her up the freezing creek near the orchard. She was leading me somewhere, but I'd never gone that far up the creek before in real life, so I pictured again and again the different things we might've found until Mom came into my room and shut off the stereo. "Go to sleep," she said, and I scrambled to rearrange my pillows and do as I'd been told.

Payton had Cody and I kiss when Cody returned to school, under our umbrella fort. Cody definitely wasn't as good as Payton, but there was something about the tentative way he touched my cheek that made me want to draw pictures onto his skin. When we'd finished, he gave me a tightlipped smile. "Yeah, that was pretty good." I didn't know much about Cody's likes and dislikes, but I figured a small, red strawberry on the back of his hand would suit him nicely. Strawberries were simple to draw, and easily distinguishable.

Payton clapped with glee. "I'd take credit for teaching him," he said, "but I think it's from all the gross movies he watches. I do wish I could take credit."

I frowned. "They're not gross." If Cody got a strawberry, Payton would get a green apple. I glanced down at the back of my hand, wondering what I would have.

Cody cocked his head to the side. "They kind of are. My sister watches them and they make me feel sick."

"You just have to give them an actual chance," I mumbled, looking back up at them both.

Payton's eyes were trained onto my mouth, and a second later his hand darted out and swiped at my bottom lip. I jerked away with a grimace.

"Sorry," he said. "There was spit."

Cody was staring at me with a thoughtful expression, but it was thoughtful in a bitter way and I couldn't hold his gaze for long. He didn't explain himself, and after a while he looked at Payton to start a new conversation, and that was that. Pressing my thumb to the back of my hand, I decided I would want a drawing of a red apple with a green leaf.

The last day before Christmas break we all got out of school early, even Mom. She drove us home and Kyle talked about his new friend Dustin, which I thought was a stupid name. I didn't say anything about it, though.

Conversations came to a stop when our house came into view—two stories tall, white with green trim, wrapped in a gravel driveway. It looked nice in the weather, with the black roof sharp against the dull grey sky, with the three pine trees in the front yard sharp too. But it was the semi truck parked in the gravel drive that grabbed our attention, nothing more.

"I thought Dad wasn't getting home until tomorrow!" Kyle leaned forward in his seat to get a better look, and I did the same. As we got closer we could see Dad waiting in the driver's seat of the semi, no doubt locked out of the house itself.

"I haven't cleaned my room yet," Matt moaned.

Mom frowned at us in the rearview mirror as she pulled into the drive behind the truck. "I thought I'd told you—he was able to drop off his shipment early."

I looked at Matt. "Were we supposed to clean our rooms?"

“No more than usual,” he said, “but Dad always gets this look in his eye when he sees it messy. I hate it.”

As soon as the car was stopped, we all clambered out. Mom said something about putting our things away when we were finished using them instead of waiting for them to pile up, but we weren't really listening. Dad must have seen us, because he was already coming out from the truck's door and down the big metal steps. We rushed toward him, big smiles already on our faces, all three of us fighting to tell him everything that had happened since we'd last seen him.

Altogether, Christmas and New Year's happened in a flurry. It started to snow on the twenty fourth and didn't stop until the twenty seventh, and our plans to spend Christmas dinner at Grandma's house were foiled. In fact, most of our plans were foiled, as there were drifts taller than Matt blocking our way off of the porch, and several feet of snow everywhere else. Mom tried to get us to shovel, but we got ourselves out of it—even when Dad started pushing us, too.

For Christmas, Matt, Kyle and I collectively got a GameCube, and then we each got different games to go with it, plus one extra for all of us. Matt and Kyle's both looked like fighting games, from what I could see of the covers. I clutched my game close after unwrapping it—Animal Crossing, it was called. There were little animals all over the front, all smiling, and a person I figured would be me. I wasn't sure whether or not I wanted Matt and Kyle to know what the game was, but Matt demanded I show him. Luckily, he just smiled. “Looks fun,” he said, and then Kyle took the box from me to read the back. When I picked up and examined their games, I couldn't help being embarrassed for... thinking I'd needed to be embarrassed.

We also got checkered onesies, which we all promptly put on before settling down to play Super Smash Bros, the game meant for all of us. Matt and Kyle screamed a lot when they died, irritating Mom. Dad told them to calm down, but they never could manage to long.

The day went like that. There wasn't much to do besides play games (mostly video games, but a few board games as well) and watch new movies Dad had acquired. Dad also showed us the iPod he'd bought—it was white and had a little screen at the top, and he let us scroll through the hundreds of songs he'd already put on it. It was so small, and the headphones it had come with were small too, without the band that went over the head.

“My friend Dustin said he might be getting one of these for Christmas,” Kyle said, turning the iPod between his fingers.

Matt snatched it from him. “Is your friend Dustin rich?”

I imagined the possibilities, if I had that iPod with those headphones... The band on the headphones I already had made it impossible to use them without hurting myself while I listened to music in bed. They pressed against my skull or my temples when I rocked. Which meant I had to use my stereo instead of my Walkman. Undesirable. But with the iPod headphones, I thought it might not hurt at all, and with the iPod itself I wouldn't have to hunt through my CDs to find whatever song I knew would best suit upcoming moments in my stories. And, and, sometimes—often—I screwed up the daydream, timed something wrong or simply got distracted so what I was imagining didn't line up with the music quite right or didn't achieve what I wanted it to achieve. But with the iPod I could restart each song as many times as I wanted without getting embarrassed about someone hearing.

When Matt handed the iPod to me, I cradled it. How much had it cost? Were we rich? Our house was pretty big, I figured, but there was only one bathroom and, in the living room, a huge hole in the wall. It'd been a big heater once, stretching all the way up to the ceiling, but during an inspection it was found to be a safety hazard and removed. Mom put a bookshelf in front of the gaping darkness it'd left behind.

Regardless of the state of the house, we had a GameCube with four games and Dad had an iPod, so I figured we were all set to go.

We finally got up to Grandma's on New Year's Day, though the drive took us almost an hour longer than usual because, as Mom always put it, the roads were "slicker than snot." The plan was to have a feast with Grandma and our uncle James, play some games like we always did, and then leave before dark, but a surprise snowstorm began and we were trapped. As we ate I watched the snow swirling over the meadow outside, worrying about whether or not I would get to listen to music and do my rocking. There weren't enough bedrooms for me to get my own. The thought of going without daydreaming tugged at the back of my neck.

Uncle James told Matt and Kyle, several times over, that they were likely going to hell. This was typical—it had gotten to the point where Mom, Dad, and Grandma never bothered intercepting anymore, since Matt and Kyle found so much humor in it anyhow.

We played board games all evening long, and when Mom, Dad, and Grandma started getting more and more drunk, Uncle James slouched to the living room to watch the news. Sometimes we could hear his voice, a slow chatter that drifted past the kitchen into the dining room, as he talked to himself. Mom told us once that he'd had a hard life and we should give him a pass. And also that he told absolutely everyone they were going to hell, regardless of how decent they

might've been, so we shouldn't take it to heart. I still dreaded his appearances though, no matter how short they sometimes were. In his presence—under his tall, rail-thin shadow—I couldn't help but feel as though he could see through me, that he could see every sin I'd ever committed, every lie I'd ever told, and that he was only holding back his damning words because I was still quite little.

I wondered, when I brought him a glass of water per Mom's request, if he could look and see what Payton and I had done together, what Cody and I had done together. Was it a mark, like dirt on my lips? Or maybe God Himself whispered into Uncle James' ear and told him to tell Mom what I was getting up to.

Nothing happened, of course, and, though I didn't really believe in Him, I said a small thank you to God. When it was time for bed, I slept on the floor in the little bedroom Kyle had claimed, and I didn't get to listen to music, and so I fell asleep irritated.

The sun, in the morning, shined white across the already blinding snow. Grandma made poached eggs and crispy bacon, and, as always happened when she made bacon, the fire alarm went off. Even with the fan above the stove on, thick smoke hung grey in the air. If it hadn't smelt like bacon, I might have minded more.

Matt was put on duty to wave a magazine in front of the alarm until the smoke drifted far enough away that the alarm would stop wailing at us, but he got tired so Kyle took over. Matt slumped down against the wall nearby, rested his elbows on his bent knees and cupped his hands over his ears, watching Kyle with a bored expression. Almost at once I saw both Payton and Cody in him, and I wondered what it would really be like if they were one person. They collided in front of me, and I tweaked their hair, then their face, and down. I found that the person I was

building looked rather plain. Payton and Cody were so different, I supposed—Payton very pale and Cody dark, Payton’s face very pointy and Cody’s rounded—that put together as one they just balanced out. The alarm stopped, and I remembered that it had still been screaming.

It wasn’t until the next day that we could safely drive home. Someone had plowed early in the morning, and the snowbanks along the sides of the road had that slippery look to them, so Mom hoped that the ice atop the gravel and, further down, the pavement, had mostly melted. “We cut it so close,” Mom said, because school was starting up again tomorrow.

On the drive down, I remembered our cat Floppy back home, and I hoped she was okay. Did she have enough food when we’d left? Or water? When I asked Mom and Dad, they assured me that she’d be perfectly fine, that there’d been a lot of food in her bowl and that she liked to drink from the drippy faucet in the kitchen sink. Still, I couldn’t take my mind off of the idea of returning home to find her body on the floor, and as the drive went on I got more and more worked up. I tried to listen to music to distract myself, but the battery in my Walkman died early on, and then I was left with nothing to do except imagine how skinny a starved, dead cat looked. And, when Payton and Cody found out that I was grieving, would they hold me? Would they tell everyone else to back off, because I needed my space? Maybe they would pool their allowances together to get me a new kitten—a completely black one. Cody would hold it out to me delicately, and I’d take it and pull it to my chest, inhale against its fur, and his eyes would fill with tears because he couldn’t imagine how much pain I was in.

Floppy was perfectly fine. When we came inside the house, she circled our feet and meowed. I picked her up and carried her to the living room to I've her lots of pets until it was time for Dad to leave.

He gathered up all of his things and climbed back into his truck, shouting a goodbye at Kyle and me in the driveway. Mom and Matt stayed in the house, saying it was too cold to leave now that they'd gotten inside again. When Dad had pulled out of the driveway, Kyle and I ran out to the front yard and waved and waved at him until we couldn't see his truck anymore.

Seeing Payton again was miraculous, like a New Year's gift. He stumbled into Kids Club only moments after I had, wearing his signature grin and practically swan diving into a hug. For a second I felt angry, so angry as his body enveloped mine—almost angry enough to actually, maybe, do real harm to him—but then he whispered “I missed you” into my ear, and his breath cascaded down my neck, and all of that went away. First I went limp, and then I put my arms around his waist and hugged him back.

He told me his New Year's resolution was to read more books than me. I frowned, because I'd barely been reading any books lately, except during the quiet time that followed the recess after lunch, which Payton read during, too. Maybe he meant he was going to try to read as quickly as I did.

I told him I was going to talk to a new person in our class at least once every week. Mom and Dad had suggested it, saying I was too shy. I would've felt bad saying no, so I didn't. Secretly, though, I'd resolved to practice kissing more. I wanted to be really good. While it probably wouldn't be a big deal to tell Payton that, or even Cody, I decided against it because I didn't want

it to seem like I was trying too hard. Payton—and recently Cody, too—never seemed to be trying too hard at all.

Cody and I’s reunion was less than miraculous. Though he hugged Payton as tightly as I had, and gave him as big a smile as Cody ever gave, he barely looked at me at all. Had I done something wrong? My fingers twitched against the pocket of my jeans, and I considered asking him. Surely someone who wasn’t shy would’ve just asked him.

But a second later the bell rang, and then we were called to our seats. After a brief run-down of everyone’s vacations, we were back to our regularly scheduled schooling. I couldn’t speak to Cody at all. During math, I pictured a very small Midnight curling up against his feet. Mrs. Reader called on me to answer a question, and I scrambled for a moment before seeing a subtraction problem on the board. The solution came easily and she smiled wide. My returning smile was a bit more of a grimace.

To make matters worse, we were assigned partners for a poster project about our New Year’s resolutions, and Payton and Cody got put together while I was put with Devon. Of all people, it’d had to be Devon. I wondered if he could count as the new classmate I spoke to this week—surely, he could.

“I’m so glad I’m with you,” Devon said after we’d settled into seats beside each other. A blank piece of poster paper sat across the desks we’d pushed together. “You’re so good at drawing.”

“Thank you,” I said, and cleared my throat. “It’s... cool to be with you too.”

“It is?”

And he looked so hopeful, his mouth in a little ‘o’ and his eyes streaked with highlights—reflections—that I smiled a real smile. “Yeah. I think we have a lot in common. You like dinosaurs, I like dinosaurs. You like *Lord of the Rings*, I like it too.” I glanced over at Payton and Cody, saw that they were looking at me with so much pity, and I hated that what I’d said was completely true.

The project went well. Really well, actually. Our poster ended up looking a lot cooler than most others, with small drawings of every student in the class—candidates to try to speak to each week—lined up along the bottom, and with various fruits lined up along the top (Devon wanted to eat a new fruit every day until he’d tried them all—I wondered if, after that happened, he would just quit eating fruit entirely?). But when we presented the project, I couldn’t help but look at Payton’s face, which was filled with so much concern, and Cody’s, which was filled with... an emotion I couldn’t quite identify. I thought for a second that if Midnight were here she would surely make me feel better, pushing her nose and cheeks against my legs like cats always did, but there was too much pressure standing in front of everyone to conjure up the image, let alone the feeling of her body against mine.

At recess, under the umbrellas, I said about Devon, “It was awful. He’s the worst. I never want to talk to him again.”

“I’m so sorry,” Payton replied, and he looked it.

“Do you think this is what following through with my New Year’s resolution is always gonna be like?”

Cody said, “I’d guess Devon wasn’t a great start. Everyone else is far better than Devon. Mostly.”

“Totally,” Payton agreed. He dipped his nose to my shoulder, and I hissed and butted him away with the heel of my hand. “I’m so sorry. I’m really sorry. I forgot.”

I sighed and opened my mouth to tell him it was okay, but Cody spoke first. “What is that? You hating to be touched—why is that a thing?”

Meeting his gaze felt like being stabbed. “I—I’m not sure. It’s just always been like that.”

“Like what? Why does it matter?” And then his hand struck out over Payton’s legs, and he slapped my shin. Hard, actually. I leapt to my feet, crashing through the umbrella fort and then back against the wall opposite our corner. My breath came short and fast.

He *hit* me. *Cody* hit me.

After they’d clambered out of the fallen umbrellas, Payton stared back and forth between Cody and me. It may have been comical if I could see it properly, but everything looked fuzzy, and my body felt fuzzy too.

“It’s weird,” Cody spat. He looked at Payton. “Can’t you see it’s weird?”

Payton replied, “You always told me to respect it.”

With my palms flattened against the wall behind me—it was so cold I could feel it through my gloves—I managed a deep breath. The next few were strangled again, but at least I could make out Payton’s expression. It was a frown. He looked almost as confused and hurt as I was.

“I know you like Devon,” Cody said. “I saw you laughing and smiling.”

I swallowed and licked my lips. They were salty—I was crying. “I was just trying to be nice.”

“Why don’t you just kiss him, too? I bet you want to.”

Payton gagged and then laughed, just a short sound, like he was trying to break the tension.

“I’m going to go,” I said. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Yeah, alright,” Cody bent down and picked up an umbrella. With the realization that I was crying, it stung to see that he wasn’t as well.

The playground monitor looked really worried as she led me inside. She tried to ask me what was wrong, if someone had been mean, and I just shook my head and told her I’d tripped, but that I wasn’t actually hurt or anything.

I pulled down my jeans when I got into a stall and examined my shin. It stung again to see that there was no mark. Before I could help it, I dragged my fingernails, hard, across where Cody had hit me. It didn’t bleed, but the scratches turned red. I told myself I must have stepped on Midnight’s tail, and she defended herself as any other cat would have.

At the next recess, I didn’t dare follow Payton and Cody to our usual hangout. I watched from afar as they put together their umbrella fort—minus one umbrella—and then disappeared underneath it. My contribution to the fort, the red umbrella that had started it all, had broken in the fall. The cheap plastic handle had cracked against the cement ground, and one of the spokes had snapped. It was folded up in my backpack, looking like a bloody fruit bat.

I was wondering what Payton and Cody could possibly be doing under their fort—could they go so quickly back to kissing? Were they talking about me?—when Devon appeared at my side. “You wanna play dinosaurs?” he asked.

And I did, so I nodded.

Payton came to me during Kids Club the next morning, which was a relief. He sat down across from me, clasped his hands together atop the table, and stared deep into my eyes. A hard stare, like he was looking for something.

“Cody doesn’t want to hang out with you anymore,” he said.

I swallowed. “Oh.”

“He thinks you’re weird. And also gay.”

“G—” the word stuck in my throat— “I’m not!”

Payton shrugged. “If it’s okay with you—Cody already agreed—I’ll hang out with each of you every other recess. You during lunch recess today, Cody during the afternoon one. And then tomorrow Cody during lunch, you during afternoon. Cody already agreed,” he said again.

I nodded without thinking and without really processing his words. It was pure luck that it was actually a decent compromise. “Payton,” I started, “I’m not... I’m not what Cody said.”

Another shrug. “I don’t really care, honestly. I’m ninety-nine percent certain my dad is gay. That’s probably why he divorced my mom. Well, okay. Ninety-eight percent certain. So I don’t really care.”

I blinked, trying to take in this new information. If his dad were gay, why would he have married a woman in the first place? How would Payton have been born? I thought maybe I could

ask Mom—or even Matt or Kyle—about it later, but as far as I knew I wasn't supposed to say 'gay.' Like I was pretty sure I wasn't allowed to say 'wine' or 'bra.' I'd get in trouble asking Mom, and Matt would probably laugh at me, and Kyle would just tell Matt and then they'd both laugh at me.

And so life went like that. On the days Payton was with Cody, I played with Devon and his friends. His friends were weird. One day a boy named Shaun accidentally pushed me from behind and I fell flat on my face. The air was sucked from my lungs and I thought I was going to die. And then I had to deal with the fact that I had massive scrapes on my chin and nose and forehead, from hitting the gravelly pavement.

When Payton and I were together, always under the umbrellas (except at Kids Club), we touched. We touched all the time. It was getting easier, with him, because he was always gentle. He'd put his hand on my thigh and drag his fingernails up to my hip, squeezing my puffy coat as he deepened a kiss. We almost got caught once. There was a new playground monitor and she didn't bother announcing her presence before she ripped off an umbrella. Payton and I fell back, thankfully shielded by the other collapsing umbrellas. He scrambled to find his pile of flashcards, but it was too late. The monitor didn't know what we'd been doing exactly, but she knew it wasn't practicing math, and so she forbade us from hiding under the umbrellas any more. Payton dragged me along, then, and we found Lana and joined in her game of tag.

I liked watching Lana's long braid trail behind her as she ran, and once, when I caught her and told her she was 'it,' she looked at me for what felt like too long. But she had a smile in her eyes and then one on her glossy lips as well, and maybe it wasn't too long after all.

I made the fatal mistake of trying to sneak people the invitations to my birthday party in the classroom itself. Mrs. Reader caught me, and she insisted that tomorrow I bring invites for everyone else. I'd only handed out three: one for Payton, one for Devon when Payton wasn't looking (though that was useless because he would've definitely seen Devon at the party anyways), and one for Devon's friend. Actually, it was Shaun, the friend who had pushed me down, but besides that whole fiasco we'd been getting along quite well.

Mom was enraged when I told her about the invites—"Does this house look like it'll fit twelve six-year-old boys?"—but she conceded because it was all we could do.

Payton, weirdly, was also enraged, though he managed to hide it at least a little. But by then I knew him well enough to see through the facade. When I asked him what was wrong, he shook his head hard, and then stared down to the ground like he was deep in thought.

The house was full. There were kids in every room downstairs: the kitchen, the living room, the dining and computer room. Even the bathroom—three boys were gathered there, doing God knows what. There was a small ladder in the kitchen, typically used to reach the high cupboards, and Mom yelled at a large cluster of boys who were fighting to be the one at its top. Devon and Shaun were drawing at the kitchen table, ignoring the ruckus. Devon had told me when he arrived that he needed to be sleeping by seven thirty—that was his bedtime. I told him to eschew his bedtime, and he frowned. I had to explain what that meant.

Cody wasn't there, of course, but Payton was, and he didn't leave my side for a second. Mom watched him, the way he held onto my arm all the time, the way he'd bend slightly to whisper into my ear. We'd giggle. I watched Mom watch him.

Matt and Kyle had gone to spend the night with their own friends. When Payton bent to whisper that he wished he had me all to himself, I was glad they weren't there.

We had a scavenger hunt, just like Kyle had at his birthday party the year before. It was a blast. All the presents and gifts at the end were in my closet, and we carried them back to the kitchen, crammed in around the table, and everyone sang the happy birthday song. I didn't know where to look, if I should smile or not, so I just nodded my head along with the rhythm. Nodding my head, I realized that my whole body was moving too. Rocking. So then I stopped and held still.

I had to make a wish. As the song came to a close, I stared down at the candles, and I thought: it would be really nice to be friends with Cody again.

Most of my presents were dinosaur related, though the kids who knew me a little better got me cat stuff. Actually, I wondered where our cat Floppy was. She had to be around somewhere, but she was probably hiding from all the noise.

Payton got me Littlest Pet Shop toys. "They reminded me of that Animal Crossing game you like," he said.

I held the package close. "Thank you. I love it."

The night took a turn when we were all set loose again. Devon chose not to eschew his bedtime and went upstairs with his sleeping bag, falling asleep on my bedroom floor. Two boys

went home because they weren't allowed to stay the night—Payton's eyes trailed after them as they went out the door. I couldn't read his expression, and that was discouraging. I could usually read him in an instant.

When the rest of us—nine—went to my room and set up the sleeping bags, we tried to be quiet so as not to wake Devon. But then we realized that Devon slept very soundly, and we could be as loud as we wanted.

We'd all been talking about our favorite movies and games when Payton climbed up to stand on my bed. "Silence," he said. "It is now eight thirty, and darkness has fallen." The room went still under his command. We waited as he surveyed the room, looking down at me last. I was sitting at his feet, legs tucked under myself, and I clutched a pillow to my chest.

"Shaun, please turn out the lights."

Shaun was not the type to disobey an order from Payton—few were—and so he did as he was told. The room was plunged into darkness, and then Payton had a flashlight. Where he'd found it, I wasn't sure. It wasn't a familiar flashlight, and I thought, vaguely, that he must have brought it from home.

"Have you heard," he began, tipping the flashlight up beneath his chin, casting shadows across his face. "...that this house is over a hundred years old?"

He shined the light down at me, and I nodded. It was nearly the oldest house in our town, second only to one just down the street. I hated that house, truly.

The light took its place back under his chin. "Have you perhaps also heard..." His smile was gruesome. I leaned back so I could see it from a better angle, and then I leaned forward again because I didn't like seeing it. "About the woman in the cellar?"

A few boys murmured to each other as Payton sank down to his knees. “Adrian!” he called, making me jump. He held the flashlight out like a microphone. “Tell us about your cellar.”

I took the light, and said, in all honesty, “It’s terrifying. The stairs down are steep and covered in filth and cobwebs. And then the floor at the bottom is dirt, not stone or wood. Just dirt. It’s small, and there are shelves filling most of the room with empty jars on them. And there’s trash littered about, but we don’t really know where it came from, because we never go down there.”

“And the walls?” Payton prompted.

I frowned. “Brick, I think.”

He took the light back. “Yes, brick. Now, I did not hear this story from Adrian—no—but from his eldest brother... um... Mark.” So the story definitely wasn’t true. I was relieved. Payton went on, “Mark told me, and me only, one night weeks ago. He’s never told Adrian, because he knew Adrian would be too scared to continue living in the house. But I’m brave. And I know Adrian better than Mark does, and I know that he can be brave, too.”

Our eyes were getting used to the light. I could look around and see the wide eyes and the stillness of bodies. We all tried to put on brave faces to level ourselves to the faith Payton was putting in us.

“The first people to live in this house, a hundred years ago, were a man and his wife. Their names have been lost to time, but their tale has not. They were happy, at first, but there was something about the house that began to drive them mad. When they passed by the bathroom mirror, they saw faces. Faces of people they’d never met. And at night the floorboards on the

stairs and in the hall—just outside this door—they creaked. Footsteps, for sure. First the couple was happy, and then they were insane. The woman became convinced that her husband was cheating on her, and when she confronted him, he laughed in her face. He called her crazy, and that upset her even more, so she attacked him. She scratched at his face with long fingernails, and that was the last straw. The man found an axe in the cellar and chased after her, and they ran up to this very bedroom. The woman slammed the door in her husband's face and locked it. But he had an axe, remember? He'd gotten it from the cellar. And he cut at the door again and again—this very door.”

He turned the light onto that door, and there were cracks. I'd always looked upon those cracks and wondered where they'd come from. While Payton's story was without a doubt fake, it was putting all sorts of new ideas in my mind.

Two boys gasped. One whimpered and asked Payton to stop.

“No—this story needs to be told. If it is not told at least once every ten years, the house will drive the people inside it insane, just like it drove the couple insane so long ago.”

Everyone was quiet again. Well, not completely quiet. I could hear Devon snoring, and between those snores, someone sniffing. Crying, I thought.

“And finally, with one last swing of his axe, the door fell open. The man came through, and wham!”

We all jumped.

“He buried the axe into her skull, and she fell dead on the floor.”

Yes, someone was definitely crying. Maybe more than one person.

“As soon as he’d seen what he’d done, the man became terrified. But, because he was insane, he wasn’t terrified of himself, of having committed the crime in the first place, but of getting caught. And so he dragged his wife out into the hall, down the stairs—her limp body thumping against each step—and out the door and into the cellar. The walls, back then, were only dirt like the floors. But in the corner were hundreds of bricks, and so he built them up and built them up, all around the room, and shoved his wife behind them. He saw blood trickle down her ruined face as he put the last bricks up around her. She was forever consumed by darkness. And she still is. Darkness. Down in the cellar, behind the walls, her body has rotted to bone.”

Even I couldn’t help but shiver. I hugged my arms and leaned against Payton’s shoulder, seeking his comfort. He glanced at me and then wrapped his own arm around my waist.

“The man was never seen again. Did he run away? Or does he still walk these halls, looking for his next victim? Late at night, the house still creaks, and... Mark said, that for a long time he’d tried to convince himself it was just the wind. But deep down, he knew it wasn’t. He knew it was the man. The axe murderer.”

And just then, almost like Payton had planned it, we heard footsteps banging up the stairs. I saw Payton’s eyes widen with glee, and a smile overtake his face, just as everyone began to scream. And still, Devon slept.

It had been Mom. And, after she’d managed to make sense of what had happened, she was angry. All the boys except Payton, Devon, and I were sobbing and waiting for the phone to be free so they could call their parents. They all wanted to go home. They all wanted out of the house before it was too late.

Mom's eyes flared towards Payton. She pulled me aside to say, "Tell him to leave too. I don't want him here."

"No," I said shakily. "I don't want to be alone. And Devon's asleep so he couldn't save me if the husband came in."

"That story was fake, Adrian—"

I cut in. "I know that. But that doesn't make it any less scary."

She regarded me for a long moment before sighing. "Okay. Fine. But I want him gone right away tomorrow morning."

Soon enough, everyone but Payton and Devon was getting picked up by their parents. I watched them go, one by one, and I felt awful. I looked to Payton, hoping he looked just as awful as I felt, but while he was in fact watching everyone leave as I was, he didn't look awful at all. His eyes burned with something I'd never seen before. The lids were heavy and I could have sworn a smile was toying at his lips, barely concealed. Meanwhile, I fought to hold back tears.

I'd never heard Payton speak that way before. Had he found it in a book? Had he practiced?

Mom spoke to each frustrated parent, who'd no doubt been promised a night to themselves, and I was almost certain she was condemning Payton, telling them all about what he'd done. It hurt that she didn't like him.

She ordered us to go to sleep shortly after everyone had gone.

"We're sharing," Payton murmured as he sat on my bed and dug through his bag for pajamas. Devon continued to snore softly from the floor, wrapped up in a big blanket. What kind of person goes to bed at seven thirty and sleeps so soundly afterwards? Even through screams? Pay-

ton glared at him for several seconds, maybe several seconds too long, looking truly upset by his presence. He really did hate Devon, I supposed.

After changing into our pajamas, Payton and I huddled under our own blanket. We were both on our backs at first, staring into the darkness, but when Payton rolled to face me I mirrored him.

“Now that everyone’s gone, I can give you the next lesson. Do you want the next lesson?” he whispered.

I blinked, not understanding. It took me a second to catch up. “There’s more?” And wait, now that everyone’s gone?

The terrible thoughts that had earlier only begun to take root blossomed rapidly.

“Of course there is,” he said with a little smile. “Do you want it?”

“Okay,” I said, and nodded. I bit back anything I’d been thinking to say, and then a moment or two later, I couldn’t remember those things at all.

“It’s perfect really.” He put his hand on my cheek, slow so I was prepared for the touch, and then he tugged on the hair above my ear until I scooted a little closer. “I showed Cody at my birthday sleepover.”

I didn’t want to think about Cody right then, but I said, “You did?”

“Yes,” he replied, and leaned in to kiss me. He paused first— “Can I?”

“You can.”

The kiss was short and simple—we were good at this now. “Tonight’s lesson is a little tricky, but I don’t think it’ll take much practice before you get it down.”

“Okay.” Our lips brushed when I nodded.

We locked into another kiss just in time for Payton to push me onto my back without pulling us apart at all. His tongue poked at my teeth, and he held himself over me with one hand. I whimpered when he pulled back, and watched with a furrowed brow as he spat in his free hand and then slipped it into my pajama pants. After a short moment of awkward fumbling, he sat back onto his knees and lifted one of my legs up by the knee. The blanket fell off of his shoulders behind him. “You always start with just one finger,” he said. “Remember that.”

It was underwhelming and unpleasant, and I couldn’t tell exactly what he was doing or what purpose it served, so I wriggled beneath him in an attempt to edge away. With his hand on my leg, though, he held me in place. All I could do was look at him looking at me.

Luckily it didn’t last long—after maybe a minute, he removed his finger, dropped my leg, and then flopped back down beside me. I readjusted my pants as he pulled the blanket back over us.

“That’s it,” he said. “That’s all there is to it.”

“Really?” I asked, and then a second later I wondered if I’d actually asked it.

“Well, for a while, yeah. It usually goes on longer, and then there’s a little more. But we’ll save that for later, I think.” He kissed my cheek, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

Surprisingly, my body didn’t hurt in any way. I didn’t feel burnt or tingly or anything like I usually did. But I was, kind of, wondering if I had a body at all.

“Did you like it?” Payton asked.

“Oh,” I breathed. “Sure.”

“Yeah, it’s alright.” He nodded, and the pillow we were sharing shifted a little, grazing my ear. “As long as it’s just fingers.”

I hummed like I understood.

“Goodnight, Adrian.”

“Goodnight, Payton,” I replied, and Devon snored.

It wasn't until the following Monday, during the recess we spent together, that Payton leaned in close and told me that we'd had sex.

The rest of the school year passed in just that way. Payton and I kissed as often as we could, though we only had sex one more time—the only time we had the opportunity to. It was in the school bathroom during free time on a wintry day when we couldn't go out for recess. He had me against the cement wall, pants all the way down—I blushed and blushed under his gaze—and it lasted longer than before, and it hurt more than before, too. There was more than one finger this time, but I couldn't focus enough to know how many more. I choked on tears and saliva. Payton was careful, and he kissed my shoulder when I let out an involuntary whine, but I didn't want to be there. I loved him, for sure, but this couldn't be right.

We'd only gotten to do it that one time more because we knew the recess monitors would get suspicious if we went inside all the time. And Mom didn't want him in our house, and Payton had decided his house wasn't exactly welcoming enough either. We did talk on the phone a lot, though. I didn't tell him that Devon had started sleeping over fairly often.

Two weeks into summer, Floppy got hit by a car. I never got to see the body, because Mom was very careful to keep me away. We dug a hole in the backyard for the funeral, beneath

the two lilac bushes that were apparently just as old as our house, and Mom made me cover my eyes as she laid Floppy into her grave.

I pictured it vividly—Floppy’s skull had been crushed under a wheel. Her face was deformed. An eye was half-popped out and leaking pus. Her shoulders were flattened. She was mangy and her fur was stained with blood. Surely, that was why Mom wouldn’t let me see.

I listened into the call when Mom told Dad. I heard him say, “Funny her name was Floppy,” and Mom didn’t laugh.

And then Payton called for the last time. He said something very quietly, too quietly—the crackling of our phones disguised his words. “Come again?” I said.

“I won’t be here next year. I’m moving away.”

Apparently his dad had found bigger land for cheap in Wyoming, and he wanted to get some cattle. Or horses. Pigs, maybe. I wasn’t really listening.

I held the phone in my hands for too long after we’d already ended the call. Stared down at it, examined the little holes for the speaker without really processing what they were. And then I found myself upstairs, lying in bed, skipping song after song on CD after CD, looking for something to fall into without success.

I knew it the moment it happened: I’d crushed up Midnight, and I’d never consider her again.

Fourth Grade

East Elementary was haunted. West had been haunted too, but only by a few six year olds who had been blessed with an extensive playground for all of eternity. Kids' stuff—which wouldn't even scare the kids still living. No, the haunting at East was serious business. On the roof walked a janitor who had taken a manic step off of the side of the building, fell the three stories down and sprayed shards of bone and mangled flesh over the pavement. In the balcony of the auditorium, a group of fifth graders bemoaned the moment the ceiling collapsed over their heads. And legend has it, the girls' bathroom on the first floor was host to a murder-suicide, teacher and teacher. The first floor was for third graders. I'd given the bathroom door a wide berth every time I'd passed by.

What the ghosts wanted, we were never sure. Help, probably. I waited for them to approach me, to show me what they needed, but they never came. In quiet moments when class was going on and I was out in the halls, either on my way to the restroom or performing some menial task for a teacher, I would stop at intersections, take a deep breath, and swear that in my peripherals I could see three bodies, hung from the ceiling, staring at me with dumbed but pleading faces. I thought, it would be easy to help them. They probably just wanted to be untied, to be on their feet again.

Mom very much regretted letting me watch *The Sixth Sense*.

Matt and Kyle had told me about the ghosts of East, and on the first day of fourth grade, right at the beginning of recess, I had the pleasure of telling everyone who would listen about them, too. Most everyone laughed. My story telling abilities weren't exactly great, so I knew I had to play up the humor. A few of the more timid kids looked a little scared, though, or maybe they were just too shy to join the joke.

After my little crowd had dispersed, I followed Devon, Shaun, and our new friend Caroline to a big tree in the middle of the playground. It was the only tree, big and fat beside a small cement wall with a four foot drop to the lower level of the yard. The roots of the tree swelled from the dirt at a seemingly impossible radius, and had even begun to push through the little wall. It was an oak tree, and for the rest of recess we ducked around its branches and delighted in gathering acorns. We crammed as many as we could into our pants pockets, wishing the weather were cooler so we could've used jacket pockets too, and then snuck them into our backpacks when we'd gotten back inside.

In the middle of a speed-spelling game, my new teacher Mr. Edwards asked me to deliver a message to a teacher down the hall. I was a bit disappointed, since I'd been winning, and I wondered on my walk to the other room if the class was relieved that I'd left. Or even if Mr. Edwards was.

After all, the pink sticky note hanging from my fingers was ridiculously unimportant—"Can I see your lesson plans later?"—and every room had phones. He could have just called. Calling wouldn't have been any more disruptive than my sudden presence in the other teacher's room had been.

“Oh, you must be Adrian!” she said, smiling. She held out her arms and took me into a hug. Which would have been fine, except the whole class was watching. When I’d stumbled from her grip, I surveyed the room.

Firstly, it was better decorated than ours was. Mom said Mr. Edwards was a newer teacher, so maybe he hadn’t had enough time to accumulate as many posters for the walls. Or maybe he didn’t care as much.

Secondly, Lana was in the front row, and she was grinning at me. White teeth, and hair even longer than it had been last year. She hadn’t been there to hear my ghost stories at recess, or if she had been I hadn’t seen her. But I would have seen her, I was sure. I grinned back and gave her a half-wave before turning to the teacher. I thought her name may have been Mrs. Manson. “From Mr. Edwards,” I said, giving her the note.

“I was a bit let down not having you in my class, you know. I had both of your brothers.”

“Ah,” I said, and nodded. I wiped my grin away and pursed my lips. I didn’t really know what to say. Another glance at Lana showed that she was quietly laughing at my expense. By now, she knew how much I hated hearing about my brothers. They were all any adult in this school ever talked about, at least until they got to know me better.

Lana stuck her tongue out at me as I left, and I thought about all the things that could mean while heading back to class. But then... everything got cold, and I could hear what sounded like a children’s choir. The entrance to the auditorium was nearby—it was the dead fifth graders. I quickened my pace into the classroom and slammed the door behind me. Luckily, the game was still going on and the volume had increased since I’d left, so no one noticed. But, then

again, that meant I didn't get the opportunity to gauge their reactions upon seeing my return, so maybe I should have slammed the door louder.

School got out at 3:15, and then, as I waited for Mom to get out of work at 4:00, Lana and I hung out in the commons. We'd been doing that since third grade, as Lana's mom was the music teacher and also had to stay late after school. There was a large selection of board games and toys available near the nurse's office, for whatever reason, and today we were playing with marble coaster tracks. We'd constructed a three foot tall, looping track and selected our favorite marbles to drop in. Lana's favorite was bright blue with hints of lime green, while mine was a swirl of golden brown and orange. It looked like amber, and Lana would joke that I only picked it because I thought there might be dinosaur DNA inside. She may not have been entirely incorrect.

"You know," she said as we watched my marble overtake hers for maybe the dozenth time, "I think this might be unfair. Yours is heavier."

"You know," I mocked, "maybe you should have picked a better marble."

She knocked her shoulder against mine. "Don't be rude."

I bumped her back. "I'm just stating the facts."

My marble rolled into the finish line, and when hers followed several seconds behind, she sighed and started digging through the little plastic tub to find a new one.

I regarded her while she was distracted. She was wearing a pale yellow tank top with a sequined, golden scarf—or rather a shawl—draped over her shoulders, and a burnt orange skirt that hung just above her knees. Knees that were without scrapes, which I could barely fathom.

Even after days of inactivity my knees would be bruised. It was her dainty white tennis shoes that pushed me over the edge.

“I like your outfit,” I blurted, and then swallowed. “Those shoes are absurd. They’re so white. And this,” I tugged gently on the shawl, “is absurd, too. But in a good way.”

She glanced up with a smile. “In a good way?”

“A good way,” I nodded. “How do you keep your shoes so white?” Looking down at my own, I frowned. Though they were quite new, maybe two or three weeks old, they were already scuffed and dirtied.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she said through another smile as she went back to digging through the bin, “but I only got them yesterday.”

I laughed. “Why can’t I tell anyone?”

“I have to keep up the illusion of being orderly. All my friends depend on it.”

“You’ve never been orderly in your life.”

She pulled out a marble, holding it up close in front of her eyes and examining it. This one was all sorts of colors, patched with red, gold, and black and white stripes. It was nice. I hadn’t seen it before, but if I had, I may have chosen it myself. “I did say ‘illusion,’ didn’t I?” I watched as she bit her lip, released it, and then smiled once more. I was still staring when she turned to appraise me. “I guess I can say your outfit is nice too. If you’re going for an ‘I didn’t try at all’ sort of look.”

I hummed. “In a good way?”

She shrugged. “I guess so. Ready to race again?”

We faced our contraption, and I took a deep breath. The truth was, I had tried today—I'd tried a lot. I'd gotten up much earlier than I'd needed to, taken a long shower, and stood in front of the mirror until my brothers yelled at me to get out of the bathroom. I'd pressed my hair down flat, then tucked it behind my ear, then mussed it all up and tried again. It was too fluffy, and while previously it'd had a soft, reddish tint to it, as I aged it harshened to a darker, mousy brown.

And my clothes—I'd tried there, too. Nothing too extravagant, but neat and clipped. Or, what'd I'd thought was neat and clipped. I cleared my throat and focused on the marble track, scanning over it. "First, do you think we should swap out that sharp turn for a funnel? My marble almost went over the side last time."

"Yeah, okay."

As we were dismantling our creation, Mrs. Manson came toward us. The common room was situated between the gym, teacher's lounge, main office, and several halls and stairways, so it had a lot of traffic even once the after-school rush died out. Usually everyone left us alone, but there were always a few teachers who recognized us and wanted to waste some time before they were allowed to leave. I hoped Mrs. Manson wouldn't make a habit of it, that it was only a one time thing.

"I'm glad you two are friends," she said with a big smile. It showed way too many teeth. And large teeth, as well. Like big shards of limestone. I snapped together the last tubes from the marble track before facing her. "You know, Adrian's brother Matt was good friends with your sister Audrey, Lana. I think there may have been a little something-something going on there, too, if you know what I'm saying." She winked. I leaned away.

“Oh, I know,” Lana said, giggling. “Audrey talked about him enough. Still does, actually. They got together a few times over the summer.”

“Did they?” I asked. That came as a surprise. All the times Matt had disappeared, I thought he was at band practice with his friend John. If Audrey talked about Matt a lot, then maybe the feelings weren’t mutual, because I, at least, had never even heard of her. With Matt it was always, “White Stripes, John and I are just like the White Stripes.” I had a hard time getting behind it. Regardless of the fact that Matt and John’s music was actually really good, it was far too loud.

Lana glanced at me. “Yup. I think they might actually be... a little something-something, if you know what I’m saying.” And then Lana winked, and it was very, very different.

Mrs. Manson laughed, and I tried to join her. “I would not be surprised. They’re both so talented, and so sweet, too. I imagine they get along just as well as they used to.”

Lana and I snorted. She said, “Audrey is not sweet.”

“Matt neither.”

“Well, that’s a shame. But you two are the little ones, right? Older siblings always torment the littlest ones.”

I looked away pointedly. “We were about to race. Do you mind?”

“Oh,” Mrs. Manson stepped up right between Lana and me. I sighed. “Can I watch? Who’s who?”

She lingered for far too long. By the time she left, Lana had to get ready to leave. She helped me take apart our track, box up all the parts, and then leaned in for a hug. “It’s so good to see you again, Adj. Been too long.” She always called me that, Adj. She even wrote it that way,

on the rare occasions when she had to write my name. Pronounced like Age, but she said it was too weird to spell like that. It was very endearing—she was the only one who did it—and it always made me smile.

Before she walked out of sight, I called her name. She tucked her chin in to look over her shoulder, and the gentle spirals in her hair shifted across her back. “It’s sad that we’re not in the same class this year. I’ll really miss being in music with you—hearing you sing, and all that.”

“It is a shame, isn’t it?” she said, and left without saying goodbye.

The house was brimming when Mom and I got there. Matt had John over, and Kyle had Dustin over. While Matt and John were going over a new song they were working on, Kyle and Dustin sat nearby on the computers, playing a flight simulator. I hovered over Kyle’s shoulder and watched him flip switches to get his plane off of the ground.

Every so often Kyle would say something to Dustin, and then Matt would pause whatever he was doing to make some crude remark. Most often, he would find some way to call Kyle gay, or work ‘gay’ into whatever Kyle was saying. “More like flight simugaytor, right?” That one came up a few times over the course of the evening. Kyle didn’t find it funny, so neither did I.

Mom didn’t make dinner—she usually didn’t. At various times throughout the night we all got up individually to scrounge the fridge, freezer, and cupboards for whatever we could find to eat. I had two microwavable burritos with shredded cheese sprinkled over the top, and then about an hour later a cup-o-noodle. When my brothers got boring I tried to draw, but I had no inspiration and it felt like I couldn’t even hold the pencil right, so then Mom and I watched *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. We’d seen it twice already, all the way from start to finish, but it was our fa-

favorite, so we had started it over again. We were both very much team Spike, and any episode that didn't include him always seemed like a bit of a let-down for me. Right then, we hadn't even reached his introductory episode, so I slipped down low on the couch and watched, inattentively, as Buffy had an intense discussion with Angel.

Dad called, and we all passed the phone around to chat and tell him about our first days at school, and he revealed that he'd be coming home briefly over the weekend. At nine thirty I went up to my room, put in my earbuds, and sifted through the music on the MP3 player I'd gotten the year before.

I was between fantasies, somewhat bored with the vampires I'd been imagining for the past several weeks but still trying to find ways to revitalize them. I enjoyed putting myself in a leather trench coat and dramatically revealing to people that I was actually undead, and I tried it out a few times on Lana. I also dramatically revealed that, because I was dead, I could see other dead people, like the ghosts in the school. All of that was too much for Lana, though, and she ran off—but only for a little while. Eventually she came back and, as I tried to tell her that I wouldn't hurt her, she interrupted me with a deep kiss. Pulled me down to her height by my neck and dug her fingernails into my skin, leaving indents behind. And then she asked me to turn her, to make her like me, and I latched down on her throat and drained her until she fell slack.

But, again, I'd envisioned this lots of times, and it didn't really hold my attention. I took out my headphones barely a half hour after lying down and curled up with my hands under my pillow, tried to sleep. My eyelids were so heavy, and my breath slow and even, but I still lay there for what felt like hours before finally dropping away.

Mr. Edwards had this idea to rearrange the seating plan every day for the first couple of weeks so we all could get to know each other. Today, to my left, was Caroline, whom I already knew, and then to my right was a girl named Sofia. I'd never seen her before, so I asked if she was new this year.

"No," she frowned, "I've been here since second grade."

"Oh," I said with a smile. "How have I never noticed you?" That wasn't even a line—she was rather unique, with black hair longer than Lana's, though she didn't bother styling it like Lana did, instead leaving it down and somewhat fuzzy. Today she was wearing an odd, mint-green and crushed velvet track suit, which seemed like the specific kind of thing that implied she might have always worn strange clothes. I couldn't place her accent or her race, really—she definitely wasn't Native American, but her skin was a greyed olive. I wondered if it was always that color, or if she just hadn't gotten any sun lately.

She shrugged. "I don't know, Adrian. I see you everywhere."

"My bad, then." I shrugged back.

Our conversation didn't go much further after that. She turned and faced the front, then dug around in her desk drawer and pulled out an eraser. It was a long cylinder, longer than a finger, with rainbow stripes all up the sides. She twisted it around in her hands, bending it slightly and then spinning it and thwacking it against the desk. I wondered where she got an eraser like that.

Caroline caught my attention and she told me about some show called *Avatar*, which I'd never seen, but she thought it would be cool to play it at recess.

"I think you'd be a firebender," she said. "I'm a waterbender."

“It’s just like superpowers, right?”

She pondered that with a hum. “Kind of. But like, kung fu superpowers.”

Sofia chimed in, just before Mr. Edwards began roll call, saying, “I’ve never been able to figure out which one I am. Maybe water?” I nodded like that meant something to me, and then she watched me smile with what felt like heavy scrutiny. I shifted to avoid the gaze.

Over the rest of the week, I found that there wasn’t much to be learned yet. We reviewed our multiplication tables and started applying them to two and three digit numbers, but after the first lesson I had it down and essentially was made to do busy work while everyone else caught up. In English we just had to write up short reports about a book we’d read recently, and in science we were covering the different forms of matter. Kyle had taught me all about that already.

Recess was fun, though I sort of felt like the odd one out since apparently I was the only person on the planet who’d never seen *Avatar*. Mom didn’t particularly like to let us watch cartoons, though. Typically I stuck to Animal Planet, the Discovery Channel, or National Geographic. That combined with my recent interest in the *Warriors* book series meant I always preferred when we played animal games. My love of cats remained as strong as ever, and I’d take any chance to prance around and pretend to be one.

After school with Lana was also a high point, of course. She was quite a physical person, unafraid of skimming her fingers over my collar or poking my face or pushing into me. Hugs, too, came often, which I’d known from last year but it still managed to surprise me. No one in my family was much of a hugger, unless one of us were leaving for a few days, or unless it was Dad. We would usually hug Dad a few times when he was around, since he wasn’t around much.

I think in general I probably got fewer hugs than Matt and Kyle did—remnants from when I'd demanded to not be touched without permission. I wasn't particularly sure when that had stopped being an issue. I wasn't even sure if the discomfort had slowly tapered away or if I'd just woken up one morning and it was completely gone, from one hundred to zero. No matter; I was glad it was gone, because it meant I could get closer to Lana.

Friday began a little unfortunately when we found a dead bird on the porch on our way out the door. We weren't running behind at all, so we took the time to wrap it in an old cloth and bury it under the lilac bushes, which had become a sort of pet cemetery after we'd put Floppy there. Kyle put his arm around me when he saw I was holding back tears. Matt and I made eye contact, but only for a moment before he went to climb inside the car. His expression had been blank—it didn't mean anything.

On the drive to East, I stared out the window and let the tinny hum of the radio guide me to:

The dead bird, cupped in my hands. Matt and Kyle looked on with curiosity. Mom told me to put the bird down, that I would catch a disease, but Kyle shushed her—he knew something was coming. I took a deep breath and looked to the sky, and the clouds swirled grey and chalk blue before a golden light tied my hands to the heavens. Everyone around me gasped, but I remained calm, and in my serenity—perhaps because of my serenity—the bird hopped to its feet and stretched its wings. Its tiny talons stuck into my skin as it danced to my finger before flying off in a flutter of feathers. The sky cleared and Matt, Kyle, and my mother watched me with something similar to horror.

Once at school, I waited for our whole group to arrive on the playground before starting in on my story of the dead bird. I told them it'd had bloody claw-marks all down its body. Devon looked just as upset as I had been, perhaps more so after I added a detail about rotting eyes. I pushed my knuckles against his arm in some meager attempt to comfort him, feeling a little guilty.

And then we all kept talking, just gathered in a circle under the big oak tree and letting the conversation take us wherever it would. Unfortunately it happened to take us to who we had crushes on.

I would've loved to talk about Lana in any other situation. There was something very satisfying about confiding in others, about verbalizing all the reasons you enjoyed being around someone. I always thought, moments where you could list those reasons out loud were good practice for when you'd eventually list them to the person themselves. A big romantic gesture—I love your eyes, and your smile, and the way you laugh and then tilt your head to the side when I say something stupid and will you take my hand in marriage?

The issue was I knew at least two of the girls sitting with us couldn't be trusted to keep secrets. And while the others didn't seem concerned, I couldn't stand the idea of Lana knowing I liked her before I was ready to tell her myself.

Devon was the only other one who refused to say who he liked. But with the way he kept his eyes lowered... I'd figured a long while ago that he liked Caroline, so it made sense, really. It would take a lot of bravery to admit your crush right up front like that, surrounded by other people, no less.

A boy named Chase came up three times, once by Caroline, once by a girl named Marie, and then by another girl who'd picked someone else but conceded that he was probably her second choice. The name was familiar, but I couldn't picture his face.

"He's in our class," Caroline said, ducking her head. "I'll point him out when I see him."

That turned out to not be necessary, because the shuffled seating chart put me right beside him. I was already sitting when he pulled out the chair to my left and lowered himself into it. He looked at me as he did, and I shot him a quick smile.

"Hey," he said, dropping his backpack to the floor. He leaned forward, arms crossed over each other on the desk. "Adrian, yeah?"

I nodded. "And you're Chase?"

"Yup. I've heard about you, you know."

"What?" I jolted. "Good or bad?"

"Mixed reviews, really. Did you know you have dirt on your face?"

It took me a moment to process what he'd said, as I was trying to imagine what people could have been saying about me. "What? No. Where?" My voice was small and pathetic, but Chase smiled.

He pointed to the spot on his own face, and I managed to wipe the dirt away after a few tries. "I helped bury a dead bird this morning," I told him. "Must have happened then."

"Gross."

I was about to ask him what kinds of things people were saying, but Mr. Edwards called the class to attention.

What surprised me about Chase, and what had me glancing at him again and again over the course of the day, was that he wasn't all that good looking, at least compared to a lot of the other boys in our grade. He had his hair tucked behind his ears, and it fell straight and heavy to graze against his shoulders. Its shade and the narrow formation of his eyes had me wondering if he was Lakota, even just fractionally—but his skin was rather fair, and he had soft freckles over his nose, so probably not.

There were shadows all around his eyes, so dark that I wondered if he was wearing makeup. But no, there was no way he could've gotten away with that, so it must have been natural. I found myself wishing I looked like that. Just my eyes, though—while all of those things were well and good, he had a sort of frumpiness about him. His clothes were nice and seemed to be the right size, but they still managed to look ill-fitted.

And he caught me staring, but passed it off with a grin. I shook my head and looked away, putting on a smile as well. Laughing it off carefully and quietly.

On our way down to lunch, I caught him by his shirt sleeve. "I've heard about you, too, by the way."

His eyebrows shot up. They were very bushy eyebrows. "You have? Like what?"

"I'll tell you something if you tell me something. Like a trade."

I had to move in front of him as we went down the stairs—fifth graders were coming up on our left, returning from recess.

"Alright. I've heard you're an amazing artist."

I ducked. "Ah. I like that."

"Your turn."

I waited until we were at the bottom of the stairs and he was beside me again. After a quick check to see who all was surrounding us, I tipped my head towards his and said, “Caroline has a crush on you.”

“No way.”

“Yes way. Your turn.”

“Caroline does?”

“Yup.”

He looked truly stunned. Suddenly I was very excited to reveal who else did.

“Okay, um.” He shook his head as if he was trying to dispel his surprise. “Everyone seems to think you’re really nice. Especially since you hang out with Devon.”

I exhaled and watched the carpeted floor pass beneath our feet. “He’s—” I paused. Devon was nice. We liked the same things. He’d never been mean to anyone in his whole life. I genuinely enjoyed being his friend, but. He was Devon, and Devon was... Devon. I couldn’t tell Chase any of that. So instead, I said, “Yeah. He’s really annoying sometimes, but I think if I wasn’t his friend he wouldn’t have any friends at all, and that’s just really sad. No one deserves that.”

Caroline would’ve still been his friend, I knew.

“If you ever need a break, though, you can sit with us at lunch or play with us at recess. Usually we play Magic: the Gathering—that’s a card game, like Pokémon for adults, kinda—we play it at the picnic tables. I don’t know if you’re into that.”

“Actually, my brothers and I used to play that a lot. Sounds great, really.”

He granted me another grin as we entered the cafeteria. “Marie has a crush on you, too,” I tell him.

He stops dead in his tracks. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope. I’ll give you one more—there’s Madison as well, though she likes someone else, more—Todd, maybe? I can’t remember.”

“You really must be kidding.”

“I’m not. Whatever you’re doing, man, keep it up.” I bumped my shoulder against his the way Lana always did to me, and then I cleared my throat and regarded the two tables our class was allowed. “Have a nice lunch. I’m gonna stick with Devon for today. I’ll want to give him some warning before I leave him all alone.”

It wasn’t until I’d gotten to the table, sitting beside Caroline and across from Devon, that I realized Chase hadn’t told me any negative things he’d heard about me. Surely “mixed reviews” implied a balance between good and bad. I’d have to ask him later.

I told Devon that some days in the future I might be joining Chase and his friends for lunch and recess, and he nodded approvingly.

“Sounds good. Maybe we’ll play *Avatar* on those days. I know it confuses you a little.”

“That’d be perfect.” I had been a little worried that Devon would be hurt, but I should’ve known that wouldn’t have been the case. He was too sweet and thoughtful a person for that.

A few moments later he launched into a *Thomas the Tank Engine* theory he had, and I glanced down the long tables to see Chase seated a fair distance away. He was speaking animatedly about something, and his hands fluttered around in the air as he did. I turned back to Devon and asked if he’d come up with his theory himself.

Dad arrived later that night, parking his semi-truck in the driveway like usual. As we went inside he informed me that the trailer was filled with ground coffee beans. Ever since he'd told me he'd been transporting two Lamborghinis, I liked to know what he was carrying.

When he stepped into the living room, my brothers and I behind him, he sighed.

The laundry pile was getting out of hand again. We were consistently terrible at doing laundry—instead of folding it and hanging it up right when we took it from the dryer, we always carried it into the living room and dropped it into a bin in the corner. It would accumulate for days, sometimes weeks if Mom didn't harp on us enough, reaching insane heights. Today was, unsurprisingly, one of the days it was overflowing. It was overflowing more often than not, spilling out from the bin and littering the floor.

Dad ordered that we all set to work cleaning it up, turning on the TV remote and flipping to MTV. "If we do it together, it'll be done in no time."

There was very little conversation. We half-heartedly watched a countdown of the best music videos from the last few years, and sometimes Dad would give us a little fact about the artist who was featured, but I only nodded along as I worked. First I sorted all of the underwear and folded the towels, and then I settled down to match socks. Dad, Matt, and Kyle were hanging things up—I personally hated using hangers, so I avoided them at all costs.

Matt worked lethargically, and after about ten minutes Kyle excused himself to the bathroom and didn't return, so it wasn't "done in no time" the way Dad had said it would be.

Any attempts to daydream fell flat as the socks required too much of my attention and the music was unfamiliar. Eventually I gave up and started paying more attention to the TV.

The current video was formatted like a movie trailer, which I liked. It was different, at least. Words flashed on a black background between shots of what looked like a rather dysfunctional high school and a very unhappy lead singer. I watched for a little while, but then one of the clips made a clear reference to a blowjob—in the stall of a school bathroom, no less—and so I averted my eyes back to the socks in front of me.

It was peculiar, really—the whole thing—and it didn't take long before I was watching again. The lead singer wore heavy, pale makeup all over his face, and his eyes were lined with black and faded red. It was ghastly, but I waited with anticipation for each new time he appeared on the screen. Even under the hard edges of his makeup and black hair and dark clothes, he looked smooth—soft and full, somehow, as he screamed at the camera.

He looked like a girl—but then again, not quite. I decided, before I could help it, before I could wonder what Matt would think, that I wanted to look just like him.

Each time I saw him I tried to memorize him, create an imprint of his eyes and his cheekbones and his jawline in my mind. Maybe, I thought, if I focused really hard for a long while, I could train my bones and flesh to grow up like his.

Rocking in bed that night, my headphones in my ears, I thought about him. First I imagined that I was him, that I went to school and I was him and everyone thought I was peculiar, but beautiful too. I imagined pushing a lock of dyed, black hair behind my ear, and looking up at someone with my sickly eyes. Maybe I was dying, I thought, and that was why I was so pale. Consumption, like in *Moulin Rouge!*. I coughed up blood and everyone was worried.

And then I imagined that I brought him to school with me, led him into the building by his sleeve and everyone wondered where I'd found a boy like that.

I wished I knew his name, but then again, no. I didn't know his music, I didn't know his life, I didn't know anything about the man himself—it was okay, I thought, better even, to keep him as something separate, as something that was completely my own.

He leaned over me from behind, his arms around my shoulders and his chin resting on the top of my head, and he waited for me to introduce him to my friends. “This is Anthony,” I said, and Lana thought we were both very handsome.

Eighth Grade

I arrived at the middle school at 7:25—before everyone else. But this had been protocol the year before, as well, because Mom had to be at East by 7:30 and it was easiest to just drop me off on the way, like she used to do for Matt and Kyle. Kyle was a senior, now, in high school, and had his own car. He had told us the night before that he didn't plan on waking up until 8:00, fifteen minutes before the bell rang. Mom protested, but barely. She knew there was nothing she could do.

And Matt—Matt was in Los Angeles with John. Last year we'd taken a family "vacation" to move them out, a three day trip by car, and we helped shove two people's belongings into a tiny studio apartment. Their band Beak Eagle had become quite popular in our area after they'd recorded and released an album, and they were going to have a go at becoming popular at some place it mattered.

I had a letter from Matt in my new, black backpack. We'd grabbed our mail that morning and it just so happened his reply had arrived. It was sooner than usual, I thought. After finding a seat at my usual table in the commons, I pulled it out.

He told me he got employee of the month, which meant he also got a small bonus. He wanted so badly to spend that money, buy a new game or even just a new battery for his computer, but he knew he needed to save it for rent.

He told me he hadn't written or drawn anything in weeks, that he didn't have the time or motivation to, and that was depressing him. "But," he wrote, "where there is sorrow, there is holy ground."

He told me I didn't have to be nervous for my first day of school, that I'd done it before. "After a while it's all the same," he said.

No one else in the family heard from Matt as often as I did. I'd written him a letter out of the blue one day after finding some bordered stationery up at Grandma's, and when he wrote back he said that it was really cool and meant a lot to him. It typically took at least two weeks, sometimes a month, to get a response after I sent a new one out, but that was more often than he called home. Mom often looked to me for updates.

Matt told me, in a thin and scrawled hand at the end of the letter, that he had to go, because a guy from his apartment building had just invited him to a party.

I read the letter a second time before refolding it, slipping it back into its envelope, and putting it in the folder in the back of a new notebook. To pass the time, then, I flipped to the first page and started to draw.

I'd had this idea a few days before of a girl who had a crow on her shoulder—a crow that was invisible to everyone but her and the new boy at school. I'd written, "I've always found it pretty weird, you know, how that one kid has a crow on her shoulder," and I didn't know what

the crow meant exactly or if it had to mean anything at all, and because of that I didn't know where the story would go from there.

But I drew a big box—a panel—and got to work drawing the girl. I deliberately started with her body, since I generally started with the face and by the time I got to her neck and shoulders I wouldn't know where to go from there. So there was a slight angle at her waist, tight jeans and high-heeled boots, one arm heavy at her side and one folded upward to touch what would eventually be her hair. She leaned against a wall, looking tired. Her t-shirt was basic with plain stripes, and her chest was flat because I wasn't sure what people would think if I drew breasts. Kyle had laughed at me, once, for the stupidly large ones I'd put on a different character. I hadn't even meant to make them so large, honestly. It was too easy to get carried away, I thought, when proportions were determined by a single, curved line.

I drew the crow last, on her right shoulder opposite a loose braid on her left. She looked sad, and I liked it. It probably would be sad to have talons digging into your skin and random startling moments when the crow decided to vocalize, and to be completely alone because to everyone else, the crow didn't exist.

I looked up and I built her in front of me, seated across from me. She was looking down, fumbling with a flip phone in her lap, so her bangs shielded her face. She had the phone, but no one to call or message, and so it only acted as another source of sadness.

The crow looked right at me with its shiny black eyes. Its beak opened slowly, just a little, and then it cawed, and the noise echoed through the room. I flinched, and the girl looked up. She was surprised, but she didn't convey it on her face. Her expression remained completely unchanged.

In the next panel I tried to draw the commons, bustling with people. A boy with black hair and skin that was too pale—I went back and shaded the girl’s, slightly, so you could see the difference—who had dark shadows under his eyes and sharp cheekbones, who was already surrounded by new friends even though it was only his first day. He was watching the girl with curiosity, because he could see the crow. In the third panel I drew them in a classroom, the girl and the students around them—students who were drawn as blobs, really—dutifully reading from their textbooks while the boy continued to watch the girl. And the crow. Probably mostly the crow.

In the last panel, I wrote the line in a thin, neat font, the line which by then I’d memorized: “I’ve always found it pretty weird, you know, how that one kid has a crow on her shoulder.”

I’d just finished when Sofia appeared and, with a hand on my shoulder, plopped down right beside me. I jumped, but only a little.

It was a relief that she had arrived first. We didn’t have to perform a greeting, didn’t have to catch up. There was no “How was your summer?” because we already knew how each other’s summers had been. We’d hung out often, either at her house or down by the river near there, and I supposed she was probably my best friend.

She took my notebook and read over the comic with a growing smile. “That is so cool. What’re their names?”

I frowned. “I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Name her Sofia?” Her eyes were glossy and expectant, and I huffed out a laugh. I hadn’t realized how close she’d sat to me, but I could see every detail of her dark irises. Our shoulders were pressed together—and it wasn’t unusual in the slightest.

“How ‘bout Sophie?”

“Yeah, alright,” she smiled.

I was certain that if someone asked me who I had a crush on, I would tell them it was Sofia. Really, though, when it came down to it, there was no certainty at all. Her hair was impossibly long now, never cut in her life, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to touch it frequently. But I did touch it frequently—a ridiculous amount of time over the summer was spent in her bedroom (the door wide open), with her seated on the floor and me lying on my stomach on the bed, watching her play Twilight Princess while I combed my fingers through her hair. Or sometimes braided it. She didn’t care. And I knew that if I were to touch her hair right now, she would have no problem with it. So, because I could, I did.

She grinned so wide her teeth parted, and her tongue flicked out to press against one of her canines. She always did that when she smiled. It was another thing I liked—another thing that often led me to believe I had a crush on her.

I did have a crush on her, I decided then. At least a fair portion of the time, I had a crush on her. It just wasn’t the burning kind of crush I’d once had on Lana. That didn’t bother me, though—being rejected by Lana had hurt so much—watching helplessly as she drifted away. I didn’t need to go through that again.

A few other people I didn’t care much for arrived a little bit later, yammering about their summers. There was Nancy, who pressed that her little sister had ruined the entirety of her sum-

mer simply by existing, and there was Alan, who'd taken up rock climbing. I'd asked him for details at first, honestly curious about what it would be like, but then he launched into specific differences between all the cliffs he'd climbed, and I regretted having said anything at all.

Sofia wrote a little note on the corner of my notebook and then nudged it toward me. "Should we run while we still can?" the note said, and there was a little smiley face, too. Suppressing any kind of facial expression, I discretely wrote, "Where to?"

We ended up in a cranny off of the eighth grade hallway, in front of a janitor's closet. We leaned on opposing walls and made fun of Alan, perhaps a little unfairly. Just before the bell rang, Sofia said, "He's cute, though."

"Is he?" I wrinkled my nose. "If you say so."

"If he didn't have braces—" and then the bell cut her off, and with disappointed smiles we traipsed to our new homeroom.

Our teacher Mrs. Thompson was easy to love right away. I enjoyed the class and, after she summarized her long-term goals for us, was excited for the year to come. She came across as a person I would be willing to talk to, perhaps about anything. It was comforting—she was comforting.

Also, she had a ball python. I remembered, upon seeing it, hearing Matt talk about it once or twice. I jotted down a little reminder to mention the snake in the next letter I wrote to him.

Mrs. Thompson told us we could sign up to hold the snake, named Lola, sometime before school, and I was eager for that as well. Generally, everything that happened on the first day had me looking forward to the upcoming year. The art teacher, while somewhat intimidating, seemed more competent than my art teachers had been in the past, and I longed to impress him. I was

taking Spanish II, and that teacher, Señorita Margarita, was cute and charming. At Sofia's birthday party last year we'd played truth or dare, and when asked which female teacher she would kiss if she had to choose, Sofia chose Señorita Margarita. I agreed. (When I was asked which male teacher I would kiss, I adamantly refused to answer. I'd felt guilty about it at first, but then all of the other boys present refused as well.)

And then there was gym. I wasn't an overly athletic person, but I enjoyed it and felt that when I applied myself I wasn't half bad. At the start of class we lined up alphabetically as we always had. It was an elective, so while Sofia wasn't in the class a few of my other, more distant friends were. Notably, there was Chase.

He was right before me alphabetically, Reid and then Retzl, and he pulled me into a hug when he saw me. A long hug, really. We hadn't seen each other much in the past two years, just here and there in the halls before school or at birthday parties.

He'd changed. Just since last year, he'd changed. In appearance, sure—we were the same height now, which was several inches above most everyone else in our grade, and it was a little disorienting to look straight ahead into his eyes. Especially since he was looking so intently into my own. He'd cropped his thick, blackish hair, too. It was still longer than most other boys', but it was much shorter than it had been in the past. His freckles were dark and plentiful from summer, and he'd slimmed down. Even so, his t-shirt pulled a bit tight over a lumpy chest.

But his appearance wasn't what shocked me. It was his voice and the way he held himself. In that respect, he was nearly unrecognizable. It was obvious: he was gay.

He didn't have the lisp, but his voice lilted and lingered in that notorious way, and he punctuated certain words with a real flip of his wrist. I watched him with wide eyes, barely listening as he gave a recap of his summer.

We were dressed similarly, and I shifted on my feet. Tight jeans, Converse, a graphic t-shirt and a short-sleeved, plaid button-up over the top. If it weren't for our severely different hair and faces and body types, he may as well have been a recolored version of myself. Two male models in a magazine about underwhelming middle schoolers.

I crossed my arms around my torso, wishing we weren't being forced to stand in a line so I could put some distance between us. I tried to catch someone's eye, to subtly grab the attention of anyone near us, but everyone was distracted. I needed to be sure someone else was hearing him, that it wasn't imaginary.

Because it was so sudden. Last year, Chase had been completely normal. How did a person adopt an entirely new way of speaking in just three or four months? Was it a prank? Was he making fun of me?

I paused to quickly shove that thought aside. I'd heard enough jokes from both Matt and Kyle to grow concerned about whether people thought I was gay, but Chase knew me. Chase knew how enraptured I'd been with Lana and how devastated I'd been when she'd turned me down. So it wasn't that. I knew it wasn't that—but still, I worried.

Chase was looking at me expectantly. "Oh," I said, replaying his most recent words in my head. "Not much. Sofia and I hung out a lot."

He raised his eyebrows. "Any progress there?"

I swallowed. "Progress?"

“You know...” He wiggled his shoulders and grinned. I had to look away. It was the gayest thing he’d done yet.

“No, uh. It’s not like that. At least not yet.”

“Yet?”

I smiled in his direction but didn’t look at him. It was a tight-lipped smile, and I hoped he would take it as a hint to leave me alone. “Yeah. Not yet.”

He didn’t leave me alone. He went off about a video game he’d discovered, and I was paying so little attention that it took me about a minute before I realized it was a game I was incredibly familiar with and had been playing for over a year. “Oh, Left 4 Dead?” I clarified.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. I risked a glance and he was looking at me with suspicion. “I said that. You’ve heard of it?”

I hummed and tightened my arms around myself. “Barely.”

Class was called to attention, for which I was grateful, but we spent the majority of the hour and a half standing in more lines. Waiting to get on the scale or to be measured, that kind of thing. It gave Chase lots of time to continue talking at me. My resistance to commit to the conversation didn’t deter him at all.

He went to hug me again at the end of class, his arms extended wide, and I recoiled. “Sorry,” I said dryly when I saw his hurt expression. “I don’t like to be touched.”

The expression vanished and he tilted his head to the side. “You know, I remember hearing about that a long time ago. I thought you’d gotten better though. At least, you didn’t have a problem with it when we were in that one class together.”

I shrugged. “It comes and goes, I guess.”

We went in different directions to get back to our respective homerooms, and when I met up with Sofia at her desk before the class actually started, I told her about Chase.

“No way,” she said.

“Yes, way.”

She blinked up at me. “I had such a big crush on him, though.”

“In fourth?”

“And fifth.”

“Do you still?”

“Have a crush on him?” She chuffed. “God, no. I don’t like anyone right now. You know that.”

I narrowed my eyes. “And you know I don’t believe you, but okay.”

“Go sit down,” she ordered. “You smell bad from gym.”

“We didn’t even do anything,” I said and rolled my eyes, but then I went off toward my desk anyways.

Adults always said, usually with an air of warning, that time goes by faster and faster the older you get. While it always struck me as a stupid thing to say, since the literal rate at which time passed was unchanging, it was impossible to disregard entirely. The following weeks felt like they ended before they’d really begun, flying by in a flurry of brand new pencils and acquaintances I couldn’t stand to be around for any extended length of time. I made a note to myself to bring up an idea with Kyle: that multiple universe theory was correct, but more infiltrating than we thought. That every person had their own, literal universe in which they were the only

truly autonomous being within it, and that within that universe time really *did* start to speed up as it went on. But for every person, in each of their own universes, the tempo increased at different speeds. And we only saw everyone else around us through windows. We were constantly surrounded by windows.

Chase's window must have been dirty or scratched up, I thought, because he never took the hint that I didn't want to talk to him. Eventually I had to suck it up and go along with it. I noticed more and more that the other boys were avoiding him just as I had tried to, and then on an unfortunate day one decided to push him to the ground. We were playing floor hockey, and the coach didn't see exactly what had happened, so the boy didn't get in trouble. But I had seen, and I had also seen how Chase had looked so genuinely hurt and confused as he remained seated on the ground. I wondered if it had even occurred to him at that point that he should've stood back up.

And so I scuffed over to him, my hockey stick dragging on the floor behind me, and I held out my hand.

After a moment of blatant surprise, he grinned and accepted my help. He tumbled forward slightly before he found his footing, his shoulder knocking into mine, and I made an effort not to flinch.

It only made sense, I supposed, since Devon had gone off to do his own thing and make his own friends, that I would find another underdog to let cling to me. I took it with as much grace as I knew how, while also maintaining distance.

In homeroom, a boy I thought was maybe named Trevor whispered my name. When I looked up, I saw that he and a few of his friends were leaning towards me. They were all on the

football team, and we rarely spoke to each other unless we were being forced to. I raised my eyebrows at them.

“You’re friends with Chase. He’s a fag, yeah?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Uh, yeah. Pretty sure.”

“Told you,” Trevor said to one of his friends. Then he turned back to me. “Is it weird? Being friends with him, I mean.”

I swallowed. “Definitely. I think he might have a thing for me.” I had no idea if that was true or not, but, regardless, I made a face. “Not sure what to do about it.”

“Cut him out. Cold turkey,” Trevor said with a laugh.

“I couldn’t do it,” another boy chimed in, looking at me with wide eyes. “I feel weird enough seeing him in the locker room.”

Sofia, meanwhile, loved that Chase and I were friends. She thought it was cute. She said, “I’ve always wanted a gay best friend. We all should hang out sometime.”

I wanted to tell her there was no way I’d ever hang out with Chase outside of school, but I thought it would be best to not say anything instead.

In late September the Autumn dance was announced, to take place in early November. As some kind of romantic gesture I drew Sofia a picture of her and I slow dancing. I couldn’t get the poses exactly right—we both looked stiff and a little too squat to be realistic—but I showed it to Mom for a second opinion and she said it’d be perfect. “I think I raised you right,” she added, and I shook my head and abandoned her before she could embarrass me further.

The next morning I gave Sofia my headphones and played “Love Story” by Taylor Swift for her, because Sofia was obsessed with Taylor Swift. She was the one who encouraged me to

download her music in the first place. Then I slid the drawing over to her and watched as her perplexed expression become one of understanding. She turned her eyes to mine slowly and giggled, speaking too loudly around the headphones. “Are you asking me to the dance?”

I mouthed “maybe” and she did the thing where her tongue pressed against her teeth as she smiled.

“Okay,” she said, and then squeaked. “Okay, yes!”

We were both giddy for the next few weeks, never quite sure how to act around each other. I wondered if she knew that I wasn’t asking her as a friend—if she knew that I wanted more. And if she did know that, did that mean she liked me back?

“Obviously she does,” Chase said when I voiced my concerns. “Have you seen her around you? She never stops smiling.”

“That’s just how she is, though,” I countered.

“Not true.”

“I’m better friends with her than you are,” I said. “I think I know better.”

He rolled his eyes and said, “Outsider’s perspective,” as though that defeated my argument.

Of course, he wasn’t wrong.

Ever since I’d told Mom that I wanted to take Sofia to the dance, she didn’t let us hang out without a modicum of adult supervision. Apparently she had called Sofia’s parents and they’d hashed out ground rules together. It was embarrassing. When I went to Sofia’s house, we had to hang out in the living room, and I had to go home by eight. Anytime we went someplace together we had to lay out a specific time table with either Mom or one of Sofia’s parents, which

had to be followed to a T. There was never any time for dillydallying, which meant I could never be sure if my feelings for her were reciprocated. Until we went to the movies, that is.

Mom came inside to buy our tickets, as the movie we'd decided on—*Zombieland*—was rated R, and then with a quick “Be good” she left us to our devices. We bought a medium popcorn and some M&M's to share, found some seats in the back, and settled in.

We were about halfway through the movie, thoroughly enjoying it, when Sofia's knee knocked against mine. In that moment I realized where we were: the shadowed corner of a mostly empty theater. My breath hitched, and I stared down at her dainty little hand laying on the armrest between us.

Before I could think it over, I pressed my knuckles up against hers. She jumped with a tiny yelp before looking right at me and taking my hand.

It was easy, really. We grinned at each other for a few moments, the movie forgotten before us, and then I leaned in and kissed her.

When Mom met us outside afterwards and asked how the movie was, I couldn't think of a response. I felt like I was buzzing all over, and the movie was the very last thing on my mind. Sofia responded, luckily. “It was good, Mrs. Retzl. So funny.”

We dropped Sofia off at her house, talking about what we saw of the movie on the way, and then the drive back home with Mom was mostly silent but for a few more movie comments. When Mom shut off the car, though, she turned to me.

“You kissed, didn't you?” she asked.

I swallowed. “How'd you know?”

“Your face. And your voice.”

“Oh.” I laughed nervously, looking down at my lap. “Is that okay?”

After a moment, she said, “Sure. Just don’t go further than that, okay?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, okay. We’re too young for anything more anyways.” While I said that mostly because it seemed like the right thing to say, I also believed it. We really were too young. There was no point in having any kind of serious relationship so young. Besides, Sofia and I weren’t like that. I enjoyed kissing her, of course, and was looking forward to doing it more, but going any further seemed out of bounds, somehow.

It just wasn’t something I wanted. I decided that was indicative of our youth. We were fine, only kissing.

“I’ll have to give you the talk still, you know.”

I sucked in a breath. “The talk? Please no.”

Mom made to get out of the car. “I’d be doing it sometime soon even if Sofia wasn’t in the picture.”

“Right,” I said between my teeth, cringing when she slammed the car door. Following her inside felt a bit like a walk of shame.

The talk didn’t end up being completely horrible, though Mom went on a little longer than I would have liked about all of the various fluids involved. She also gave me a box of condoms, and despite my attempts to refuse it entirely she not only forced me to take it to my room, but also had me open it and put one in my backpack. As horrific as that had been, the talk a few days later affected me much more.

“Your dad and I are getting a divorce,” she said. We were sitting in the living room in our usual seats. Mom in her rocking chair, Kyle on the floor (he loved the floor), and me on the couch, crunched up under a thin blanket.

I watched Kyle. He didn’t look all that surprised, and I felt something in my shoulders and across the back of my neck drop. He said, “I knew it,” and my cheeks swarmed. I covered them with my hands, immediately very aware of the way they protruded. I’d never thought about that before. I wondered if it looked weird. I felt it then in my lips, too, a vague tingling, and I turned my hands so their heels shielded my mouth, too.

When I dared look at Mom, she was looking at me.

“Adrian?” she said, her voice soft.

“Oh,” I said into my hands. “Kyle, you knew?”

He shrugged. “I thought it was gonna happen a lot sooner.”

Mom exhaled. “Nothing will change. When he visits, he’ll still stay here.”

The conversation went on longer, but I wasn’t sure how much time passed exactly. Windows, I thought—I was willing to bet money that the way Kyle was framing his time hadn’t changed. Mom told us why it was happening, but her explanations were so vague they may as well have been useless—money stuff, mostly, but also communication problems. Kyle nodded a lot, and all I could think was that I’d been a complete idiot.

Oblivious, detached, unobservant. Did they hate each other? Why couldn’t I figure out if they hated each other? I tried to dig up memories, interactions between the two of them, but everything seemed distant and the weight of my face against my hands was distracting. I waited for as long as I could before I left, so Mom wouldn’t think I was upset. I didn’t even think I was

all that upset, really. Of course there were things I didn't notice. Mom said outright that she'd tried to keep us out of it, because she didn't want it to feel like we had to take sides. As soon as the words left her lips, though, I knew I would've taken her side, had I known anything about whatever was happening. She was here. We watched our favorite movies together, dug around for things that could almost be considered dinner together. Sat together in silence, because we knew each other well enough to know that silence was okay. It wasn't exactly like that with Dad.

With Matt gone and Kyle coming into his own, having a job and money and all sorts of new friends, it was just Mom and me. Everything she said stuck with me and we were in it together, whatever 'it' might've been.

I went upstairs. Put in headphones and shuffled my iPod. It was a Classic, and Dad had put thousands of songs on it, songs I never listened to because I didn't listen to music like he did. He was always looking for new artists, always downloading albums and sharing them with us. But I liked the songs I already knew—I had a playlist of just them—and every so often I'd hear something fresh and buy it and add it to the list. Songs I knew well carried daydreams better, and 99% of the time I only listened to music to fuel the daydreams.

But today I shuffled it all, for no real reason I could think of. I listened to the first thirty seconds or so of each song that came up before skipping ahead, unimpressed. More than I tried to focus on any of my characters, on the new girl with the crow—Sophie—and the boy who was still unnamed, I focused on forgetting my face. I imagined it lifting away, starting with my lips with everything else following behind, and I took deep breaths in time with my rocking. Back and forth, monotonously paging through dozens of songs.

But then there was one song—new, yes, but I liked it. It started simple and raw, a vocalist and a guitar, and then it slammed into the full band and it hit me like a wave.

I restarted it again and again, memorizing the first verse before even hearing the second. The daydream was simple—it was me, in the commons at school, singing and playing the guitar. When the music kicked in, my foot struck down on a pedal and my peers in front of me looked surprised by the volume of the electric guitar.

When I finally got to the end of the song about a half hour later, it was abrupt. It cut off in the middle of the notes. Curious, I followed the track to the album and played it there with shuffle turned off. It was the first song on the album, actually, and that seemed fitting. With the second song following it, the ending was no longer abrupt. It flowed into the other and the other was just as good as the first.

The band was called Welcome Silver Lining. The album cover was black with a simple drawing of a mangled, white feather in the center. In my daydream, I put a white crow behind me, and when the song ended, I stretched out my arm and it landed on my wrist like we were old friends.

The following morning, as I was messing with my hair in front of the hallway mirror—trying and failing to get ready for school—Kyle slumped by to go to the bathroom. He mumbled something about how he hated that he'd woken up already. I was inclined to agree. Besides the fact that I always hated waking up so early, it had been particularly difficult today. I'd stayed up listening to Welcome Silver Lining for hours—the last time I'd checked the time on my iPod it had read 3:50, and that wasn't even when I'd shut it off to go to sleep. Already there were four

songs on the album that I loved, which was atypical. I was almost overwhelmed by the fact that I had four fresh songs to play with. The most I usually had at a time was two.

When Kyle returned, he had a smile on his face and already looked more alert. “My friends and I went to the diner last night, and we landed on a name for our group.”

“What’s that?” I tried pushing my hair behind my ear, sighed, and then yanked it back down.

“The Baby Bird Gang.”

I blinked at him. “Why?”

His smile became a bit wild. “Have you ever heard of baby-birding?”

“Nah.”

“Well, mamma birds have to chew up and swallow their food for their babies so it’s all soft and digestible. Then they regurgitate it into the baby birds’ mouths.”

I dropped my head to the side and glared at him. “For the love of God, tell me you don’t throw up in each other’s mouths.”

He laughed. “Not throw up, no. But we chew it up and then share.”

“That’s revolting. You shouldn’t be proud of that.”

He bounced on his toes and laughed again. “It’s hilarious, is what it is. Also we were a little drunk, so.”

“That doesn’t make it better.”

“It wasn’t as gross as you think.”

“No, I’m sure it was.”

He nudged my shoulder and made his way back towards the bedroom. I stared after him before saying, “Kyle?” He looked at me with impatience, so I went on. “Do Mom and Dad hate each other?”

Frowning, he came a little closer again. “I don’t think so. They definitely aren’t happy, though. I mean, have you heard Mom when she’s on the phone with him?”

I nodded. “But it’s always been like that.”

He huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, exactly.”

When he’d retreated again, I looked back into the mirror, ran my fingers across my cheeks and then dragged one to pull at my bottom lip. It didn’t look all that strange, from what I could tell. I whispered ‘Baby Bird Gang’ and watched the way my mouth moved—how the corners of my lips shifted as I spoke. No, it didn’t look weird. Maybe my mouth was a little small, but I thought that if Sofia liked me, it must not have been a big issue.

Chase had a certain way of talking to boys. He made no effort to disguise his body language—his shoulders were tense, and he’d set one foot behind him so he wasn’t facing them full-on. He’d lower his head slightly, looking up or down at them through his eyelashes with an air of total disgust. Superiority, but superiority that was clearly shrouded with insecurity. And he was mean. He talked back in a low, biting voice, and he wrinkled his nose and smirked and laughed cruelly at whatever they said.

Boys, yes, but I was the exception. When it was just us, he smiled often and told me about all the goings-on in his life, and he’d step in close and watch me even closer. He told me about the games he was playing, and he told me about his abhorrent father who always picked on

him for being too lazy or for not being tough enough. He asked me to draw him pictures of characters from games or from his favorite TV shows, and I... did.

Sofia said, "You never draw things for me," and I replied, "You never ask."

Chase said, "How's Sofia?" and I replied, "We coordinated our outfits for the dance tonight."

It was the start of gym, in our alphabetical line. The bulk of our conversations took place in that line.

"Do you care a lot about that?" he asked.

"About what?"

"Coordinating. Dressing up."

I frowned. "Sure, why not?"

"No reason."

"She cares too. I care about what she cares about."

He looked me up and down, then, and I ran a hand through my hair. "You care a lot about how you look," he said, and it wasn't a question.

"I guess so."

His sudden grin took me by surprise. "You'll be unhappy to know, then, that you have a whitehead on your chin."

I straightened. I wanted to slap my hand over my face, but I refrained in favor of appearing nonchalant. "I'm fully aware, thanks."

"Why don't you pop it?"

I motioned to the gym around us. “Because school is happening? It wasn’t so bad this morning when I saw it.”

“I hate looking at it,” Chase said, and then he coughed. “Sorry, that’s mean. I get it, I do.”

Enough time had passed that I felt comfortable lifting a hand and putting it over the offending spot. “Your skin is so clear—it’s not fair.”

He shrugged. “I wash my face twice a day.”

“Well, me too,” I said, but it was a lie. I showered every other day, sure, but on the days I didn’t shower I only washed my face once, if that. I was fully aware that that was somewhat repulsive, though, so I’d be damned if I told Chase.

Nancy butted in beside us, jostling him with her shoulder. “We’re starting warm-ups,” she said. “Hurry before everyone sees you flirting.”

In an instant I had turned and walked away. I strode toward where the majority of the class was gathering, staring straight ahead. My neck grew hot and I flexed my fingers at my side before closing them into fists. I didn’t bother checking to see if Chase and Nancy were following along behind me, but I hoped they weren’t. Nancy had said what she had so smugly, with such a look on her face, and I couldn’t get the image out of my mind.

Everyone knew Chase was gay whether he would admit it or not, and I made it too easy to draw conclusions when I let him stand that close—when I laughed at his jokes, or when I allowed him to look at me the way he looked at me.

For the rest of the class, I replayed the scene in my mind.

“Hurry before everyone sees you flirting,” Nancy said.

I stood up tall, rolling my shoulders back as I said, “We’re not fucking flirting.”

But that felt too insincere. It read like a lie.

“Hurry before everyone sees you flirting.”

“You know I’m dating Sofia, right?”

And then:

“Hurry before everyone sees you flirting.”

“Mind your own business.”

There it was. It felt like defeat. I realized then that no matter what I might’ve said, it would’ve been admitting defeat. Walking away had been the right thing to do. Even though Chase was sneaking wary glances at me for the rest of class, looking defeated himself, it had been the right thing to do. We hadn’t been flirting—not at all, I was sure—but it had looked like flirting, and that was enough.

He approached me in the locker rooms after class as I was getting ready to pull my gym shirt off, and when I saw him in the corner of my eye I grabbed my clothes and went into a stall. Trevor might have been right. Cutting him out cold turkey suddenly seemed like a very viable option.

Mom drove me to Sofia’s the night of the dance. It was about six—the dance started at six thirty—and I tugged at the hem of my button-up before scraping my fingers over the top of my black jeans.

“Stop fidgeting,” Mom said. “You look good.”

“Yeah,” I croaked. “Okay.”

After ringing the doorbell at Sofia's, I undid and redid the second button of my shirt. Several times, actually. I'd done it before we left, too, standing in front of the mirror. I wished the second button was just a little higher up on my collar—with it buttoned, it looked to constricting, but with it unbuttoned I felt too exposed. I hated that Chase was right. I hated how much I cared about how I looked.

Sofia's mom answered the door, and so I left the button done up. Sofia looked very similar to her mom, though her mom's skin was a little darker and obviously more worn. She had a distinct accent, too—not too strong, but present and notable. I'd called Sofia black, once, maybe in fifth grade, and she'd snapped at me. "I'm not black," she'd said. "I'm Mexican."

It had been a source of contention between us for a long time. As a class we'd just watched an animated video about the civil rights era, and the leading girl character had had much lighter skin than the other black characters. I hadn't known that was possible at the time, or what it meant or anything, so I drew the line between her and Sofia. Sofia didn't speak to me until I apologized a couple of days later.

When Sofia came out of her room a short while after I'd arrived, she was in a red blouse and a flouncy black skirt. Her lips were a deeper red than the blouse and her eyeliner had sharp wings—with outright honesty, I told her she looked amazing.

She frowned at me. "You didn't wear the shirt we decided on."

I looked down. No, my shirt wasn't the patterned red we'd planned out. It was a pale blue. "I spilt some lemonade on it like an hour ago, and I couldn't get the stain out." That was a lie. We didn't even have lemonade at the house. "Sorry," I added.

Sighing, she came up beside me and took my hand. “It’s okay,” she said. “Did you want pictures, Ma?”

We took photos for a few minutes in all sorts of poses. It seemed a little ridiculous to me—it was a casual dance, not prom. But before we left I made sure to tell Sofia’s mom to make copies of the photos for my mom, because I was sure she’d want to have them too.

On the ride to the school, I sat in the backseat with Sofia. Mom went over some rules from the driver’s seat, glancing in the rearview mirror and staring pointedly at me so I knew she was serious. “I get it, I get it,” I told her with a laugh.

“I’ll be outside to pick you up at nine.”

“Can we go somewhere to eat after? There’s a concession stand but no real food, I think.”

Mom tapped on the wheel, pulling up beside the school. “If Sofia’s parents are okay with it, sure.”

“They said to be back by ten,” Sofia said.

“Works out, then,” Mom replied with a nod. As we climbed out of the car, she added, “Please... please be good.”

“Yes, Mother.” I rolled my eyes. “We’ll be good. Perfect angels, all night long.” Sofia snickered.

“Well now I don’t believe you,” Mom said, but she laughed too.

We waited until she had driven off before holding hands and strolling inside. The common room was done up with streamers, while all of the walls were lined with jackets and backpacks. Only a few kids lingered there, grouped mostly around where the concession stand was

set up. Sofia threw a purse I hadn't noticed she'd been carrying into a corner and then dragged me along towards the gym. Music pulsed through the walls, the floor vibrating with the bass.

"I wonder who all is here already," she said.

The main lights in the gym were shut off, but the DJ near the far wall had purple and blue spotlights going in time with the music. Most everyone was gathered around the DJ, leaving a fair amount of space open everywhere else. No one was really dancing yet, though. Sofia expressed disappointment on that matter as she looked around for any of our friends, so I squeezed her hand tighter and dragged her towards the DJ.

"We're gonna dance," I said, raising my voice so she could hear me over the music.

She shook her head. "Adrian, no one's dancing yet."

"Don't care."

I didn't recognize the song, which was typical. I never listened to the radio, which meant a lot of new music—disregarding the extremely popular songs—never reached me. But it had a nice, upbeat rhythm, so I grabbed Sofia's other hand and swayed. She laughed, saying, "You look ridiculous."

"Don't care," I repeated, and then I twirled her. As we continued to dance, Sofia kept glancing around at the people watching us. Some of them were laughing. I was amazed, really, that I wasn't more put off by them. It was Sofia, I was sure. Though she did look nervous, I could tell she was really enjoying herself, really enjoying the attention. Truly, I was too—all I was doing was helping Sofia have fun, and I was pretty sure everyone could see that.

And it wasn't long before other kids started dancing, as well. Sofia started to loosen up, then, and get more creative. She swished her hips around and did little, practiced gestures with

her hands. We didn't touch all that much, and the heavy eyes of all the chaperones wandering through the crowd kept us from getting any closer than two feet from each other, but we grinned and laughed a lot.

At previous dances over the course of my middle school career, I'd had no issue getting used to the volume of the music as time went on. Initially upon entering the gym it was always too loud, but a few minutes in everything settled in and I was fine. Tonight, though, with the bass rumbling beneath my feet it seemed like I could feel the vibrations in my bones, and each clap of a high-hat rang in my ears. Hissing, it sounded like. I did what I could to ignore it, instead focusing on what was physical in my immediate vicinity.

A few of Sofia's friends found us and we formed a circle to dance in, Sofia at my right and some girl I barely knew to my left. I didn't know many of Sofia's friends at all, and I wondered suddenly if she was keeping us apart. But then again, no—as I considered everyone, I realized I just hadn't ever put any effort in. During classes Sofia and I always focused on each other, and at lunch we sat with my group. I saw hers sometimes in the mornings before school or at parties, but I never paid much attention.

“Adrian,” the girl beside me called, “you look so stiff. Move your hips more!” She touched her hand to my waist and gave me a little push, and I chuckled before grinning down at Sofia and trying to loosen up.

“Like this?” I looked between them both.

“No,” the girl said immediately, and both she and Sofia cackled. “But it's a little better, I guess.”

Our circle slowly grew wider and wider, and every once and a while someone would jump into the center to freestyle and we would all cheer. I tried to place names to each of the unfamiliar faces around me, but even the ones I thought I knew didn't seem quite right. The song playing at that time had a clap track, and I had to fight to not wince each time it hit.

It took me a while to notice that Chase was there, on the other side of the circle, laughing with a girl who may have been named Tori. Just as soon as I'd spotted him, he looked over at me. His lips turned up but it was barely a smile. We hadn't spoken since earlier, and the awareness of that fact was evident on his face.

As soon as I recognized this, I knew I wouldn't be able to cut him out of my life. Logistically, yeah, it wouldn't have been easy, but I was sure I wouldn't have been able to handle it emotionally, either. I had walked away and Chase knew exactly why, and it had hurt him because he also knew exactly what it meant. I wondered what conclusions he'd drawn—and I wondered if he was scared of me.

I didn't entertain the idea of going up to him to apologize—or maybe not even apologize, just say anything to let him know I didn't hate him—but I thought it might've been better to find him later into the night. On a break for food at the concession stand, perhaps. It just couldn't be in the gym. With the low lights and the music, where everyone was under scrutiny and every step had to mean something, it would've been too charged. And the noise, as well, would only have made it more difficult.

I smiled back at him as well as I could and half-waved. He narrowed his eyes turned back to Tori. Trying not to overthink it, I dropped my hand and looked at Sofia, at the way her wrists turned in the air above her head and how her shoulders swiveled. I was trying to think of some-

thing to say simply for the sake of doing something when the song ended and a slow one came on.

She looked up at me with a knowing expression, and I took her by the hands and led us away from the circle.

About thirty seconds into the song I decided I didn't like slow-dancing. Sofia wanted to make eye contact, and the pressure of her eyes on mine was heavy. If only there hadn't been chaperones, I would have pulled her in close so her head could rest on my shoulder and we wouldn't have to stare. What were we getting out of staring, exactly?

It was supposed to be romantic, I knew. It was in all of the movies—for whatever reason, people who were in love liked staring into each other's eyes. Sofia's eyes held the same expression of the love-sick characters' in movies, and I tried to paint it onto my face, too. But I couldn't help imagining what she was seeing as she stared at me. Had my hair gotten mussed up since I'd seen it last? How big did my nose look from her angle? And my eyes, so plain—were they open too wide? Was I blinking too much?

Mostly, though, it was my mouth. It felt like it was pasted onto my face, and the more I thought about it, the more uncomfortable it became. Perhaps my lips were drawn too tight—I parted them a little, but that didn't feel good, either. I wished I could let Sofia go, untangle just one arm, so I could run a hand over my face and leave it resting over my mouth. I didn't want her to see—I hated that she could see.

And I hated that I was overthinking all of it, but it felt like just another instance where it was clear we were too young for what we were trying to do. If we'd been alone, we wouldn't

have been staring, and I wouldn't have been feeling my facial features as separate entities, and I would have been free to let go and hide my face.

But I kept staring, nonetheless—it was clearly what Sofia wanted of me. We swayed in time to the music, a little over a foot of space between us, and the song couldn't have ended soon enough. As it faded out, Sofia tugged me a little closer and said, "I'm going to go to the bathroom."

"Alright." I nodded.

"No," she said. "I'm going to go to the sixth graders' bathroom."

"What? Why?"

She gave me a look, a mixture between fondness and annoyance that morphed into something more intense. I swallowed. She said, "Wait a little bit before you follow."

And then she left me standing there, pulsing with a new, endless bass-line and a crashing cymbal, and in a daze I wandered back to where the circle was reforming. Chase and Tori or whoever weren't there, and without Sofia I was kind of at a loss. Luckily Alan came up beside me before my uncertainty became awkwardness. He asked where Sofia went, and then, before I could answer, asked if it would be okay if he danced with her. "Nothing weird," he clarified.

"Just one song."

I shrugged. "Yeah, go ahead. She's in the bathroom now, though."

Once he diverted his attention elsewhere, I took a deep breath. Enough time had probably passed. It wasn't like any chaperone was spying solely on us, anyways. I'd just made it out of the gym, blinking under the fluorescent lights, when I saw Chase again. He was up against a wall in the commons with Nancy and Tori, and I prayed he didn't see me.

But Nancy did, and she nudged Chase and nodded towards me. His face was blank when we met eyes, and I didn't bother smiling or waving this time.

I was about to turn down the corridor that led to the sixth grade hall, but then I accidentally made eye contact with Mrs. Thompson. I saluted her and went into the commons instead, getting in line for the concessions. I didn't want anything to eat or drink, really, in fact the idea of anything that I saw on the shelves seemed completely abhorrent, but a few minutes later I found myself stepping out of the line with a can of icy, orange Fanta in my hands. And Mrs. Thompson hadn't moved, so I cracked it open. It was sickly and metallic, and I regretting having chosen it as soon as it touched my tongue—any other soda, I thought, would have been preferable—but still I chugged the whole thing with only a single breath halfway through. By the time I'd finished Mrs. Thompson was gone, and with one last glance at Chase I took off to find Sofia.

The girls' room seemed more cramped than ours did, and I shuddered out a breath. I wasn't claustrophobic in the slightest, but as my stomach started to churn I longed for the familiarity of open space—the urinals, I realized, were what was missing. I didn't make a sound upon entering, worried someone else might've been inside and that they'd spot me intruding, but when the door clicked shut, Sofia peeked out of the handicapped stall and waved me towards her. "Come on," she said, and she had that intense expression on again.

I chucked the empty can of Fanta into a bin before making my way toward the stall, wrapping my arms over my shoulders and squeezing as I went. I liked Sofia a lot, I did. I reminded myself of that again and again, with each step I took. But I was having an absurd amount of feelings all at once, and I couldn't place any of them.

Once I was inside, Sofia locked the door behind me and pushed me to sit on the lid of the toilet. “I like you so much, Adrian,” she said, and her voice was small and tinkling. “I wanted to thank you for tonight.”

“Tonight’s not even over, though,” I said. My voice was wrecked—scratchy, and it broke when I said ‘over.’ Sofia started to giggle, and I went on. “Actually, it’s barely started, you know?”

She shrugged and kneeled down in front of my legs. I exhaled harshly, and my hands found the rim of the toilet seat beneath me and gripped tight. Had that been washed? I imagined all of the disgusting particles that were climbing onto my bare skin, but I could barely find it in me to care. I wasn’t sure what I wanted, but I was sure that it wasn’t what was about to happen.

She leaned up and we kissed, and only then, despite our mouths being pressed together, was I able to get a full breath of air. I understood this part—I enjoyed it. I knew how Sofia liked to move against me, how her lips felt and how she sometimes smiled after I tugged on her bottom lip with my teeth. I tried to slip into it like I always did, but I couldn’t shake the anxiety of what was to come. How far did she plan to go? We’d never done anything remotely like this before, and it seemed wrong to be doing it in a school bathroom, of all places, without having planned it out beforehand. I’d always been drawn to the idea of making a big deal of milestones in relationships. Candles, soft music, all of that. But maybe the echoes of bass was supposed to be enough, or maybe this wasn’t meant to be an actual milestone. Maybe it wouldn’t be like whatever it was that I was dreading.

I considered what I would be fine with. Seeing, yes. There was no denying that there were parts of Sofia I had pictured quite often, imagined running my hands over. And I thought

about kissing her neck, biting it maybe, leaving little marks before placing small pecks across her shoulders and then moving back up to kiss her properly.

What wasn't exactly fine was that after what seemed like a very short amount of time, her hands were working at my zipper. I suddenly couldn't focus on our mouths anymore, and I couldn't hear the bass anymore. "You taste like bad oranges," she said, and her voice was startling. I went rigid when she wrapped her hand around me, and I held my breath when she started to move. And it was already too much, but then she ducked down and took me into her mouth.

It was over very quickly, the sensation less one of pleasure and more one of choking. She grinned at me as she spat into some toilet paper and then tucked me back into my pants.

"Was that good?" she asked, holding the wad of soiled paper at her side as she tipped up to kiss me again.

I hummed against her lips and nodded, and when she added a bit of tongue I could taste myself. I'd expected a salty flavor, but it was more akin to chlorine. I pulled back quickly.

My hands were shaking—I could feel them. I shifted my hands around on the rim of the toilet seat so I could hold it tighter. "We should get back," I said. My voice was even more gravelly than before.

"Yeah, probably. I'll go first." She stood very suddenly, looking amused, and then she thrust the toilet paper to me. Each movement seemed too fast, and when I lifted a hand and took the paper between a finger and thumb, it felt like I was moving too fast, as well.

I didn't stand up right away after she'd left. Instead I stared at the tiled floor, counting the squares, pretending each one turned red after I'd added it in, trying to level my breathing. It

didn't work very well. There was one tile I thought I may have gone back to at least three times, and the world continued to tilt in my peripherals.

When I did find it in me to get up, to face and open the toilet and to drop in the wad of toilet paper, real dizziness settled in. The darkening kind, like I'd stood too quickly. It certainly had felt like I had, even though I'd tried to take it slow.

The toilet paper was cheap and started dissolving before I even flushed it down. I watched it swirl and sink, and then I stared at the rippling water left over because I couldn't think of anything else to do. It felt like I was processing everything before I'd even seen it. Every thought I had seemed to simply be clarification of the one before it, somewhat like *déjà vu* that didn't end—yes, of course that drop of water landed on the toilet seat—yes, of course that drop of water had drawn my attention in the first place—yes, of course I kind of wanted to wipe that drop of water away, but, no, of course I wouldn't do it.

I sank down and threw up, flushed away the diluted, orange vomit, and then went back towards the gym.

Chase met me halfway (—yes, of course he strolled up so casually—) and I suppressed the urge to turn around and go back.

“Saw Sofia come out from here a minute ago,” he said, blinking slowly.

I nodded. “Yeah, we were... talking.”

“Right.” He smirked and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Talking.”

I looked away with a roll of my eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

“So it happened then?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

My voice sounded detached. I knew I was speaking, and it wasn't as though the words that reverberated in my throat and skull weren't words that I wanted to say, but somehow they didn't seem to be *my* words. They were thought out, planned, but they were surprising, and yet still as I heard them I only could really process them belatedly.

"Okay, sure." I didn't look at him, but I figured he was probably smiling. "I know it was weird earlier," he said, and then I did look at him. He, in fact, was not smiling. "I'm sorry about that, really. I told Nancy off."

"You didn't have to do that." My breath smelt like vomit. I cleared my throat and dropped my gaze to Chase's feet. He was wearing his usual Converse, and they were starting to look a little worse for wear.

"No, I didn't have to, but I still did."

"You always say what you're thinking," I said. "I don't get it. I couldn't ever do that."

"Probably get it from my dad."

I took a deep breath and stared at him. "I guess I get my whole thing from my parents, too. I mean, I just found out they're getting a divorce, and they were so quiet about it I had absolutely no clue they weren't happy." When I brought a hand up to run through my hair, it caught my eye. Not mine, I thought—but yes, mine. It didn't get all the way up to my hair—instead it lingered by my temple, and I watched it.

Chase's shoulders dropped. "I'm sorry."

"Nah, don't be. Nothing's gonna change, apparently. Dad's gone most of the time already."

He stepped towards me, reached out and put his hand on my raised wrist, frowning. Everything jolted around where he made contact. I blinked, hard, but didn't pull away from his touch. Yes, I thought again, the hand was certainly mine. "My mom and dad got divorced when I was in Kindergarten," Chase said. "Well, no—it might've been first grade."

I made a noise before I could help it, a little slip similar to a groan, and let my hand drop slowly. Chase's did too, then. "That must've sucked," I said, forcing a laugh, but I thought, *First grade*. It was a violent thought, and my chest tightened as I held back from doubling over.

"I barely remember it, so..."

I shook off like a dog. Chase raised his eyebrows. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, fine. I'm gonna head back." I started to go around him, but then paused. "Sorry for how I responded earlier."

"It's alright."

"I'm serious, though. It was dumb." The words did surprise me this time. The entire day prior to the dance—or not even just that—the entire day prior to entering the girls' bathroom felt like it had taken place ages ago, and it was the last thing on my mind.

"Really, it's okay." When I began walking again, he fell into step beside me. "We're friends, right?" he asked.

I hated that he had to ask, but I couldn't deny that it made sense. "Yeah, of course."

"Good. Cool."

This time, when I looked over to him, he was definitely smiling. I tried to do the same, but my lips caught on my teeth, so I shut my mouth again.

“So Sofia, yeah?” His smile didn’t shift at all, and I wondered if I’d been self-centered thinking he had a crush on me. Or, I thought, maybe he was perfectly able to set the crush aside to be supportive. It was definitely self-centered that the very idea of that being the case disappointed me. “What happened there?” Then again, maybe he was just a good actor.

I wanted him to be in love with me. I wanted him to be debilitated by me, and I realized then that I wanted that of Sofia, too. I should’ve been flattered, then, that she’d offered herself up to me tonight like she had.

“It—” I stopped and hummed. “What are the bases again?”

He spoke without hesitation. “Kissing, groping, oral, and all the way.”

“Okay. Third base.”

“Wow.”

“But I guess we skipped second?”

“Was tonight the first time?”

My hands flitted up to check the collar of my shirt. “Uh, yeah.”

Right before we reentered the disruptive havoc of the gym, he put his hand on my shoulder and dragged me towards him. The music was loud enough, though, right outside the door, that my answering whine wasn’t audible. “Way to go. Big milestone.”

“Guess so,” I said, gulping down a mouthful of air.

And then we walked side by side back to our circle, brushing against each other all the way despite my attempts to casually add a little distance. Sofia giggled when she saw me, as did the couple of girls standing around her, completely oblivious to... whatever was happening to me. I couldn’t even be bothered that she’d obviously told her friends what we’d done together.

I'd told Chase, after all. In the scheme of things, third base didn't matter. But maybe it'd get around to the rest of our grade, and any other less-than-ideal rumors would die before they even took root.

But the way Sofia laughed made me uncomfortable. I danced with her for a little while, uncertain of my movements as the music buzzed and the lights whirled around us, but I tried not to meet her eyes. I couldn't bear the idea of her picking up on the fact that something was wrong, but I also doubted my ability to conceal it. I didn't have control. There *was* something wrong. There was something very, very wrong, and I didn't want to be dancing anymore, and I didn't want to be surrounded by music anymore. I wanted to be at home in bed, sleeping.

I saw Alan coming over and exhaled in relief. He and Sofia went off to dance together—but not before she pulled me into a quick hug, squeezing a gasp from my lungs—and I left the gym as fast as my legs would carry me.

The smell of my breath was getting worse by the second, so I stepped into the nearest bathroom and rinsed my mouth with cool water. I spent a long time, afterwards, staring at my reflection in the mirror, trying to understand my emotions by first piecing together my facial expression. It didn't work. The crease between my brows, the severe shine in my eyes, and the way my lips pulled down at the corners just looked angry, and I certainly wasn't angry. The longer I stared, though, the more extreme the expression seemed to become, and I found myself despising the way I looked. I unbuttoned the second button on my shirt.

I stared into my eyes for a long while with a degree of purpose. Maybe I was angry—maybe I was arguing with myself. It would've been easy in that moment to open my mouth and begin a conversation. One thought came up again and again, all alone without context but hitting

me like a fist: First grade. Each time it came to mind, I shut it down immediately. It was not the time nor the place.

On top of all that, a headache was setting in. I wanted to scream. And because it was the only thing I could think to do, in a single, jerking motion I scraped my fingernails down the side of my neck.

The white trails left behind turned into an angry pink, and I was watching the pink slowly disappear when some boy I didn't recognize stumbled into the bathroom. He nodded to me and said, "Hey, Adrian." I nodded back. He went right to a urinal, but looked at me over his shoulder and opened his mouth.

I cut him off. "See ya'," I said, and strode out the door. Who even was that? Was he in one of my classes? How did everyone always seem to know me, and I couldn't say the same for them?

Returning to the gym felt like a mistake the instant I did it. Whatever I'd hoped scratching myself would accomplish did not occur, and as it turned out that Sofia had already been looking for me, I felt petty and childish for having stayed in the bathroom for so long. "I thought you'd left!" she exclaimed, clutching at my shirt and pulling me back toward the mass of bodies. I pried her fingers off and she paused to stare at me. "What is it?"

"I—I don't know."

"What?" she leaned closer, cupping one hand over her ear. "Can't hear you!"

"I'm—" I cleared my throat and shouted over the noise. "It's nothing. Let's go."

I had to swallow constantly, saliva filling up the moment I'd gotten the last mouthful down. I prayed that I'd already ejected all of the Fanta I'd consumed. The pounding rhythm was

relentless and my feeling of sickness didn't go away for the rest of the night, though I did get increasingly light-headed which at least meant I had even less of the capacity to think about things. There were two more slow songs, and the first of them was even more horrid than the one before had been—because I couldn't stand to fake the puppy-dog eyes, and because each time Sofia and I touched it felt like she was putting fifty pound weights on me.

“Is something wrong?” she asked halfway through.

“No,” I said, and smiled.

When the third slow song came on a little later, I took off into the commons before Sofia could make eye contact. I considered getting into the line for the concession stand again, maybe buying a bag of chips to settle my stomach, but the clock on the wall said it was almost nine. Mom would be outside soon, so it was perfectly reasonable to have stepped out when I had.

When Mom did arrive, Sofia quietly followed along behind me to the car. I sat in the passenger seat, and she sat in the back. She carried on a conversation with Mom while I focused on the way my head was thrumming.

Mom asked if I was okay after we found a table at the diner. I told her I wasn't feeling well, and she replied that I wasn't looking well, either. Sofia chewed on the insides of her cheeks and picked at a roll of silverware.

When our food was brought out I thought of how Kyle and his Baby Bird Gang frequented this diner. I wondered if they'd ever spat into each other's mouths at the very table we were sitting at, and then I gagged. Mom looked extra concerned, now. I didn't want to eat anymore, the thought chewing and swallowing suddenly repulsive with the Baby Bird Gang still in mind, but Mom did manage to get me to eat a few fries.

We didn't finish until ten, so Sofia pulled out her flip phone and called her house to inform her parents we were going to be a minute late. I didn't have a cellphone yet—Mom and Dad had agreed they'd wait until I started high school. Even as more and more of my friends got them, it didn't bother me much. It was like with Sophie, how she didn't have anyone to message so the phone was pointless, except for me it was just a lack of desire to hold conversations with the people I probably could have been messaging. It wasn't that I really preferred talking to people in person, but I did have trouble coming up with conversation starters sometimes, so it was just easier to hold onto my cards until I saw them in real life. Besides, all the places I spent a lot of time at—namely school and Sofia's house—had phones I could use if I needed to call Mom. Sofia told me herself that she didn't see much a point in her phone either, except that her parents had wanted her to have one in case of emergencies.

Never before, though, had I ever been quite so glad to not have a cellphone. If I'd had one, then Sofia probably would've wanted to text me after we dropped her off tonight. Ask me questions I didn't have the answer to.

On our way to drop Sofia off, I mulled over whether that made me a bad boyfriend. And then, when it was just Mom and I and we were on our way home, Mom asked me again if I was okay.

I frowned. "Yeah? Headache might be getting worse."

"We'll get you a Tylenol. That's all it is though? Nothing, like, happened?"

I looked out the window again. "Well, I'm tired, too. I kept dancing even after I started to feel off."

She nodded, and we didn't talk for the rest of the drive. I did picture it, though—telling her about what had happened between Sofía and me. And then I took it another step and pictured—first grade. Telling her about first grade. And that was a mistake, because suddenly I remembered Payton, and that was too much. I let my head fall against the window, and it hit with a thunk.

“Ouch,” Mom said absently. I mumbled an agreement.

The Sofía thing would put Mom on the defensive and the thing about first grade would... would what? Scare her? Make her sad? There wasn't a benefit that I could see in either, so I kept my mouth shut and tried to relax my muscles.

I didn't wake up until eleven thirty the next morning, having stayed up late again. I'd flipped back and forth between lying awake staring at the ceiling and listening to *Welcome Silver Lining*, not managing to fall asleep until at least three. The good news was that I didn't feel sick anymore upon waking up. Exhausted, but not sick.

Kyle was asleep on the living room floor—at some point he'd taken to sleeping there instead of in his bedroom—and Mom was in her rocking chair with a book. I sighed, got myself a cup of coffee, and sank into the computer chair in the other room.

I started to make Sophie and the new boy in *The Sims* but exited out quickly out of lack of interest. I didn't know enough about what either of them looked like to put so much effort into detailing their faces, and the boy still didn't have a name. There were no crows in the game, either, so it all would've been useless anyways. I put in my headphones, played the album by *Welcome Silver Lining* that I loved (by now there wasn't a single song I didn't know most if not all

of the lyrics to), and I drew a crow. When I tried to go over the sketch with a pen, though, I accidentally smudged the feather details with the side of my hand. I crumpled up the page and threw it into the little garbage bin beneath the desk.

I tapped the plastic top of the desk before laying my head down on it. The wood was cold under my cheek, and it felt like a relief.

I thought about the night before. I thought about the way Sofia had looked at me, and the way she had felt wrapped around me, and the disgusting orange mess in the toilet after I'd thrown up.

And I tried to remember what Payton had looked like, exactly, but the image wouldn't construct itself beyond fuzzy, generalized features. When it did clear up, he looked too old. My age, maybe. I tried to degenerate him but was wholly unsuccessful.

Mom came in, then, and asked how I was feeling.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm fine. Much better." I sat back in my seat, pulled my headphones from my ears, and held them out for her. "Listen to this band," I added.

She did, and after about twenty seconds she said, "That's Welcome Silver Lining."

"You know them?" I raised my eyebrows before I could help it, genuinely surprised.

"Yeah." She nodded. "I've been listening to them for years. Their last album was great, but this one's my favorite."

"When did it come out?"

She frowned. "I don't know. A few years ago at least."

I was a little let down, honestly. I'd been looking forward to showing the band to Mom, to participating in the discovery and watching her hear them for the first time. But the album wasn't new, and, apparently, the band wasn't obscure.

After she'd left again, I put my headphones back in. The singer's voice rang in something like a shout, and I shuddered out a breath, rewound the song a few seconds, and listened to it again. I must have done that dozens of times, just listened to the same moment over and over, loving the slight, raspy growl, being completely fascinated by it. Eventually I opened up Internet Explorer on the computer and searched "Welcome Silver Lining." The top few search results caught my eye before I clicked over to look at images—they were on hiatus, they were from New Jersey, someone named Simon Ward had spoken out recently about going into the recording studio.

But it was the images I wanted, and they didn't disappoint. I didn't have to look for long before recognition struck.

The member in the front and center of most of the photos—shiny black hair, a pale face of makeup, black eyeliner and red eyeshadow—I knew him. My mind supplied the name "Anthony," and, no, that wasn't his real name, but I remembered all the daydreams I'd had so many years ago, how vividly I had constructed the man before me now. The daydreams about showing him off to my friends, or the ones where I was him and everyone found me peculiar but enticing.

It was so absurd. I stared and stared at the photos, wondering what the chances were.

He was Simon Ward, I learned. I searched just his name, and I looked through those photos for an indeterminable amount of time. That was how Kyle found me.

“What’re you doing?” he asked. His hair was a mess from the carpet—he didn’t use a pillow when he slept on the floor, just a single blanket that he often buried himself under.

“Oh,” I said, debating whether I should close the window or not. “I just—I found this band, and I was curious what they looked like.” I closed it, and then I looked up at Kyle. “And then I got sucked in looking at the lead singer’s makeup.”

“His makeup?” He laughed.

“It’s all dark and stuff. And girly, like what Matt used to do.”

“Alright,” Kyle said, crossing his arms. “What’s the band?”

“Welcome Silver Lining.”

He nodded and grinned. “A lot of kids in my grade are into them.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The emo kids.” With a little shrug, he went into the kitchen, leaving me alone. I pulled a fresh sheet of paper from the printer to draw on, though I didn’t have any specific ideas so the resulting product was just a mess of half-drawn faces and scribbled doodles.

Simon Ward was a very nice name, I thought. Much better than Anthony, at least. It almost made me laugh, how little the name Anthony suited him.

Payton came to mind a few more times as I drew, but I didn’t allow him to concern me. Before long the urge to daydream took hold, so I tossed the page of drawings I’d made, went upstairs to lie down, and played the Welcome Silver Lining album over from the beginning. The crow story didn’t cross my mind at all—no—I was singing with Simon Ward at an assembly in the gym. At the start, everyone was upset to be there, as we always were for any assembly, but then the crowd realized that the show Simon and I were putting on actually impressive, and soon

enough they were jumping in time to the music and singing along to the songs they recognized. If Mom and Kyle and kids in Kyle's grade knew about Welcome Silver Lining, surely they were popular enough to have recognizable songs. I wondered how many people in my grade knew of them, and how many of them knew of Simon Ward himself. How impressive would it be, if I had him to show off? It was amusing to me that after all of those years, upon seeing Simon again, the content of the daydreams he inspired had barely changed.

By the time the bell rang Monday morning, Sofia was fully aware there was something wrong between us. I longed to pull her aside, to tell her why I couldn't look into her eyes and involve myself in her conversations, but I couldn't formulate the reasons in my own mind, let alone articulate them aloud. I knew, though, that when she first came up to join me at the table in the commons, I'd felt disappointed. And I knew that when she kept trying to talk to me, one topic after another, I'd felt annoyed. To make matters worse, when she'd asked what I'd done over the weekend and I'd told her the truth—that I'd recently gotten into a new band and had been watching their music videos and interviews—she told me, “Oh, my brother likes them. It's too much screaming for me, though.” It was petty, but I couldn't help it. Obviously, I thought, she hadn't listened to their music very closely, because there wasn't much screaming at all.

I finished our math assignment early and turned it into Mrs. Thompson to look over, then pulled out a sheet of stationery and began to write to Matt. He'd told me in a letter I'd received a week before that he was feeling helpless, that with all the work he had to do to pay the rent he didn't have the energy to play music anymore, and that John didn't either, and that the whole

venture to LA was starting to feel like a mistake. “I wonder if I shouldn’t have left at all,” he’d said.

I wrote, “But think: you’re not in South Dakota, at least.” And then, “Just imagine what it would’ve felt like to graduate and not have gone anywhere, to still be stuck here doing nothing.”

I asked if he remembered Sofia, and I told him she was my girlfriend. My pen paused over a period and before I could help it that period became a comma, and I added, “but it’s not really working.”

I wrote about Welcome Silver Lining, and I asked if he had seen the divorce coming, and I wrote about Kyle’s Baby Bird Gang. In a split moment’s decision I began to tell him about my multiple universe theory as well, and then it occurred to me for the first time that maybe it wasn’t only an exciting idea, but something that could actually be true.

Perhaps at the dance, I had somehow stepped through my little window. One foot out—just enough that I was able to glimpse myself from the outside. See what Sofia saw, or what Chase saw, or what all the people I could never name saw. It had been disorienting, obviously, but also enlightening. I set down my pen and ran my hands over my face. My face: each feature organized as I’d always known it, but feeling much heavier under scrutiny.

I didn’t write any of that. I didn’t do anything, actually, until Mrs. Thompson came to drop off my corrected assignment. Until then I kept my head in my hands, shielding myself from view.

“Good job,” Mrs. Thompson said. I hadn’t gotten any problems wrong, but at the top of the page she’d written, “Show more of your work!”

I sighed and went to reread my letter. At the end of the sloppy description of my theory, I added, “I don’t know. It’s probably just a longer way of saying ‘everyone sees things differently.’” And then I signed my name and folded the page into thirds.

Sofia didn’t break up with me until about a week later. She’d been hoping I’d break up with her first, I was sure. In that time things grew progressively worse—I’d managed to scrape up a sense of security over the weekend, thinking we certainly wouldn’t make contact at any point then, but then she called and Mom answered the phone before I could tell her not to. I took it upstairs with me and sat rigid on the edge of my bed, trying to sound interested in or even just not annoyed by whatever Sofia was talking about. Because she was still trying so, so hard to talk about things. Not us—we never talked about us—but it was clear she was putting a lot of effort in to make things work.

After we hung up, I clutched the phone tight in one hand and the bedsheets with the other. I couldn’t stand what I was doing to her, how much I was hurting her. There was no impulsivity this time—I pulled my sweater sleeve as far up as it would go, stared down at the clear skin I’d revealed, and then slowly scratched from my bicep to the crook of my elbow. The immediate white lines were much more distinct this time, and they turned pink faster, and then red, too. They hadn’t even begun to fade by the time I got up and went downstairs, feeling perfectly okay again.

It was on the following Tuesday when Sofia marched up to our table, grabbed my pencil and dropped it onto the floor, and said, “We’re done.” It was clear she’d been crying.

“Okay,” I replied, and then I made the mistake of shrugging.

She gasped, and tears spilled over before she whipped around and went to sit at a different table. It was uncomfortably close by, and I didn't particularly want to watch or hear her sob, so I gathered my things—sweeping my pencil from the floor—and went to our classroom. The door was open, but only Mrs. Thompson was inside. She was typing something at her computer, but she paused and looked up as I came inside.

“Adrian, hello. You're early.”

I slumped toward my desk but didn't sit down. “Yeah.”

Her head tilted as she regarded me. “You missed your appointment to hold Lola.”

“What?”

She motioned to the snake tank. “You'd signed up to hold her Wednesday morning of last week, but didn't come.”

“Oh,” I frowned. I could barely even remember signing up in the first place—I must have done it early October, at least. “My bad. I'm sorry.”

“You can hold her now, if you like.”

The snake was warm from having been sitting under her lamp, and after Mrs. Thompson had draped her around my neck I found myself slumping against a nearby desk. “Oh,” I said, “can I pet her?”

Mrs. Thompson nodded, so I trailed a finger from where Lola's fat body was already curling around my arm up to her thin neck on my shoulder. She bobbed as I pressed gently on the back of her head, her tongue flicking in and out. I let her slip about as she pleased, though Mrs. Thompson shifted her once so she wouldn't loop around my neck. Her skin bent and folded as

she turned, and as she began to make her way down my other arm, I noticed the white reflections the fluorescent lights cast onto in her eye.

“Are you doing okay, Adrian?” Mrs. Thompson asked, and Lola ducked behind me, her face out of view.

“She’s so pretty,” I said, smiling softly down at her patterned, brown skin. “And yes, I’m okay.”

Mrs. Thompson took Lola and draped her around my back and over my shoulder again. She was properly spun around me now, and I wondered what it would feel like if she started constricting. Was she strong enough to suffocate me? Had she ever constricted a student before? Mrs. Thompson told me I looked tired, asked if I’d been sleeping well, and with a deep breath I told her that Sofia and I had broken up. Lola’s tail tightened around my arm and curled at its tip, and Mrs. Thompson lamented something about young love, and I remembered that that was all it was.

“She’s sobbing in the commons,” I told her, and I couldn’t find it in me to care.

Twelfth Grade

We claimed the new boy. His name was Owen, and he was actually a Junior, but he'd missed the Junior open house so he had to come to ours. He was better dressed than the lot of us; when we first saw him he was in a large, threadbare sweater akin to a potato sack, but we thought it was probably more fashionable than anything we—in South Dakota, so behind the times—would wear, and his form wasn't lost in it for he wore skin-tight, pleather pants underneath. He held himself differently, he spoke differently, but his hair was similar enough to Chase and I's that we thought, maybe, he was one of us.

He wasn't, of course—the music we listened to and our interests were opposing to the point of being conflicting—but since we had braved the awkwardness of calling him over, of inviting him to sit with us, he liked us. And he liked that we dressed somewhat abnormally, saying, “You don't care what other people think. Admirable.” It was a backhanded compliment, but a compliment nonetheless, so I took it with grace.

He was from Las Vegas, and he never did answer when we asked why he'd come to South Dakota of all places. “Random,” Tori said with a frown.

Before the bell on the first day of school he came and sat with us, and he flipped through my sketchbook. “Have you ever seen the movie *Blade Runner*?” he asked.

“Yeahhuh.” I raised my eyebrows. “I love it.”

He nodded and smirked. “I can tell. You can see it in your art.”

It amazed me that he was able to pick up on something like that, that he could immediately see what influenced me. I didn’t tell him, but it was actually even more impressive than just that—my art was heavily influenced by Simon Ward’s art (on top of being a musician, he was a comic book artist), and it was Simon’s art that was heavily influenced by *Blade Runner*. I did like *Blade Runner*, but I’d only actually watched it in the first place because of Simon. So Owen had essentially seen a second generation of *Blade Runner* inspiration, just from the few drawings in my relatively new sketchbook.

He looked slowly at each page. Slower than anyone had ever looked at my art, probably. Taking them in, piece by piece, commenting on what he liked. “You capture a lot of emotion here,” he said, pointing to one of my character’s faces. Another time he pointed to the shadows in the foreground of a drawing—indistinct and scratching marks, but suggestive of a figure beside a messy desk—and said, “The physical spaces you create feel like real areas that are being inhabited. Not imitations of them.”

“Oh,” I said. I wasn’t sure how exactly that was possible, since drawings could only ever be imitations, but I thanked him nonetheless.

Owen said I drew ‘low art,’ and he was more interested in ‘high art.’ He stressed, though, that this wasn’t indicative of the quality or importance of our differing styles—that ‘low art’ didn’t mean ‘less than’—that low and high art just had different purposes. High art was found in galleries, and low art in cartoons and comics. “If anyone ever tells you that what you make is worth less than high art, spit in their face and say ‘fuck you.’”

I couldn't help but to grin. "Easier said than done, but I'll definitely keep that in mind."

Initially, I was elated to have another artist around. Especially since he didn't seem overly concerned with taking art classes—he was someone I could discuss art with, but I didn't have to compete with him. My position of being our high school's best artist would remain unchallenged until I graduated.

But as time went on, it became clear that Owen and I didn't really get along. Apparently when he'd lived in Las Vegas he'd gone to some kind of specialty school for artists, so he knew much more than I did. That in itself didn't bother me, but he tried so hard, I thought, to create a certain dynamic between us, to make himself into some kind of mentor for me. In a single conversation he would drop dozens of artists' names or names of obscure art techniques, blowing past them as though I would understand—while knowing full well that I didn't. Or he'd ask if I knew some artist's work, his eyes begging me to give in and say yes, dying to catch me in a lie. But I had learned long ago, from Matt in particular, that there was no point in pretending to know more than I really did. So I would let Owen play teacher, but not on his terms. Every moment, I strove to display to him that I was only eager to learn, that none of the shit he was throwing at me was phasing me at all—because it wasn't. I wouldn't let it.

Chase had even less patience. True to form, he never bothered to disguise his distaste for Owen, though Owen never seemed to mind. Tori and our new friend Rachel weren't opposed to complaining about him either, about this and that rude thing he'd said or done, but never to his face. "It's a shame he's so pretty," Rachel would add, and Chase would scrunch up his face, sigh, and agree.

I was never fond of the fact that people had smells—that at any point in time you could lean into someone and inhale, and there would be a scent that wasn't that of my worn-in bed sheets I had grown acclimated to, of the pillow I hugged to my chest and buried my face into. Tori and Rachel both wore perfumes, but perfumes that were never strong enough to completely mask the undeniably human odor underneath. Chase, I'm sure, smelled fine. Indeterminable, something with shaving cream or body wash, not terrible. But I still turned away from him when he got too close. I turned away from all of them when they got too close. It wasn't that they smelled bad—just that they smelled at all.

Owen did smell bad, though. He smelled like cigarettes and rotten coffee. I'd never seen him smoke, but I wouldn't have been at all surprised if he did. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, however, and assumed his parents smoked in his house and the smell had simply permeated his clothes.

When he leaned towards me, or sat up beside me, I tried to casually put distance between us. He was persistent, though, and frankly, despite how much he tended to bother me, I enjoyed that he wanted to be close. He would turn his whole torso to face me, and he would smile with full, white teeth. Instead of leaning away, I would hold my breath. His own breath smelled even worse than the rest of him did, but only because it was warm—he chewed minty gum often, actually, but the cool flavor did nothing to cool the temperature, and he huffed when he laughed. And then he would look somewhere else, and his smile would taper off, and his jaw would tighten as he swallowed. I watched the movement.

And thin lines drew down from my own jaw, down onto my shoulders and across my back—flat lines that pinched my skin and inhibited my ability to move, to look away. And I was stuck smelling him, because I couldn't hold my breath for that long.

Chase said to me once, "He's a Scorpio, you know," as if that meant something. His gaze lingered on mine with an air of great concern.

"Is that bad?"

"For you, yes."

"Okay."

"Yeah."

And then Owen said to me once, "I love that you rock."

"I'm sorry?"

He rested a finger against my upper arm, and I saw his hand move and realized, of course, I was rocking back and forth. "Fuck," I said, stopping.

"No, don't." He pushed at me slightly, and I scowled.

Chase said, "He rocks. Get over it. You don't have to draw attention to it."

"Chill boy," Owen replied with a grin, looking between us both, and my scowl grew as I stared at his lips.

We had a new art teacher this year, much to my chagrin. I'd really liked the last one—to the point where, when he announced he was leaving, I'd had to hold back tears. He had always offered me support, telling me he was there to talk if I'd needed it. I'd been under significant distress at the time, as Welcome Silver Lining had just broken up, although the event had brought

on a bizarre realization: that high school was nothing like it was portrayed in movies. Or maybe it was just my high school, or maybe it was just my grade.

The band, over the years, had become a part of who I was. It was in the way I dressed, the way I spoke, the way I moved my body, the way I drew and the way I wrote. Kids would come up to me—kids I barely knew, boys I thought were sociopathic assholes and girls I thought were preppy snobs—and they'd tell me they'd heard one of Welcome Silver Lining's singles on the radio over the weekend, and that they'd thought of me. Once, at lunch, a tiny freshman boy brought me bracelets he'd bought from Hot Topic, wrapped with a black ribbon. He asked if he could sit with us, because he didn't have any friends. "You didn't have to do this," I said, shaking the bracelets before slipping one on. "We don't tax people for sitting with us." But he'd shrugged and given me a little smile. He'd moved away a few months later, but in the time before then he was always bringing us things—things he'd bought, often, but also things he'd made. He drew pictures of Simon Ward for me, and he hadn't ever heard much Welcome Silver Lining but a few times a week he'd come and tell me he'd listened to a new song. He'd break down all the things he enjoyed about it, and—after he'd left, one day, Tori said, "He has a crush on you, you know." And I'd glared at her for a few moments before relaxing, before feeling an encompassing glow in my chest and throat.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

But the thing was—for weeks after Welcome Silver Lining had broken up, all of those kids came over and told me they were sorry, and some hugged me and asked if I knew why they'd broken up, to which I'd reply, "No. They won't say." And then, usually, I'd get another hug.

I'd seized up and choked on tears a lot in those few weeks, struck suddenly as I remembered that I'd never see them in concert again or hear any new songs from them again, and I'd hide in bathroom stalls and pierce the nape of my neck with my fingernails until I'd calmed down. It was an overreaction, I was sure, but as long as no one actually saw me crying, it was okay.

And I never actually took the art teacher up on his offer to talk, if I needed it, but it had been nice to know he was there for me. Except now he wasn't, and the new teacher and I hadn't gotten off to a great start.

Her name was Mrs. Suki. She seemed really competent, maybe even talented (though it was hard to tell). On the first day she'd set us out making "humanoid figures" from clay, which was fine, but while she was wandering around the counters to see what we were working on, she stopped and said to me, "You'd have better luck working the clay if you rolled up your sleeves." She cocked her head to the side. "It's a little hot to be wearing long sleeves anyways, isn't it?"

I tugged on them. My fingers were already dirty from the clay, and they left little dusty prints on the fabric. "It's an important part of my emo mode," I spoke swiftly, unfaltering. "We're acclimated to wearing all black in extremes temperatures."

That made her laugh, so I laughed too.

"You're doing good work," she noted, nodding to the mass of clay in front of me. "I think you're the only one who isn't working additively."

I shrugged. "I have trouble keeping tall figures standing when I do additive work."

"Well, keep it up," she said, and then she walked on to look at the other kids' progress.

So it wasn't terrible. But, I was sure, she'd known what she was doing when she'd drawn attention to my sleeves. Who wouldn't? And bringing it up, especially with everyone around, had been inconsiderate. Maybe even cruel.

Or maybe she hadn't meant anything by it at all. There was no way to tell, though, so I would have to take precautionary measures regardless.

I was one of the few people who, at the end of the period, opted to keep my sculpture and let it dry to get fired in the kiln. Most of the other kids had ended up more or less messing around over the course of the class, since it was only the first day. Their end results weren't very impressive, and they knew it. Mine wasn't all that great either, but it portrayed my current daydream obsession—a boy named Mycah Shane—and I figured I may as well keep it.

Chase, Tori, Rachel, and Owen came over after school. Owen was the only one who hadn't been there before, but after being let inside he kicked off his shoes and strolled ahead of all of us to the living room. With his hands up to tousle his hair, he took in the state of the floor.

Clothes all around, an empty McDonalds coffee cup tipped over by the TV, and a large pile of things beside my usual seat on the couch. The pile consisted of pretty much anything I ever needed while sitting down, so once I'd settled in I never had to get up again unless absolutely necessary.

"Sorry," I said, motioning to the pile. "I tend to nest."

Owen flopped into Mom's rocking chair and hitched his legs onto the ottoman. "It's cool. Doesn't matter." I tried to remember if he was shorter or taller than I was. His legs, stretched out before him, seemed absurdly long and narrow. He flexed a foot, hooked one leg over the other,

and then lifted his arms behind his head and stretched. A low groan escaped him, and I looked away.

We played video games for about twenty minutes, but it became increasingly obvious in that time that Owen was growing more and more displeased. He sighed, and made small quips about the things we said to each other while we played, and none of it was in the good fun we were all used to, so after finishing a round we switched over to Youtube.

“What do you usually watch?” Owen asked, sitting forward in the chair. “Wait, show me that band you like.”

Tori and I argued for a minute about which Welcome Silver Lining music video to show him first, and then Chase chimed in and supported my cause. It was one of their older videos, a classic, one where the setting was dramatic and beautifully constructed, and Simon Ward appeared at his best. Well, no. As soon as I thought that, I took it back, because really, he looked his best all the time.

Only a few seconds into the video, Owen laughed. I tore my gaze from the screen and frowned at him, but he didn’t notice. Chase did, and he shot me a nervous glance, which I responded to with open-mouthed disbelief.

It wasn’t even that Owen clearly didn’t like the video that bothered me—mostly—it was just that he was so open about it. I’d already heard some of his favorite music, and though I did think it was experimental garbage, I would’ve never told him that. In fact, I’d nodded along and asked him questions about the artist and the way the songs were made, anything I could think of so I seemed interested, because that’s what you did when someone liked something. You didn’t shut them down, or make them feel bad about it.

Something told me, though, that if I had tried to shut him down, he wouldn't have felt bad about it.

When Mom got home, I wasn't sorry to kick him from his seat. It felt nice, actually. "You gotta move," I said, jerking my thumb towards the floor. "That's Mom's chair."

He laughed again in the way he tended to—a little patronizing, but with genuine amusement. He slipped down onto the floor and shuffled to settle in near my feet as Mom came in.

"Full house," she noted, glancing at Owen as she sat down. "Don't know you, do I?"

"Mrs. Retzl," he said with a charming smile. "A pleasure. I'm Owen."

She pulled her laptop out and opened it. "Not a Mrs. nor a Retzl. Call me Marie."

"Marie it is." He leaned back, resting half against the couch and half against my leg, before turning back to the TV. His hand fell loosely on top of my foot.

Mom looked at him, and then she looked at me, cocking her head to the side. I pointedly turned my attention to the TV as well.

Everyone left at about five, piling into Chase's car as they told Owen about a city nearby that acted as our main shopping center. A bland conversation that I was happy to not participate in. As soon as they were out the door, Mom said, "I don't like him."

I hummed and nodded. "That's fair."

"He seems rude."

"And that's true."

"Condescending."

“Also true.” I wandered into the kitchen to find something to eat, and she followed me.
“He’s kinda cool to talk to, though.”

“If you want to feel bad about yourself.”

There was nothing of real substance in the fridge, so I moved to a cupboard. “He knows about art stuff. Like, a lot about art stuff. Probably more than me.”

“I bet he makes you feel bad about it.”

I laughed. “No, it’s fine. He’s fine.”

She was silent as I forwent food in favor of hot chocolate, filled a kettle at the sink, and started the stove. When I looked over my shoulder at her, she was staring. “You two aren’t—” she paused to frown, and then she hummed thoughtfully.

“Aren’t what?” Water droplets from the underside of the kettle popped in the flames, and I turned back to watch. “We met last week. He’s a Junior. Hails from Las Vegas.”

“Huh,” she said. “City boy. That explains it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, alright.”

She started back towards the living room. “You wanna watch a movie?”

“Nah, I think I’m gonna take a nap.”

“Not a long one,” she said before retreating to her rocking chair.

I made my cup of hot chocolate and took it upstairs to my bedroom. Which was a right mess. The floor wasn’t visible beneath the laundry—most of which had actually been clean, but never hung up—and the old, discarded toys I hadn’t bothered to put away for years, and right upon entering there was a musty, almost leafy scent. Like old tea—except that it was, without a doubt, mold. Over the past year I had watched as greyish spots had sprouted up on the wall by

my end table, but I was only vaguely concerned. The last time I'd actually cleaned my room (having the help of my family) had been fifth or sixth grade, and since then I'd only done half-hearted pick-ups that barely went deeper than the most recent layer of garbage on the floor and tables. I barely spent any time in my room, apart from listening to music and sleeping, but for the time I did spend there, I was used to the filth. And I figured, as far as the mold went, that it'd been growing long before it had become visible to me. Behind and under my bed, in the abandoned drawers of the end table, hidden in the shadows of my closet. As long as Mom never saw it, and as long as I kept my friends out, it didn't matter.

This was true of other things, as well. I carefully crawled across my bed and set my mug onto the end table, then lifted up a messy stack of papers and folders. Underneath was a wide array of objects: an X-Acto knife, a pair of scissors, paper clips, safety pins, disposable razors, and then also bandages, gauze, tape, and disinfecting wipes. I picked up a razor, first, put it back, and then grabbed the X-Acto knife.

When I'd first begun cutting myself it had been reactionary—when I was upset, the pain overpowered the thoughts, drew away my focus. I could breathe afterwards, and watching the blood bubble up (I rarely cut deep) was immensely satisfying. As time went on, though, it became more of a ritual, something to do because—apart from the initial, stinging pain—I liked how it made me feel. Calm, usually, and like I'd paid some kind of debt.

And then I grew to like it visually, as well. I liked to look at the marks the day after, when they were inflamed but no longer bleeding and had started to scab. Tiny cuts, usually, along the bone in my left wrist and up my arm. I'd found the perfect amount of pressure to apply—just

enough to sufficiently bleed, but not enough that they wouldn't heal to disappearance in a few days.

Over time I gathered more and more tools to do it because, as it turned out, some days called for different kinds of pain. Some days I liked to scratch and scratch with the flat end of a paper clip, others I liked to pierce and drag with a safety pin. Razor blades cut cleanly, but they stung like none of the others did, and the X-Acto knife had all of the razor's fierceness without that sting. For that reason, it was my favorite. (The scissors were for special occasions.)

I plumped up my pillows, piling them against the wall behind my bed, and leaning on them before peeling back my sleeve. There was a thin layer of gauze wrapped all around my arm, a somewhat unnecessary precaution since the cuts underneath were so shallow, and I peeled that away too. I had the X-Acto knife poised over the back of my wrist before I remembered Mrs. Suki and her comments on my sleeves. With a sigh, I dropped the knife to the bed and wrapped my arm back up with the gauze. I would wait a few days, then, so I could show up in class completely clear of marks and she would see that nothing was wrong. After my sleeve was in place, I unbuttoned my jeans and kicked them down to my feet.

There were cuts on my thighs, too. I didn't cut there as often, but when I did they tended to be much deeper. The marks I could see now had to have been a few months old at least, pale and raised and looking like they wouldn't go away for a while. There was one long, ragged scar that started about halfway up my thigh and disappeared underneath my boxers, and it was just as thick and fat as it had been when I'd made it the year before when *Welcome Silver Lining* had broken up. That one wouldn't ever go away, I figured—the scissors had a lasting impact.

Down near my ankle were a few words and phrases, usually done with a safety pin or the X-Acto knife. The words never meant anything. I knew that some people wrote hateful things on their skin when they cut, the things they hated about themselves or the names people called them, but I just wrote things I thought sounded cool, or that I thought would look cool. These were shallow too, and never lasted long. Currently, I could barely make out the phrase “TRASH TRAUMA.” For lack of anything better to do, I went to work retracing it, making sure blood was seeping out of each line of a letter before moving onto the next one. When I’d finished, I admired my work for a moment and then set out to wipe away the blood and wrap up my ankle.

I didn’t bother putting my pants back on, instead choosing to pull them off entirely and throw them to the floor. After stashing the knife and the bloody disinfecting wipes, I got my iPod and headphones out, tossed my pillows to the other side of my bed, and lay down under my sheet.

Mycah Shane had come for the first time almost a year ago in a dream—a true dream, not a daydream—a boy of twelve with an electric guitar slung over his shoulder and abandoned at his hip. He was all wispy hair and wide smiles, arched brows and rapid fingers. He was hyperactivity with hazel eyes, and he sang like Simon Ward. Tonight I imagined him at age five with his father, running through math flashcards. Mycah was terrible at math, no matter how hard he and his father tried.

But then the song I’d been listening to ended, and the one that came up after reminded me of a different moment in Mycah’s story, so I took him to age ten, where he was showing his best friend how to play the drums. Mycah draped himself over his friend’s shoulders and slapped his

hand down onto the hi-hat. The loud sound made his friend flinch, but then the two of them laughed and sank into one another, because it was only a noise and they lived for noise.

Mycah's friend jumped back and forth time and time again between being Erin, a slender, blonde girl Mycah wanted to but never would kiss, and Aaron, a slender, blonde boy who wanted to but never would kiss Mycah. I couldn't decide. In either case, the friend was always two years older than Mycah, and when I eventually drew Mycah's story—a graphic novel—it would all be subtext, anyways. But what was subtext in the physical stories I created could be and was fleshed out in blinding detail in my mind, and before I could help it I was Aaron, and Aaron was feeling Mycah giggling behind him, and Aaron was wondering how difficult it would be to tell Mycah, "I love you."

Mycah would be dumbstruck, having had no idea, and Aaron would start to apologize, and maybe Mycah would start to cry, and Aaron looked something like Owen, and maybe that was the real reason I'd called Owen over to meet us in the first place.

I was fortunate enough to hear Mom knocking on the door over the music—it gave me time to throw my headphones off, push my iPod aside, grab a pillow and feign sleeping. When she came in and told me it was time to come back downstairs, I groaned and rolled over, then sat up and rubbed the fake sleep from my face. I watched her examine first the mess on my floor and then the poster I had on my closet door—a self portrait by Simon Ward, which she'd seen dozens of times. She said, absently, "You really need to clean your room." I got up and followed her downstairs, and we put on a movie. About twenty minutes in, I realized that I'd left my hot chocolate, untouched, upstairs.

By the following Monday all of the cuts on my left arm had healed, vanished. I wore short sleeves to school, and when Mrs. Suki came by during class to assist me, I used my left hand, wrist clearly exposed, to push back my hair and to rub the back of my neck. When she brought my sculpture of Mycah from the first day of class out from the kiln, and set it in front of me and apologized, I picked it up with my left hand, turned it over between both of my hands. There was a crack straight down the center, from his right shoulder to his groin. It wouldn't be safe to glaze and fire again, Mrs. Suki said, so I threw him away. More than once, I thought I saw her eyes focus on my arm. I would wait one more day, show off my skin again tomorrow, and then things could return to normal.

