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The View From the House by the Ocean

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The View From the House by the Ocean

Senior Project submitted to

**The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College**

by

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1

When I was nine, I went to stay at my friend's house for the entire weekend. I had never been away from home for more than a night, and never in another state without my parents but I found now, since the divorce, Mom didn't care about things like sleeping away from home and Dad wasn't around to say No. We got Rosco just before Dad moved out. He was a mixed terrier mutt, brown and black, and was a present to help us forget that Mom made Dad move out. At least that's what James told me. Rosco wasn't allowed to sleep anywhere else but a cage in the kitchen because he was so tiny Mom said he might get lost in the house if he got out.

The first night we had him in the house, I could only think about his small body, no bigger than my two hands together, alone in that cage. There was no light left on in the kitchen over night, and the heat was turned down to 58 degrees. His whimper was just barely audible over the buzz of our house, which never seemed to go away but was only loud in the dark silence. I turned over in my bed to see if Leah was awake.

"Leah?" I whispered. No response. I put a blanket over my head and tried to block out the buzz, and the soft cries coming from below my room. Through the wall of blankets, I heard something creak in the hallway. Our house was old and the wood often made sounds on its own, which Mom said was just the house stretching out its bones from a long life. But the creaking came from the hall, and then the stairs, and soft foot steps were creeping down to the kitchen. I slipped out of bed and peeked through the door to the hallway. I saw the top of James's brown

curly hair just reaching the bottom step, skipping it because it made the loudest creak of all the rest. He un-did Rosco's cage and scooped him up onto his chest. The whimpering stopped. Bringing Rosco back up to bed with him, I think James saw me peeking through the door, because he stopped at the top of the stairs and looked right at my room through the darkness before he turned left to go back into his room. We didn't speak about it the next morning. Instead, when we walked into the kitchen, we found Rosco wagging his tail in his cage waiting to be walked. Together, the five of us took him for a walk in the early dew.

All week long, and for every night since that I can remember, I'd hear James sneak upstairs with Rosco. James was the oldest. He had curly brown hair and became obsessed with video games at a young age, a skill that we praised him for but that as we got older teased him about incessantly. He carried around a hand-held gaming device well into his twenties and often kept the screen open during dinner if he thought he was close to beating a level in the newest Pokémon. Leaving out my mother, to whom I shared a striking resemblance, James and I looked the most alike. We shared the same almond shaped eyes, dark brown in the light but deep enough to be called black. Both of our noses turned down in a subtle way at the very tip—a trademark Italian sign of beauty according to our grandmother— and the feature that Leah would come to be most jealous of as she grew into her more noticeably Italian nose, taking after Dad.

I still heard the crying, a soft dull and muffled noise even after James would return to his bed with a now soothed Rosco. I realized it wasn't coming from below, but above me, from the third floor. It was the kind of cry that makes you wish you weren't alone, the kind of cry you feel all over your body, that makes you squirm and go still at the same time, like you are intruding on an intimate moment between lovers. I have only heard my mother cry like that one other time in my life. On that night, I wanted to hold her in my arms, to wrap myself around her

until there were no longer tears or shaking sobs. I was older then, so I didn't feel scared to help her, or to cry with her. But with Rosco tucked safely in James's arms while Leah and Gabe slept in the beds next to mine, I just stayed up and listened to the cries, sucking on my pink blanket to keep from doing the same.

It was near Easter, the snow was still in patches, melting and slowly leaving behind brown slush and wet, dirty mud. My friend's Dad was called Dean. He was the one driving us up to their house in Maine. He was also the only other parent I knew who was divorced. I had always thought of him as nice, but as we pulled away from my house he had stuck his hand out the window at my mom waving bye on the porch. His fingers--the third and the fourth one down with the pinky and first finger up-right beside them-- formed a symbol. Later, at the hospital I asked my grandmother what it meant. She told me it was something people do to say I love you without using the words, and when I got home from Maine, I found a letter with Mom's name written in a heart taped to our front door. I grabbed it quickly and hid it in my coat pocket until Mom let us in the house. I went straight to my room and hid it under my pillow.

When we got to their house in Maine, we went inside to put our things away. The whole house smelled like damp wood, and didn't creak the way mine did because the bones of the house were moist, and felt heavy under my feet. We spent the whole day down by the lake, playing in the half-thawed sand until it grew too dark to pretend we weren't cold. For dinner, we ate hot dogs and hamburgers and drank hot chocolate from warm mugs to reheat our purple fingers. After dinner, my friend and I changed into dry bathing suits and sat in the hot tub, both of our stomachs puffing out from underneath the straps of our bikinis. We laughed and splashed

each other and when it was time to go upstairs for bed we traipsed water all over the house, trying to dry off before her dad could yell at us for making the house a mess. Before we went to sleep we talked and giggled about the boys we had crushes on, and told ghost stories we made up to scare each other. When we turned the lights out Molly came over and slipped into bed next to me. We fell asleep warm from the hot tub.

In the morning, the sun came through the window, reflecting off of the lake and the little bits of snow still refusing to melt away. We ate pancakes for breakfast and tried to sneak a peek out the window at her dad. He was hiding plastic easter eggs all over the yard, in the barn and down by the lake. When he came back inside he told us there was one egg, the golden egg, that had a big prize inside it. Molly and I ate the rest of our pancakes in a hurry and grabbed the wicker baskets her dad laid out for us labeled with our names in a fancy calligraphy. The E at the beginning of my name was rounded at the back and it swirled out in a thin trail at the top. It was the same handwriting I would come to recognize on the envelope I peeled off the front door back home.

“On your marks, get set, go,” Molly and I tore off down to the barn, collecting the eggs we found along the way. Some were hidden in the snow mounds, some under exposed tree roots, Molly even found one hidden inside a fallen birds nest. With our baskets full of bright colored eggs, we searched around the barn and the lake for the one golden egg. I could feel the anxious jealousy bubbling in my throat as I worried that I would hear her shriek of joy first, but kept my thoughts to myself and stayed close behind her. After an hour we still hadn’t found the golden egg. Her dad yelled from back at the house that it was time to come back up. From down by the lake where I was searching under wet sand, his voice sounded far away and small, nervous. I remember walking back up to that house feeling disappointed that we hadn’t found the egg yet,

and annoyed that he had stopped the hunt. He was standing on the porch holding a phone in his left hand. He stretched it out to me.

“Your mom is on the phone,” he said. His face looked somber, dejected. I wondered if he too was disappointed we hadn’t found the golden egg yet. His eyes were looking around for Molly, and I could see my bag in the kitchen. It had been packed back up with my towel and bathing suit left out on top because they were still wet from the night before. I put the phone to my ear.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hi, sweetie,” Mom sounded upset, like she’d been crying, but I thought maybe it was just because the phone was old and still connected to the wall by a wire. I could hear something in the background, noise and voices over the static of a bad connection. “Honey, it’s your dad. He’s okay but, we need you to come back a day early.” Her voice started sounding far away and behind me I could hear Dean still yelling for Molly to come back to the house. All through the ride back home, I thought about why Dad needed me home now. Was he angry that Mom let me stay overnight at a friend’s house? I knew I was old enough, and even if it was in a different state it wasn’t different than a regular sleep over. I got mad at him thinking it was unfair that I had to come home just so he could yell at me for breaking his rules, which he hadn’t even been around to enforce. I traced a heart into the condensation building on the car window from my heated tears. I hate you I thought. I hate you. Things started looking familiar a while later. I recognized the streets and we passed a playground Gabe and I sometimes went to with Mom when we were waiting for James and Leah to get out of school. They were older so they got out later. When we passed my dentist’s office, I knew we were going the wrong way but I didn’t say anything to Dean because I wanted to be as late as possible to spite Dad. We got further and further away

from my street, and I started to get worried that it wasn't a mistake, driving past my street. I looked up at the front seat, Dean was watching me in the rearview mirror. I felt the car slow down, and his eyes left my view of the mirror.

“What’s wrong,” I said. “Where are we?” The building stretched along the whole road we drove down and was the tallest one I had seen outside of New York City. I saw my mom, she looked small next to the double doors towering behind her. We pulled up in front of an overhanging like the ones you see outside of hotels. When I got out of the car she bent down to hug me.

“I don’t want you to be scared, but your dad had a skiing accident. He broke his neck.”

2

The last time the six of us were together, James, Leah, myself, Gabe and Mom, as we were in the hospital was in New York. It was the summer after Dad moved out. I remember because it was the first summer vacation we were taking that wasn't on Martha's Vineyard. He was living in a hotel that seemed to me taller than any other around it. When I looked up at the sky and the buildings climbing up from the ground, they all seemed tilted in, as if they would fall in on each other if a strong wind blew in the right direction. Rosco wasn't allowed to come with us. We left our car in a parking garage and took a taxi to the hotel. I was squished against the door behind the passenger seat, the left half of my body propped up on James's leg, angling me towards the window and forcing me to follow the people, cars, buildings and sidewalks that were all blurring together. I wondered who all these yellow cars were filled with.

"He lives right up in there somewhere," Mom said, pointing at a building with reflective windows covering its entirety.

"Oh," I said. When we pulled up to the front of the building I looked up. Dad was waiting for us when we got out of the cab. He was taller than I remembered, thinner too maybe. He was dressed in a gray suit, slightly reflective in the sun, looking like another window panel on the hotel behind him. His bald head also shone in the sun, oval and oblong in the way it stretched up towards the sky. I had only seen a couple pictures of what he used to look like before he lost

his hair in patches and then eventually started shaving it. They were in a high school year book Mom still kept on the bookshelf in the living room. I could never understand why, looking at him standing next to Mom, she had decided to date him. Mom hadn't changed much in the way she looked since high school. She was heavier in the stomach and hips now—something I see her regret about giving birth to four kids each time she looks at herself in the mirror—but she still had tanned olive skin as smooth and soft as the color of her silky chocolate eyes. They contrasted Dad's greying-green ones whose whites would come to grow yellow like the crevices of his teeth.

He was staying on the 36th floor, only two floors below the roof top bar where we ate dinner. I remember the whole restaurant was only separated from the night sky by a glass wall that ran the perimeter of the roof. I stood on my tippy toes hoping to get my chin up over the edge. The street below had cars blurring together in lines of yellow and red lights. Pebble sized people weaved around and across the white paint that broke up the black roads. The whole city was divided by the crisscrossing of gridlocked streets, closed off by the towers that seemed to sway back and forth in their enormity. James and Leah had taken Gabe down to the room to get changed for the pool which was separated from the bar by the same glass walls.

From the edge of the building, I looked to where Mom and Dad still sat at our table. She was drinking red wine, and he a Jack Daniel's on the rocks. They were sitting across from each other. Someone who walked passed them might have thought they were on their first date. Dad leaned back in his chair, looking towards the bar and knocking the ice in his glass, now emptied of the caramel-colored liquor. Mom leaned forward towards the table, and smiled across the table at Dad, swirling the wine around in her glass, thinning its deep red color to a light purple. When he got his refill, Dad leaned forward too, and said something to Mom. They both laughed,

and when Mom rested her glass down on the table, I saw Dad reach his hand across to hers and touch her outstretched fingers. The elevator opened behind me, and Leah, James and Gabe came pouring out, all in bathing suits and racing towards the glass door. James threw my bathing suit at me.

“Last one in is a rotten egg,” Leah said as she jumped into the blue water. I changed into my bathing suit under a towel on a long pool chair, wishing that the wall looking in on Mom and Dad and the restaurant wasn’t glass, but thick wood, or concrete. Something that didn’t show what was on the other side.

The rim of the pool was lit up with a string of violet lights that changed periodically to blue, green and then magenta. The glow of the lights was softened by a matte finish on each bulb. Opposite the wall separating us from the restaurant, there were rows and rows of chairs all angled the same way overlooking the manhattan skyline. After a while, Mom and Dad joined us at the pool, each with a new drink, sitting on the same plastic chair under a towel as the night got cooler. A couple had already taken our old table and was kissing over two pink martinis. Watching the restaurant from this side of the glass wall was like watching a silent film. The bar was rimmed just as the pool was, in color-changing lights. You could tell there was supposed to be sound.

Watching Dad lay in the hospital bed surrounded by our family, and some people I had never seen before, I had the same unsettled feeling as I did that night in New York. The glass window looking in on his room was too thick to let sound through, and everyone seemed to be moving in slow motion around him. His neck was held onto his body by a plastic brace that gave the impression of an egg sitting in a crate. I was the last one to get there. My grandparents, my cousins, my siblings, Mom, they were all there. There was also one person, a woman, who I

didn't recognize. She had blonde hair, the kind that you can tell is dyed from a box, brown at the roots that fades into a golden streaked mess. She was talking to the doctor and looking at the chart at the end of dad's bed. Once, she sat down in the chair next to his bed, while he was asleep, and reached for his hand. When she rested her manicured hand upon his calloused and hairy fingers, he flinched in his sleep. He had to sleep with the bed in an upright position, more like a chair than a bed.

He stayed in the hospital for more than a week. We weren't introduced to Julie until the third day when she offered to go out and get tacos for everyone. She took our orders, all except for Mom's who said she wasn't hungry.

"Who is that?" Gabriel asked. He climbed into the chair next to Dad's bed.

"She is the one who drove me here after my accident," Dad said. "That's my friend Julie."

"Oh, so she was skiing at the same mountain?" Gabe said.

"Well, she was skiing with me. We were there together." No one said much after that, and later in the week, Mom started dropping us off at the hospital's front doors. It became routine, we would stay for lunch and Mom would return later when Dad was getting tired, to bring us back home. Julie was always there. On Dad's last day in the hospital, Mom asked us to wait in the car so she could talk to Dad, alone.

"What do you think they are talking about," Leah said.

"What else?" Said James, "Julie."

"I like her," said Gabe. "She's really nice. Plus she let me have 4 tacos." I sat in the trunk facing the cars pulling in and out around us. At the time, we had a Volvo that had the backward seats behind those in the middle section. Sometimes, I would sit back there and

pretend to be the driver, making turning motions in the air with my fists as if I were clutching the steering wheel on either side. I thought back to that weekend in New York again. I had watched Mom and Dad with each other, the way they were laughing and touching hands. I never told James or Leah, but that night I in New York, after we were exhausted from swimming and too full off of over priced burgers, I woke up to a noise in the room. He had one of the rooms that connected to ours from a door in the middle. Our room was dark except for a sliver of light coming in from Dad's side of the doors. I sat up from the floor and looked around the room as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. Gabe was alone in the queen bed. Where Mom was supposed to be beside him was a small pile of messy blankets. I crawled over to the door to Dad's room, hearing voices from the TV. Leah snored from the cot by the window. I heard Mom's voice, and Dad's too. They were talking quietly, saying each others names, breathing heavily, laughing. The TV played quietly behind them. I crawled back to my bed and whispered into the air quietly.

“Hello? James?” My whisper hung unanswered in the darkness. Silence.

Now, in the back of the Volvo, I watched Mom wheel Dad's broken body up to Julie's car—a silver BMW convertible—in a faded blue wheel chair. Mom and Dad were talking. From behind the glass window in the Volvo I looked at Julie. She waved to me sitting in the rear-facing seats of the trunk. I smiled back. Together, Julie and Mom helped Dad out of the chair and into the front seat of the car. I expected him to look to the right and see us, his kids, in the Volvo and remember that this was the car he should be getting in, but the brace around his neck kept him from turning his head, and by the time Julie had buckled him in and pulled his fallen hat up from over his eyes, Mom had gotten back in the front seat of our car and we drove away.

“Dad's moving home,” Mom said, “not with us, but he will be a 10 minute drive away. He is going to need everyone's help getting better.”

3

Julie didn't have any kids of her own, but she did have two dogs called Huck and Chaz whom she liked to compare to us. They are my babies, she was always saying. She helped Dad move into his new house on Mckinley road with us, though moving into Dad's new house wasn't really like moving. It took only one trip from the car to the house up the short paved driveway to move all of his clothes into the empty room upstairs. There was no furniture in the house. Dad said he had lived in the house years before, with Mom, when they were new parents with James and Leah.

When they bought the house on Miller ave, Mom's house now, they rented out this house on Mckinley road to a man who, by the cigarette butts and broken windows, had no regard for the wellbeing of the house. The whole house smelled of smoke and the air felt stale and cold. A draft was always present from the window in the living room, which was cracked and boarded up with duct tape and cardboard. That was the first thing to be fixed in the house. Dad didn't have a lot to say about the changes Julie approved for the workers. I think he was just thankful to have someone helping him while his neck healed. He had the brace around his neck for six months. In that time Julie managed to turn the empty cold house into a colorful palace that looked a bit like a child had flipped through a catalogue and chosen the furniture. The couch in the living room was bright blue, clashing with the deep red that Julie had chosen for the walls, and the

bright green rug that sat in front of the yellow entertainment set. Aren't these colors so fun? She would say, moving a new multi-colored lamp into the corner of the room.

Everything during the time in Dad's house on McKinley Road was Fun. Every Friday night, when Mom dropped us off at Dads for the weekend, Julie would be waiting in the kitchen for us with a pen and a pad of paper. Each of us got to choose what we wanted for dinner, tacos, steak, mashed potatoes, pizza, Chinese food, anything, and she would get it for us. Crave night, she called it.

During the week, Dad and Julie would stay at her house because it was closer to where they worked. Dad worked on computers, in an office with a large water fountain out front. I had been there only once. Julie worked as an event planner for a big company in Boston. She was always bringing home toys, and tickets to various shows and parties she got invited to. She bragged about her clients. Every client seemed to be friends of a friend who knew someone famous.

"In college, my roommate's sister went on a date with Steve Carrell," she told me once, "I could probably get his number, he graduated from my college, only five years ahead of me." She could always get us tickets to Baseball games, which Dad loved to go to. We would sit up in the nose bleeds and eat hot dogs longer than our arms and Dad would drink cheap beer from plastic cups that piled up under the blue plastic seats at the ball park. That first summer after Dad got his neck brace off was the happiest I remember him being in a long time. He started fixing up the outside of his house, whose shingles had greyed and molded from years of rain and snow. He loved doing projects with us. Julie wanted to pay someone to come and power wash the house, but Dad said why pay someone to do what he could do? He showed me how to rip the old shingles from the outside of the house with an old hammer from the tool box James had built him

in wood shop class. We filled up lawn bag after lawn bag with splintered wood and Dad let me drink lemonade straight from the carton. We listened to a popular radio station and after hearing the same songs over and over again we started to sing our favorites out loud and bet on how many times in a day they would repeat. When we were working in the garage one day, I picked up the carton of lemonade to take the last sip only to feel that it was empty. I saw Dad's cup, full. I snuck a sip of his, just small enough to not give me away. It tasted sour, and when I swallowed it burnt my throat and even after I had swallowed my breath felt hot for the rest of the day. I didn't tell Dad, I didn't want him to get mad, and for the rest of the summer I could feel that hot sensation on my tongue.

While we worked outside, Julie would sit in the back yard in the over-sized lawn chairs she bought from her favorite gaudy furniture store. Her hand was never without a glass of white wine, and when she sipped out of the polka-dotted glasses she would swallow with a loud heavy sigh, as if she wanted everyone to know she deserved a break from a hard life of shopping and planning parties. I think that was the thing that Leah resented the most about Julie being in our lives now, the luxury Julie exuded. Leah told me it was called living above your lifestyle.

"What is living above your lifestyle," I said when she told me. We were both watching Julie as she sunbathed.

"You can just tell she's an only child. What is Dad thinking with her? And besides, she's blonde," she said back to me. "Trust me, it won't work out." Leah was always making sweeping statements like this elaborating on them only with an eye roll or an eyebrow raise, but never with deeper explanation. She was bitter about not being first born, like she had something taken away from her before she was even given a chance to fight for it, but she used the power she assigned to herself as the oldest girl in the family to act as another mother. Even before Leah told me

about how she felt about Julie, it was clear how the two of them felt about each other. They fought about mundane and trivial things like which wall the couch should face and what cabinet should house the cups and the plates. There was always tension between them. They were usually subtle about the way they let their words slip out in quiet daggers. They almost never fought when Dad was around. They were good at hiding their animosity in front of him, and if they weren't Dad never let on that he knew things were getting as bad they did in the end. I used to think it was about fighting for Dad's affection, but later, when things between Julie and Leah, and Julie and Dad, got bad enough I realized it wasn't about Dad at all.

When the outside of the house was done, we decided to repaint the bedrooms we had each chosen on that first day when we moved in. They were the only rooms Julie hadn't repainted yet, and Dad let us choose the colors we wanted.

James and I chose the two single rooms on the first floor down the hall from the kitchen, which was separated from the living room by only a half wall. Leah chose the biggest room on the second floor, a room she had won after an argument with Gabe over where he would sleep.

"I need my own room, I am a girl. I am not sharing a room with a boy," Leah's voice was hardly muffled coming through the ceiling. Gabriel ended up sharing a room with Dad, and eventually Julie. He was the only one who didn't get to paint a room with a color he chose, but I let him help me with mine. We drove to Home Depot in Dad's old Honda civic, (the one he promised to give James if he got his license) with the windows down. We piled into the back with the heat of the summer making our legs sticky with sweat. There were only two working seat belts so we stretched them as far as they would go and wrapped them around us.

My room at Mom's house was painted taupe. Every room in her house was some form of beige, or tan. Neutral, earthy tones she called them. They created a soft background for the artwork hanging, and the stairway full of pictures of our family, smiling and blowing out birthday candles, laughing while ripping open presents on Christmas morning. My favorite picture in that stairwell was the newest one. A picture of James, Leah and Gabe crowded around Rosco in the back yard. Rosco had dirt in his beard and his teeth, which were spread into a smile as if he too knew the picture was being taken. He had a pink bow around his neck from the groomers.

"What color can I paint my room?" I asked Dad. My eyes had gone straight to the bright pink, and orange. There was a fade from those electric swatches to the softer, lighter versions of their excitement. Blurred together they looked like a harsh sunset.

"Anything you want," Dad said, taking the electric yellow card from my hand and putting it in the trash, "Except that. That feels like a headache." I spent the whole time picking up and putting back the different squares. Some were rounded on the edges and felt smooth. Others were shiny and came to a sharp point at each corner.

"What color is my room, Dad?" Gabe's hand was reaching up at the wall. He was too short to reach above the bottom row.

"Our room is going to stay grey," Said Dad. I found them later in the lighting aisle. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling and protrude from the walls around us. The light Dad chose would hang over the kitchen table. It was brown metal, and had lights that stuck out off the ends of its curving arms like a spider descending from the ceiling. It didn't go with the lights Julie had already put in the kitchen, or the living room, but I think Dad wanted to put something of his own into the house.

On Sunday nights, Mom still made family dinner. When she would pick us up from Dad's house it was usually still light outside. Julie would already be gone by then, her dogs too. Going home to Mom's felt like taking a deep breath. Rosco would run up to the kitchen door, kept closed to keep him from escaping out the front door, and scratch on it with his small paws. Our house had taken on a new smell, warm and wet, from when Rosco was not yet house trained and would leave quarter sized puddles of pee on the wooden floors when he got excited. When we reached the kitchen, Rosco jumped up on all of us, too flustered to choose just one of us to say hello to. He was almost too big for me to carry him. The last Sunday night of the summer before school started again, we came home and Rosco knocked Gabe playfully to the floor, licking his entire face. Mom had hung all of our backpacks in a row on the hooks in the back hall. Leah went over to the stove and dipped her finger into the mashed potatoes heating on the front burner. Mom nagged her about her unwashed hands, and we all sat down to eat at the steel island we had turned into a kitchen table. Leah, James and Gabe fought to tell Mom about the weekend and to talk about what teachers and classes they would have the next day. Leah taunted James about how hot his friends were, and he motioned to punch her from across the table.

"Leah, don't instigate. James, apologize for trying to hit her," Mom took a sip of the single glass of red wine she had with dinner. Gabe fed Rosco under the table and James and Leah continued back and forth at each other. I leaned over and put my head on Mom's shoulder, thinking about what to wear to the first day of school.

4

We only lasted two years in Dad's house on McKinley Road. When the work was done and there was no longer a distraction of painting, or refurnishing, Dad and Julie began spending more time inside with each other. The fun atmosphere Julie tried so hard to cultivate dwindled with each minor argument or disagreement they had, and a tension spread throughout the house, hovering over Dad and Julie. At first it was about small things, things that Julie and Leah bickered about like the placement of the couch, or the dog hair that stuck to everything even after it went through the washing machine. Whenever Dad heard Julie and Leah start to fight he would step in with a passive statement like Hey ladies, take it easy, or Come on girls, settle down. But whenever Dad started fighting with Julie there was no one to break the tension, no one to stop it before it got set into full swing. A couple times Gabe and I walked in on Dad and Julie fighting in the living room and acted as if we hadn't been listening to them from my room behind the closed doors and laughing with each other as Julie whined and scolded my Dad about how inconsiderate he was being that day.

"Don't you ever think about anyone other than yourself, Chris?" This was one of Julie's trademark phrases. She had a way of emphasizing the word 'ever' that implied the answer to the question right there in her accusation. Dad's response was always the same. He would walk to the cabinet under the kitchen sink and pour himself a glass of whiskey. Jack Daniel's on the

rocks, topped off with a splash of lemonade. He would take a small sip from the brim and chase it with the silence of her angry stare and the fight would seem to just end, evaporate into the heat of the day.

It felt different than it did when we used to listen to Mom and Dad fight. Gabe was too young to remember, but it was usually at night. They had a routine. After they set me, James and Leah up in the play room with a movie and put Gabe to sleep they would start in on each other. They tried to hide behind the volume of Mr. Incredible's booming voice or Lindsay Lohan's fake english accent but when they left us alone and descended the stairs into the kitchen, the three of us would sit huddled on the red bean bag chair, the movie paused, shaking and listening to our parents. Their fighting got worse the later it was in the day, switching from fighting over dinner and time spent with the family to insults and demeaning one another. Whenever I wanted to cry during those nights, I would think of Gabriel asleep in his bed, happy to know that he would never hear two people spit hate at each other like it was a contest on who could wound deepest with words.

Julie and Dad's fights seemed superficial compared to those between Mom and Dad. And I think too that Dad was worn out from the first time around. It was like he was still recovering from old battle wounds with Mom, and rather than reopen them he was going to wait until they healed over before returning to battle with a new opponent. But Julie didn't want to wait for Dad to recover, and because Dad wasn't fully healed yet, he said nothing to us about moving out of the house we had worked on fixing up together, but instead let Julie put the For Sale sign on the edge of the front lawn so that it was visible for anyone driving by.

I guess it was inevitable. She had been complaining about the house for months. Chris, this house is too small for six people, Chris, I hate the fire place, it makes the house smell like an

ash tray, Chris, Gabe needs his own room. When I learned about the house being put on the market it was a Friday. Mom was dropping me and Gabe off at Dads. We could see the sign from the end of the street, like a red and white billboard advertisement. Mom pulled into the driveway and looked at us from the rearview mirror.

“Is Dad moving?” Her voice was sad, almost worried and maybe hurt that we hadn’t told her.

“Dad’s not moving,” I said, thinking he would have told us if he was.

“Julie said we were,” said Gabe. He was chewing a piece of bright blue gum that was stuck in various places around his lips and on his cheeks. Mom asked us to go in, and said she would wait in the car but could we have Dad come out and talk to her.

We ran inside and told Dad that Mom was in the driveway. From the picture window in the living room Gabe and I watched Mom turn the car off and get out to meet Dad. We crouched low behind the back of the couch, careful not to reveal ourselves. They were talking for a while. Mom gestured to the For Sale sign behind her. Gabe got bored and went to play in the backyard. When he opened the door, I could hear Mom’s voice.

“Were you going to tell me? Tell the kids?” Their voices were getting louder. I could only make out parts of sentences, back and forth. As they got angrier, they got quieter, and closer.

“...Just looking...”

“...That’s a Hell of a way...”

“...Screw it, you don’t...” Mom got back in her car. Dad flicked his hand at her as if waving good bye, but it looked more like he was slapping the air. I jumped down from the couch and ran on my tip toes to my room, shutting the door carefully and putting in my headphones as if to show I had been in my room the whole time.

Over the next few weeks people were coming every weekend to see the house. Men came in dark blue clothing and painted over the colorful walls until they were a white so bright it hurt my head. They painted all of the rooms, the red wall in the living room, the splatter on Leah's walls, the spray paint on James's. Other's came and put a garden in the middle of our wiffle ball field in the backyard, and planted trees in the front yard. Julie asked me to bake cookies almost every weekend.

"It makes it feel homey," she said. When I started getting tired of it, she bought a candle called "Clean home scent" and kept it lit throughout the day. A couple with a new born baby came to see the house more than once. I remember them because they let me hold the little boy while they were walking through the house. From the window in the kitchen I watched them outside in the backyard. Julie was pointing all around the yard to the newly sprouting plants and clean cut grass. They turned around as she pointed up above to the second floor of the house, talking and laughing with them. They waved at me holding their baby. I lifted his tiny hand and used it to wave back. Their names were Tom and Rachel and they ended up buying the house. I drove by years later and saw the home they made from our house. They had taken off the shingles, putting white siding all around the exterior. The yard was closed in by a white fence and the back yard was no longer a garden but a large wooden patio with a screened in porch. There was smoke coming out of the chimney.

On the last night we spent in the house on Mckinley Road Julie cooked dinner. It was in November, close to Thanksgiving which we were spending at Moms, so she cooked a turkey. She and Dad had been packing all week. The last thing left was the kitchen table, and a bed of blankets which James, Leah, Gabe and I were expected to sleep on because our beds were already in the truck (thought I found out later they had been given to goodwill).

“Pass the mashed potato, I want extra,” said Leah, reaching in front of Gabe. James piled on gravy to the turkey leg and green beans on his plate. Gabe had taken the other Turkey leg and was already biting into it when Julie came to sit at the table. Dad was pouring himself a glass of whiskey into a plastic cup and I was trying to keep the paper plate under my food to keep from sticking to the table.

“Where’s my turkey leg?” Said Julie. Her plate was empty, as was the bottle of white wine next to her full glass. We all laughed as Gabe ripped into his second bite, tearing the meat off the bone. “I cooked this full meal, all I asked for was one of the legs.” We stopped laughing, Leah taking a nervous bite of potatoes looked at James from across the table.

“Here, have mine,” said James picking up his gravy drowned turkey leg from the bone and bringing it over to her plate. She grabbed it from his hands and threw it back down on his plate. Potato and gravy splashed over the table.

“Chris, are you kidding me? You aren’t going to say anything,” Julie stood up and went across to him, ripping the cup from his hands and yelling in his ear. “I spent all day cooking for your family and I can’t even get a fucking turkey leg? That was all I asked for. All I asked for.”

“Calm down, Jule. James just said you can have it. He hasn’t eaten it yet,” Dad picked his glass back up and took another sip. Julie smacked it away, showering Leah’s white sweater in caramel colored whiskey.

“You kids, all of you guys are so ungrateful. I didn’t have to cook for you. Have some respect. I am buying you a bigger house, I put furniture in this house, I spend money buying you new clothes, and this is how I am treated?” She was behind her chair now, her face getting redder with every word. The veins in her neck stuck out and wound up to her fore head like a street map coming to life.

“So, you don’t want my turkey leg?” said James. I held back a laugh but a small bit of lemonade came out of my nose as it slipped through. Julie picked up her chair by the back and hoisted it over her head. She threw it across the room into the empty living room. It would have smashed the hanging lamp if it hadn’t already been boxed away in the U-Haul outside. The chair crashed, echoing throughout the bare house and snapped in half. Gabe stopped chewing. Dad stood up from the table and pointed his finger across the table at her. His face turned a demonic shade of purple. I thought he was going to yell, scream, show his veins which rival hers in their aggression when he yells. Instead he got quiet, serious. His finger was steady.

“Get your ass outside, now.” It was the first time I had heard them fight. He spoke to her like a child in trouble for breaking curfew. She grabbed her glass of wine and started towards the door.

“Happy fucking Thanksgiving, kids” she said walking out. Dad followed her. When she left, it was silent with the ring of the broken chair still hanging in the tense air.

“If she tasted the turkey leg,” said Gabe “I don’t think she would have been so mad she didn’t get one.” The four of us laughed. Leah took her sweater off and dabbed up the whiskey on the floor with it.

“Shall we?” said James. He poured himself and Leah each a shot of whiskey from the bottle on the counter. Gabriel and I cheers them with our cups of lemonade and we all drank to our last Thanksgiving in the house on McKinley road. We heard Julie’s car pull out of the driveway. Dad came back in smelling like cigarettes. We all got quiet again when he sat back down. James took another cup from the stack and poured Dad another cup of Jack Daniel’s.

“Everyone, go around and say what you are thankful for. Now.” He took the whole cup in one gulp. A timer went off in the kitchen. No one got up to shut it off. No one spoke. I took a bite of stuffing. It tasted sour and sweet, like warm alcohol slipping slowly down your throat.

“I love you guys,” Said James. Dad got up from the table and went upstairs. The four of us finished eating, talking about what we would miss about the house. The thin walls, the fire place, watching movies on the crooked TV that sat on the ugly entertainment set that never fit right along the living room wall, the damp smell that lingered when the basement door was left open, the summer project.

“And this,” said Leah. She didn’t say what this was, but we all knew, and we raised our glasses again. After we finished eating, we cleaned the table and put Dad’s untouched plate in the fridge. He came down a while later, in the middle of a game of Yahtzee. We started over, adding his name to the score card. He took us back to Mom’s that night. We packed up the blankets meant to be our bed and put them in the box by the door on our way out. It was the last time we would all walk out of the door in the kitchen that moaned from the cold in the winter. Driving away from the house, I thought about the last summer we spent in our house on Martha’s Vineyard, years before when Mom and Dad let us convince them to take one last family vacation together. They spent most mornings in bed, us spying on them from outside. Even on top of James’s shoulders I wasn’t tall enough to see inside their room, but we could hear them laughing and talking in the way people do when they start loving each other for the first time. We had high fived each other, running around the house and jumping because our plan had worked. But when we drove away from the beach cottage on the way to the ferry, just as we were now driving away from Dads house, we felt like strangers in the car.

5

I don't remember if Mom or Dad talked to the four of us about it first, but it was decided that even though they would live separately, we would still spend holidays together in the same house. They wanted it to feel normal for us, but what they really meant was that we would only spend the big holidays together, like Christmas or Easter, both of which our family celebrates though we haven't ever been to church, nor are any of us religious. Their pact to keep things 'normal' for us meant that Christmas didn't change much at first. Mom would still invite Dad to come pick out the tree with us, usually at a farm where James would hold the tree steady while Dad sawed it down. All of us would walk back to the car smelling like pine with sticky hands from sap and covered in needles from the tree sprinkling on us while we trudged back in the snow covered ground. Dad would drop us off at home with Mom and unload the tree to the porch to let the branches relax from the ride. Mom always had last say on the tree. She liked trees with character, round on the bottom with a thin top and scraggily branches around the middle straying away from the classic cone shape.

"I don't want it to look fake," Mom would say, "No one else will have this tree." After Dad put the tree in the stand, we clapped and Mom made her special hot chocolate, her secret was half milk, half eggnog. We used to decorate it on the night that we bought it, but since Dad moved into the house by the ocean with Julie, the tree usually stayed bare for a couple of days. The first winter after Dad moved in there, he left before hot chocolate, and the decorations stayed in a box next to the tree for a week until Dad could come over and help us decorate. I think

Mom thought it was important for us to see that we could still do things as a family, but to James, Leah and me it got harder to pretend that we liked having Mom and Dad in the same room together. Another thing born from the divorce was an annual visit to Dad's parents house on Christmas Eve day. We saw our grandparents only one other day out of the year. Though they lived close, only an hour from our small town in New Hampshire, they drove up only once a year in the Summer for a day at the beach. Dad has never told us much about his relationship with his parents, but he complains and sighs heavily each time we are on our way to see them, as if seeing them is comparable to going to the dentist or working on a Saturday (both of which he hadn't done in years).

On the first year that Julie accompanied us to our grandparent's day of Christmas Eve, she insisted on bringing her dogs which meant taking two cars. Dad picked the four of us up from Mom's to go to our grandparent's house, and Julie pulled up behind him in sunglasses too big for her face wearing a Santa hat. She rolled down her window and waved to us on the porch making the bells around her wrist jingle and make her dogs bark and bite at each other.

"Who wants to come with me and the dogs?" she said.

"You brought the dogs?" said Leah, descending the stairs of the porch and rolling her eyes.

"No one should be alone this time of year," she said back, "do you think your dad would leave you kids at home on Christmas?" Equating us to her dogs again. As we pulled away from the house, Rosco stood on his hind legs in Mom's living room on the couch, the both of them seeing us off for the day. I watched her kiss his wet snout.

Julie parked down the street when we got to my grandparents house because the driveway was too small to fit both cars. We ate dinner in the early evening. The food served at their house

was always the highlight of the evening, and the thing I most looked forward to when walking into my grandparents house. The smell of the shrimp scampi and lobster claws, calamari and salted fish salad, the aroma of the seven course meal was intoxicating each year. The house smelled thick, as if I could fill myself up just by breathing in the bubbling red pasta sauce served over thick linguine and mussels. Leah was the only one in our family who didn't eat seafood. She filled up on Dad's famous baked ziti and on the bottles of wine that were replaced almost immediately after they were emptied. The color of the bottles changed with each replacement bottle, a red for a white, or a light pink for a burgundy. Dad motioned across the table in the middle of dinner to Leah. He swiped his hand across his neck, telling her had enough to drink without interrupting the story my uncle was telling. But her cheeks continued gaining color and a soft heat as she disregarded Dad's instructions and after the table was cleared, she fell asleep on the couch watching football. We passed out presents to our uncle and aunt and our cousins. Our grandparents hid envelopes of money throughout the tinsel-covered tree. Leah woke up to retrieve hers, and we teased her a little for her still wine-flushed cheeks and finished the night with cookies and eggnog. When we were leaving, Julie called to her dogs who were still somewhere inside the house. They ran from the dining room and barreled through the kitchen out the front door, dragging with them the tablecloth and the remaining desserts as they bit at each other and raced to the car.

“Huck, Chaz. Stop it! Bad dogs,” Julie yelled after them. Dad offered to stay and clean up the mess, but was shuffled out of the house by his parents, apologizing for the dogs behavior. Julie turned back to Dad and under her breath said, “At least they didn't pass out in the middle of Christmas Eve.” I looked at Leah who was giving Julie the finger behind her back while the

words were still coming out in hot puffs of white in the cold air of the winter night. When we got back home, Dad kissed us each on the cheek.

“Ok, troops. I will see you in the morning,” he said. He and Mom had decided he would come open presents with us in the morning before we went over to his house to spend the rest of the day. This was the new arrangement they had decided would work best with Dad now living in a house with Julie. I wondered how much older they wanted Gabriel to get before they stopped pretending this was the best way to handle Christmas with divorced parents. It was getting tiring having Mom and Dad in the same room together, acting as if it were more normal to be spending this time together rather than apart.

Leah and I slept together in her bed. She had slipped a bottle of Jägermeister into her jacket on the way out of our grandparents house. We took turns taking swigs of the licorice flavored liquor, each time getting a little giddier about the morning and daring each other to sneak down stairs and see if Mom had decorated the floor in front of the tree with our presents yet. We woke up to Gabe jumping on top of us before the sun had fully risen. The three of us ran down the hall into James’s room and woke him up in the same excited manner. He put his pillow over his head, sounding like Mom, begging for five more minutes of sleep. Dad was already waiting for us downstairs when Mom finally got up and let us run down the stairs behind her. Rosco was barking to be let out of the kitchen. He jumped up on Mom and James, licking their faces and weaving between all of us to claim his spot on the couch. He settled his head on Momm’s lap, taking up half the couch. At his vet appointment the year before, they said he was fully grown. He was now five pounds bigger.

“Slow down, I don’t have my camera ready,” Mom said, fumbling in her pocket for her phone. “Leah, take pictures.” Gabe was already tearing open half his presents. Though he had

the most because he was the youngest, there were more presents under the tree than I had ever remembered. I heard Dad tell Mom she had gone overboard. She shrugged it off and pointed her phone at Gabe.

“Gabe, what did you get? Turn towards the camera.” When we had unwrapped all the presents and Rosco had torn up the empty boxes, we sat down to eat the mountain of eggs and bagels waiting on the dining room table. Leah was upstairs trying on her new clothes when Dad called her down, getting us ready to go over to spend our first Christmas in his new house. In the living room, Mom sat on the couch alone, surrounded by the mess of crumpled wrapping paper and torn cardboard. She had her glasses on, smiling through a furrowed face looking through the pictures she had taken on her phone. I walked over in my hat and down coat and hugged her around the neck. Rosco came and jumped back up to stay with her, again resting his head in her lap. He licked her face and nuzzled her stomach, as if trying to get back the happy buzz that had evaporated from the house. When we pulled away from Mom’s driveway, I didn’t see Rosco’s head poke up in the window to say bye, but I was happy because this meant that he was keeping Mom company where ever she was in the house, probably doing the dishes and putting the extra eggs in Rosco’s bowl.

Julie was waiting on the wooden patio for us when we arrived. She was dressed in a Santa hat, and an elf costume. Their tree was next to the electric fireplace that was switched on, making the house hot in an uncomfortable and stuffy way. By the end of the day, the plastic pine needles on the right side of the tree had melted together to form a hard plastic stick. All of the furniture in the house was as white as the walls. The kitchen looked out of place. The cabinets

lining the walls and the island in the center were made of a dark wood. The countertops were dark green marble and the bar stools lining the far side of the island were wicker and looked as if they belonged outside. They had brought no new furniture into the house. Julie had paid the previous owners an extra fee to leave everything as it stood, down to the dark green pool table upstairs, and the dishes we would eat Christmas dinner on.

Lined up on the island were glasses, bloody Mary mix, vodka, wine, and four Santa hats.

“Merry Christmas!” Julie clapped as we put on our hats. Leah left the one meant for her on the counter.

“That will ruin my hair.” Leah made herself a bloody Mary, James went to the cabinet in Dads office and poured himself a glass of Dad’s whiskey, the only bottle that wasn’t offered on the table.

“Have some wine, I think you’re old enough now,” Julie poured me a glass of the white wine she was drinking. None of us were old enough, really, but I took the cup anyway. By the time we got around to opening our presents for the second time that day, the bottle of bloody Mary mix was half empty and I had lost track of how many times Julie had refilled my wine glass. Dad handed out the presents one by one per Julie’s request.

“If you open them all at once, Christmas is over,” she said. “Besides, Christmas isn’t about the presents, it’s about being around the people you love.” When it was Julie’s turn to open a present, we handed the presents we had gotten her to Dad, so he could distribute them one at a time. All except Leah.

“I forgot to get one,” she said. She had told me earlier in the week that she wasn’t going to buy Julie one. When I asked why she said because she didn’t care and besides, she would just return it anyways. Leah’s words hung stale in the air as Julie began to open her gift from me. It

was a scented candle, New home scent. When all the presents had been opened, Julie stood up, refilled her glass and thanked everyone for their gifts.

“So thoughtful,” she said as she pushed the keychain James got her and the ornament Gabe made her aside to make room on the coffee table for her wine.

“Wait, I think there is one more over here, behind the tree,” said Dad. He pretended to look behind the tree and pulled a small black box out of his front jean pocket.

“Is it for me?” said Gabe sitting up from his blanket by the fireplace. We were all staring at the box in Dads hand. Everyone was quiet. James looked across the room and me and Leah. The color in his face that had been building all day from the many glasses of whiskey drained away. Leah, who was mid sip in her drink, spit back out the bit that was in her mouth into her cup, which she set down on the table next to Julie’s.

“Merry Christmas, Julie,” Dad said, moving across the rug towards the couch to give her the box. Julie took the box and held it in her hands. She rubbed the velvet top, looking as if she were about to cry. I felt sick, too sick for words. I wanted to say something but my mouth was dry, and my throat heavy making it hard for me to breathe. Leah stood up from the couch before Julie had time to open the box.

“Is no one going to say anything? This is fucking ridiculous,” she looked at Dad. “Dad, please don’t—” She was cut off by Julie, who stood up, looking as though she was going to slap Leah.

“You need to sit down and apologize to your father. Be thankful for—”

“I don’t have to do shit that you tell me,” Leah said back.

“Don’t raise your voice to me in my own house,” said Julie. They were spitting words back and forth at each other. Dad got up and put his hand on Leah’s shoulder, motioning her to sit back down. She slapped his hand off her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” she said. When Leah got mad, this mad, it was the only time she looked like Dad. They shared the same heavy color in their faces and wide eyes that disappeared behind wrinkled squints, and both of their voices dropped low and deep. She made the room feel small, and still and breathed heavily as if taking everyone else’s breath from their own throats. It felt like standing with a partially diffused bomb in your hand, trying to decide whether to cut the black wire, or the red wire. One breath and the room would explode.

“You need to calm down and apologize to me, and your father, or you need to leave this house.” Julie’s voice was even, wavering only for a moment giving away the tears she was holding back. Gabe whispered something about everyone getting along on Christmas. They stood facing each other, neither one backing down. Leah reached across to Julie’s head, yanked off her hat, and threw it on the floor at Julie’s feet. She walked out the back door, through the garage, and slamming it shut behind her. No one spoke, and then wiping away her tears, Julie looked at Dad.

“You need to teach your daughter some respect. She is not allowed back into this house until I get an apology.” Dad sipped his Jack Daniel’s and lemonade.

After Leah left, Dad made me and James and Gabe take the dogs for a walk. We took them to the beach. The sand was wet with melted snow and the shore line was white with foam from the water lapping on its edge.

“Why did Leah get so mad?” Gabe asked us. James and I didn’t have much to say. We walked down towards the rock barrier that separated the connecting beaches, only crossable at

low tide. The dogs had already made their way over to the other side, stopping between sprints to check back on us. Huck's tongue hung out the side of his mouth. Chaz was squirming in the sand on his back with all four legs in the air. When we made it back to the house, we hosed down the dogs. I looked at James and saw in the dim porch light that his cheeks looked as hot as mine felt. Both of us still feeling the spirits of the holiday and the alcohol, and a bit incredulous about the fight between Julie and Leah that had been building for years, James and I sprayed the hose water across the dogs fur and all over the patio without caring where the dirt and sand flying off went, or whom it covered. The fire was still on inside, but we stayed out on the porch washing the dogs until our fingers were frozen purple, and our knuckles white. We dried them off with towels from the garage. When we were done, I stood up and looked in at the house's warm yellow glow. Through the glass panels on the porch door, I could see directly into the kitchen. I saw the black box sitting alone on the wooden island. It was open. I grabbed James's arm and pointed inside.

“Look,” I said. “Gabe come here.” When Gabe ran over from behind the hot tub he saw what I was pointing to. On the white cushion setting inside the box sat a single rectangular diamond, but it wasn't set on a silver cushion, or in a gold band. Instead, it hung down from a thin, white-gold chain. A necklace. The three of us looked at each other. James pulled me and Gabe into his arms and we stood on the porch laughing in our over-sized coats and warming up in each others heat.

6

“Why don’t you just say sorry and pretend like you mean it,” said Gabe. Leah, James Gabe and I sat in a cafe downtown waiting for Dad to get here. Leah was still banned from his house. She hadn’t spoken to Julie in months. It was her eighteenth birthday today. James, Leah and I had snuck a bottle of champagne into Mom’s this morning to celebrate early before we met Dad. He had been getting more and more attentive to us drinking. I don’t know exactly what made him change his tone about it. He had been more attentive, hovering over each beer or glass of whiskey James poured, since the fight on Christmas. I imagine Julie said something while we were gone at the beach with the dogs, questioning the habit we were all coveting, as if attempting to control yet another aspect of their house. But Dad wasn’t firm on enforcing guidelines for drinking so whatever she said, if she said anything at all, it wasn’t enough to effect real change in him, or in us. After that night, I think Julie realized for the first time that Dad wasn’t a person who could be changed, wasn’t a person who was amenable to other’s thoughts, or feelings, and he wasn’t a person who ever wanted to be. But neither was Julie. Their stubbornness clashed. Julie started ordering and pre-ordering case after case of her favorite dry chardonnay to the house. She stored them under the stairs, a new shipment every month. By the time she would move out, there were over thirty cases of the same bottle of wine. It was never Dad’s style, the large white house by the beach with an electric fireplace and marble counter tops, bottle after bottle of wine, but he somehow made it fit. He was always a whiskey man, I had never known him to drink anything else, and in his haze of downing glass after glass he let the landscape, the

open ocean air, the wooded backyard that looked as if it never ended, enable his drinking, his carelessness. And he let us get swallowed up with it.

“Because, then she wins. Plus, if Dad won’t talk to me because of her, then I am definitely not talking to him, especially if he thinks living in that fucking house with her is more important than talking to me, his own daughter.” Gabe had stopped listening but Leah continued to talk, as if to justify to herself that she was doing the right thing. “Besides, I know she will apologize to me first. I have the power in this relationship, not her.” When I heard Leah say that, I knew now that their relationship had nothing to do with Dad. That Julie and Leah would always be in competition with each other, not for Dad’s affection, but for the dominant role in the house, the power, the upper hand. The control.

“Or you can just go there when she isn’t there. If you want to see Dad,” I said.

“She never leaves that house, neither of them do. I don’t even know how they deal with each other in that house. Every single day. All day. No wonder Dad hasn’t proposed, he is probably too busy planning an escape route out.” Said James. We all laughed. It was true. Since moving into their new house, Dad spent all of his time inside. The house became his office, it’s inviting walls and open feel let one beer after work turn into a glass of whiskey during his work day. I don’t know if it was Julie who encouraged it, or the lack of motivation it seemed Dad had contracted since moving into his new house but the morning commute Dad used to make every day was now too trying for him, and as he explained to his boss on the phone it made sense for him to work remotely, so that he could spend more time with his family and less time on the road. I listened to him ask for this allowance all while taking intermittent sips from the crystalline glass in his hands. His boss said yes. Every time I heard him and Julie fight after that,

especially about never getting out of the house anymore, I wondered if that was what he meant by spending more time with his family.

The first time Mom caught me drinking was on a Sunday in July. I remember because the feeling of returning to Mom's after being at Dad's for a weekend was sometimes like being called into work on your day off. Leah and I had stumbled into Mom's house still sandy and salted from a day in the ocean. We had thrown our empty coffee cups into the recycling on the front porch still wet on the inside with a mix of vodka and sprite. It was a trick we had learned from Dad a way to bring a drink to the beach without arousing suspicion from cops who would be patrolling the shore looking to ticket anyone with a drink in their hands which, in our case felt like every day since Dad and Julie moved into the house by the ocean.

"I don't want drinking in my house," Mom said to me. "I don't have control over what happens at Dad's house, but you are still my daughter, and you are fifteen."

"Why are you saying this to me, Mom," I said, sitting down and letting Rosco pad his way over to my lap. "I don't even drink. It's Leah and James you should be talking to." The green tile on kitchen floor felt cool against my hot skin. I lowered my face to the ground.

"Do you think I was born yesterday?" Mom said. "You are drunk right now."

"Mom, I had one beer at Dad's like three hours ago. I'm fine." I tried to bury my face near Rosco's, hoping his sticky tongue hanging limp from his mouth would disguise the vodka on my breath. Mom grounded me the next morning, after cleaning up the vomit from the trash can in my room. Leah told me that throwing up builds character, it's how you know how much you can handle she'd tell me. She and James had friends over at Dad's almost every weekend in the summer. They were born only a year apart and usually hung out with the same people. Leah,

always wanting to be the oldest, pushed her way into James's friend group. I was always jealous of their closeness. Being two years younger than Leah and four years older than Gabe I was always one of the younger kids, but trying to keep up with the older kids kept me somewhere in limbo. James confided in me when he needed advice, but hung out with Leah and called me 'little sis' when his friends were around. Sometimes, when I watched them drive away from Dad's with the windows down and too many kids shoved into the back seat, I felt a pit of jealousy in my stomach and my eyes grew hot with tears. I was four years old again, sneaking out of bed to watch the older kids in the neighborhood run around the house with flashlights in the dark playing cops and robbers while my babysitter sat outside my door making sure I was going to be asleep before Mom and Dad returned home.

Mom's face grew wrinkled, and her false enthusiasm (weighted down by her worry about allowing us to be subject to a life of frivolity) for us as we returned home each weekend was slackened and eventually defeated when she heard us talking about corn hole tournaments, paddle boarding, and warm drunk days on the beach with beers that left sweaty rings on the patio from the heat of the sun. When I think about Mom sometimes all I can see in my mind is her face with streaks of dirt and her hands calloused from hours of work in gardens around the neighborhood. She worked as a landscaper to fund the art studio she rarely worked in anymore. Sometimes I resented her for that, because I felt an increasing amount of guilt growing inside me each time I returned from a relaxed day at the beach. My resentment towards Mom and her lack of excitement about the summer only grew when she commented on the lack of actual parenting Dad did when we went over to his house. I wondered why she couldn't just be happy for us that he was finally spending time with us. I grew irrationally mad at her on many days, especially the ones she berated me for coming back to her house drunk. Didn't she want us to have a

relationship with our father after all of his years of never being there for us when we were younger? I thought bitterly to myself she must just be jealous of the life he was living, aging in reverse with his high spirit and carefree attitude while she stood still in the same place she had been since the divorce, struggling to make ends meet and trying to convince herself that her art, her paintings, her passion, still mattered. I lay in bed watching the ceiling form a pattern I knew wasn't really there, was that it made me wish, just for a moment, that we lived with Dad.

7

On the morning of the day that Dad and Julie got engaged, I woke up to yelling in the kitchen. Gabriel and I were the only ones at Moms. The house was already sticky with the heat of the morning and with each step to the bathroom the skin on my bare feet peeled up from the wood in a slow movement. I opened Gabe's door to see if he was awake. I bumped his head opening the door, his ear had been pressed up against the crack in the doorway on the other side. He was now taller than me and had grown out of his baby face. His round nose now came to a defined point at the end resembling Leah's, and his voice was now deep and baritone.

"Is that Dad and Mom?" he said, gesturing to the voices reverberating through the house.

"Yeah. Quiet, come here." We snuck to the top of the stairs.

"I can't be the only parent who gives a damn about how our kids turn out," Mom's voice was low and deep, the way it only gets when she is fighting with Dad. "James is drunk every time he comes home from your house. He's eighteen Chris, but you don't give a shit about anything as long as you are running a damn fun house, do you?"

"Fun house, grow up Cathy. This is about Julie, and the kids actually enjoying—"

"Bullshit. I resent that. This has nothing to do with her. This is about me cleaning out trash cans of vomit from the girls' room after they come home from a weekend of partying at the beach, when you are supposed to be a parent and you seeing that as an invitation to let them do whatever the hell they want." Gabe and I crept back from the top of the stairs out of sight as we heard their footsteps below approaching the kitchen door.

“I am a parent, I just don’t do it the way you do. This was always your problem. You can never just let go.” I heard Dad say this and my stomach felt as though it was melting inside of me. I wanted to go down stairs and hug Mom.

“You’re not their friend Chris, you are their father. Start acting like it or get ready to be there to pick up the pieces when James turns out exactly like you.” With each word Mom got a little quieter, I could almost feel the spit flying from between her teeth as she got close to Dad’s face.

“And that would be the worst thing, wouldn’t it?” Dad said back. Mom was silent. For a while there was no talking at all. Rosco was probably cowering in the corner of the kitchen.

“Gabe, Emma, let’s go. I’ll be in the car.” Dad yelled up to us. We took the appropriate amount of time to go down stairs to cover up our obvious eavesdropping. On his way out, Dad gave Mom the finger and left with a “Nice talking to you, Cath.”

I had seen Dad and Mom fight exactly where they were now in the front hall like that so many times before it was hard to think of this as any different. I hated being with Gabe when Mom and Dad fought. I never knew what to say to him. It felt uncomfortable to hug him because both of us wanted to act like this was a normalcy that came with the price of divorced parents. Neither of us wanted Mom or Dad to know we heard them, but the awkward quietness of the three of us standing in the front hall, Gabe and I watching Mom hold back tears, didn’t make it easier to pretend we hadn’t been listening to every word they had said. Mom pulled us both into her arms and kissed the top of our heads.

“I’ll see you on Sunday,” she said. Her face was red and patchy and her eyes were glazed with tears that would no doubt fall in number when we left her there alone for the weekend. She held me back when Gabe walked out of the house. “Emma, I am serious about the drinking. Your

father may not care but I need you to know that I am fighting with him because I love you, and it's my job as a mother. For Christ's sake you are fifteen. What example is this setting for your younger brother? You are damaging your body."

I didn't know what to say to her other than to agree with her, say okay and hug her so that I could go out to the car and sit with Gabe in the back of Dad's car for the ten minute ride to his house while he told us everything he hated about Mom. Mom's words about setting an example for Gabe had started gaining weight. The guilt I felt in my stomach was morphing into something else, fear maybe, because the only thing worse than hearing them fight was sitting in silence while Mom told me Dad was a bad parent, or while Dad told us that Mom was too uptight and controlling. I wanted say to Mom that I was scared to get in the car with Dad when he was this mad, but I was more afraid of what Dad would do if I didn't get in the car. I kissed Mom, and told her I would look out for Gabe this weekend, but even as the words left my lips I was thinking about how much I wanted to sit on the patio at Dad's with a beer in my hands and let the sun put me to sleep.

The morning after Dad and Julie's engagement, James, Leah, me and Gabe sat on the beach alone. It was overcast, the only other people around us were families who were on vacation and had little to do other than sit on the beach and hope for the sun to come out.

"Did he even give her a ring?" Leah said. James took out a black and mild cigar and lit it facing away from Gabe who was crouched on his right, digging in the wet sand.

"Does he even have a ring?" I said. James drew in a long, deep breath from the wood tip of the cigar and exhaled a milky white cloud towards the grey ocean. Thick clouds hung heavy at the horizon.

“What do you think?” said James, “Did anything about last night feel planned out?”

He was right. Nothing about the night before was planned. It was all a blur of shots, and emptying bottles. It was the first time I had seen Dad smoke a cigarette since he lived in New York. It was what started the fight that led to the engagement. Julie had never liked tobacco, and when she wasn't around Dad usually had a wet chunk of chewing tobacco between his bottom lip and his yellowing teeth. If she would catch him with it in his mouth, it usually ended the night in a fight, quicker than normal. But the cigarette was different. There was nowhere to hide it, and Dad didn't seem to want to that night. When she followed him outside, the four of us sat at the island in the kitchen and watched the fight unfold. It was like watching a movie on rewind and repeat. Dad would put a cigarette in his mouth, and light it, and Julie would stand next to him and pull it from between his lips and throw it into the woods in front of the patio. When she did it for a fifth time, Dad grabbed her wrist as it was going to his mouth. I could see his knuckles growing white as he tightened his grip on her skinny, bony arm. He threw it away from his face and walked off of the patio and into the trees to recover the unsmoked cigarettes. Julie was yelling after him, and without shoes followed him into the dark.

“Here we go again,” said James. The four of us just watched, and for the first time I could remember since moving into this house, we saw them embrace in a kiss that looked like it was happening between people who really did love each other, at least at one point. It was a kiss that looked like it was motivated by two people remembering that at one time, there was a reason for them to be together. When they came apart, I saw Dad's eyes. He was looking at Julie. I have only seen his face void of a rigid hardness like that one other time, in a photo from his high school yearbook. In the photo, Mom and Dad are standing in front of a black SUV. Dad is wearing a black tuxedo standing just behind Mom who is dressed in a white cotton floor length

gown. Her sleeves puffed up to ears and her long brown hair was stuck between the crinkles of the fabric. Mom was looking down, grabbing the bottom of her dress, straightening it out, and Dad was looking at her through his curly black hair that came down over his eyes. Even when they were married, I hadn't seen that softness in his eyes when they talked to each other, or kissed on the cheek after a long day. It was my favorite picture of them, of him. I have always wanted to know that version of Dad. But now looking at him and Julie outside, looking at one half of that picture, I wanted to close my eyes, turn my head, look away.

"Maybe not," I said. I think that kiss is what kept them together during the engagement before it ended. Even in the dark, I could see both of their bodies, they were light and unburdened.

"Well, I didn't see that coming," said Leah.

"Hey, there's a first time for everything," I said.

"I think that is the first time I have seen Dad kiss anyone," said Gabe. "Gross."

When they came back inside, both of their faces, though red with wine and whiskey, looked different. Tired, and satisfied with a hint of defeat.

"Dad?" Leah's eyes went back and forth between the two of them.

"Your Dad and I are engaged," Said Julie. I now recognized her face, it was smug. The rest of the night was a blur. I think the only one not drinking to forget this moment was Julie, who was saying nothing about the cigarette smoke swirling around us all in the kitchen and sticking to the cotton couch cushions of the living room. The whole house smelled sick.

Now, on the beach, it was a different smoke surrounding us. Leah was on my right, Gabe on my left, and James next to him on the other side. It started with Leah. She put her arm around me, and I followed by putting mine around Gabe, and he laid his head on James's shoulder. The

wet sand was seeping into my underwear through my pants, and the sun was beginning to rise over the choppy ocean. I imagined what the cold ocean would feel like, salty on my bare skin. I wanted to undress and submerge myself in its uninviting depths. I closed my eyes and exhaled another cloud of smoke and passed the cigarillo back to James.

“Can I try some,” said Gabe. His voice was dazed, a little shy as if he didn’t know how we would react to his request.

“Fuck it,” said James, “I think we all need it Gabe,” said James. Gabe coughed almost immediately. His coughing didn’t stop, and it turned into laughing. We were all laughing. We could only sit there and laugh until no one could breathe and when Leah finally did catch her breath, it slowed us all down and we inhaled together. We sat there breathing in the silent morning until James stood up and looked down at the three of us sitting there on the ground.

“So, who is going to tell Mom.”

8

When I walked in the front door the next morning, after Julie had said yes, the words were heavy on my tongue and the dryness of my mouth was no longer just from the hangover and I felt as if I didn't belong there with Mom, ready with the words I was hoping to never have to say to her. I never knew how Dad had asked Mom to marry him, but I did know that when she told her parents she was going to marry him, they tried to talk her out of it.

She didn't ask anything. She didn't say anything for a while. James and I sat on either side of her in one of the prolonged silences that happens when anything that can be said would only be the wrong thing. She looked down at her jeans. They had a small wrinkle in them above the knee. She smoothed it out with her right hand. I looked to the book shelf across the room where she kept her high school year book and thought of the picture from prom, of her looking down and smoothing out her white dress, of her face and Dad's dark eyes looking at her from behind. I don't know when Mom and Dad stopped looking like that, because I have never known either of the people in that picture, but watching James look at Mom I saw Dad and felt a small pang of guilt in my heart.

"I'll have to remember to congratulate them," she said, and went upstairs. James and I looked at each other.

"We shouldn't have told her," I said to him. I pet Rosco's graying head.

"She would have found out anyway, better that it came from us," James said.

"Well she has Ed now," he said.

“I guess so.” Mom and Ed had been dating for about a year, during which time he had broken up with her several times. He had silver hair and a long face like a horse. He was taller than Dad, and skinnier, like his body had never filled out but instead just stretched upwards. He made a slurping noise when he drank his coffee and spent Sunday’s with Mom and Rosco doing the crossword puzzle in the New York Times. They met online on a site where Mom kept her profile up even during their relationship. I think she felt safer with it online, like it somehow validated her never ending it with Ed.

“At least I am putting myself out there,” She’d say. He broke up with her for good years later, he told her he needed more and she went back to doing the puzzle by herself and he moved back into the apartment he had never sold when he moved into Mom’s house. I guess we should have guessed that when he hadn’t moved any furniture in, simply made room in Mom’s bureau for his clothes. He was like Dad in that way, doing as little as he could to appease the minds of people around them, both of them passive to the point of not caring. The pictures in the yearbook made it hard for me to think about Dad and Julie and their first date. I didn’t want to have the picture in my head of Dad looking at anyone else the way he looked at Mom when they were younger, before they had us.

The only thing I knew about Dad and Julie before she made him sell his house on Mckinley road was that something with the timing, and the way she had to be kept secret from Mom felt wrong from the beginning. On their first date they went to a restaurant in town. I remember because it was also the night when Mom had left us with Dad for the first time overnight since they had been divorced, and Leah was recovering from surgery. Dad left James and myself to watch out for her and give her the pain medication if she needed it. He put Gabe down to sleep and was about to leave when he turned back to us, pausing half way out the door.

I thought he was going to give us a hug goodbye, tell us not to go to bed too late, let us know when he would be back. Instead he put his left hand on my shoulder and his right on James's and bent down to eye level with us both.

“You guys aren't going to tell your mother, are you?” He said. It was the first time I remember feeling like that. Like I would be doing something wrong if I told Mom Dad had left us alone. Feeling like a pawn in the middle of the two people you are supposed to trust the most is a cliché for a reason. It's because if you move closer to one side even just one step, there is no turning back and every move you make after this is based on that first step. I looked at James after Dad left.

“Should we tell Mom?” I said.

“Not unless you want to never see Dad again,” he said. And then he went into the fridge in the kitchen and I went upstairs. I heard him open a can from halfway up the stairs, thinking he must be sneaking a soda now that Dad was gone.

Leaving without saying where he is going, breath hot with alcohol, teeth yellow with tobacco between the crevices; this is how I think of Dad. It's how he returned from New York all those years ago, and how he was after moving back into the Mckinley house. I can't remember much about him before that except for a few times at Martha's Vineyard, laughing in bed with Mom and helping me put a burnt marshmallow onto a s'more. And the fighting. I got used to it quickly because after the tenth or twentieth time it happened, it started fading into the background. But when Julie moved in with Dad and they bought the house by the ocean Dad no longer tried to hide the fighting from us as he had done when he lived with us in Mom's house. I think it was the alcohol. It left every day up to subject, as if everything was fine until the second when it wasn't, and with each drink the tension and anticipation of the fighting grew higher and

higher. When it happens all the time it sometimes feels like it was always happening, and I can't remember a time before that. Like how Mom's house smells of dog pee and wet wood, or how the summer days at Dad and Julie's house all started with the wet pop of a wine bottle opening, or the cool crack of a beer can cutting through the heat.

That night when Dad left us in the house alone—Leah sick upstairs and Gabriel asleep in bed—and every night since then I have been considered one of the younger kids. It has always been me and Gabe, both of us being the youngest and usually assumed to be the ones who needed to be coddled the most. I know Mom and Dad thought of us as one unit, and James and Leah as another. But now James and I shared a secret. I have never talked to him about that night since it had happened but every time I get a call from him while he is at college I think about that secret. I don't ask if he tells Leah what he tells me about his relationships or if he also calls her on nights when he is waiting to go back into the bar and wants to kill time while smoking a cigarette outside, something he has been doing increasingly more often since I became a senior. We don't talk about anything of meaning, and our conversations consist most commonly of him monologuing about how much he misses me, how much he misses hanging out at Dad's and sneaking into Mom's after, and how he was glad he had me to talk to.

“You always answer when I call,” James mused at the end of our calls. It was his favorite exit line before he hung up the phone and threw his cigarette butt, smoked down to the filter, onto the ground and went back into the bar. I did always answer when he called, but it wasn't because I missed him. The truth is I always picked up the phone because I wanted to know if he was okay. I wasn't getting calls from him with slurred speech only on the weekends. I would get

them during class in the middle of the day, on school nights, when I was sitting at the dinner table at Mom's house. Mom and Dad had stopped fighting about him, and started in on Leah.

One time, I asked mom if she wished she hadn't had four kids, if she wanted fewer of us. We were driving to visit James at school. She turned around at me in the back seat of the car and told me there were almost five of us. She was pregnant once before she had James but hadn't been dating Dad when she found out, and that 19 was too young to raise a kid alone. I was scared to ask if it was Dad's kid too, or if he even knew about that first baby. He told me when he was drunk once on a Wednesday that if he could start his life over, he would change everything about where he ended up, Starting with you kids. Make more of this. If I didn't know him, I might have thought he meant that he wished he had raised us differently, but the gloss in his eyes and his slurred speech made it easy to know he meant something else entirely. He had imagined a life for himself, one unburdened by kids, responsibility, commitment or stability. Mom's voice, deepening when she spoke, her regretful look down to her lap, and the inability to look at me reaffirmed what I already knew. The sibling I would never know, could never have known, was Dad's.

His face in the year book, the soft kindness and happy longing when he looked at Mom made me think he may have gotten it right the first time. I imagined him getting down on one knee in the spot where they had first kissed, or something more casual, like asking her out of the blue when they were both watching a movie and it felt like they could do nothing like that and be happy forever, and the question would just slip out of his mouth without meaning to. I wondered if Mom was thinking about that too when we told her that Dad and Julie were engaged.

She didn't ask anything. She didn't say anything for a while. James and I sat on either side of her in one of the prolonged silences that happens when anything that can be said would only be the wrong thing. I wanted to hug Mom but that felt wrong too looking at the stiffness of her body, and I felt guilty for ever wanting to have left her alone in our house.

9

The house by the ocean was bigger than the house on Mckinley road, and not in an unnoticeable way. It wasn't bigger than Mom's house, but the space inside was more expansive. There were fewer walls, an open floor plan from the kitchen to the living room to the windowed walls along the far wall that looked out over the patio. It was unclear where the backyard ended, the trees surrounding the house gave the impression that the property went on for miles. The house itself wasn't on the beach, but in the master bedroom on the second floor there was a window in the corner of the room, just under the slanted ceiling where the wall climbed up at an angle that looked straight out to the shoreline. It was the only place in the house that had a direct view of the ocean. The window let in almost no light and was a perfect square just big enough to frame my face. Sometimes, when Julie was away on business trips and Dad was in his office on the first floor I would go into their bedroom and look out to the water.

Dad didn't go into the office any more, neither did Julie except for the occasional business trip to states across the country. The two of them were trapped in the house every day, Dad in his office and Julie at the kitchen table. The light surrounding them was almost unnoticeable behind the screens of their computers. They sat for hours on conference calls and typing away on their keyboards. Their voices would meet in the air and clash into each other without answer or agreement. I had never known Dad to stay at home, to want to stay in a house all day. At least not when we were growing up. He was always out of the house before I woke up, and home after dinner was being cleaned up. Most nights Mom left his plate of food in the

fridge covered in tin foil. I used to sneak out of bed to hear them talking after he got home, she with a glass of wine and he with a beer and usually the same conversations going around as if a well-rehearsed screen play.

How was your day Mom would say.

It was fine, traffic was a grid lock as usual. Mark wants me to go to New York next week.

For how long?

A couple days.

It was a familiar topic, Dad's company losing employees who had been there for years, relocating senior employees, cutting back on expenses. But the conversations never indicated the severity of the situation, and if it was something Dad feared, he never let on. He stood stoic and impersonal about the way he talked about the down sizing of the company. I used to hope he would be the next, maybe he could stay home more and family dinners could happen more than just on Sunday nights, and the script Mom and Dad had perfected could change, and expand into one with meaning behind empty lines.

When Dad started working from home is when the fighting started growing between him and Julie. But I don't think it was just the home office, or the new house that gave him an outlet to turn his life into what it is now. I think it was fear. Fear that he was losing his kids with his inability to set a parental example, fear that admitting this would leave him at fault for all future failures we might encounter if something didn't change about the environment we were living in. And towards the end, fear that he was going to be in the same position, living alone and fighting in court to keep contact with his kids for the second time before he was 55. But I think what scared him most, what scared me the most, was that the truth about the custody battle for me and Gabe that Mom filed in July would be revealed, that Dad wasn't fit to have partial custody, and

that his lack of responsibility when he did have partial custody only showed the court that he didn't want the responsibility.

I don't think Dad fought hard enough for us, and when I think of them together in the court room that we were kept out of, I picture him fighting only to keep Mom from taking something from him, like his kids were the last thing left in his house that Julie had emptied when she left, down to the crystal knobs of the dresser in their bedroom. I hear James's voice in my head Not unless you never want to see Dad again. By the time Mom and Dad would be together in the court room again the battle was only for me and Gabe. I have wondered why she didn't contact a lawyer before, at the beginning, when she seemed to be the only one who wasn't in love with the way weekends and summers near the beach gave us a kind of liquor-induced trance. I think this is how Dad justified us drinking at his house—summers and weekends. Just as the fighting became something unremarkable about Dad, so did the ever-present cloudiness of an alcoholic haze attach itself to his person. Drinking everyday he may have come to realize this as his new normal, and because he was a part-time parent I think he took it to mean we weren't a full time responsibility.

Mom filed for sole-custody the day after James picked Dad up from jail, the summer after Dad and Julie were engaged on that muggy August night. It was also the same day Dad returned to his house to find it empty of everything, including Julie. The living room with the white cotton sofas and the pale green and pink rug now stood empty and the walls stood void of decoration except for the nails left stuck where pictures hung around the room. The whole house had an echo. The open layout, the lack of walls, the appeal of a light-filled first floor now felt over whelming, as if it's life had not been in the flush white of the aesthetic but of the things that filled

those barren white walls. Even Dad, standing in the middle of his vacant office with his keys and wallet still in the plastic bag given to him by the arresting officer, looked deserted. It was the first time I thought he looked like he belonged in that house.

James had followed the police car to the station the night before. He was the only one of us in Dad's house when Julie called the cops.

"He grabbed her," James said to me later. "It was the same as before, like with Mom." It was the first time he talked to me about it. I knew what he was talking about. It was before Dad had moved out of Mom's house, just after we had gotten Rosco. Dad was coming home later than usual, most nights he was home after we were all in bed. I don't remember why I couldn't fall asleep that night, but I remember hearing someone sneak out into the hallway, and noise coming from down stairs. I snuck out of my bed and peered into the hallway. James was sitting at the top of the stairs. Mom and Dad's voices were at a hushed yell coming from the foyer down stairs. I saw James creep down just two more steps until he could see the two of them standing there in the foyer. I didn't want to let anyone know I was awake, so I tip toed across the hall to the railing at the top of the stairs and looked below at what was happening. From where I stood, Mom and Dad would have to look directly up to catch me out of bed, but James could see me if he turned his head back towards the hallway. I tried to stay as silent as I could.

"That's the third night this week you are coming home Chris, Jesus you smell like a pub," Mom was turning her head away from Dad's, looking to the ground and trying to get away from the stench of his hot breath. He had backed her against the door to the kitchen, responding in a slurred but serious tone that mimicked hers.

"What the hell do you care? It's not like we are still pretending this ridiculous charade is working any longer."

“Your kids are in the house Chris, our kids. Do you think the judge is going to give you any visitation rights when I tell him that you come home drunk every single night to a house that we agreed would be—” Mom didn’t get to finish what she was saying before Dad grabbed her by the neck. He didn’t lift her up, or squeeze it, he put his hand around her throat and backed her tight up against the door. Her body went stiff and she let out a soft cry. At the same time, I made a small noise trying to hold back in a scream, and James looked up at me. I slapped my hand over my mouth and he brought his finger up to his lips, begging me with his eyes to be quiet. I don’t know what happened after that, I snuck back into my bed and put the covers over my head. I don’t know how long James stayed watching them. When I woke up in the morning I came down stairs to find Mom in the kitchen cooking eggs. She turned to me and said good morning. I examined her neck and her face but they looked normal, and she was smiling. When James came down stairs he didn’t say anything either. It was like the night before had been a bad dream, something I had made up in my head to justify why Dad was leaving us.

I didn’t want to ask about Julie, or about Dad and what happened with them, or about the fact that James and I had never discussed that night nine years earlier in the hallway of what we now knew to be Mom’s house. Each time I thought about asking James what happened, or thought about Dad alone in that house, or Mom on that night nine years ago all I wanted to do was have a drink. Just forget about what had driven my family to this point where Dad was facing a restraining order, where Mom was spending days in court, where James and Leah weren’t home to be put in the middle of another war between them, a war that could only end in defeat for everyone involved. Wasn’t family court supposed to be about the whole family? We were divided. Gabe had become increasingly more quiet throughout the process. I tried to talk to

him about what he was thinking, what he wanted the outcome to be, who he wanted to live with and without revealing what I knew I wanted to know if he knew why Mom and Dad were back in the same position they were when they divided our family the first time.

“Is Dad going to jail,” he asked me. The two of us were sitting in the TV room at Momm’s. He was playing a video game. In the game, you could choose what your house looked like, and even make your own family to live in the house. The characters in the game weren’t human but they resembled some kind of two-legged form of organism. There were different modes to play in the game. In one mode, you could create these houses and villages and people without interruption, and in another mode, you could set your house in an online world where everyone else playing the game could come and invade your house and take what they wanted. Everyone had guns, and if they were successful in destroying you or your family they could take what they wanted. If your house was destroyed, you had to start again in the first mode and create a new life.

“Dad’s not going to Jail, Gabe. But I don’t think we are going to his house with him anymore for a while, either,” I said back. Gabe’s character in the video game was approaching another player’s house. He was crouched with a gun waiting outside the front door.

“Why, because of Mom?”

“Not because of Mom,” I said. I didn’t really know what to say. It wasn’t because of Mom. I don’t even think I could say that it was because of Dad. It was all of us, everything we had done, everything we hadn’t done. It was the house, and the hotel in New York when I didn’t tell anyone I had heard Mom and Dad in love, and the secret that James and I kept from her that night when Dad left us at home to take care of Leah. It was the day Mom had the abortion and didn’t tell Dad, and the night I caught James drinking whiskey, the same kind Dad liked, alone in

his room and asked for a shot. It was Mom and Dad's wedding, Dad and Julie's engagement, their fight, his hands grabbing at her, their break up.

"Then why?" He asked me again.

"I think because Dad just needs a break, like before, in New York."

"He's moving to New York again?" Gabe had invaded the other players house now. He was shooting at the figures who were sitting around the dinner table. When he hit them, their heads didn't bleed, but instead broke into pixels and a halo appeared above the place they had just been sitting. Inside every halo was the number of points he collected for killing them. Each one was worth 50 points.

"He isn't moving to New York again. I don't think he will ever leave his house Gabe, you don't have to worry about that."

10

By the time the court awarded Mom full custody of me and Gabe we had already had our first snow of the season, trees were glossy and frosted and the ground was no longer visible under the thick and heavy snow. It was only October. Rosco couldn't make it outside to go to the bathroom, his paws grew cold with chunks of ice that balled up in his fur before he whined to be picked up. His short snout had turned from the rich brown and black to a peppered gray and I carried him up to me bed and back downstairs every night and morning. I woke up many times to him peeing on the floor next to the queen bed I had taken over since Leah had gone to college. Each time I did, I would pick him up from a puddle of his own urine and bring him into the bath tub, rubbing his wet belly with soap and water as I tried to soothe him, cooing his name into his ear over and over again. When I looked at Rosco like that in the bath, fur wet and clinging to his thin body his eyes drooped low with shame, as if to tell me he was humiliated, I was reminded of Dad. The court ordered him a month in a rehabilitation facility. We were allowed to visit him once a week, but Dad didn't want us to see him there so we spoke on the phone sometimes. He told us he was taking anger management classes there and asked us about school. He didn't sound angry or upset but his voice was soft and low and I pictured him hanging his head as he spoke through the phone.

Dad wasn't allowed to see Julie after the night when she called the police on him. She filed a restraining order against him. I don't know when it was lifted but I do know that he never saw her again. James told me she moved away, she talks to him sometimes, texts mostly. He

says he feels bad for her but when I think of her I only think about Dad in his office, standing alone in the empty house with his bag of possessions after being released from jail. And I can only think of her as the person who caused that humiliation.

Everyone wanted to be home when Dad was allowed to go home, so the day before he got out, James and Leah came home from school. Mom made dinner for all of us, chicken and mashed potatoes, and the five of us sat around the kitchen table like we had never stopped doing it when James and Leah left for college. James looked tired, and older. His eyes looked as though they had fallen deeper into his head, and Leah—though already the tallest in the family—looked as if she had grown even more. The two of them sat on either side of Mom. Having everyone around the dinner table I felt full before I started eating. I hadn't seen Mom laugh in a long time, really laugh like she was now with her mouth open and tilting her head back just a bit. "All my children back home again," she mused. She called us the fab four. When Mom got tired she went up to bed, warning us not to stay up late.

"Your father is picking you up at 9 tomorrow morning, I want you to be ready when he gets here, you know how he is," she said. And just before she made it out of the kitchen she turned back to us. "And no drinking. James, Leah I'm talking to you two. Don't make me come back down." Mom was leaving the house early, before Dad was supposed to get there. They hadn't spoken to each other since he had lost the custody battle. I don't picture dad fighting hard enough for us, but in his own twisted way I think he thought that was a good thing. For us, and for himself. He had always preferred to be alone. Sometimes I think that if he hadn't met Mom he never would have had kids. He showed me pictures once from a trip he took in college. He is standing alone on top of a mountain with a big orange backpack on his back. His hands are up in

the air and his yellow teeth are spread in a wide smile. The sun is setting behind him, descending below the mountain range he was making his way through on a solo camping trip. It was the best time of my life he told me when he showed me the pictures. Three weeks after he returned home from rehab, he flew out to Colorado and took the same trip.

When Mom was gone and too far upstairs to hear us, we all laughed. It felt like it was three years ago, like us sitting around that kitchen table laughing and talking wouldn't have been complete without a warning from Mom. James went over to the refrigerator and opened up the freezer. Rosco used to jump up and run to the fridge every time he heard it open, hoping for a snack, but now he just lifted his peppered grey head and looked in the direction of the sound. From the freezer, James grabbed a bottle of vodka he had snuck in there earlier. The bottle had frosted over and the letters underneath looked blurry and unclear. Since Dad had gone to rehab, I had barely touched a drink. Staying at Mom's on the weekends made it hard to get any, and even when I did the emptiness of the house since James and Leah had left and the cold of the winter had removed the appeal that I used to find in the bottles at Dad's. I was almost scared to have a drink with them. James poured four shots. I had never seen Gabe drink before, I didn't ask if he did or if he had ever tried it. I didn't want to know and most of all I never wanted to have the opportunity to find out. Where Leah taught me how to drink, and build character as she called it, I hoped to do the opposite for Gabe.

We all took the shot on the count of three, and though Gabe only had that one it was clear from the smooth technique and easy swallow that it hadn't been his first time. It didn't surprise me but I felt protective, almost like a parent, when I watched him slam the empty glass down on the table with authority and thought for a moment that I hoped Mom would come down stairs and catch us. I hoped she would scold us, scold James not for disobeying her but for offering a

drink to his younger siblings, for drinking at all when he knew we were going to be seeing Dad tomorrow. I wished she would tell Leah that she was setting a bad example for her younger brother and sister, and that it was time for her to step up and be responsible. And I wished for her to ground me like she did when she had found my vomit in the trash can, keep me in the house long enough to set an example for Gabe. But she didn't. So instead James poured us all another shot, and we took them together as if we were four old friends coming back together after years of separation, only to hit our glasses together and laugh about the lives we had lived.

