

WAXING AND WANING: A NOVEL

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Waxing And Waning is a Young Adult novel about seventeen year-old Aaron Wasserstein. The novel concerns Aaron's dual desires to date Valerie Richard, the cute new girl in school, and to please his grandparents, whose money makes Aaron's comfortable suburban life possible, but who do not like the fact that Valerie is not Jewish. Told from Aaron's irreverent point of view, the novel deals with the various trials of adolescence: lust/love, responsibility toward friends and family, and development of personal identity. It also examines what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century, and the struggle between the identity we choose, and the identity our family and heritage impose upon us.

Chapter 1

I know *exactly* when I first touched Val's boobs. But nobody ever comes up to me and says, "Hey, Aaron, when did you first touch your girlfriend's boobies?" They ask me, instead, when Val and I met. And that's harder to remember.

It helped that she was the new girl.

My school is a small school, in terms of student body size. That is, not in terms of the size of the students' bodies, but in terms of the number of individuals who make up the "student body."

Everybody in my school knows everybody else, so it's a big deal when there's a new person. We usually get two to three new people each year, which means we get one to one-and-a-half new girls. And the new girl is a big deal for us guys. You see, the girls who already go to our school don't tend to hook up with their male classmates. They know us too well, and therefore, they consider us "friends," and not sexual objects, when we'd really much prefer it the other way around.

This is why it is particularly exciting when there's a new girl, because the new girl doesn't know us yet. There's an incubation period, for lack of a better term, before the new girl gets to know us too well, in which we have a chance to "get with her." This advantage is aided by the fact that girls are cliquy and unfriendly. Not the girls who go to my school specifically. Just girls in general. We guys are friendly, and we lack the defensiveness and exclusivity of girls.

Valerie Richard was new to the school, and to the area. She moved to Philadelphia (from Minnesota) for the same reason that all 17-year-old girls move. Her

Dad got a new job. Actually, now that I think about it, I can come up with a whole bunch of different reasons why a 17-year-old girl would move. There's human trafficking/sex-slavery. Her mom could have gotten a new job. Her parents could have died, and she could have moved in with her two evil aunts, who could have tortured her by making her chop wood, and then she could have grown a gargantuan fruit by mistake, with magic beans, and along with a benevolent group of mutant insects, slaughtered the aunts and flown the fruit to suburban Philadelphia. But as it was, her Dad got a new job.

On the first day of school, Valerie was in my very first class, American History Part II with Mr. Karl. She was already sitting in her seat, leaning over her desk, wearing a blue sundress. She was flipping idly through the pages of a notebook, looking calm and content. Which is a strange way to look on the first day of school. I tend to experience a mix of fatigue, nausea, and trepidation.

I sat down next to her. This was a bold move for me. There were lots of empty seats, and the usual rule is that you don't sit right next to somebody you don't know, especially when there are lots of other places available. But I wanted to meet her, and I thought she wouldn't mind the friendly gesture.

As I eased into the chair next to her, she extended a small hand and said, "I'm Val."

I sized her up. She had little size. Not in any one specific way. She was small in almost all ways. Short, about five feet tall. She had short brown hair, which ended just above her shoulders, and, I thought, framed her face very nicely. Between her short hair, and her lack of curves, Val had kind of a boyish look to her. You wouldn't have confused her gender. But you might have said, "Hey, she has kind of a boyish look to her." What

does Nick Caraway say in *Gatsby*, about Jordan? He describes her as “boyish,” doesn’t he? He says she has an “erect carriage.” I would have said that Val had one of those too, had I known what exactly an “erect carriage” was.

We had a wildly exciting first conversation:

“Is Val short for Valerie?” I asked.

“Yep.” she replied.

“I’m Aaron. It’s not short for anything.”

“That’s not surprising.”

And that was all we said. But it was enough for me to be totally captivated by Val, and her conversational abilities. And by her boobs. Did I mention that she had boobs?

I was totally unable to concentrate on the syllabus, or on Mr. Karl’s class guidelines. I found myself capable only of watching *Val* concentrate on the syllabus, and on Mr. Karl’s class guidelines. She watched Karl like I watch a Phillies game: engaged, interested, invested. She glanced back and forth between the first-day-handout and the “smart” board, as I might look back and forth between the TV and the live box score.

Val had very nice legs, which she subconsciously waved back and forth in a slow rhythm. There was something particularly cute in how unaware she was of her own cuteness. Other girls who show up on the first day in adorable sundresses, they know that they’re putting on a sort of show. But Val didn’t seem to have any idea. Lost in the details of Mr. Karl’s grading rubric, she looked...naïve, or innocent. And there was something about that innocence that was quite appealing.

My friend Ian later agreed. “I’d fuck that innocence right out of her, bro,” he said to me. And that pretty much summed up all of our collective thoughts about her.

A side note here: There’s nothing sexier than a sundress, at least to me. There’s a certain vulnerability to them. Like if a quick gust of wind hit a girl in a sundress, at just the right angle, it would blow the dress right away, and the girl would be there, in only her underwear, just like that.

After the syllabus stuff, Mr. Karl jumped right into a scintillating lecture about the failed presidential campaigns of William Jennings Bryan. Nobody gives a fuck about William Jennings Bryan, and because of him, and I suppose because of the textbook companies, I’m stuck knowing the key points of his “Cross of Gold” speech for the rest of my existence.

I tried to occupy myself by gazing glazy-eyed around the room, a pretty standard suburban high school classroom: rows of desk-chair units, a table up front for the teacher, and a couple of sizeable white-boards. The school has been transitioning to these electronic “smart” boards, but the teachers don’t seem to “smart” enough to figure out how to use them. Most classrooms also contain corny motivational posters. I spent a few minutes considering the one near the door in Karl’s room. It said: “You miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take.” This is, I suppose, a nice sentiment, but it’s mathematically impossible. You *cannot* miss a shot you don’t take.

My eyes kept wandering back to Val. She was making me nervous, and I started chewing on my pen. I was really going at it, like a lion devouring a choice bit of warthog carcass, when my pen exploded, and filled my mouth with ink. The ink tasted a bit like

blood: sweet and oddly viscous. I tried desperately to keep from swallowing, but the more I thought, *Don't swallow. Aaron, don't swallow*, the harder it became.

I grunted, and shot my hand in the air. Mr. Karl, thrilled that I was eager to discuss the 1908 Democratic Convention, called on me immediately. I pointed at my mouth and grunted some more. He didn't take this to mean that my mouth was filled with black ink, so he just raised his eyebrows, and said, "Yes?"

I tried to speak with my mouth full, like I do when I'm brushing my teeth, but I was having trouble keeping the ink in. As I babbled, I covered my mouth with my hand to keep the ink from dripping onto the floor, and I jogged out the door to the bathroom.

I washed my mouth out six or seven million times. Then I walked back to the classroom, mouth entirely black, and took my seat next to Val. She glanced over at me, and took in my black lips, and grey chin. She smiled and whispered, "Did you eat a live squid?"

"Sure did," I replied, and I high-fived myself internally for my quick response.

"How was it?"

"A little inky."

Mr. Karl looked over at us. He knew that nothing about WJB's prohibition rhetoric could possibly be funny, and he turned sternly to face our side of the classroom. "What's so amusing?" he asked.

Val, clearly a "good girl," shriveled up a little bit and just shook her head in an apologetic way.

"Nothing," I said, "We were just enjoying some marine cephalopod-based humor."

“Aaron!” Mr. Karl exclaimed. “What happened to your mouth?”

“A pen. Or a squid.”

“Jesus, do you want to go to the nurse?”

“No. I’m pretty sure it’s not toxic.”

Val had her head bent over her notes, but when I glanced at her she met my eyes. And she shook her head a little bit, but not in a disapproving way.

At lunch, I was sitting with Ian, trying to override the ink taste with some strawberry Go-Gurt, which my mother continues to pack me even though I’m not eight years old, and I’m perfectly capable of operating a spoon.

“The new girl was in my English class this morning,” I said to Ian.

“She hot?” Ian asked casually, but I knew him well enough to know that this was not a casual question.

“Yeah,” I replied, “in that small, cute, innocent way.” I paused. “Plus, she’s wearing this blue sundress, and—”

“Dude, what’s with you and sundresses? It’s kind of creepy. I think you’d fuck my mom if she wore a sundress.”

Over Ian’s shoulder, I watched Val enter the room. She scanned the area. Her eyes landed on me and she made her way through the crowd to our table. As she approached, I got all nervous again, and my stomach tied itself up in tight little knots. There are some guys who talk to good-looking girls, and they’re in their element. They’ve got the self-esteem to think, “Oh yeah, this chick is going to dig *me*, so I can just act the way I normally do, and she’ll want all up on my dick.”

I'm not one of those guys. I've got the *lack* of self-esteem to think, "Hey, should I have popped that big zit on my upper lip?"

Ian, on the other hand, is not self-aware enough to experience self-consciousness. And, at times, I envy him. "Dude," he declared, as Val approached, "I would fuck that innocence right out of her."

"I'll bet you would, but would you keep it together for now? I kind of like this girl."

Val came up right behind Ian and sat down beside him.

"What could I possibly do?" Ian continued, "All I said is that I'd fuck the—"

"More squid for lunch?" Val asked me, cutting Ian off mid-sentence.

And I tore through my brain in search of a clever response, but all I could manage was, "Uh, no. Go-Gurt." And I pointed at my pack of Go-Gurt.

"Are you eight years-old?" Val asked.

"I have trouble with my fine motor skills. Spoons can be a challenge."

Val did not immediately recognize this as a joke. She probably didn't want to laugh, in case I really did have trouble with my fine motor skills.

"I'm kidding," I said. "My motor skills are fantastic. I don't know why my mom packs me yogurt in tubes." There was a decently long pause, and then I said, "This is Ian," indicating Ian. I didn't really want to introduce Ian, as this would give him an invitation to join the conversation. But it would be both rude and just plain weird to pretend that he wasn't there.

"Hey," said Ian, "I'm Ian."

"She knows that you're Ian," I said, "I just told her you were Ian."

“I thought it would be more fucking polite to introduce myself more formally. No need to be a douche.” He changed his tone, and turned toward Val. “And you’re Val?” Val nodded and started to unwrap a sandwich.

“So how was your first morning?” Ian asked, drawing the conversation, sadly, away from me.

“Not too bad.”

The conversation gets kind of boring here, so I’ll just give you the Spark notes—that’s the free alternative to Cliff notes. We talked about generic crap for a few minutes, until Ian slipped up and started to act more like himself. Out of nowhere, he turned to Val and asked: “So, have you figured out yet that Aaron here has a serious boner for you?” I have no fucking idea what to do when he says things like this. How do I respond to something like that? If I deny it, it just makes it seem like I do “have a serious boner” for her. And then if I agree, and say, “Why yes, I do think that you’re cute, and I like your sundress, and I’d like to remove it from your body, and on top of all that you seem like a genuinely nice person,” I just come off as creepy. Plus, I’ve learned over the years, that if you let a girl know that you like her, you’re fucked—in the bad way. So, actually, you’re not fucked.

I was in a real tough spot. But Val saved me. “I didn’t notice any boner,” she said, without skipping a beat, as if she’d been expecting to field that exact question.

“Well you wouldn’t have,” Ian replied just as quickly, “You see, it’s very—“

“Small? No, I don’t think so. Your mom told me it was huge.” This was a pivotal moment for me. That sentence really changed the way I saw Valerie. Those seven words: “Your mom told me it was huge,” let me know that this wasn’t just a cute new girl. This

girl was great, and I liked her. A lot. Now I did have a serious boner for her. Not actually though. It was a figurative boner.

A side note here: Have you ever made a joke about somebody's mom, and it turns out that the person's mother is dead, or seriously ill, and then you feel horrible about it? It happened to me once. I made a joke about this kid's mom, and I found out later that his mother had died of cancer just the year before. I felt fucking terrible about it, and I wanted to apologize, but what was I going to say? "Hey, sorry I said that I had intercourse with your deceased mother. That was insensitive of me"? There's just no recourse if you make a mistake like that. Now, you could suggest that this problem is grounds enough to stop making crude jokes about people's moms, but mom-jokes are just too integral a part of my everyday conversations and banter. It's impossible to remove them completely. So I have an ask-first policy. I never make a joke about somebody's mother unless I know that she is alive and healthy. And, in case you were wondering, Ian's mother is very much alive.

Backtracking to the story, Val had just shut Ian down. She followed this up with an adorable bout of giggling. Ian didn't know what to do or say, but it was time to go to our next classes anyways. Val had had the last laugh. Or the last giggle, or whatever.

As Ian got up, he said, "Hey Aaron, did I mention that I enjoy intercourse with your mother on a regular basis?" But this was a futile face-saving effort.

I simply smiled and said, "No, you hadn't mentioned that Ian. I'm happy for both of you."

For fairly obvious reasons, you can't actually meet my family. I'm just going to talk about them, and "establish them as characters" in this book. I'm also hoping, perhaps in vain, that I'll be able to move the plot forward simultaneously. So we'll see whether or not I can juggle character development and plot at the same time. I can juggle *three* bean bags, but I don't think these two skills are related.

Let's start with me. I'm a member of my family.

My first name is Aaron, but you know that already. My last name is Wasserstein. In case you're wondering, it can be pronounced as either "Wasserstine" or "Wassersteen." I don't care. There's a lively family debate over which is the proper pronunciation. One camp argues that we should say "stine," because that's how a German would pronounce it. That's how it was in the Old Land. The second camp says that the Germans were Nazis, so we should say it "steen" for the same reasons we shouldn't buy Volkswagens. And my grandmother, who belongs to camp two, drives a Mercedes, so that camp has no ground to stand on. The third camp (me) says "who cares?"

You may have pictured me in your mind by now. If you're going by grossly exaggerated Jewish stereotypes, then you're spot on. Congratulations. I look like a walking Bar Mitzvah: dark, curly hair and a rather prominent nose. I've also been told that I walk "a little awkwardly." I'm about 5'10, and I generally wear jeans and a t-shirt for *all* occasions, unless my parents make me wear something else. Right now, I've been wearing the same pair of jeans, without washing them, for a full month. They're fairly clean, except for a small grape juice stain on the right thigh. My laundress (who doubles

as my mother) says that she won't wash any more of my clothes until I let her wash these jeans. I'm getting a little desperate, but I think I can hold out for another week.

I'm fairly thin, and I'm in that athletic purgatory where I'm better than everybody in gym class, but worse than most people on an actual sports team. I am, however, a fairly good tennis player. My tennis abilities are pretty unimportant. So if you're choosing which information to commit to memory, and which to forget, you can disregard the comment about my tennis skills.

I live in suburban Philadelphia, in a four bedroom home with my father, my mother, and my younger sister. The fourth bedroom is a guestroom, used only in the case of grandparental invasions.

I go to a Quaker school. The Quakers, who founded Philadelphia, believe that each person has a little window inside of them, through which he or she can see a piece of the greater truth of the world. But each person can only see a little bit of this truth. It's like the truth is a jigsaw puzzle, and each person can only see one piece of it. I hate puzzles. If I can see what it looks like on the front of the box, why would I want to spend hours trying to recreate a picture I've already seen? But Quakers believe that if we come together, and we each share our individual puzzle-pieces of truth, we can see the greater picture, be it a scene of a rustic farm, or the Eiffel tower at night.

I don't believe in the religiosity behind this whole thing, but I like the idea that even though I'm a kid, and my story isn't new or revolutionary, it matters. It contributes, in some small way, to a greater picture. Of what? I'm not sure. "Truth" is pretty vague. Either way, without my perspective, reader, your puzzle will be incomplete. And don't

bother looking for the missing piece in the box, or under the couch. Because I've got it, and I'm holding it hostage until you finish my book.

The first day of school is always a Friday. This is not a Quaker thing. It's a stupid thing. They have teacher in-service Monday through Thursday, and then we come in for one day, to dip our toes in the icy, piranha-infested waters of September school.

After our first day, I went over to Ian's to smoke weed on his basement couch. Ian turned on the TV, but by the time our joint was gone, he'd fallen asleep, sitting straight up on the couch, with the remote in his hand. The television was set to the Home and Garden Network. I watched a young couple choose some really ghastly maroon drapes. Then an "interior designer" rearranged their furniture. I was about to get up and change to the channel, when I got a text from my mom, asking me to come home. This was odd, but I didn't have any reason to object. I took the back steps into Ian's yard, and walked home.

It was early September, and it was probably beautiful out. There were probably lots of cute little kids scampering around the park near Ian's: swinging on swings, sliding down slides, enjoying the last gasp of summer air. But I wasn't really paying attention. I was a little uncertain about the text my mom had just sent me. And I couldn't help but think about Val, and wonder how she felt about me. I don't like to wonder. I don't like to be uncertain. I like to know.

I was also the slightest bit concerned that I looked, or smelled, high. And I'm a bad liar. I'm terrible with even really innocuous lies. I'd have trouble telling you, reader, that I like cauliflower. I love it! I adore cauliflower. No. That's a lie. I don't. I hate cauliflower. It's disgusting. See what I'm saying? So I get nervous any time I do anything

my parents wouldn't approve of. They have a *very* squeaky-clean image of me, and I'd like to keep it that way.

I maintain this clean image mostly because my parents are not suspicious people. They are, as far as I can tell, extremely innocent, clueless, gullible, and other words that mean basically the same thing as those words. They're bookish introverts. They don't drink. They don't smoke, and I don't think they ever have. I've never heard them talk about sex, or have sex. As my sister and I are not twins, they must have had sex at least twice. But they're not the kind of parents you can picture having sex. I've got friends who've walked in on their parents having sex. Or they'll say, "Hey, let's wait a little while before we go back to my house. I think my parents are doing it." And I can picture *their* parents banging in all kinds of positions, on a variety of different surfaces. But I can't picture mine. And I know you're saying, "Aaron, that's because they're your own parents. They're not categorically different from other people's parents." But you're wrong. They are. If you knew my parents, you couldn't picture it either.

I'm probably a poor liar because my parents will believe any lie. *Any* lie. It simply doesn't occur to either of them that somebody wouldn't tell the truth. They're like the aliens in *Galaxy Quest*. When I was six or seven, there was a very nice vase on a small wooden table next to the living room couch. It was off-white with Japanese cherry blossoms swirling up and down the sides. The young couples on HGTV would have killed for it. But they'd have done so in vain. Because it is no more. I broke it. I was playing with a toy truck. And the vase was somewhere in the imaginary construction site. And I bowled that thing right over and it shattered on the floor into many pieces. My

mom trotted into the room, and I was standing *right* on top of the crime scene, guiltily holding my truck. “What happened?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It was Gorpus.” Gorpus was our cat. I named him. He’s dead. Now, Gorpus could not have committed this crime. He was nowhere near it. Gorpus was a pussy in all senses of that word, except the sense that’s a derogatory slang term for vagina. And whenever the doorbell rang, Gorpus would go hide in a closet for days, sometimes full weeks, without being seen. We saw the raccoon who snuck into our insulation *way* more often than we saw Gorpus. So the idea that Gorpus had smashed the vase was beyond ridiculous, for the cat was surely deeply embedded in a hallway closet, nervously scratching a towel to shreds. And if he *had* somehow broken the vase, he’d probably still have been there, dead of a little kitty heart attack. To this day, my mother still believes that Gorpus broke that vase. She refers to the cat as “the feline who broke my Japanese vase.”

So my parents do not suspect that I *ever* do anything untoward. If, when I returned from Ian’s, I’d told my parents that I’d spent the afternoon listening to Schumann, playing chess and discussing the philosophy of Kierkegaard, they’d have believed me. And they’d probably have questioned me about my chess strategy, or about my opinions on Kierkegaard.

I live in what is known as a split-level home. This means that the levels are split. *This* means that it’s a pain in the ass to verbally identify the different floors, especially since the house is on a bit of a hill.

Our house has three distinct spaces, at three different elevations, connected by half-flights of stairs. The bottom floor contains a family room with a TV and tall windows that look out over the backyard. It also has a laundry room where we (meaning my mother) do laundry, and a garage where we store old sports equipment nobody uses. Cars go in the driveway. The middle floor contains a kitchen where we make food and dine, a dining room where we never do anything, and a living room where I occasionally spill a beverage on the rug and try to clean it up with seltzer before anybody notices. We also read there. And by “we,” I mean other members of the family. I read in my room. On the highest floor there are four bedrooms. From front to back, they go: parent, me, Sarah, guest. I don’t think it’s necessary to discuss the bathrooms. There are some.

I entered the house through the garage, and took the half-flight of stairs into the little antechamber (for lack of a less medieval word) between the living room and kitchen. It was only about four o’clock, and my father was home very early. His name is Joe, and he was in the kitchen, reading some magazine article, and munching on a snack.

My dad looks a lot like a dad. If you just picture a generic dad, you’ll probably be close enough. If you’d like more details, I’ll provide a few. Joe has the Wasserstein curls, but his are graying, and his hairline is rapidly receding. He’s very expressive with his eyebrows. He’s always moving them around to look severe or goofy or nervous, and it’s amazing the range of emotions he can express with such subtle movement. Also, he’s taller than me, which kind of pisses me off.

Usually my dad greets me eagerly when I get home, as though it’s been a really long time since he’s seen me. But this time he barely looked up when I entered the room. “Hi,” I said.

“You were at Ian’s?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you guys do?”

“We listened to Schumann, played chess, and discussed the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard.”

“No you didn’t. I don’t believe you.”

“We watched the ‘Home and Garden channel.’ Ian’s really into homes. And gardens. I think he might be gay.”

My father *did* believe this. All he said was, “Don’t eat too much. Your grandparents are coming over for dinner.”

There was something off about my dad. Something about his expression made it seem like something was wrong.

I figured it was probably something in the article he was reading. So I dismissed it and went to the fridge in search of food. I took out the skim milk and looked through the cereal cabinet. I would *like* to have eaten a toasted-oat and marshmallow-based cereal called Lucky Charms. But my father, a sort of health-food autocrat (think Tito), does not consider Lucky Charms, or really most foods, to be food. The things he considers to be food either closely resemble spinach, or they *are* spinach. Since there are no spinach-based cereals, my father buys whole-grain-wheat-germ-flaxseed cereals, which taste, at best, like cardboard. These cereals always look good on the box: toasty little squares or circles endorsed by a colorful bird or hip fox. And I can usually trick myself into eating them by telling myself that they might resemble stale Cheerios. So I poured myself a bowl, doused it in milk, and paced back and forth in the kitchen, crunching.

Incidentally, I've got no idea what the fuck flaxseed is. It sounds like some sort of lesser-known bodily fluid, as in "It looks like the criminal has left traces of his flaxseed on the body." Or, "Yeah baby, fuck me till we're both dripping with flaxseed." I guess it's supposed to be nutritious. Okay, back to the kitchen, where:

My father sniffed the air. "You smell like smoke," he announced. I smelled myself. I didn't smell it, but I pretty much always have a stuffy nose. And it's hard to smell your own scent. My dad's tone wasn't, as I've suggested before, suspicious at all. Rather, he sounded concerned. But I still felt I had to dispel the possibility that the smoke came from a cigarette or joint.

"Ian's dad smokes cigars."

I've never seen Ian's dad smoke a cigar. Mr. Goodman has cicatricial alopecia, which means he doesn't have hair anywhere on his body. This is totally unrelated to his smoking or not smoking cigars, but it's interesting, and kind of creepy.

"Well that's not good," my dad replied, "That's really awful. And irresponsible. Second-hand smoke is *terrible* for you." My father then went into a long series of questions about how often Ian's dad smoked cigars in the house. And *where* in the house did he do this? And how did I feel about that? And what about my asthma? And did my friends smoke? And how was my lung function?

How do you answer the question, "How is your lung function?" On what scale do you rate it? Eight out of ten? A-? Pretty good?

None of this interrogation had anything to do with misbehavior on my part. It was all about my health. One of my father's most striking and most infuriating qualities is his concern for the health of *everything*.

He should have been a doctor. Then he could diagnose health problems. But as it is, he's an environmental engineer. He, like me (or really vice versa), cannot stand uncertainty. Therefore, when there's a medical issue or non-issue, since he doesn't know all the details, he cannot diagnose it. It's an unknown. When someone he loves, or knows, or has heard of might be ill, he freaks out in a fit of fear and anxiety that would impress the most paranoid of schizophrenics.

Let me tell you about the time I didn't have meningitis.

When I was sixteen, there was an outbreak of meningitis at the University of Pennsylvania, which is about ten miles from my house. I had *no* contact with anybody who went to Penn, or taught at Penn, or knew anybody who did either of those things. But, on the same day that the newspaper reported the death of a student from spinal meningitis, I came down with a fever. My dad assumed that I too *must* have meningitis. In his mind, it made perfect sense. The kids at Penn were young. I was young. They lived in the Philadelphia area. *I* lived in the Philadelphia area. They had meningitis, and therefore, I had meningitis.

I did indeed have a fever, and a headache, two symptoms of meningitis. These are symptoms of almost every other illness, too. But that's not the sort of logical thinking my father employs when health is at stake. "I think you may have meningitis," he said to me.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you have a fever, and a headache."

"I think it's lupus," I told him.

"You don't even know what lupus is."

“Neither do you. Isn’t it the one where you have weak bones, and you get all bow-legged?”

“That’s rickets.”

“Same deal.”

My dad came home early from work, went on the computer, and read just about everything there was to read about meningitis, which, in the age of the internet, is a *lot*. He showed me pictures of infants with sickening red splotches all over their bodies. He was particularly concerned about swollen lymph nodes. I did not know that I *had* lymph nodes. But the Internet said that when you have meningitis, the lymph nodes in your neck become so swollen that you cannot touch your chin to your chest.

“Can you touch your chin to your chest?” my dad asked me. I tried it. I could. But he kept asking me, over and over, and with increasing levels of urgency. And it got to the point where I even started doing it when he wasn’t asking. And eventually my neck *was* sore, and it *was* hard to touch my chin to my chest. I assumed that this was usual soreness from repetitive activity.

I made the huge mistake of admitting, eventually, that it had become difficult to bend my neck, and off we went to the hospital. After a series of tests and panicked questions from my father, I was told that *of course* I did not have meningitis. “Then what is it?” ol’ Joe asked.

“Lupus.” That’s what I said. The doctor said, “Nothing. He seems to have a mild fever. I’d get some rest, *maybe* take one more day off of school if the temperature’s still high in the morning.”

My father is not embarrassed by this incident. He maintains that he did his “due diligence.” I maintain that if that’s “due diligence,” I’d have to go to the hospital every time I stub my toe, in case it needs to be amputated.

I can understand, on some level, the fear of loss. I don’t have a child. I am one. But my grandma died when I was younger. That was kind of sad. And I remember when Gorpus died. And our hamster, Dumbo, died last year. He’s still around actually. He died in the winter, and the ground was too hard to bury him. So we put him in a box in the freezer, with the intention of burying him when it got warmer. But he’s still there, living, or rather not living, in our freezer next to the whole-grain extra-fiber flaxseed waffles.

The point that I’m trying to get at, though I admit that I may be doing so rather indirectly, is that I *do* sympathize with the way my dad feels. It’s sweet that he cares deeply for me, but this sort of overbearing, paranoid protectiveness can be smothering and embarrassing.

Okay. Deep breath. Time for some more plot.

I finished my cereal, told my father that my lung function was just splendid, and I was just getting up to go take a shower, when my mom came down the stairs and blocked my path.

My mother, like most mothers, is named Susan. Susan stood in the kitchen’s doorless doorway, looking frazzled. My mom often looks frazzled, especially at the end of the week. I think a lot of it is the hair. Her wavy hair is longer than your standard mom-cut, and when she works she wears it up in a no-nonsense, business-like fashion. But when’s home, she lets it go, and it makes her look like a mad scientist.

On this particular afternoon, it wasn't just the hair. Something about the creases in her face made her look weary, and upset. It was clearly more than just a buildup of the week's stresses. Her face was a little red. She looked angry. I went on the defensive immediately. "What'd I do?" I asked, and tried to look innocent.

"Nobody's accusing you of anything," she replied.

"He smells like smoke," my dad said, as he flipped a page of his magazine.

"See? He's accusing me of smelling like smoke," I said, indicating my father.

My mom sighed and turned her concerned glance toward my dad. "Did you talk to him?" she asked.

"He talked to me all about smoke," I replied. "He's of the opinion that it's not good for you."

I tried to squeeze by my mom, but she took a wider, aggressive stance, so I backed off and leaned on the counter, feeling uneasy.

"Jesus," my mom said, still talking to Joe. "I can't tell if you don't want to talk about it, or if you just don't think this is a serious issue. I thought we had this all sorted out last night."

I looked back and forth between them. It was weird for my dad not to want to talk about something. But he seemed uninterested, or at least hesitant. "Hey," I cut in, "If I'm not part of the conversation, can I go? I need to shower. You don't need me to *be* here to talk about me. I can be just as awkward and silent *upstairs*."

"Your father was laid off from his job," my mom told me, though she continued to stare laser beams at my dad and his trail mix.

"I wasn't *laid off*," my dad mumbled. "I quit."

“He was *forced* to quit.”

I shifted my weight uncomfortably. My parents rarely argued, and they didn't seem to be very good at it. My mom was looking at my dad, but talking to me. My dad appeared to be talking to his nuts (the ones he was eating). And I was required to *be* there, but I wasn't really part of the discussion. I was kind of an object, a talking point.

“I think in the long run, it'll be better this way,” Joe said.

“We don't pay private school tuition in the *long run*,” my mom replied. “Jesus, this migraine is *killing* me.”

“Don't the grandparents pay my tuition?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” Susan replied, “They pay half of the total of yours and Sarah's. But we're in a tough spot now. Maybe we can work something out with the school. I don't know.”

“My parents will probably be happy to cover more tuition,” my dad said.

“I'm tired of accepting money from your parents. I've had enough of it.”

My parents had never talked to me about money before. And it made me feel very adult to be included in the conversation. I was pleased to be allowed into this world of adult issues, but the actual problem itself didn't hit me at all. I felt like an eager animal exploring a new territory. I was much more curious than I was concerned.

“So are you unemployed?” I asked my dad. “Cause if so, you could drive me to school, and I wouldn't have to take the bus. I keep getting gum on my shoes, which would be less likely to happen in your car.”

“I’m not unemployed,” he said, putting his empty plate aside, “I have a new job for a non-profit doing conservation work. I’ve been talking to the director about it for years now. It’s something I’m quite excited about.”

Joe went on to explain what had happened. My dad had, for years, designed sewage treatment facilities. Basically, he and a group of other engineers sat around all day figuring out how to make shitty water less shitty. But for whatever reason, his section of the firm had been getting fewer and fewer projects, and the firm wanted to lay them off and re-hire them to work fewer projects, for less money. My mom, based on her tone of voice and the scowl on her face, had wanted him to suck it up and accept the bad deal. But my dad had said, “screw it.” He’d quit, and he’d taken a job with a non-profit that did work preserving the water quality of tributaries of the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers.

The problem was that my dad had been the family’s primary bread-winner. He won all kinds of delicious bread. My mom was a Speech Therapist at a local elementary school, and although it paid well for a teaching job, it was still a teaching job. And apparently my dad’s new position was going to pay him about the same amount as the school district paid my mom.

I went upstairs to take a shower. I know most people shower in the morning, but I never have the energy. And, frankly, I’m not a big fan of showers. You get all wet. But I take them daily, because otherwise you’d be able to smell me through the pages. When I got out of the shower, I could hear my parents heatedly whispering to each other in their room.

I didn't know exactly what to think or do about the whole dad-job thing. We'd never had money problems, really, that I'd been aware of. We come from an affluent area, and I had always lived a comfortable life, in a comfortable community, surrounded by other comfortable people. So maybe it just didn't feel *real* to me that my parents were in financial trouble. I was more unsettled by the fact that my parents were arguing about something. And frankly, I was still most unsettled by Valerie Richard.

I spent the rest of the afternoon alternately reading, and Facebook stalking Val. I winced at every picture of her with a dude in it, and winced extra hard when he had his arm around her shoulders or waist. I read *every* post on her timeline, making sure none of the male posters said anything too intimate. I'd read a chapter or so of the Vonnegut book I was reading, as the anxiety built up, and then I'd do another round of stalking, to temporarily relieve myself. It was torture, and it was exhausting, but I couldn't really keep myself from doing it. It was a bit like jerking off when you don't really want to. It's kind of a chore, but you feel relaxed and a bit relieved afterwards.

I wanted to call Val. I wanted to hang out with her. I wanted to see her naked. She, Ian, and I had exchanged numbers at lunch, but I didn't have anything to call about. And if I asked her to hang out, what would we do?

Sometime in the early evening, my sister Sarah came home with a small gaggle of friends. Usually I try to avoid Sarah's friends, because they're loud, and sometimes I have trouble not finding them attractive. Sarah's two years my junior, and so her friends aren't so young that it's inappropriate for me to lust after them. But I don't *want* to be attracted to them. It makes me feel sort of dirty.

I was in the kitchen scarfing down another bowl of cereal, when they came up the stairs from the garage: Sarah, two girls, and a boy. I didn't know any of the non-Sarah people. I almost never do. Her friends are in a constant state of flux. I don't think that this is because she's not a good a friend. I blame this on the difficulty and complexity of fifteen year old girls. Not to mention the snottiness, and fickleness.

I've had the same few friends since we were all in pre-K. Ian and I have been buds since I can remember, and unless he hits his head and drowns trying to cross the stream to our imaginary woodland kingdom, I don't see any reason why we won't continue to be friends until *I* die trying to become the first person to reach the summit of Mount Everest by tricycle. I value loyalty. It's nice to have friends you can trust, with whom you can share your secrets, and talk about the things that embarrass you most. I'm kind of sad for Sarah that she doesn't have anybody like that. I guess she has me. But I wouldn't confide in me either.

One of Sarah's new girls was a short blonde with really impressive boobs. It was warm outside, and she was wearing a low cut shirt, which, well, you get the idea. I felt uncomfortable staring at her chest, and I wondered as usual if it was wrong to want to touch Sarah's friend's boobs.

I wondered if my parents had told Sarah about the job thing yet. I guessed that they hadn't. They were probably waiting for her friends to leave.

I went back to my room to see if Val's Facebook would betray her plans for her Friday evening. It didn't. But that made my anxiety a little worse. I was just returning to my book, when there was a knock on my door. "Yeah?" I said.

“Aar, do you want to drive us to the drug store?” Sarah asked. “We’re going to watch a movie, and we want to get some snacks that aren’t so good for us.”

I did not want to drive them to the drug store. I was alone, feeling out of sorts, and kind of resentful that she had evening plans with friends, even if they were temporary, recyclable friends. “No,” I said, “I don’t want to.”

“Well, will you? Can I open this door? I don’t like talking through it.”

“I’m naked.”

“No you’re not.” She opened the door. I lay the on the bed, fully clothed, with my book on my chest. Sarah leaned forward on the doorframe and her long black curls fell over her face. My sister looks a lot like me. We’re built in the same way: long spindly legs, small torso. She’s got baby fat in her cheeks that’s never really gone away, while my face looks, not gaunt, but more trim than hers.

Sarah looked annoyed and a little desperate. Perhaps she’d guaranteed her new friends a ride, and it would be her fault if they didn’t get one. Instead of engendering sympathy in me, this desperate look had the opposite effect. “Please?” she asked. I shook my head.

“Mom!” Sarah hollered. My mom, who spoils Sarah, arrived at my door a moment later. My mother does not like when Sarah and I engage in any sort of sibling conflict. Her number one goal in life seems to be for Sarah and me to get along. And, mostly because *I* am made to feel cripplingly guilty when we quarrel, Sarah and I generally stay on each other’s good sides. “Mom,” Sarah began, calmer this time, knowing that our mother’s concerned presence guaranteed her an automobile ride with

brother chauffeur, “Aaron here will not drive us to the drug store. But he’s not *doing* anything.”

“I’m phenomenally busy right now. This book isn’t going to read itself.”

“Aaron,” my exasperated mother said, “I have a migraine. I can barely see you right now. Drive Sarah to the pharmacy.”

A dispute ensued in which I argued that I was not a slave, and that I should not be conscripted to chauffeur my sister around wherever she pleased. I may even have used the word “conscripted.” My mother, who *always* had a migraine at convenient moments like this, said that since I was not doing anything, and because I’m a “decent person,” I should drive her. This left me the options of either arguing that I was *not* in fact a decent person, or just sucking it up and driving five minutes to the drug store. So, feeling a little angry and a little impotent, I started up my mom’s SUV, and drove Sarah and her new acquaintances to the drug store.

I waited in the car while Sarah and her friends selected snacks for their movie, which took forever. By the time they returned, I was in a *really* foul mood. I felt it was inconsiderate to take so long, when there was somebody waiting for you in the parking lot. I felt it was inconsiderate for Tyler, Sarah’s male friend, to *look* older than me, and have a full beard. I felt it was inconsiderate of Sarah to announce that the store was out of Almond Hershey’s bars. I thought I was only person who *liked* Almond Hershey’s bars. I fumed about all of these minor atrocities, and then I heard myself say, “You guys should have bought some acne medication.” One of the girls had pimples speckling her cheeks, and I guessed that Tyler was growing his annoying beard to cover up his own zit issue. None of them responded, and they looked not at me, but at Sarah for an explanation.

“Those chips will probably make you fat too,” I mumbled and then I backed quickly out of the parking space, and into a small sign. “Fuck!” I shouted.

I got out of the car to examine the damage. The sign was only a few feet tall. It said the name of the store in small letters, “Enter” in large ones, and it had an arrow that had previously pointed into the parking lot. The sign was twisted a bit, but was otherwise unscathed. The SUV had a dent in the rear bumper.

I returned to the chauffeur’s seat, got the hell out of the parking lot before any pharmacists came out to see how the sign was doing, and I drove home in a panic.

In the driveway, Sarah and her friends rushed out of the car and toward the open garage. It seemed that they were trying to get away, to shirk their responsibility, to leave me to deal with this alone. I ran up and blocked their path. I ordered Sarah’s friends to go inside. I wanted to talk to Sarah alone. To my great pleasure, her friends obeyed my command. I think they were a little shaken by my insults, and worried there would be trouble in the house when the parents discovered the bumper dent.

I stood face to face with Sarah in the garage. She looked a little frightened. “Don’t tell mom and dad,” I ordered her.

“Why? You’re such a dick. Why are you a dick to my friends? What’d they do to you?”

“It’s been a strange day. Just please don’t tell them.”

“I’m not making any promises. And, look, they’re going to *notice* the giant dent in the car.”

“It’s a small dent.”

“It’s a medium-sized dent.”

“Fuck. God fucking damn it.” I grabbed a tennis ball from a box of assorted balls, and fired it off of the opposite wall.

“Relax. They’re not going to punish you for it.”

That was probably true. My parents have never punished me for anything. I think it makes them feel mean, so they just don’t do it. But this was different. It wasn’t exactly punishment I feared. It was anger, or disappointment. My dad hadn’t looked stressed earlier, but he had to be freaking out a little bit, under the surface. And my mom was already on the brink. I didn’t want to push her over.

“Fuck. I’m going to have to pay for it,” I said. “Want to help? It was kind of also your fault.”

“It wasn’t my fault *at all*. And you know I don’t have any money.”

“Because you’ve never worked in your life.”

“Yeah, you’ve done some tough labor, scooping slush into cups.”

I had worked at a water-ice place over the summer.

Sarah paused for a second to let her little insult sink in. It didn’t seem right that she could be condescending towards me. I was the bigger, stronger, cleverer, more emotionally mature sibling, and yet I felt so tired and overmatched. Sarah could be a whiny baby when it suited her, like when she’d gotten my mom to make me drive her and her friends to the store. But she could also be sharp and confident, and impressively quick-witted. “Don’t you have money saved from the summer?” she asked me.

“No. I spent it all on blow,” I said. I’d actually spent it on baseball tickets, and beer.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a slang term for cocaine. I was kidding. Do you live under a rock?”

“You know where I live. How are you going to get the money?”

“Sell blow.”

“Seriously.”

“Don’t know, Sar. Shit. I don’t know. I’ll handle it. Just let me tell them, okay.

You can go watch the stupid romantic comedy.”

“How do you know what we’re—”

“I’m a psychic. And you have poor taste.”

I opened the garage door, announced that I’d crashed the car, and waited for my parents to come flying down the stairs. It didn’t take long. They followed me out onto the driveway.

“I put a small but noticeable dent in your bumper,” I informed my mother, “Or, rather, the ‘enter’ sign did. It wasn’t really my fault. I couldn’t see it out the mirror. It was too short. It was to signs as Danny DeVito is to actors, unless you count dwarf actors like the guy who plays Professor Flitwick, or the guy in—”

My mother bent down to look at the indentation just above the left rear tire. I couldn’t tell if she was angry, or just...sad. Her face was all contorted. She squinted to the point where you could barely see her eyes, and this pulled the rest of her face back in a way that exposed her teeth. She looked like a kind of middle-aged gremlin, and on most days, I would probably have laughed.

My father didn't look at the car. "I can't believe you've done this to your mother," he told me, "on a day when she's got a *bad migraine*. On a day when she's already having a tough time."

I'd told myself I'd be contrite. But I had trouble. "Yeah, it's definitely the migraine that's bothering her. I'm sorry I can't pick and choose my car crash days to coincide with mom's headache's," I said.

"Now is *not* the time to be sarcastic. You could have endangered Sarah *and* her friends. They could have *whiplash*. You could have whiplash. Back problems run in this family. You know I have to do stretches in the morning just to—"

"We were going like three, maybe four miles an hour," I told him.

"Those kids' parents trust that they'll be *safe* when they come to our house, and you can't jeopardize that."

"I tried to stay here. No jeopardy. I'm unlikely to crash the car while reading. Well, that is if I'm reading on my bed. If I were reading in the fucking car—"

"Don't curse, Aaron. Do you want your mother to be any more upset?"

I looked down at my mother, and wondered if that were actually possible. She was still running her hand along the bumper, and she looked about as furious as I could remember her. She stood up and turned to face me. "I've had a driver's license for over thirty years," she said quietly, which seemed, counter-intuitively, to accentuate her anger, "and do you know how many times I've hit something with my car?"

My mom's a big fan of rhetorical questions, and I try my best to answer all of them. "Three? Five?"

"Zero."

“That was my next guess.”

I have *never* so much as grazed another vehicle.”

“It was a sign. A little baby one, like a—”

“I don’t care.” She took a deep breath to formulate her next thought. “This is really inexcusable.”

‘But school just started,’ I thought to myself, ‘And I’m worried about this stupid girl. And dad changed jobs all of a sudden. And you and dad are both acting really weird, especially toward each other. And aren’t those solid excuses for letting your emotions get the better of you?’ But I couldn’t say either of those things, so I stood there stupidly, knowing that if I said something out loud it would be sarcastic and filled with profanity. I could only be contrite in silence, so I bit my tongue—figuratively, of course—and just nodded.

“You’ll have to get it fixed,” my mother told me, calming down a little.

“Now?”

“Nothing’s open now. You’ll have to pay for it. They’ll raise our insurance rates if we report it.”

Again, I just nodded and tried to look ashamed.

“Your grandparents are coming over for dinner any minute now,” my dad said, putting a close to the conversation. “I’ve got to start cooking.” He put a hand on Susan’s back and they made their way up the driveway toward the house. I followed them as far as the garage, but they closed the door firmly behind them, and I felt like I wasn’t quite welcome back in.

I found myself alone in the garage. I called Ian.

Most kids my age text each other instead of calling. But texting frustrates me. It's slow and impersonal. And so much of what we want to say, we convey not with words, but with our tone of voice and the *way* we speak. You cannot, in a text, convey sarcasm or irony or a German accent, three things which are necessary for me to properly express myself. I call people. Even when my friends text me, I tend to call them in response. They love it when I do this. I'm being sarcastic, of course, but I wouldn't have to announce my sarcasm if you could hear my voice.

Ian answered and sounded annoyed. "Am I interrupting something?" I asked.

"I'm down a fucking touchdown in the final two minutes here. Just had a third and ten, ran a nice crossing route to Maclin, put the ball right on the money, and he dropped it. So now I've got to kick a field goal and hope I can make a stand on D."

Usually, I don't mind hearing about Ian's Madden games. I'm even down to coach him a little bit. But my mind was racing, and I didn't really have the patience for it.

I pace when I'm nervous, *and* when I'm on the phone, so I strode back and forth between my sister's old rusted bike and the family's busted lawnmower, like a tiger in the zoo, except that the tiger has neither bike nor lawnmower. "You know the new girl? The one who shut you down at lunch?"

"I missed it."

"You weren't listening?"

"Wide right. Shanked it."

"Dude, focus."

"I know. It was chip-shot distance too."

“Pause the fucking game. I want to talk to you.” I conveyed urgency in my voice, and I heard some shuffling on the other end of the line.

“All right, I’m all yours, baby girl,” Ian said. “Okay, you mean the girl you were practically drooling over.”

“Sure.”

I wanted to get to the point, try to untie the knot in my stomach. I felt like I was running a marathon, heart-rate-wise, though I’ve never run a marathon or even like a twentieth of one, so I’ve got no idea what that would feel like. “What do you think of her?” I asked.

“She seems nice. And I guess she’s kind of cute if you look at her from the right angle. Her short hair is kind of weird. She and my mom have basically the same do.”

“I like her hair. And I distinctly recall you said you would, and I quote, ‘fuck the innocence right out of her.’”

“That’s just an expression.”

“No it’s not. An ‘expression’ implies that multiple people say it. Come on, man. What do I, like, do?”

“She seems pretty easy to talk to. Why don’t you just call her? It won’t be awkward if you don’t make it awkward. Be persistent.”

Persistence wasn’t really my thing. Ian is an ‘If at first you fail, try, try, try again person.’ I’m more of an, ‘If at first you fail, give up immediately’ kind of guy.

“What if she rejects me, man?” I asked.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“That’s patently false. What if I, like, lost a leg? I wouldn’t be dead, but I’d be considerably weaker. I wouldn’t be able to *stand* without help.”

“Maybe you’d be mentally stronger.”

“What if I also had PTSD?”

“What’s that?”

“Post-traumatic...don’t worry about it. But when you think about lots of the expressions we use, none of them make any sense. Just last week in gym, T.J. Benson told me to go ‘balls to the wall’ in floor hockey. Was I, like, supposed to put my balls on the gym wall? And if I did, how would that improve my floor hockey game?”

“Dude,” Ian said in an effort to get back on track, “I’m just trying to help. Better to take a chance now, than to end up in a Phil and Hannah situation.”

He had a point there. That would suck.

Hannah is our closest female friend. She’s one of those girls who’s one of the guys. She doesn’t act or dress like a “girl.” I put “girl” in quotations here, because she is, in technical terms, a girl. I’m fairly certain that she has female genitalia, though I haven’t personally checked. She just doesn’t act in a “girly” way. For instance, she doesn’t follow the contemporary female fashion trends—meaning she doesn’t dress like a whore. She wears baggy jeans and sweat pants, because, as she says, “they’re more comfortable than skin tight shit, and I can put stuff in the pockets. Clothes designed for teenage girls lack pockets. Pockets are great. Who doesn’t want pockets?” That’s not a direct quote from her; rather, it’s a summary of her pro-pocket stance on female fashion

Because Hannah is “one of the guys,” it’s hard to see her as a sexual object, just as it’s hard for most of the girls at our school to think of their familiar male classmates in

sexual terms. She's been in love with Phil for like a thousand years, and he's never been all that interested. But I don't think it's because he doesn't find her attractive. I just think it's hard to change the terms of such an established friendship. It's hard to date a girl around whom you've bragged that you've managed to jerk off six times in one day, as Phil claims to have done.

I guess it's like if you owned a pet pig. Let's call him Gerald. You and Gerald the pig would be buddies. You'd play games together, and go on walks, and you'd feed him. You might even snuggle up and sleep with him at night. Other people, when they saw Gerald would think about bacon, and ham, and pork chops, and just how delicious Gerald could be, if seasoned properly. But you wouldn't think to eat Gerald, because he'd be your friend. This is how it is with Phil and Hannah. Hannah would probably make some juicy bacon, but Phil won't eat it because you don't eat your friends.

"Look," Ian continued, pulling me back to the phone conversation, "All you need is some kind of pretense, you know? Something you can invite her to do, that seems offhand, so your voice won't sound like it does now. You sound like this is a matter of life or death, not like you're just trying to get your D wet."

"I don't just want my D wet. I mean, I wouldn't mind a moist D. But I want to get to know her, and I want her to know me. I want her to *like* me," I said.

Ian pretended not to understand what I meant. I think, well, I know, that deep down he's got a soft side. I'll bet he watches romantic comedies when I'm not around. But something about Ian keeps him from opening up this side of himself, even to me. Maybe he's never really talked about feelings, so he doesn't know how. I tell him every detail about my life, and how I feel about things. And he tells me *most* of his life. He tells

me about his pet-peeves, and the things that embarrass him, and his sexual fantasies (even when I don't ask), and about how he jerks off, and how often (even though I *never* ask). But he never tells me about his emotions. He acts as though he's without emotion, but nobody is without emotion. Maybe he just figures I've got enough emotions for the both of us.

I heard a car approaching, and turned to see my grandparents pull their silver Mercedes into the driveway. "Yeah, that's not a bad idea," I mumbled to Ian.

"Of course it's not," he said. "I only have great ideas."

"All right man, I've got to go."

My dad's parents greeted me with eager waves, my grandpa smiling broadly, my grandmother scowling suspiciously, just as you'd expect.

Art, the family patriarch, is a tall dude, taller than me. He was once taller than his son, but he's shriveled a little, like a raisin. He's got pretty much the same kind of hair as the other Wasserstein boys, but he's only got wisps of it left, in a ring around the back of his head, like a half-halo. He was almost entirely bald by the age of eighteen. Every time he sees me, he warns me that my curls will start disappearing "any day now." He thinks this is *very* funny. I do not.

Art is a charismatic guy. There's something about his smile, and the way he carries himself that projects both confidence and warmth. He stepped into the garage and engulfed me in a hug.

Grandma Deborah does not hug. She paused until her husband relinquished me, then stood stock-still and waited for me to give her an awkward kiss on the cheek.

Grandmothers are supposed to have three basic qualities. They're supposed to be warm and fuzzy. They're supposed to smell like mothballs. And they're supposed to know how to cook. Deborah *can* cook. I don't think they let you be a grandmother unless you can cook. But she tends to smell like smoked fish, not moth balls. And she's generally very cold. She's not mean. She has some very loving moments. But she's very sharp, and she has a dry, dark sense of humor. My mom is always complaining that I'm a lot like her.

"How's my boy?" Art asked me as I followed them into the house. He likes to talk about me in the third person. I usually play along, which confuses him.

"He's okay," I said, "He's hanging in there. Though he has to pee fairly badly."

"How is he liking...how are you...how's school?"

"Fine."

And then my grandmother jumped in with a fantastic non-sequitur. "Have you been putting your telescope to good use?"

I had turned seventeen just the week before. My grandparents are very generous people, but they're also very out of touch. And they have the habit of buying me phenomenally bad gifts. The best part about my birthday is wondering what kind of useless thing I'll receive from them. The only problem is that, since I see my grandparents at least once a week, no matter how stupid or embarrassing the present is, I have to keep it *and* find a way to show how much I appreciate it, or else I'm taken out back to the woodshed, (it's a figurative woodshed. We don't have a real woodshed) and beaten with the belt of Jewish guilt.

For my Bar Mitzvah, for example, my grandparents decided that what I wanted and needed was an African tapestry. They saw all of the band posters on my wall (The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Who), and they thought, “You know what would go great with posters of 1960s and 70s British rock groups? A tapestry of a naked tribal boy getting sliced open by a knife as part of a coming-of-age ritual.” So now, on my wall, between the Stones and the Kinks, there’s a giant, bleeding African boy. I have to keep it up there, because every time my grandparents visit, they ask, “How do you like your tapestry?” And they walk up to my room to make sure the boy is still there, blood dripping down his naked body. So the only alternative is to leave it rolled up in a drawer somewhere, and then stick it up on the wall whenever the grandparents show up. But it’s heavy, and I’m lazy.

The tapestry does make a good talking point. The few people who enter my room ask, “What the *fuck* is that?”

And I say, “It’s a nineteenth century Xhosa tapestry, dumbass.”

And they say, “What the fuck is *that*?”

And I guess I take a certain pride in being the only teenager in the area who can explain, in painstaking detail, the coming-of-age rituals of the Xhosa people:

The Xhosa people circumcise teen males, and then they send them out into the bush to live on their own for a while so they can prove their worth and newfound manliness. When my grandpa sees the tapestry, he likes to say they were planning on putting me through the same coming-of-age ritual, but that “they couldn’t circumcise [me] twice.” So they had to settle for a Bar Mitzvah. He then likes to repeat the joke, to make sure everybody’s heard.

For this past birthday, my grandparents had purchased me a high-powered telescope. I had, of course, never expressed any interest in space, or in seeing things up close that are really very far away. I didn't even want to be an astronaut when I was a little kid. I read that if you go out in space, in about ten seconds, the lack of pressure turns you into a giant, bloated, floating blueberry. When they die, I'm going to sell the telescope on craigslist.

But anyway, my grandma asked me if I was putting the telescope to "good use." In truth, I hadn't taken the cap off the lens. But I said, "Yes," then wracked my brain for some specifics. "I've seen some...stars...some Ewoks."

"What's an Ewok?" she asked.

"They're small furry aliens. It's a *really* good telescope."

Both of them looked skeptical, but they figured this was just another contemporary thing they didn't understand, like text messages or Lady Gaga.

I followed the two of them up the stairs and into the house. We all settled in the kitchen, where my dad was cooking, and my mother was absentmindedly straightening the already straight tablecloth. She'd clearly been saying something to my dad, but she'd hushed when we came up the stairs.

My grandparents sat down and started ordering my mom around. I don't think that Art and Deborah dislike my mom. And they're not exactly *mean* to her. But when they're at my house, my grandparents treat her a bit like one treats a waitress, except without the tips. "Some water would be great," my grandmother announced, as though my mother had offered.

"Oh yes, Susan. That would be wonderful," my grandfather echoed.

I got up and got them water, which my mother acknowledged with a thankful nod. My grandfather accepted his glass and held it aloft in front of him, as though it were some sort of mysterious gem. He put the glass down without taking a sip, and he leaned forward across the table toward my mother. “You look down, Susan,” he said.

“I’m fine,” she replied, “It’s just been a tough last day or two.”

“Well, we think this change is great,” he said. “Joseph will have more free time to spend with us, and with his children. He’ll be doing the work he’s wanted to do.”

“Yes, I understand, I just—”

“If it’s about the money, I’m sure Joe has already told you that we’re willing to pay as much of the tuition as you’d like. Just pay whatever you can. That’s how we got where we are. We value education.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that they change schools. I just don’t like accepting—”

“You don’t have to graciously accept,” my grandpa said with a boyish grin, “You can accept kicking and screaming if you want. We’ll pay the school directly if we have to.”

My grandparents have money, and they’re generous with it. They make it rain on them academic institutions and charitable organizations. My grandfather made a lot of money as a corporate lawyer, and he invested the money well. He retired a couple years ago, and now he runs a volunteer organization that fights hunger in Philadelphia. It’s called Jewish Hunger Relief (JHR). Originally, the plan was to distribute food to hungry Jews in Philadelphia, and let everybody else starve. But it turned out that there weren’t *that* many hungry Jews, so now the organization delivers to all sorts of people. On

Sunday and Wednesday mornings, volunteers get together in a warehouse, pack food into boxes, and then drive around Philly delivering said boxes.

Dinner was quieter and more subdued than usual. Sarah was still watching the movie, which my parents allowed, I think because they liked the idea that Sarah had friends over. The talk was mostly about my how much my school cost, which was way more than I would have guessed. And I told myself, only partly in jest, that I'd start paying attention a little more in class.

I tuned out most the table chatter, and tried to concentrate on pretending that I enjoyed the whole wheat pasta my dad had prepared. But the basic gist of the talk was this: My grandparents wanted to pay for stuff and they were proud of themselves for being so generous. My dad liked his parents' generosity and wasn't in position refuse it. My mother didn't want to owe her in-laws anything. Even though they expressly said that it wasn't a loan and that they wanted nothing in return, I knew how she was feeling. The same way I'd felt if my parents had offered to pay to fix the car, the same why I felt now that I knew how much it cost for me not to go to the top-notch, nationally recognized, local public high school.

After dinner, Sarah made a quick appearance to say hello, but then disappeared to her room to do homework. Unlike most teenage girls, who would produce this excuse, but sit on around on Facebook instead of doing their homework, Sarah was probably being honest. She's a schoolwork machine, and teachers are always saying things to my mom like, "Aaron was a...well, he was an interesting student, but you really did a great job with Sarah." Practice makes perfect, I suppose.

Sarah had just gone upstairs, and I was starting to clear the table, when my mother said, “Aaron, you need to apologize to your sister.”

“For what?” I asked, perplexed.

“For saying some *nasty* things to her friends.” My mom was being a lot more authoritative than usual. I think my grandparents had made her feel powerless.

“Shit. Why did Sarah—”

“I don’t want to hear that language at the dinner table.”

“We’re not having dinner anymore. When does it revert back to being just ‘the table?’”

“I’m not in the mood,” my mom replied.

“Anyway, I already did,” I told her, “in the gar—”

“I didn’t hear it.”

“You weren’t *there*. If a kid apologizes to his sister, but nobody’s around to hear it, does—”

“Just do it.”

I rolled my eyes, and slid a dish onto the drying rack. “You always act like I’m not nice to Sarah, but she and I get along pretty well, relatively. Did you hear about the kid in the news, in Mount Airy, who killed his sister with an axe?”

“He was schizophrenic, Aaron. That’s not something to make light of.”

“Regardless, I have yet to axe Sarah to death. You’re always telling me not to take my good fortune for granted.”

I'll cut this conversation off right there, and pretend that I got the last word. I'm pretty sure I didn't, because when I'd finished with the dishes, I wound up at the highest of the split levels, apologizing once more to Sarah, quite loudly.

"Sorry Sarah," I shouted, to be sure that everyone heard.

"Why are you shouting?" Sarah asked.

"Aaron," my father called up from the kitchen, "Apologize like you *mean it*."

"He's not capable of meaning something," Sarah called down to the kitchen.

"Anyway," I said in my normal tone, "Like I said earlier, I'm sorry that I was a dick to your friends. And that I presumably caused you crippling whiplash from which you'll never recover."

"No sweat."

"Do people still say that?"

"Say what?"

"No sweat," I said, and I stepped into the room and took up a perch on the corner of Sarah's desk. Sarah's room is an exact mirror image of mine, except that her bed is arranged at a different angle, and I always find this a bit disorienting.

"I just said it." Sarah took her eyes off her chemistry textbook. She sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed, surrounded by a sea of papers covered in her neat handwriting.

"Why'd you rat me out to mom?" I asked.

"I was upset. I'm sorry." Sarah turned a page in her textbook. "Do you know anything about covalent bonds?"

"Ask dad."

“Nope. He’ll give me a three-hour lecture about every possible type of bond, and then about everything related to bonds, and then about the whole field of chemistry, and then about all related fields of science. I just want to know if they’re stronger or weaker than hydrogen bonds. It’s a yes or no question, but he won’t just say yes or no.”

“Probably true. The only thing I learned in chemistry is that Steve Ricks likes to eat bits of his own dried skin.”

“Gross.”

My grandparents came up to the top of the stairs to say goodbye. I said “thanks” to them, but I didn’t say what I was thanking them for. My grandfather seemed to understand, and he just nodded as if to say “any time.” As they were turning to go, he said, “Aaron, I know you don’t like to wake up in the *morning* on Sunday, but we’re short some volunteers this time. And if you want to deliver food, you can choose whatever route you want. Something short.”

Usually, I’ll find any excuse I can not to do JHR—I’ve got too much homework, I’m sick with meningitis—but I felt indebted to my grandfather. So I said yes.

“Great. I’ll see you tomorrow. It’ll be a delight,” Art replied, and he followed my grandma down the stairs.

I went to my room, and got out my phone. I took a deep breath to calm myself. Ian was right that all I needed was a pretense. And now I had one. I dialed Val’s number, and got up to pace.

She answered. “Hi, it’s Aaron,” I said. “From school.”

“I don’t know any other Aarons.”

“Yeah, me either. Anyway, my grandpa runs this charity thing,” I began, “where you, like, deliver food to hungry people all over the area. Cause the non-hungry people don’t need food, cause they’re not hungry. And he, like, guilted me into doing it on Sunday. And I wouldn’t mind some company. Ian won’t come with me because he’s a huge dick. And I was wondering if you might want to come. Old Russian Jews will give you gross candy.”

“I like pretty much all candy.”

“Not this shit. Trust me. It’s like this fruity toffee, and it’s way too sweet. And you can’t really even *eat* it. You basically just embed it in your teeth. And then you get to spend the rest of the day trying to pick it out.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Do what?”

“Let’s deliver food.”

She gave me her address while I celebrated by stubbing my toe against my bedpost.

Chapter 3

I lay on my bed, playing out possible scenarios for Sunday, trying to figure out how to get in Val’s good book, how to become her buddy, how to touch her intimately.

I tried to draw on my past experiences with girls. The problem was, my two major sexual successes with girls had come out of *nowhere*. They’d been, basically, pure luck.

But I turned them over in my head nonetheless, searching for clues that would inform my Valerie situation.

I will now “turn them over” on the page. I think in order to understand somebody, you’ve got to understand their history. Look how J.K. Rowling deals with He Who Must Not Be Named. We go back and see his past. We do the same with Dumbledore. That’s how we understand You Know Who’s weaknesses, and how we know that Dumbledore is gay. Oops, spoiler alert. Dumbledore’s gay.

So we’re going to go back in time and see some my past experiences. Just to be clear, we aren’t literally going to go back in time. It’s figurative time travel. There’s just going to be a space break, and it should be understood that the events described thereafter, happened in the past.

I first kissed a girl at summer camp when I was thirteen. Her name was Stacey. I didn’t really like summer camp, but I went, because in the summer, that’s what everybody else was doing—this is a good reason to do just about anything. So if I didn’t go, there was nobody around to hang out with.

I’m not going to describe the whole summer camp to you. You know what a summer camp looks like. There’s some shabby wooden buildings, some athletic facilities, and a body of water.

I was sitting at the edge of the gym. The gym was under a sort of pavilion, so that it had a roof, but no walls. “Who needs walls?” the camp-designer said, “If we built walls, when somebody missed a jump shot, the ball wouldn’t be able to roll all the way down the hill and into the lake.”

I sat with my butt on the gym's concrete floor, with my legs stretched out onto the grass outside. It was between "activities," so I didn't have anywhere I needed to be. There weren't a lot of people around, just a couple of kids shooting hoops, and a few down the hill, talking in a circle. I was just sitting there, daydreaming.

Anyway, I was sitting at the edge of the gym, and this girl I'd seen around, but never spoken to, strolled up the hill, and sat down next to me. As far as I knew, she and I didn't have any mutual acquaintances. I'd noticed her before, but never paid her much mind. I doubt that we'd ever even made eye contact. So this was a strange occurrence, and I was confused. But I played it cool. "Hey," I said, and looked down at the grass in front of me, trying not to betray my surprise.

"Hey," she replied. And then she said *exactly* what I was hoping she would say. She asked me the precise question the girls in my daydreams asked me. And I'm not making this up, I promise. You can't make up this kind of good fortune. She asked: "You want to make out?"

Of course I wanted to make out. I *always* wanted to make out. I was in a perpetual state of wanting to make out. In daydreams, girls of all ages, shapes, colors, and sizes approached me out of nowhere, and slipped their tongues into my mouth. And here was a real live one, sitting next to me, her soft leg brushing mine, offering to do exactly that.

I looked at her, decided that she was a girl, and that I'd heard her correctly. "Yeah," I said, "yeah, okay." And even though I'd been briefed on what she was going to do, it surprised me when she turned my way, slipped her tongue into my mouth, and started moving it around. Later, when I described the occasion to my bunk-mates, I suavely told them that Stacey and I had "played a little tonsil hockey." I'd always wanted

to use that expression, but it turned out to be more descriptively accurate than I'd thought it would be. Our kiss didn't look like kisses you see in movies, with people delicately easing their lips together. We turned our heads, locked our open mouths together, and then remained entirely motionless, except for our tongues, which just bombarded the fuck out of each other.

I didn't really know how long this was supposed to go on for. Part of me hoped that it would go on forever, that our tongues would never go more than a second without colliding with each other. And part of me was getting tired, and a little self-conscious about the public display of whatever it was we were displaying. Certainly not affection. Teenage lust? Sexual curiosity? Who knows?

Eventually, Stacey unraveled her tongue from mine, got up, started walking, and motioned for me to follow her. But I couldn't really stand, as I had worked up a sizable erection—yep, I'm going with “sizable”—which I did not want her, or anybody else, to see. I declined her walking invitation with a wave of my hand, and I lay down to stare at the sky and replay the kiss in my mind.

So, Stacey and I shared a few magical evenings of “make outs.” We would sit down next to each other, between two trees, kiss sloppily for a few minutes, and then part ways. Stacey, behind her braces and poorly drawn eye makeup, seemed to be an assertive, independently minded person. She stood up for herself, and did what *she* wanted, above the influence of her peers. This is, in my experience, odd for a teenage girl.

The pervading camp trend was to pick a summer crush, and stick with him. But Stacey was a bit too rash, or a bit too curious, for that.

So Stacey “dumped” me. At least this was how it felt to me. I told my camp-friend Andy, “Stacey dumped me.”

“Sucks man,” he said.

“Yep,” I agreed.

“Sorry Aaron,” My counselor Aaron—he was Persian—jumped in, “rejection sucks the balls of donkey.”

“Yep,” I replied. I said nothing else, because I thought more words might bring tears to my young, heartbroken eyes. I just kept my mind focused on donkey balls, and stared into space. This break-up seems (to me now, and I’m sure to you) like “small beans,” but I was devastated, for a day for two. And a day (or two) is a long time at summer camp, when all of eternity is shrunk down and shoved into about six weeks.

Technically, Stacey didn’t “dump” me because, in her eyes, we’d never been officially “together.” And she also didn’t “dump” me, because she never officially called anything off. I was simply strolling up the hill one evening, toward the Canteen, where the camp sold candy bars and Costco cheeseburgers, when I saw two figures making out between two trees. One of these figures was Stacey Katz, and she was running her hand through her companion’s blond hair. She’d never touched my hair. Though I supposed if she’d tried to run her hand through it, her fingers were liable to get caught.

I would describe the feeling of despair and betrayal that overtook me, but I’m sure you know it. Everybody’s been betrayed. ‘What does Jayson Jackson have that I do not?’ I thought to myself, ‘Straight blond hair? An alliterative name? Freckles?’ Fuck that kid. Who spells Jayson with a Y anyway?’

This taught me the first, and most important girl lesson I needed. Aarun, the counselor, put it best when he said, “Girls are fickle, Aaron. Sucks the balls of donkey.”

“Huh? Who sucks the donkey balls?”

“Nobody, Aaron,” he replied, wisely. Aarun was chock-full of old, traditional Persian wisdom, “Girls being fickle sucks the balls.”

“Yep.”

A day or two later, when I found Stacey not playing tonsil hockey with Jayson, I approached her. She was receptive of my approach, and she greeted me with a confusing smile. She was, to me, a mortal enemy. But to her, I seemed to be some long lost friend, not some chump she’d unceremoniously discarded. My primary goal in this conversation was not to cry, so I just tried not to say much, which is tough when you want to get a lot across.

“What happened?” I asked, trying not to look at her face.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing? What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything.”

“Then why did you, you know...”

“Felt like it, I guess.” She sighed. “Don’t be upset, Aaron. It’s camp. It doesn’t count.”

“If I die here,” I asked, “Do I die in real life?”

“Obviously. It’s not the Matrix.” She laughed at my joke, but this just made me more upset. She’d never given me the chance to make her laugh with any other jokes.

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings,” she said.

“Then why did you do it?” I asked. In response, she shrugged, a shrug with finality, a shrug that ended the conversation. Thirteen year old girls can put a definitive end to discourse with a shrug.

When I was in the 10th grade, I had the hot-pants for a girl named Marcy. Marcy was a perfectly nice girl. But she was also a bit of a hussy.

You know how when you’re caught chewing gum in class, the teacher might say, “Did you bring enough for everybody?” and you have to hand out all of your remaining sticks of gum, until everybody has one? Well Marcy seemed to take this approach to sexual favors. She gave them freely, and made sure that there were enough to go around. She gave a hand-job on the school bus to Luca Blaszykowski, and gave Scotty Bower a blowjob in the bathroom at Starbucks. She even gave Jeb Turner a drunken b.j. on his basement floor. “She just loves the cock,” Ian would say, shaking his head, but not in a disapproving manner, “just can’t get enough.”

“Yep,” I would reply, in an only slightly disapproving manner.

I found Marcy to be quite attractive. Most people did. It’s hard to hand out that many sexual favors if nobody wants them. Marcy had auburn hair, and pale skin that wasn’t *too* pale. And she had a bouncy, outgoing, flirtatious personality. She would steal your textbook from you, so that you’d have to grab her around the waste and tickle her to get it back. And then she’d roll on the floor laughing. And somewhere in this process, her short skirt would hike up a little higher, and you’d get a nice glimpse of her underwear. And then you’d use the textbook you’d just recovered to hide your hard-on. But she *knew* what you were using it for, and instead of being grossed-out, as most high school girls

would be, she'd just smile at you from the dirty hallway floor, her red hair spread out around her smiling face like a lion's mane.

My usual policy, when I had a crush, was to just not do anything. The risk of unrequited love/lust wasn't worth the reward. But Marcy was a little different. Because of her reputation, and how openly she received almost any advance, whether it be for conversation, or for sexual experimentation, I was able to approach her without the usual nerves and trepidation.

Marcy and I sat together in German class. I take German because it pisses off my Jewish family, and because it includes words like "Heizölrückstoßabdämpfung," which means "heating oil recoil absorber." I like the fact that in English, I still don't know what that means. Also, German's pretty much useless. The Germans never established a widespread empire—not for lack of trying—and so you can only speak German in a couple of countries.

Marcy sat next to me because I was, and am, a good German student—I'm going to do my own German translation of this book, the demand for which I expect to be enormous—mostly because of my willingness, as Mr. Klaus puts it, "To verk on ze accent." Verking on ze accent consists of, as I see it, overdoing it to the point of caricature.

I decided one day to impress Marcy by "acting out" in class. "Acting out" is something I've been doing for quite some time now. And I'm not bad at it. I'm a good student, for the most part. But sometimes it's tough for me to take things seriously. And when I can't take things seriously, I tend to be flippant, and sarcastic, and I act in a

manner which caused my 9th grade History teacher to tell my mom that I was “an intelligent pest. Like a raccoon.”

My mother’s response to this was “Raccoons are nocturnal.” I don’t really understand why she thought that was relevant. I mean, it’s true, but it doesn’t address the accusation at all.

Moving on:

We had a “visiting student” in our German class. He was living with a student at the district’s other high school, but he came to our class, so that we could meet a real live German. His name was Lars, and he sat in the middle of the room, on a stool, like a zoo animal on display. Mr. Klaus had hung up some special posters, which featured photos of Bavarian countryside, of downtown Heidelberg, and of old Leipzig, to recreate Lars’s natural habitat. Lars was as you would expect a German person to be. He was tall and blond, and he seemed to have an awkward smile permanently stuck on his face. I showed off for Marcy by torturing poor Lars, and poor Mr. Klaus.

The class was set up as a question and answer (all in German), where the American students asked Lars questions, and Lars responded. Students started with basic things. Where do you live? What do you eat? What do you do in your free time? The class couldn’t ask much more interesting questions, because we didn’t know that much German. Eventually our shallow German wells ran dry. The discussion stalled. But I’d done some “outside research,” and I had a question prepared. “Hast du eine lange Schlange?” I asked. This translates literally to “Do you have a long snake?” And Lars took it literally.

“No,” he said (in German. I’m translating here for your benefit, because I’m nice). He displayed clear and complete confusion. Lars stuttered a bit as he continued, “In Germany,” he went on, “Very few people keep snakes. Dogs and cats are more popular pets. I have a dog.” And he gave us the dog’s name and breed, but I can’t remember them.

Marcy was thoroughly amused. When she couldn’t control her laughter, she pounded my back with her fist, instead of her desk, to the point that it left a bruise about the size of a small lime just above my shoulder blade. If she’d used her desk, it would have left a much bigger bruise. As we parted ways after class, I caught Marcy smiling at me as I walked away.

The next day, I approached her as she stood at her locker, rummaging through some clutter. Her shirt that day, the color and style of which I cannot for the life of me remember, ended about an inch before her jeans began, and that ring of exposed skin drew me toward her like a sci-fi tractor-beam. I tickled her, she turned around, and before I could chicken out, I asked her what she was doing after school. “Nothing,” she said.

“Do you want to go see a movie tonight?” I asked her.

“What movie?” she asked. But I hadn’t thought about what movie. I didn’t even know which movies were playing. And truthfully, I didn’t really feel like seeing a movie. I’m not a big fan of movies. But I couldn’t just ask her if I could go over to her house so we could touch each other sexually.

“I don’t know. Whichever one you want.”

In the evening, I told my parents I was going to Ian’s, and I walked two miles to the theatre, where I met Marcy. We saw *Tron Legacy*, which was terrible.

One of the things I liked about Marcy, was that you didn't have to hide what you were after. With other girls, you've got to pretend that the last thing you want in to world, is to touch their boobs. You have to act like you've got no interest at all. Boobs? Those things that protrude from your chest? Oh, I didn't even realize you had any. You have to pretend to care about a lot of other stuff, and then subtly and tactfully approach the sexual part of the relationship. Life is actually like this. It seems that in order to get what you want, you've got to act like you don't want it. This is counter-intuitive, and all the acting gets tiring. But with Marcy, there seemed to be an understanding that the sexual would occur, and that being outwardly interested in her sexuality wouldn't ruin anything. This relaxed me in an odd way. It put me at ease. I couldn't just ask to go to her house and feel her up, but there seemed to be a mutual understanding that our date would include more than just the film.

So Marcy and I went in to the theatre, which was mostly empty. She led me to the back row. I didn't think anything of this at the time. I often sit in the back of movie theatres—that's a fun fact about me.

About fifteen minutes into the flick, however, Marcy unceremoniously undid my belt, and asked me "Hast du eine lange Schlange?" I'm pretty sure she didn't actually say that. But this is how I relayed the scene to my friends, so I'm going to give it to you in the same way. I was too surprised and embarrassed to respond to this question. When people are shot, they often say that they go into a "state of shock," where they feel nothing, and they have a sort of out-of-body experience, where they remove themselves from the distressing physical sensation of having a bullet lodged in an important bodily cavity. I had an equivalent experience when Marcy blew me at the AMC.

At the time, not that it's changed radically since, I could count the number of people who'd touched my penis on one hand. And most of those people were pediatricians.

The problem with momentous events such as this, is that they tend to be better in your imagination, and in retrospect, than they are in reality. I had imagined this scene in my head thousands of times, with different scenery, different girls, different numbers of girls. I had anticipated my first blowjob as a small gentile child anticipates Christmas. Except that the kid has to wait a year at most for Christmas. I'd waited fifteen years. I'd heard good things. Fellatio has a very good reputation. So I was super excited for the opportunity to try my hand at it, or rather, to sit there while someone else tried her hand—or mouth, I guess—at it.

In retrospect, when I think about Marcy “S-ing my D,” it's a fond memory. I feel proud to have pulled off such a brash act of public sexuality, even though I really had very little to do with it. And it makes for a good story. My friends were very impressed. It's about the only time my friends have ever been impressed with my sexual prowess.

But when I was actually in the movie theatre, with Marcy's head in my lap, I wasn't enjoying it quite as much as I thought I would. I was, to be honest with you, a bit uncomfortable. I found it strange to have a person willingly putting my penis in her mouth. It seemed like such an odd thing to do, and an even odder thing to *want* to do. And what was *I* supposed to do while she was doing that? Whisper encouraging words? “Oh yeah baby, that's good”? I don't think I could have said that with a straight face. Was I supposed to just stare at the screen and act like I always get head at the movies? I was suddenly very aware of my whole body. I felt how rigidly I sat in the chair, and I

could feel my right leg slowly falling asleep, with Marcy's arm cutting off the circulation. My mind scanned through all of my body's various minor *discomforts*, without focusing on the one great comfort.

I was also acutely aware of the theatre around me. The movie was poorly attended, but I felt extremely self-conscious, and my head shot back and forth, trying to see if anybody was looking.

Eventually, after a few deep calming breaths, I was able to concentrate on Marcy—who, I noticed for the first time, had a relatively large mole on the back of her neck—and to, as they euphemistically say, “finish.” I redid my belt, and we finished watching the movie. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to say “thank you,” or indicate my appreciation in any way. I put my arm around Marcy, and she snuggled up to me. I thought this gesture was enough.

I hadn't particularly *enjoyed* myself, but I liked the idea that it had happened, if that makes any sense. At the very least, it was something to check off my unofficial sexual checklist.

For a week or so, Marcy and I were “boyfriend and girlfriend,” meaning that I went over to her house a few times, and she gave me a couple more blowjobs on her sofa—upon which I've actually made a very small, but I think permanent mark. Then she decided that it was time to move on. I had expected this, and I wasn't particularly hurt when she broke up with me.

I didn't see that there was much I could glean from the Stacey and Marcy things.

Frustrated, I picked up my paperback of *The Sirens of Titan*. But I didn't really feel like reading. I found myself in this introspective mood, which I occasionally slip into, but I don't really know how I end up there. It's like a hazy daydream I can control. It's a bit like being high, except that my brain functions *better* than it usually does. The Vonnegut book takes place partially in space, and I found myself thinking about the heavens.

I lay on my back on my bed, and looked at my stupid telescope, which made me think about the things that I could see with it, if I wanted to, or if I didn't live so close to the city: stars, planets, moons, satellites, Ewoks, the great glass elevator. People are always connecting space with romance, for some reason. Maybe because both space and romance feel so random, determined by something out of our control. I wondered if the romantic (and lustful, ridiculously lustful) feelings I felt for Val, were easier for people who believed in god or fate or the preordained. Did Calvinists just say, "Hey, if it's meant to be, it'll happen?" and then just not "sweat it," as my sister would say. Were there still Calvinists? If so, where?

If I believed in destiny, the whole Val thing would be out of my control. I wouldn't have to make myself appealing, to get her to like me. I wouldn't have to stare at myself in the mirror like a thirteen year old in a movie, and wonder if a high school girl would find me attractive. If I'd believed in god, I could have just asked him to make it happen. But as it was, *I* had to make it happen myself, and that involved a lot of stress, and a lot of work. And even if I put in a lot of work and a lot of stress, that guaranteed nothing. It was still contingent on the feelings of another person.

I was tempted to ask god anyway. It couldn't hurt, you know? If there was not a god, nothing bad would happen. And if there was a god, maybe he (or she,

HAHAHAHA) would listen. I'm sure he was used to people asking for favors of sexual favors. I told myself that talking to god went against my anti-religious feelings, and all of my vehement anti-god arguments. I told myself that I would betray myself, violate my own integrity, by addressing a "higher power." I commanded myself not to ask the almighty.

But I asked. I looked out my window and said out loud, "Please God, allow me, Aaron, to deflower Valerie. I'll do anything. I'll never be mean to my sister. I won't litter. I'll start believing in you." I stopped to listen for a response, but all I got was the sound of a Michael Bublé song coming from my sister's room. And it felt even sillier to *listen* for the almighty, or to Michael Bublé, than to talk to god. So I continued. "And while you're at it," I said, "If you could find a place to fix the car dent for like fifteen bucks, that would be super. And I'm tired of getting these pimples on my upper back. They hurt a fair amount, and even though nobody ever looks at my upper back, I still feel slightly self-conscious about it. And I've been trying this anti-acne face wash on my back, but I'm not very flexible. And I've tried using Sarah's loofah, but it's not that helpful, and I shudder to think where it's been."

I think I said the shower stuff in my head, but I can't be sure. I transitioned nicely from a scarring image of my showering sister, to a lovely one of a showering Valerie Richard, touching herself in ways that the modest part of me passed off as a necessary part of female hygiene. And I lay on my bed a little while longer, and I will end the chapter right there.

Just in case you're a little slow on the uptake, I was jerking off at the end of the last chapter. Sorry.

Chapter 5

Saturday crawled by uneventfully. We're going to skip it.

On Sunday morning, I woke up, had some healthful cereal, and got dressed. I have a set of drawers for my clothes, but they only contain garments that no longer fit. On the middle of my floor, I have a laundry basket that contains clean shirts, socks, and boxers. Next to it, I have a pile that contains dirty shirts, socks, and boxers. I basically have only one pair of jeans that fit, and I keep my wallet, keys, and cell phone in them, even when I'm not wearing them. I wear these pants continuously, every day, until I stain them to the point where my mom forces me to wash them. On a standard day, when I wake up, I slip on my jeans, grab the T-shirt on the top of the basket without looking, and that's it.

But on this morning, I tore through the laundry basket looking for the right shirt, one without holes, one that still had its original color. I chose a blue tee advertising a band called Fun, who, I think Val'd said she liked.

I got the keys from my mom and was about to descend the stairs toward the garage, when Sarah appeared from her room and said, "Hey, are we going to JHR today?"

"What do you mean we, Kemosabe?" I've got no idea where that phrase comes from, but I use it often. "You never want to go."

“I go when mom and dad do. I just don’t like to ride around with somebody I don’t know. But it can be kind of like an adventure, you know? We drive around here all the time. And I like going into Center City and stuff, but sometimes with JHR you end up someplace new, someplace we don’t see very often. It’s like a wild goose chase.” There was a sort of twinkle in Sarah’s eye when she said this, and though I felt bad that I had to deny her the dream of chasing geese, I suddenly felt more confident about spending time with Val. If I could sell the day as the kind of adventure that Sarah was picturing, we might have a good time.

“You can’t come,” I told Sarah.

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“That’s not a reason. You’re always telling me I need to have a reason for the things that I do. You’re a hypocrite about *everything*. Mom! Mom, Aaron won’t—”

I took a step toward her doorframe and shushed her with a punch on the shoulder.

“Don’t call mom.”

“Why not?” Sarah asked with her arms crossed defiantly. Her way of standing up for herself was to call our mother in to stand up for her.

“Because she’ll make me take you with me.”

“Yeah?”

“Look,” I began. I never discussed girls with Sarah. It was an unspoken agreement between us that we pretended not to know anything about each other’s social lives, especially when it came to the opposite sex. “There’s this new girl in my grade. Val.”

“She’s short? Short hair?”

“Yeah. She asked if she could come with me today.”

“You mean *you* asked *her*.” Sarah seemed pretty sure about this, and she cocked her head and set her jaw in the same no-nonsense pose my mom uses when she wants to indicate that she won’t tolerate any nonsense. “You’re the world’s worst liar.”

“I’m sure there’s worse. The world’s a big place.”

“You need to have, like, the reverse of that movie happen to you, where you can’t say anything true for a whole day, so you can learn how.”

“Great idea, Sar.”

“Well it’s very cute that you like her,” Sarah said with a biting sarcasm that made me proud. “If you guys end up as a couple, I get credit.”

“Sure,” I said, and I left Sarah in the doorway, her voice trailing me down the hall. I went outside to the dented car, and drove to Val’s.

That last time I’d been on a “date” was the time Marcy and I saw *Tron*, although this charity thing was not necessarily a date. Kids don’t really seem to go on dates like they do in the movies. In movies, a guy asks a girl on a date, and then he shows up at her house. Her parents answer the door, and he says, “Good evening, I’m Stanley,” because he’s polite and his name is Stanley. The girl’s parents introduce themselves, and then the girl comes down the stairs in slow motion. Stanley promises to have her home by ten, and they leave.

I don’t know anybody who’s been on a date like that. I can’t imagine a teen who would let their parents be involved in their social life to the point where they actually

meet the girl or guy their child is going out with. People at my school don't really go on traditional dates. They hook up drunkenly at parties. Or they sit around each other's houses when the parents aren't home, and stain the furniture with their bodily fluids. Or they have uncomfortable oral sex in public places. I've never really discussed sex or girls with my parents, and I think it would be truly excruciating to do so. My mom tried to give me a book once, when I was around twelve or thirteen, called *It's Totally Natural*. It basically had cartoonish diagrams of little Barbies and Kens with creepy genitalia. I found it painfully embarrassing. I think I recycled it. I'm convinced that I was delivered by stork. The whole c-section story is just a clever ruse.

I arrived at Val's house a few minutes after eleven, and I called her cell so I didn't have to go to the door, like Stanley. She didn't answer the phone, but after a few moments, she came trotting out of the house. It was a little nippy for a September day, and she wore a blue hoodie and a pair of those skin-tight "yoga pants" that basically show how you'd look naked if you dyed your bottom half black. She had her hoodie hood pulled over her head, and her short hair was tucked under it in such a way that she looked kind of bald. But it wasn't a bad bald. It was like Natalie Portman in *V For Vendetta*. She's not as hot as she is *with* hair, but you'd still do her.

"Excited?" I asked her.

"Kind of, actually," she said with a hint of a grin.

Thankfully, the ride from Val's to the warehouse was a short one, as I couldn't think of anything interesting to say, and I imagined her interest in me waning with each second of silence. I filled the silence by acting as a sort of tour guide, pointing out obvious suburban landmarks. "That's a church, the one labeled 'church.'" "That's a

synagogue, the one with the Jewish star.” “That’s a Taco Bell, the one with the bell. It sells tacos. Do they have faux Mexican food in Minnesota?” I said these things as though she didn’t pass each of these locales all the time, as though she hadn’t lived here for months. Val informed me that Taco Bells in the Twin Cities serve cheese fries, and I suggested that we take a quick detour to Minnesota.

Most of these suburbs Northwest of Philadelphia were developed a long time ago, before the city itself was formed. I know this because in the 8th grade I did a far too thorough project in which I traced the history of my neighborhood, and my split-level house. The Wasserstein abode sat on land that was once part of a large farm owned by some Welsh guy in the 17th century. The result of the long history of the township, of which that Welsh farm is an example, is that it is remarkably free of contemporary housing developments. Most of the neighborhoods grew naturally over time, with houses arranged haphazardly, and built in different eras so that they don’t all look the same.

Valerie’s family, however, had moved into one of the newer housing developments that were starting to spring up. It was on the grounds of an old park, but why have a natural park when you can have a grid of identical tan stucco houses arranged in even rows of four? The place is called Shady Terrace, though it was shadier before they removed all the trees. This makes it sound like I’m a big environmentalist tree hugger guy. I’m not. I could go either way on trees. I just find the uniformity of housing developments to be kind of creepy.

The warehouse is just that. It’s an old hollow space that used to house wares. It now houses food in cans and jars and cartons. JHR volunteers meet there and set up a kind of assembly line to fill boxes. Then, each car is assigned a route, and given a sheet

of paper with a list of names and addresses. Each group grabs the number of necessary boxes, and disappears to locations all over Philadelphia.

I wanted to talk to Val, but I didn't really get a chance during the warehouse portion of the day. Because I was one of the few able bodied males, I wasn't part of the assembly line. I had to transport giant boxes filled with jars of tomato sauce.

I had my grandfather give me a pretty long route. We loaded our boxes into the back of the SUV, and we left our comfortable, upper-middle class suburb, with its strip malls, and greenery, and big houses. We drove across the Schuylkill River, onto Roosevelt Boulevard, and into Northeast Philadelphia.

In the Northeast, most of the houses are row-homes, crushed together. They lean on each other, and each home seems to rely on its neighbor's support to remain standing. It's not that poor an area, but when you've just left a suburb where the average house could fit three or four Northeast row homes, you notice the difference.

I wanted to shed the feeling I had of being pampered, sheltered, and therefore unworldly. I wanted to somehow identify with people who might not want to identify with me. I wanted to be the most die-hard Philadelphia Eagles fan, for instance, even though my address didn't say "Philadelphia." I wanted to show the world that I could be just as violent, just as intolerant, just as crazy as the Philly fans from *Philly*. And I wanted this part-of-the-crowd feeling to carry over into other, albeit less important, parts of life.

Val was from the same milieu as me, but I still felt the need to show her that I wasn't just a spoiled suburban kid, that I at least knew my way around other places, and could fit in elsewhere. She seemed like such a thoughtful person. I guess I wanted her to

see that I was thoughtful too, and that I saw more of the world than our classmates who never left their neighborhoods.

There used to be lots of Jews in the Northeast—my grandmother grew up there—but now they've all left. Except for the more recent immigrants. There are still some old Russian people who don't speak any English, and haven't gotten the memo that they were supposed to have moved to the suburbs a couple decades ago. We pulled up to their houses, idled the car in the street, and rang their bells. We were generally greeted by old ladies who smelled like liver. They talked to us in Russian and pressed candies into our hands, even when we tried to refuse.

But most of the time was spent between houses, and Val and I just talked.

I learned that Val had a whole bunch of siblings, due perhaps to her parents both being from Catholic families. She had an older sister (whom I already knew about), a senior at our school, named Chloe. She also had three younger brothers, Danny age eleven, Mike age nine, and Adrien age seven. Her father worked for some kind of financial consulting firm, which had moved his job to Philadelphia. Her mother wasn't working, because she wanted to be home for the boys. She'd been an elementary school teacher in Minnesota, but she was concerned about transferring her teaching certification, if she decided she did want to get a job some day. I asked Val if she was a Wild or a Gophers fan, but she said she found hockey too violent to watch. I responded by saying "I know what you mean," by which I meant that I loved hockey, mostly *because* of its violence. Hockey's the only sport where they pause the action just so people can beat the crap out of each other.

The conversation was mostly boring small talk, and I usually *hate* small talk. It's up there with eggplant and the New York Mets on Aaron's List of the World's Most Offensive Things. Because I dislike small talk, I've never liked big occasions, especially with family, because you end up having the same inane conversation over and over. How old are you? How's school? What's your favorite subject? Are you thinking about college? I always feel like I should just make a T-shirt that says: "17. Not bad. Phys-Ed. Not yet," so I don't have to repeat the same thing ad nauseum, like a pet bird.

I feel basically the same way when I have to meet new peers. This is why I never make new friends. There's that song that's like "meet new friends, but keep the old ones." But if you cling to your old friends tightly enough, you don't *have* to meet any new ones. I'll write a song about it. "One is silver, and the other fucking sucks." Meeting new people is uncomfortable, boring, and tedious. It's stressful wondering how to put your best foot forward, and then wondering what the other person thinks of your foot, and then deciding what *you* think of the *other* person. If you just stick with your old buddies, you never have to experience that unease, or expose your feet. If you're looking for a lesson from this, here it is: Don't branch out. Don't try new things. Stick with what's comfortable. When you finish this book, read it again.

I somehow did not find Val's small talk painful. She giggled at my stupid jokes. And we both agreed we'd have sex with Paul McCartney, even at his current age, though especially when he was younger. And it turned out that she liked Fun, and she thought it was "ironic" that I happened to be wearing a shirt of theirs under my hoodie. And I even managed to refrain from pedantically explaining to her that it was *coincidental*, not ironic, that I was wearing their shirt. I found myself feeling comfortable with Val in a

way I don't usually feel when I'm with new people, especially people whose yoga pants I'd like to spend time in. The tension I'd felt when I'd Facebook stalked her, or when I'd talked about her with Ian, it slipped away.

When we'd finished our rounds, it was well past lunch time, and we were hungry. I don't know why I feel it's necessary to provide you with the lunch scene. It might suffice to just say *that* we ate lunch, but I feel like there's some important character development in here, and of course an advertisement for Wawa food markets:

We grabbed sandwiches from a Wawa and ate them in the car. Val got a veggie wrap. She's a vegetarian. My sister Sarah goes through a lot of phases, and she'd gone through a vegetarian phase when she was in the eighth grade. It was miserable. My dad indulged her dietary choice, and didn't cook anything with meat for months. I was ordered to "respect [my] sister's lifestyle choices." I tried to explain to my dad that Sarah's vegetarianism was just a fad, like Pokemon cards or Silly Bandz, but he wasn't having any of it. So everything we ate was green. It was a very difficult time in my life.

In the front seat of the Ford, I asked Val, "Why don't you eat meat?"

"We eat the meat without doing the killing," she began, wiping some dressing from the side of her mouth.

"Isn't that a shame? Think how much more satisfying this sandwich would be if I'd had to take down the cow and roast it myself."

Val ignored me and went on. "Since we don't have to do the killing, we never see it. Out of sight, out of mind. And we don't think about the killing part of it. I don't want to eat anything I couldn't kill myself."

“You could totally kill a cow. They’re very slow and dumb. You’re probably not the world’s strongest person, but I think you’d manage.”

I was pleased to see that Val was not offended by my sarcasm. She did this idiosyncratic closed-eyes grin thing, and said, “Yeah, physically, I probably could kill a cow. If I had to. I mean that I wouldn’t be able to make myself kill a cow, you know, emotionally, just so I could eat her. *Her*. I guess I also don’t want to eat anything with a gender.”

“This is a female sandwich,” I said, indicating my hoagie, “She’s delicious.”

I paused with my hoagie to rearrange some of the banana peppers therein, but Val seemed to think that I had stopped eating because I was suddenly considering the morality of my sandwich. “I don’t have anything against people who eat meat,” she reassured me, “I just don’t do it.”

“That’s how I feel about people who skateboard. Actually, I kind of *do* have something against people who skateboard. You don’t skateboard, do you?”

“No. I can’t even ride a bike.”

“Wow. You’re totally lacking in transport skills. If you lose your legs in a freak accident, you’re totally screwed.”

“You can’t bike or skateboard or drive without your legs, so anybody who lost legs would be equally screwed.”

It was getting stuffy in the car, and I opened the window. We’d finished our meals, but we continued to sit in the parking lot, watching Roosevelt Boulevard crawl past us. “Do you miss home?” I asked Val. I’d always wondered what it would be like to move.

“Yeah. Not the Twin Cities specifically. I just miss my friends, and my old house. It’s weird how it works with houses. It’s just a space. It’s not alive, but I miss it as much as I miss my friends. I video-chat with my friends all the time. But somebody else lives in my old house. I can’t visit or see it.” Val tightened her hood against the wind, to keep her hair in place. “Have you ever moved?” she asked.

“I changed bedrooms once when I was like eight. The one on the end of the hall was really noisy because the air conditioning system was right there, and I’m a light sleeper. So yeah, I know exactly what you’re talking about, except that nobody lives in my old room, so I can go visit any time I like.”

“It’s funny,” Val continued, “I was sad that I was going to move, but I kept telling myself it would be fun to go someplace where nobody knew me. I was like, ‘I’ll reinvent myself. I’ll be different. I’ll dye my hair pink, or I’ll listen to different music, or I’ll come up with a crazy nickname.’”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Spike? Killer?”

“Those are good.”

“Miss Strudel Pants.”

“That’s not as good. Please don’t call me that. What *is* strudel?”

“It’s like a German pastry. We do this thing in German class where they make us pretend to order food. Strudel’s like the only food I can remember, so I always order it. We don’t actually get the food we order though—”

“Yeah, obviously.”

“So I don’t actually know what strudel tastes like.” I paused to consider whether or not I should go back into Wawa and buy desert. I tried to remember the German word for apple. I tended to ask for apple strudel.

Val cut into my reverie. “I didn’t change though. I didn’t even dye my hair. Believe it or not, this plain brunette is my natural color.”

She pointed to her hair with her finger, but I couldn’t actually see any of it, because of her aforementioned hood. “I’m not a fan of change,” I found myself saying. I wanted to tell her about my dad and his job, and how it was making normal family stuff feel weird and uncomfortable. I wanted to talk about how I’d crashed the car, and how I didn’t know how I was going to pay for it. She was busy telling *me* things. But instead I said, “I like things to stay as they are. I’ve been wearing this same pair of jeans now for a full month without washing them.”

“That’s disgusting,” she replied, suppressing a laugh.

We sat in silence for a moment, but then I remembered the German. “*Apfel. Apfelstrudel,*” I said, and I started the car.

I pulled up in front of Val’s house. “Thanks for coming with me Strudel Pants,” I said.

“I was serious when I asked you not to call me that,” she replied, though it was clear that she wasn’t *that* serious about it. “You know what?” she went on, “You can call me that where nobody else can hear, so long as you call me Spike in front of other people.”

“Deal.”

“Any nicknames *you* want?”

“Miss Strudel Pants.”

“We can’t both be Miss Strudel Pants.” She giggled and leaned on the doorframe of the passenger side. “I’ll see you later,” she said, and she bounced up the walk.

In the car, I spaced a little bit, staring wistfully at the front door through which Val had disappeared. My phone rang. It was Val. I cursed and was about to ignore the call and drive away, when I had the following internal revelation:

If I told Val that I liked her, she might say she liked me back. Rejection would certainly be crippling. But if she reciprocated the feeling, it would be the opposite of crippling, whatever that was, and it might be even better than that.

I decided that if I was going to tell her, the time was nigh. I’m not sure what “nigh” means, but the time was that. I steeled myself. I managed to tamp down my pessimistic side, and I answered the phone.

“You’re still here,” Val said.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m just making sure everything’s, you know, okay.”

“I had a good time this afternoon. I’m sorry it took a while, and that that one lady told you—”

“Stop apologizing for stuff.”

“Sorry. Fuck, I did it again.”

“You should probably not think about stuff as much as you do.”

“I never think about anything. I’m like the Scarecrow. He’s the one without the brain, right? Or is that the Tin Man?”

“The Tin Man has no heart. But I had a good time too. And you know, if I’m not having a good time, I can tell you. I’m not like the Cowardly Lion.”

“What’s his defect?”

“He’s *cowardly*.”

“Fuck,” I said, as a way of changing the subject, “I like you Val. I think you’re...” I thought she was many things: smart, attractive, interesting, small, female. “I think you’re cool,” I said, and held my figurative breath

“I like you too Aaron. You make me laugh. And you’re a lot nicer than you think you are.”

I was instantly very happy. But more than I was happy, I was relieved. I exhaled a deep breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. It was like a large weight had been lifted from my scrawny shoulders.

Sunday night at my house is Stew Night. Every Sunday, since I can remember, my father has gone the grocery store, and then he comes home and makes enough stew to fill a decent-sized silo. My grandparents come over, and we have a big family meal. My dad used to invite other people over to help us eat the vat of stew, but he stopped inviting them, or they stopped coming, or both. But he still makes the same amount of stew, and the six of us can consume about a sixteenth of it. Joe then packs up the stew in little containers, and he eats it for lunch at work each day.

As I’m writing this, my father’s stew procedure sounds much less sane than it has always felt to me. I guess when you grow up with your parents’ quirks, you’re used to them. It’s all you’ve known. And then when you go to your friends’ houses, the stuff

their parents do always seems so crazy. I remember when I was like ten, I went over to this guy Mike's house. And we were playing N64 in his living room when his dad came in, completely naked, to ask us what we wanted for dinner. I was not used to seeing naked men just walking around, and I don't think I'd ever seen an uncircumcised schlong before. This was kind of a scarring experience for me, and now I've got this man's penis indelibly etched in my mind's eye, forever. But for Mike, this was totally normal. Mike just thought for a second about what he wanted for dinner, and said, "Pizza." All I could think was "Penis." But I think I also said, "Pizza."

The closest thing my father comes to a religious experience is his weekly trip to the supermarket. For most people, the grocery store is a place where you might spend an hour or so on Sunday—or one of the other six days—to stock up on food for the week. For my father, the grocery store *is* Sunday. He can spend the whole day there.

When most people grocery shop, they walk down the aisles, and when they see something they'd like to purchase, they put it in their cart, and move on. This is probably what you do. My father, when he sees something he'd like to buy, cannot simply put it in his cart. He's not capable of such a brash, uninhibited act. When Joe sees something he'd like to buy, he reads the ingredients, considering fat content and brooding over sodium levels. He then reads the ingredients of *every* other available brand or variety of that product. Then he examines the item's price, and if it all checks out, he places it in his cart. For a child, with his legs shoved through those holes on the back of the metal shopping cart, this process, which my father calls "doing his due diligence," is basically eternal.

I remember when I was younger, and I had a play date with my friend Brian, and his father asked us if it would be all right if we stopped at the grocery store on the way to their house. Brian nodded, and of course I didn't object, but I was overcome with trepidation. I didn't want to spend hours at the Super Fresh. I wanted to play G.I. Joes. The twenty-five minutes we spent in the grocery blew my little mind. The idea that someone could spend anytime short of an entire afternoon at the grocery was downright shocking to me.

When I returned home, my dad was in stew-mode, which is meditative trance in which he can think only of stew. He's in the stew, he feels the stew, he *is* the stew. My mother was reading on the couch, looking a lot more like herself. I went upstairs to get some alone time.

My house is generally a pretty lonely place. My family is usually quiet and subdued and spread out. My dad's in the kitchen eating his weight in antioxidants, my mom's in the living room doing paperwork, my sister's in her room doing homework and chatting with acquaintances on Facebook, and I'm in my room furiously masturbating. Hahahahaha, just kidding. I'm never furious when I masturbate. The point is, that on a standard Saturday or Sunday, we can go all day without seeing or speaking to each other. The previous day had been so hectic, and I just wanted to sneak up to my room and wait quietly for Stew time.

But Sarah was just getting out of the shower when I got upstairs, and she attacked me. "How was your little date today?" she asked with a grin. I'm generally uncomfortable talking to my sister when she's in any state of undress. I'm not sure why. You'll have to ask like Carl Jung or something. I assure you that I'm not in any way

attracted to my sister. This book isn't going to suddenly turn incestuous. I think you're *supposed* to be uncomfortable about your family members' bodies. And I am.

"It wasn't a date," I replied, looking past Sarah and down the hall. "And don't patronize me with the word 'little.'"

"How'd your giant non-date go?" Sarah said with an even bigger grin. It made me want to punch her in her face.

"I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"You couldn't kill me with your bare hands."

"I could if you didn't resist."

"Why wouldn't I resist?"

"Fuck you."

I should have been annoyed, but I found myself smiling at Sarah. After she'd changed, instead of lying on my bed by myself, I found myself in Sarah's room talking about the money stuff, which she was a little freaked out about, and about her new friends, whom she liked, and about Val, which was less uncomfortable than I thought it would be.

Then the grandparents came over, and there was Stew. And we talked about normal things: Phillies baseball, politics, food. One of Sarah's new friends—the one *without* the giant boobs—was named Edna, a name that only my grandparents' peers should have, and we all had a nice laugh at young Edna's expense.

Chapter 6

On a Friday, about a week into school, the eleventh grade took a field trip into the city to look at chipped pots in a museum. At most high schools, I gather, it's difficult for a whole grade to go on a field trip together. But at my school, it only takes like three buses, and we do it often. Our field trip destinations don't necessarily have any relation to something we're studying in the curriculum. Such was the case on this day. In history, we weren't studying the Etruscans, specifically. Eleventh grade history is World Civilization, and the Etruscans were a civilization, in the world. That made them relevant enough to warrant a trip to the University of Pennsylvania museum, to see their Etruscan exhibit.

We were told that we'd be back at school late, and to plan transportation accordingly. Most of my classmates drive to school. I come from an affluent area, and when kids receive their driver's licenses, they often receive a new car, or a parent's old one. Most of the area moms drive around in luxury SUVs, and then when their kids get older, the parents either pass on the old fancy car, or they buy the kid a new, but less expensive vehicle. The cars in the student parking lot are nicer than the cars in the teacher lot, and this strikes me as wrong.

I take a certain pride in the fact that I ride the bus, and that if I want to back a car into a pharmacy "enter" sign, I have to use my mom's SUV, which was manufactured by Ford. My father told my mom not to buy a German car, so she bought a Ford, which on the scale of anti-Semitism, is probably worse. I don't know if, at this point, my parents could afford to buy me a car. But I like the fact that my family's financial priorities are elsewhere. It makes me feel like less of a spoiled brat.

With that said, I drove to school that Friday. My mom only works Monday through Thursday. If little kids have speech emergencies on Fridays, they're screwed. I

asked my mom if I could drive the dented car to school on her day off, because I didn't feel like waiting around for the late bus, and she agreed because she's a swell mom—I hope she's reading. I promised not to smash it into anything.

We boarded standard yellow school buses and rode downtown into Philadelphia. Philadelphia gets shit on by just about everyone. Its sports fans are violent, they say. Its people are rude. Its culinary delicacy, the cheese steak, is a three-ingredient cardiac arrest. And when Philadelphia is not shit on, it's forgotten. When you get on I-95 North in Washington D.C., the signs say "95N to New York" as though the nation's fifth largest city weren't in between.

But Philadelphia is beautiful. It's the birthplace of our country, and the only place where people will intentionally vomit on you when you root for an opposing baseball franchise.

Philly is underrated. Last summer, on the way back from a Phils' game, I saw a drunk Ben Franklin impersonator piss on the front steps of a two-hundred year old chapel. Why would you want to live in a place where you *can't* see that happen?

You may say, "Hey, Aaron, have you ever lived anywhere else? What's your basis for comparison?" To which I say, "Shut up, reader. I'll fucking vomit on you."

The buses drove up the Schuylkill expressway, past the boathouses and the masochists rowing on the river, past the architectural majesty of 30th Street Station, and pulled up alongside Franklin Field at the University of Pennsylvania. As I stepped out of the bus, I sniffed the air. Something about being out of the suburbs, in a "natural" urban space, woke me up in a way that coffee never does.

I love the city. I wish I lived there. Living in the suburbs has its perks. You can learn to ride your bike in the street. The park around the corner from your house does not contain prostitutes. And if you don't want to experience the shame of eating a meal *in* a Taco Bell, you can drive through. But there's something about the city, the olfactory mélange of exhaust and street food, the bustle of different people moving in all different directions, that makes it feel more real, more alive. By the way, did you notice that that last sentence contained the words "mélange" *and* "olfactory?" In fact, I've now included those words together in back to back sentences. That's got to be some kind of record.

The point I'm trying to make is that the suburbs have a certain white-washed, disinfectant feel to them. And that's nice if you're Tom Sawyer, or a germophobe. But I'll take the germs and the color, and the pulsating life of the city. Although, every time I drive in downtown Philly, I feel as though I'm going to kill two or three bike messengers, and I'd like to make it through my life with as few vehicular manslaughter convictions as possible. So maybe I'll stay in the suburbs, where, if you want to kill a cyclist, you've really got to *want* to kill a cyclist.

Alas, back to the story:

In the lobby of Penn Museum, we split up into groups of "manageable" sizes, so teachers could keep an eye on students, to make sure we didn't break an already broken vase, or run away. Val and I had been spending most of our time together, and we got ourselves sorted into the same "manageable" group. It's bullshit, by the way, that you can just ask the Sorting Hat to put you in whatever House you want. Why wouldn't *everyone* just ask to be in Gryffindor? That's a big flaw in the story. If you can *choose*, the idea that somebody would decide on Hufflepuff is just laughable.

A guide led us through a group of museum exhibits displaying what were probably unwanted, ancient wedding gifts.

Valerie was enthralled by old kitchenware. She stared at the museum displays in awe and wonder, as a normal person might behold a pile of golden treasure, or a naked picture of Scarlett Johansson. Or as I beheld the way Val's chest rose and fell with her breathing, or the way she smiled to herself when she discovered something new in the museum display. "See that animal painted on the side?" she asked me, indicating a few fading red lines on the side of what appeared to be a small mixing bowl. If I squinted I could indeed see the outline of what looked like a poorly-drawn horse or ox. "It says here that was done by a girl my age. Isn't it amazing that *that* many years ago, people were interested in the same stuff we're into now?"

"I didn't know you had an interest in beasts of burden."

"Shut up," she whispered, "I mean art. I mean expressing yourself."

I tried, for her, but couldn't bring myself to be outwardly sincere. I was, however, legitimately impressed by her intense interest in old stuff. When I looked around at the other field trip goers, even the teachers looked like they'd rather be asleep, or in line at the DMV. But as the tour guide stuttered a response to Val's question about Etruscan marital practices, I couldn't help but admire the wide-eyed look with which she received the answer. Her earnestness seemed to mock my inability to take anything seriously. Here was a 21st century person who could lose herself in an historical world, just by looking at a broken pot illuminated by florescent bulbs. She nudged me, pointed at what appeared to be an ancestor of the spork, and said, "Wow."

I said “Wow” too, but more at her sincerity than at the ancient cutlery. The only thing I was earnestly interested in was having sex with her, and it made me feel kind of dirty. And her earnestness made me feel inadequate. They say we only use about ten percent of our brains. I felt like I was using about sixty percent of my ten percent to picture Val naked, another thirty percent to think of clever things to say to her, and maybe the remaining ten to concentrate on the actual world around me. There was no space for me to ponder very old spoons. Val could somehow open up her mind to the museum displays, and transport herself to whenever and wherever the Etruscans lived, and imagine their lives, and relate those lives to her own. I could only relate the artifacts to her, and only in a very elementary way: ‘Oh, there’s an old knife. I wonder what kind of underwear Valerie’s wearing under those jeans. I’ll bet they look super.’”

As they’d suggested, we got back to school late. With the traffic, we’d missed the late buses. Val and I grabbed our bags at our lockers. “I’ve been texting my sister, but she won’t respond, and I don’t like to ask my Mom, because she’s usually got her hands full with my little brothers,” Val said as though it were an inconvenience to drive her home. As we were walking away toward the student parking, I caught sight of Ian trying to catch up with us. I’d told him I’d drive him home. But he’d understand. I shot him a “fuck off” look with my eyes. He nodded at me and then performed a simulated humping motion in the air, his hand stretched out grabbing a pair of imaginary hips.

I hadn’t had as much time alone with Val as I’d wanted, and it was nice to talk with her in the car. “What did you think of the museum?” She asked as I turned into her development.

“I’ve been there before. Museums make me kind of sleepy, like a cold medicine or something. And I had to pee pretty badly for most of the tour, so it was hard to pay attention.” I was surprised at my own honesty, but Val seemed vaguely amused. “I’d ask you how you liked it, but you seemed like a pig in shit in there.”

“I just thought it was cool,” she said defensively.

“Yeah, no, I’m not saying it wasn’t. I’m just saying you seemed like you were really enjoying it.” I wanted to convey that I had picked up on her interest in the exhibit, without it seeming like I’d basically just spent the whole time watching her. “You just don’t see a lot of kids our age who are really interested in museums. I think kids tend to think they’re too cool for museum stuff, you know?”

When I pulled up to her house, Val grabbed her bag and started to thank me for the ride, but I interrupted her. “Wait,” I said, and she paused with one backpack strap on her shoulder. I wanted to tell her that I found her earnest interest in twenty-five hundred year-old crafts both impressive and attractive, but I couldn’t quite articulate it. Instead I asked, “What are you doing tonight? Jeb Turner is having a party at his house, if you want to come.”

“Is he that kind of creepy guy?”

“Yep. That’s exactly how I’d describe him.”

“Uh, yeah, sure. I told Chloe I’d watch a movie with her on Netflix. But I can probably come after that.”

“Sounds good. Enjoy the movie.”

“I won’t,” Val said as she turned to go, “Chloe always makes me watch documentaries about, like, child prostitution.”

As I was pulling out of the development, my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was Ian.

My dad, whose fear for my safety exceeds all reason, forbids me from talking on my cell phone in the car. He bought a pair of stickers—I'm not kidding—which he has placed on the dashboard of both of our cars. They read “No Cell-Phone Zone.”

I can respect safety, so I don't talk on my phone while I drive. Except sometimes, when I do, like that Friday when I answered Ian's call. I didn't even get a chance to say hello. As soon as I picked up, he spoke. “She'd better have given you road head, 'cause I had to get a ride from Suzie Falcona, and we spent more time on the curb than on the road. I thought I was going to *die*, and it would have been *your* fault.”

“Have Suzie's boobs grown significantly in, like, the last month or so?” I asked, “She's in my pre-calc class, and they're really quite something these days.”

“Yeah, I asked Hannah Gold about it. She says they got bigger after Suzie started taking birth control. Something hormonal. Sorry, did I say hormonal? I meant wonderful. But her swerving made it hard to enjoy them.”

“Shame. So, anyway, I think Val's going to come to the party tonight.”

“You should get her really drunk and take advantage of her.”

I think Ian was joking, but sometimes it's hard to tell. He walks a fine line.

I never found out if he was kidding, because a police car pulled up next to me at the traffic light. I told Ian that I was in a “No Cell Phone Zone,” and I hung up the phone.

Ian and I strolled to Jeb's together. I always go to an alcohol event from Ian's. I'm afraid that if I told my parents I was going to walk to Jeb's, they'd wonder why I didn't just drive there. They'd never guess the reason. They're too trusting. But it would make me uncomfortable to have to say something like "Ian and I like the fresh air."

On the way over, Ian was suggesting that I should hook-up with Val, and see how much of her I could touch. This sounded like splendid idea, but I was wary of making a move while intoxicated. Val and I had been spending a lot of time together after school, and we'd kissed a few times in the hallways, and in the school library. I felt like I had something honest and sober going on with her.

Now, it is said that people are both more honest, and more daring, when they're drunk. And in my experience that's true. Drunk people are more honest in their words and in their actions. Last spring, for instance, in Ian's basement, Hannah Gold got super wasted and confessed to Phil her undying, eternal love for him. In a movie it would have been really cute and sweet, and Phil might have realized that deep down he had feelings for her too, and they might have shared a long-awaited kiss. But in real life it was excruciatingly awkward. Phil was too high to know how to respond. Hannah was devastated, and she spent the rest of the night crying and vomiting into (and around) the toilet while Ian and I took turns holding back her hair, which I think was unnecessary, since her hair is quite short. But we were both drunk and male and she was tantalizingly vulnerable. Don't worry. Nothing happened. There wasn't time between vomiting fits for Ian or me to so much as lend her a comforting arm.

This event was the result of drunken honesty, and it was *not* a good thing. Hannah and Phil had trouble looking at each other for the remainder of the school year, and it

took most of the summer before their friendship went back to normal. Hannah was so embarrassed she wouldn't speak to Phil. And Phil just didn't know what to say. And when they were together, they acted like two opposite magnetic charges, or like two same magnetic charges, whichever of those repel each other. Either way, it was a pain in the ass for those of us who were used to spending enjoyable time with the both of them.

So I went to this Jeb Turner Party Extravaganza with a plan, to *not* take it further with Val. I was on the right track *without* the aid of inhibition-lowering drugs. I figured I'd keep going in that direction, so I wouldn't feel like some kind of predator, and so I wouldn't embarrass myself.

But even the best laid plans...I can't remember the rest of the expression. Something about mice. Point is: sometimes plans don't work. NASA *planned* to launch the Challenger shuttle to deploy a satellite so they could observe Haley's comet, and to relay back to earth a series of "Teacher in Space" lessons. But instead it exploded. Seven people died. Just the other day, I *planned* to drive through Wendy's for a Spicy Chicken Sandwich. I was psyched about it. I was going to get a Frosty, also, instead of a soda. And I *planned* to dip my French fries into the Frosty so as to experience a fantastic combination of sweet and savory flavors. However, when I got to the Wendy's, it was closed for renovations. Nobody died. But I was quite disappointed.

Jeb Turner's parties aren't like the keg parties you see in movies. If such parties exist, they certainly don't happen at my high school. When we have a "party," it's basically just a bunch of adolescents drinking together in an under-supervised suburban home.

Jeb's parents are rarely home, and even when they are, they don't ever seem to care what Jeb does. This probably sucks for Jeb, but it's nice for the rest of us. And we take advantage.

I'll set that Friday's party scene for you:

There were about fifteen of us, I'd say. We sat around on couches and chairs in Jeb's finished basement. We listened to music from some girl's iPod. I remember this specifically, because whenever a girl chooses the music, the music sucks. Invariably. This seems sexist, but it's just a fact. In the basement, we talked, complained, laughed, and made fun of each other. Jeb had a ping-pong table but he never let anybody play, because *he* was bad at it. Occasionally somebody would go upstairs to the kitchen to snack on something, or to use the nicer toilet. The Turners have a deck in the back of the house, which looks out over a little creek. Sometimes people went out there to smoke a cigarette or some weed.

Val arrived late, wearing yoga pants and a red zip-up sweatshirt. I was in the basement watching *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* on TV with Ian, Jeb, Hannah Gold, and some others whom I've yet introduced as characters, and so shall remain anonymous. Jeb had declared rules for some kind of Harry Potter drinking game. You know, you drink when they cast a spell. You drink when Hermione's clever. You drink when Ron has red hair. But we'd gotten very drunk and had stopped caring about the rules. We were instead playing a game of Would You Rather, with Harry Potter characters. This is a simple game:

Basically, one person picks a pair of people, and asks the group which of those two they'd rather mess around with. Flitwick or McGonagall? McGonagall's uptight, but

she may once have been pretty. Flitwick's like two feet tall, and covered in warts, but he's very "charming." Hermione or Ginny? Hermione's smarter, cooler, and *way* more attractive. But you might like redheads.

Val arrived just as Ian was deciding which of the series' house elves he'd prefer to violate with his penis. The way Val perched herself on the couch told me that she found this discussion to be a bit crass.

Once she'd had a few beers, however, Valerie joined in the discussion/game, and at that point, I'd had so many that I could no longer really read body language. So let's assume she became a full part of the game, had a good time, and said many clever things about wizarding genitalia.

As I continued drinking, I could no longer focus on anything but Val. I answered "Valerie" to every Would You Rather question (in my head, I hope). Dudley Dursley or Buckbeak the Hippogriff? Neither. Valerie Richard, as she's neither fat nor feathered. I stared at the zipper on her sweatshirt, and tried to ease it down with my mind, the sliding piece slowly releasing the zipper teeth, and revealing more and more of her. Her tight pants left little to the imagination, and my mind took full advantage. I turned the black nylon fabric into a skin color and pictured Val's legs bare, slim and smooth. When Hannah Gold got up to go to the bathroom, I slid one space over, next to Val. She was wearing a scent I'd smelled before, on another girl maybe, a deodorant or perfume. Her hair looked softer than it had earlier in the day, or maybe I just couldn't recall what her hair had looked like. Maybe she'd showered. I pictured her in the shower. It was here that my plan went awry.

After a little while, people got tired of the game, and some folks migrated upstairs in search of food. The TV marathon had moved on to *The Order of the Phoenix*. Val got up to use the bathroom. When she came back, I was the only one on the couch, unless you count Jeb, who was asleep. So he was there too, I guess, but I was the only conscious one. The couch faces the TV and there's a coffee table in between. Val took the most direct route to her seat in the middle of the couch, but Jeb's feet were propped up on the coffee table, and they blocked her path. She was intoxicated, and she was not an Olympic hurdler. She stumbled over his outstretched legs and fell onto me. I grabbed her around her waist to make it look like I wanted to hoist her off of me, but it felt amazing to touch her, and I just kind of held her there, and tried to hold my hands in place so they wouldn't rove all over her like some kind of groping Rumba. She sat, half on my leg, half on the couch cushion, with my hands awkwardly holding her just above her hips. "Cedric Diggory or me?" I asked her.

It was an awful question, hideously embarrassing, and I was wracked with nerves as soon as I asked it. I waited anxiously for her answer. But it never came, because we were already making out.

I wanted to her slide up onto my lap, but instead she eased herself back onto the couch cushion next to me. I grasped at her sweatshirt zipper and tried to pull it down, but my coordination was poor and the zipper wouldn't budge.

We'll pause here, because it occurs to me that you might not be familiar with the Rumba. A Rumba is a brand-name robotic vacuum cleaner that you put on the ground, and it slides around sucking up all the stuff on your floor. When it hits an object, it turns around, and tries another direction. The idea is that you just stick it on the floor, and go

away, and when you return, the floor will be clean. My mom purchased a Rumba a few years ago. It got caught in corners and spent hours cleaning the same tiny crevice. It also had trouble going down stairs. I'm going to patent the slinky-Rumba, which will move easily down the stairs, and get caught in corners on more than one story. Now we shall move back to Jeb's basement where Val and I were drunkenly kissing and I was trying to touch her in as many places as possible.

The standard way to grope somebody, in case you need some pointers, is to put your hand *up* their shirt from the bottom. This is the conventional way to do it, and it's also the most efficient. On Jeb's couch, I did not intentionally buck convention. I just wasn't thinking particularly clearly, and I tried to slide my arm *down* her shirt, from the top. Both her sweatshirt and t-shirt were fairly tight, and I only got to the point where her bra strap met the top of the bra itself. My hand got kind of stuck in there, like a Rumba in a tight corner, and my arm was uncomfortably raised, with my elbow sticking up in the air. I don't remember where Val put her hands. I only remember where she didn't put them.

I assure you that this sort of spontaneous make out session did not surprise any of the assembled friends, and if they were still in the room when we started going at it, they made themselves scarce. Hannah Gold came down to tell me something, but turned around when she saw that I was occupied. And Jeb had the courtesy to stay asleep.

An occupied basement couch in somebody else's house is not, I grant you, an ideal spot for a first kiss. But you've got to understand the way it is with teenage romantic activity. You can't really choose the right time, or the right place for intimacy. You aren't like the old people in Cialis commercials, secluded on a hill in matching

bathrooms, with all the time in the world. You don't have your own space, and you don't make your own schedule, so you have to improvise. You've got to be resourceful and use cars, friends' houses, or in a pinch, a Starbucks bathroom. Jeb claims to have received a blowjob in a bathroom at the local Starbucks. But I call shenanigans.

Val and I kissed for a while. At some point she adjusted my hand so that I could grope her properly. I was thankful. After a while, Val's cell phone vibrated. "Nothing," she responded to the voice on the other end. "Yeah, now's fine. Sorry if you, like, wanted to go to sleep. Yeah, see you soon."

"Chloe?" I asked.

"Yeah," Val said.

I wanted to keep kissing, but Val pulled away from me a bit, fixed her clothes and patted down her hair.

When Chloe arrived to pick her up, I walked Val down to the end of the driveway. "What are you doing the rest of the weekend?" I asked her.

"I think I'm busy tomorrow. But you should come over Sunday. You can meet my family and play floor hockey with my brothers or something. Or we can just watch TV if you want. I'll text you."

I smiled at Val as she jumped into the little Hyundai her sister was driving. Chloe eyes me suspiciously through squinted eyes. I smiled at her too.

Chapter 8

On Sunday, Val woke me up with a text at about 10:30, saying that, although her family wouldn't be there till later, I should go over to her place. As we've established, I hate texting. It feels like the lowest possible form of human communication. But if Val wanted to text, I'd text. If she'd wanted to communicate in Morse code, I'd have given it a shot. I've actually always wanted to try the other one, the one that boy scouts do, where you wave flags. That looks pretty cool. I should've gotten a boy scout to teach me to signal "I want to have sex with you" by waving flags.

I wanted to text back "Yes. I'll be over soon," but my dad had just gone over to his parents', and my mom and sister were out running errands. I was without transport. Google maps told me that I could walk to Val's in about forty-five minutes, but warned that it couldn't guarantee me sidewalks.

I didn't like my options, so I got creative. I called Ian and asked, "Do you want to drive me to Val's?"

"No," he replied, "I don't want to."

"Will you, though?" I asked, and I knew that the silence I heard on the other end was a good sign. This is when it's nice to have at least one really good friend, somebody you can call on when something goes really wrong, like somebody dies and you need a hug or a favor. And it's also nice to have that guy when something goes right, and you have a new girlfriend you need to hang out with.

"Fine, fine. You know I'll do it. But when you're fucking her and her older sister—who's hot by the way—you've got to think of *me*, and say '*Ian* made this possible.'"

"Do I have to say it out loud?"

“No. Are you an idiot?”

I grabbed a granola bar for breakfast, then texted my mom and told her where I was going.

Ian showed up, sped me over to Val’s. He tried to throw me out of the car right when we got there. He wanted to get home to see the beginning of the Penn State game. But I didn’t get out right away. “What?” Ian asked.

“I’m kind of nervous,” I admitted. “She wants me to, like, meet her family and stuff.”

“Don’t exchange their cat for a different, similar looking cat,” Ian advised me.

“I don’t think they have a cat.”

“Well then you’re safe so long as there’s no pool volleyball involved.”

“Come on, dude. Tell me it’s going to be awesome, and they’ll like me and stuff.”

“It’s going to be awesome and they’ll like you and stuff. And maybe they’ll *really* like you, and you guys can have a weird, emotionally scarring, mostly incestuous orgy full of—”

“Ian. Contain yourself.”

Sometimes Ian surprises me and he’s reassuring and supportive. And sometimes, he’s just the way he normally is. I can tell how he’s going to be in the first few moments of a conversation. I’d heard enough. “Fine, fine,” I said, “I’ll let you get home.”

I got out of the car and Ian sped away before I could thank him for the ride.

My house, if you walked around it when nobody was there, might feel more like a museum than a house, at least if you didn’t go into my bedroom. Everything is where

it's supposed to be, and you get the sense that it's been like that for a really long time, without change. The living room, for instance, looks untouched, because it *is* essentially untouched. Books evenly line the shelves, alphabetically organized by author. The throw pillows haven't been thrown in a while. They perch symmetrically in their places on the big chair, and on the couch.

Val's house feels like it's lived-in by a full-on tribe. Even though it was mostly empty when I first walked in, I could *feel* the recent activity of its occupants. Toys were strewn across the foyer, and they spilled into the living room. There were open cereal boxes on the table. Somebody had left a carton of orange juice on counter. I remember this specifically because it was "Home Style Pulp," which is disgusting. I don't want to *eat* my juice. If I want orange pulp, I'll eat an *orange*. Unlike my living room couch, which looks like it's still awaiting its first occupant, Val's living room furniture looked and felt like it had been full of people just moments before we arrived. The Richards had just moved in, but the house felt like they'd done more *living* in there than the Wassersteins had done in the however-many years we'd occupied our place.

The rest of the Richard family had all gone to the King of Prussia mall, which is a giant mall with a misleadingly regal name. Chloe needed a new comforter for her bed. And the boys, according to Val, outgrow their clothes and shoes "about every two weeks." The younger ones usually just wear hand-me-downs from Danny, the eldest, but he sometimes had to get new stuff in order to hand it down. Plus the KOP mall is kind of an attraction in itself, basically because it's gigantic. Where your standard mall would have one Victoria's Secret store, KOP has three. Where your standard mall would have two places to buy overpriced gourmet cupcakes, KOP has seven. People from out of town

always want to go there, because they love traffic and elevator music, I assume. Anyway, the Richards went there, but Adrien, the youngest, didn't want to go, and Val volunteered to stay behind to watch him.

Adrien sat on the couch in his pajamas. He was watching *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Val introduced us. I don't know what to say to a seven year old. I'm not *that* old, and I feel bad that I'm so jaded, but I can't relate to small children. I don't really remember what I was like at seven. I don't remember what I was interested in, or what I liked to talk about. I liked sports, and food, I think. But I couldn't turn to Val's brother and be like, "So, Adrien, how about food? Pretty good, right?" When she introduced us, I just shook his tiny hand and said "What's up, man?" He muttered a few inaudible words, and then we just sat there, sizing each other up.

"Ady's going to watch TV on the couch," Val informed me, pointing at Adrien and the couch, "So do you want to hangout upstairs?"

I nodded and we started our way out of the room toward the staircase in the foyer. Hers was the first room on the right from the top of the stairs, directly above the living room.

The last time I'd been alone with a girl in her room was in the ninth grade.

There was this girl named Maddie whom I found quite attractive. She's since transferred to a more preppy school. Maddie wore both braces and glasses, two things that high school boys tend to find unattractive. But Maddie's glasses and braces fit her somehow. They complemented her. I was smitten. Maddie and I "hit it off," meaning that we chatted online for hours about absolutely nothing, and in school I teased her about her

braces and glasses. One day we decided that we should have a conversation that went further than this one, which we'd repeated about a hundred times:

Aaron: Hey brace-face.

Maddie: Meanie!

Maddie invited me over to her house after school one day, and told me in an offhand manner that her parents would not be there. "She wants all up on your cock," Ian informed me.

"I think that's unlikely," I told him, "I really don't expect her to be 'all up on' any of my anatomy."

"She at least wants to make out with you. I think you'd take that."

Frankly, I would have "taken" some hand-holding. But I just nodded to Ian, and then said, "What should I do?" as if he were the expert on how to make the moves on a young woman.

"You should go. But bring a movie. Then you'll have something to do, and you can kind of choose what it is, you know? You can watch something you want to watch."

"What if she doesn't like it?"

"Well, bring something girls like too."

"What do girls like?"

"No idea."

So I didn't bring a movie. Maddie and I walked to her house in silence, entered her house in silence, and took a seat on her bright pink princess bed in silence. I just kind of stared around her room and wondered if Maddie was aware that pink and purple were

not the only colors. We'd been able to "talk" online for hours, but in person I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Maddie had gone to a different middle school than I had. And to break the silence, she asked me, "Hey, do you want to see my graduation photos?" I'd rather have been water-boarded than have viewed an album of photos from an eighth-grade "graduation" from a school where I didn't know a solitary student. Maddie wasn't even *in* any of the pictures, because she'd taken them. But I figured that if I put in my time staring at anonymous thirteen year olds, I might get to make out with Maddie on her bed.

I've read online that this kind of trade-minded attitude about sex (or in this case, kissing) is anti-feminist and leads to certain rape-like situations. A guy will buy a girl an expensive dinner, and then expect sex in return. Apparently there's a movement on the part of women to make sure that men don't pay for stuff, to alleviate pressure on the women to put out. I was not aware of this trend at the time, so I found myself thinking of my photo-perusing as trade of sorts. Kissing me couldn't possibly be as bad for her as pretending to care about the pictures was for me.

I found myself *expecting* to kiss Maddie. She'd *told* me that her parents weren't going to be home. Why would she tell me that, other than to convey that she wanted to do something with me that she couldn't do if her parents were home? I also found myself *caring* whether or not I kissed Maddie. I really wanted to. She was cute. She was close. She didn't smell like the people I was usually close to.

I found myself enthusiastically talking about the people in the photos, commenting on each of the unknown faces. 'Oh, she's pretty,' I'd say.

“Oh my god, I know. That’s so-and-so. She’s like my besty,” Maddie would reply.

After we’d completed the first album of photos, I turned toward Maddie and said (and these words still haunt me in my head), “I want to kiss you so bad right now.” I’m embarrassed to type those words. I’m blushing as my fingers punch the keys.

Maddie twisted her face a little bit and said, “Will you be mad at me if we don’t?”

Of course I would be mad at her. I’m *still* mad at her. When I’m on my deathbed at age two-hundred and seventy-three, with my many generations of grandchildren, the Associated Press, and the Pope, all gathered around to hear the final words of the first man to ice skate on Pluto, I’ll *still* be super-pissed at Maddie Grutter. “God damn that girl,” I’ll say, “Oh, sorry Pope, my bad.”

“Of course I won’t be mad at you,” I told her, “I don’t really get mad about things. I’m like the Dalai Lama.”

“Who’s that?”

“Just this Lama.”

I was devastated. We looked at another album of photos, and I left. I called Ian. “You should have brought a movie,” he said.

He was probably right. I should have brought a movie. But I also should have had lower expectations, and I shouldn’t have *cared* whether or not I kissed her. If I’d cared less, I wouldn’t have been so hurt when she didn’t reciprocate my desire for our tongues to become more intimate.

Val and I had already done some kissing, and some of what my grandparents might refer to as “heavy petting,” but we’d never been, say, naked together. And even as

visions of Friday night's groping flashed through my mind, I tried my best to tamp down my expectations. I told myself Val was just showing me her room, and nothing else.

I stepped into her bedroom and gave myself a tour. I feel like guys don't want you examining their rooms, because they're afraid that you'll find something incriminating, like porn, or the security blanket they've been sleeping with since they were two. But with girls, I think it's the opposite. Their room is like their own little sanctuary, and they want you to see it, because it's an extension of their personalities. I remember when I toured Maddie's room, I had to acknowledge all of her knick-knacks and trinkets, and comment on each of the DVDs she owned, as though I could possibly have something interesting to say about the *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. I even had to read a birthday card her grandma had sent her. I don't even read the birthday cards *my* grandparents send *me*.

Val was clearly less girly than Maddie, but I still got the sense that she was proud of her set-up, and that I should take a look around. Val commented on her possessions as I passed them, like an audio-guide at a museum.

The walls were the same off-white color as the rest of the house, but Val had hung up some posters. Most of them were images from Hayao Miyazaki movies. I'd seen enough of his stuff to identify the artist. Val had gone to Japan with her dad on a business trip a couple years earlier. They'd seen an exhibit of Miyazaki's work and she'd bought the posters there. On a bookshelf, she had ribbons and trophies from dancing and youth soccer, but she said she didn't dance or play soccer anymore. Her desk was neatly arranged, with a laptop in the middle, next to a stack of sketch books. I was curious about

the sketch books, but I didn't open them. Her bed was pink with a pink comforter, clearly leftover from a girlier era of her life.

The only logical place to sit was Val'd bed, so I took a seat next to a big teddy bear. The teddy bear was strange-looking and when I picked him up I noticed that all of his fur had been picked off, right down to what would be his skin if he were a real mammal. "That's Teddy," Val said, sitting down next to me.

"Clever name."

"I was three."

"No excuses. I had a stuffed Kangaroo named Jumpadocious." Val didn't reply, which left an awkward silence, so I went on, "I was into Kangaroos because they jump, which is pretty awesome. And I was also into that song 'Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.' 'Docious' was by far my favorite suffix, so I combined them."

"Cute," Val replied, but she seemed a little insulted by the lack of attention I'd given to her special bear. I held the bear up in front of me, and said, "He looks cold."

"I used to pick his fur when I was nervous."

"I kind of assumed he didn't lose it on his own." I got the sense that Val was looking for a different response. She wanted me to say something specific about her room, or about her bear, or about her. But I can't pick up on these things. I just kind of stared at her, feeling generally uncomfortable and unsure of myself, looking for a sign as to what I should do or say next. No sign was forthcoming. But just before the silence got too uncomfortable, we started kissing.

I put my hand up her shirt and tried to undo her bra. For the first time, she let me. It was really exhilarating to remove her clothing, and I just kept going. I'd never undressed anybody before. I'd seen Marcy topless a couple of times, but she'd always been the one to remove her own garments.

I didn't even give myself time to stop and savor the moment. I'd told myself when I'd imagined this event, over and over again in my head, that I would take little mental photographs and save them forever. But I didn't. I just kind of tore through her clothing and before I knew it, Val was naked. I can remember almost every one of Kristin Phillips' thongs that I've seen in class, but I can't remember the underwear Val was wearing when I lost my virginity.

I was fairly zoned in, paying close attention to Val, until I was also naked. It had never occurred to me that Val might be self-conscious about her body. To me, hers was so objectively nice. She wasn't curvy. Her features were all too small and understated for anyone to call her "womanly," for instance. But she was slim, and compact, and cute.

But as Val peeled off my clothing, I felt so ungainly. I stopped paying attention to her glorious nudity, and started concentrating on my own strange physique. For example, I have no real chest hair. But I've got these little squiggly individual hairs that stick off at strange angles. There are full inches between them. And there are few enough of them that I could give them each a personal name (like Stanley or Gus), but they're long, and because they're surrounded by pink skin, they're quite noticeable. They jump out of my chest like creepy abstract sculptures.

Instead of concentrating on Val's body, which I had not previously seen, I focused on her face, which I'd seen tons of times, looking for her reaction to my own

body. And every time she blinked, or her eyes moved around, I winced, hoping it wasn't a negative response to what she was seeing.

I'd rarely seen Val hesitate. But when she was finished with my clothes, she did. She was naked, lying on her back on one side of the bed. And I was naked, except that my boxers were still attached to one of my ankles. I was lying on my front, on the opposite side of the bed, wondering how often she had to shave her pubic hair to keep it so trim and kempt.

New things can be fun and exciting, but they can also be uncomfortable and awkward, especially when you have to do them naked. "Do you want to, umm, you know..." Val stumbled. I knew what she meant. Even my pessimistic, low-expectations mind knew she wasn't asking if I wanted to look at photo albums, or watch a movie.

"Sure," I replied, by which I meant "*Fuck* yeah."

"Okay. Have you done it before?"

"Of course not. You?"

"No. Do you have a..."

"Condom?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, I do," I said, and I reached down to the floor, grabbed my jeans, and removed a condom from my wallet.

I hadn't brought the condom for this event specifically. I'd had it in my wallet for about a year.

Our sophomore year, the school had hired this guy who calls himself Hank the Sex Guy. This makes him sound like a human trafficker, but his job is actually a bit

creepier. Basically, he's this forty year-old guy who goes around from school to school and gives graphic talks to teenagers about safe sex, to make safe sex sound exciting. He didn't need to convince me. Sex of all danger-levels sounded exciting to me. And I was fine with doing it safely. I've been cursed with an excess of foresight, and as much as I want to have sex with pretty much every female I see, I don't want to produce any offspring. I understand that kids all across the world already have children, but I can't *imagine* raising a human child. Well, I can actually imagine it, and it's not a fun thing to imagine.

Anyway, at the end of Hank the Sex Guy's presentation, he gave out goody bags, like party favors, that included condoms, pamphlets about pregnancy and STDs, and those Smarties candies that nobody likes. I put a condom in my wallet, so I'd be ready for an impromptu water balloon fight.

There's a teen sex-scene cliché where the kids don't really know *how* to have sex. This I don't get. I'm not an anatomical genius, but I knew what to do. I couldn't tell you where the human pancreas is, or what it does. But genitalia is pretty self-explanatory. That's one of the nice things about sex. You're pre-programmed to know how to do it. It's pre-installed on your system, like iPhoto on Macs. Other life skills, like driving, or shaving, or list-making, you've got to learn. But you're a shitty animal if you don't know how to procreate. I've got more limbs than gnats have brain cells. They die by the thousands on my windshield on summer nights, because they're too stupid to get out of the way. But they know how to reproduce. It's natural, and it's simple. In fact, it's almost terrifying how easy it is to produce a kid. If any fertile female came into the room in which I'm writing, right now, she and I could make a child in like two minutes.

This was one of the days when it was really convenient that I wasn't bound to any kind of religious ideology. There was no fear of godly wrath that kept me from having sex. When Val asked me if I wanted to, I didn't have to wonder if it was the *right* thing to do. It was just like any other choice. If somebody offers me a grilled cheese sandwich, I don't think, "Would it be morally virtuous of me to eat this sandwich?" I just eat it, because grilled cheese is delicious.

But seriously, I assume that religious people have the same urges as I do, and then they have to suppress them because their faith tells them that if they eat a pre or extra-marital grilled cheese, they'll burn for eternity. That's why those evangelical pastors end up paying to eat gay grilled cheese in motel rooms and airport bathrooms.

We've established that my body knew what to do. My mind had more trouble:

I was significantly taller than Val, and as I lay on top of her, my head went up past her shoulder, and I found myself starting downward off the edge of the bed, toward the floor. I became *very aware* that Adrien was watching cartoons in the living room, a few feet below us. And my asshole of an imagination couldn't stop picturing him, directly beneath us, perched on the couch, his legs folded under him. I couldn't get him out of my head. *This* is what I thought about as I had sex for the first time. The rooms, separated only by the floor, a floor my imagination spirited away, were compressed together in my mind. The two rooms were one. And as I thrust my hips downward, and the bed sagged lower and lower, I was acutely aware of the lack of space between the innocent child, and the recently less innocent adolescents.

I paid no attention to the new sensations I was experiencing, or the image I'd been waiting for, for so long, of a naked girl underneath me. I didn't even hear Val's ragged

breathing. All I could think about was the proximity of her little brother. I felt like I was downstairs with “Ady,” on the couch.

It was like I was watching the show with him. SpongeBob and Partick Star were going to a party on the Goofy Goobers Ice Cream Party Boat. They sang about it: “Oh, I’m a Goofy Goober, yeah / You’re a Goofy Goober, yeah / We’re all Goofy Goobers, yeah / Goofy, goofy, Goober, goober, yeah!” I should have been a Goofy Goober (yeah!), similarly excited, having sex with Adrien’s sister, singing a similar type of celebratory song. But Adrien and SpongeBob were in my head, and as hard as I tried, I couldn’t replace them with Val. I could *feel* Adrien’s SpongeBob cartoon throbbing up through the floor. Surely he could feel me awkwardly thrusting myself in his direction.

Toward the end, Ian popped into my head. I remembered that he wanted me to think of him, and that I was supposed to thank him for “making this possible.” But I was too busy being furious at myself to be thankful to Ian, or even to Val.

Eventually, I...”finished.” And then I didn’t really know what to do.

In porn, the scene ends after the sex, because nobody wants to jerk off to two people just lying there. And in movies, the two lovers separate and then they lie in bed next to each other and bask in the so-called “afterglow.” The guy turns to the girl and says, “You were great,” and then the girl says, “No, Stanley, *you* were great.” But this kind of scene only works because the actors and actresses aren’t *actually* covered in each other’s bodily fluids.

When I got off Val, I had to perform an embarrassing circus act. I didn’t just want to roll off onto her sheets and comforter, because the condom was covered in a combination of lubricants, which I didn’t want to get on her bed. But then I couldn’t put

my hands anywhere, because they too seemed to have some kind of identifiable goo on them, which I couldn't really explain. I couldn't quite figure out which part of whom I'd touched to cause the hands thing. Either way, I had to ball my hands into fists and then kind worm my way off the bed in push-up position, kind of like a mudskipper.

Once I was standing, I thought I was free and clear, but I ran into another dilemma. On the back of the condom wrapper, they tell you how to put the condom *on*, which couldn't possibly be more self-explanatory. But they don't tell you how to get it off, while keeping its contents in. I was not prepared for this, and I was much more scared standing naked in the middle of Val's room with my penis wrapped in a plastic bag, than I'd been at any other point in the process. "Fuck. What do I do?" I whispered, and I put my soiled hands up in the air for emphasis. I tried to signal with gestures that I was worried about getting semen on the carpeting, but Val either didn't understand, or was having too much fun watching me struggle.

Val was still naked, still on the bed, and she looked adorable as she rearranged her hair, which I had apparently mussed up quite a bit. "Just go to the bathroom," she whispered, as though I was supposed to *know* to do that.

"I'm naked."

"I see that," she said with a laugh. She was enjoying my embarrassment. "There's nobody here. Go."

And I went. As I tiptoed down the carpeted hall to the bathroom two doors down, I realized just how seldom I'd been naked in open spaces. Even in my *own* house, I don't usually walk around nude. Not even when people aren't home. It was a bizarre sensation, mortifying and exhilarating at the same time. I had that feeling you get when you've just

watched a scary movie, like somebody's following you, or lurking around the corner waiting to pounce. But I also had this strange desire to just walk downstairs as I was, and actually watch some SpongeBob. I imagined how the couch leather would feel on my butt.

In the bathroom, I tried to replay the sex in my mind, as I've done thousands of times since. From what I gather, the sex went fairly well. I do have a sense of what happened, but it's like I wasn't quite there. When I picture it in my mind, it's like one of those reenactments you see in crime documentaries, where you only see the actors from the shoulders down, and it's blurry so the show doesn't have to be exact with the details.

I peeled off the condom and wrapped it in toilet paper. I thought about flushing it down the toilet. I've heard that's a thing people do. But I decided to play it safe. I'd throw it away at home or something. Or maybe I'd keep it permanently as a souvenir. Years later, I'd show it to my children. They'd love that.

I washed my face at the sink and ran the reenactment in my head.

We'd started slowly and tentatively, as you'd expect. At the start, Val was clearly in a bit of pain. I was told there would be blood. But if Val did bleed, it wasn't much. And after a little bit, her breathing became steadier. I wouldn't want a penis in any of *my* bodily cavities, but by the end, Val seemed to be enjoying herself. And when I "finished"—It's weird that I felt comfortable using the word "ejaculate" earlier in the story, but when it's actually relevant, I get squeamish—Val smiled at me, ran a hand through my hair, and pulled her face up so she could plant a kiss on my cheek. That's when I kind of came to, out of my SpongeBob daydream, off of the Goofy Goobers Ice Cream Party Boat.

And at the risk of sounding a bit saccharine, that was the best part of it, when it was over, when Val smiled and kissed my cheek, just before I had to slither off the bed to avoid coating it in a blend of contraceptive lubricant and human secretion. The most important part of sex, reader, is being wanted. That matters more than the actual sex. It sucks to be unwanted. When you're a little kid, there's *nothing* worse than being left out of a game, or a group of friends. It's soul-destroying. And when you get older, it's the same with girls. It's so painful to be near a girl you like, who you want to touch, or kiss, or secrete upon, when she's put off by the idea of your kisses or secretions. Well, I can't imagine anyone being attracted by a "secretion." Even the word is off-putting. But the point stands.

Val's room was empty when I returned. I was a bit confused, but I could hear a toilet flush somewhere nearby, and I assumed she'd gone to use a different bathroom. I set about putting my own clothes back on. Val had hung my jeans on her desk chair, a novel idea. And when I finished redoing my belt, I grabbed one of her sketch books and brought it over to the bed. I lay down and started flipping through the pages.

The book was filled with Hayao Miyazaki copies, done in pencil. But they were good copies. They looked like black-and-white versions of Val's posters. I can barely draw a stick figure. Seriously, I have trouble. I used to get downgraded on visual school projects because I couldn't draw anything. And I'd be like, "It's a Social Studies project, who gives a shit how well I draw the Indians?" And then I'd get reprimanded for cursing and for calling the Native Americans 'Indians.'" So I was extra impressed by Val's sketches. I felt like if somebody had told me that those were the sketches Hayao had worked from, I would have believed them. When Val reentered the room, I told her, but

not in those words. “These are pretty great,” I said, “You can start the big movement of American Anime.”

She opened her closet and started changing. I really enjoyed watching her. That one intimate action, sex, had opened up a whole world of other intimate privileges. I could lie in her bed. I could look through her sketch books. I could watch her choose underwear. It was like that part of Aladdin when he enters the Cave of Wonder through that giant tiger’s mouth and there’s treasure everywhere. Except Aladdin can’t touch the treasure. Not only was I allowed to touch the treasure, I could have sex with it.

“Technically,” Val informed me, “It’s not *really* Anime. And those are just copies.” She pulled a t-shirt over her head, grabbed another book from her desk, and brought it to the bed. “These are my own ideas,” she said, “They’re not as good. And don’t even be like ‘oh, they’re just as good,’ because they’re not, so don’t say it.” She slid onto the bed next to me and looked over my shoulder as I turned the pages.

She was right that hers weren’t as good, but they were still really cool. She has a good eye for cuteness, and even if her sketches weren’t as detailed or as masterful, they had a whimsical cuteness that redeemed them. Val’s sketches tended to be forest scenes full of strange woodland creatures interacting with each other. The creatures looked like crosses between different real animals, which gave them a mysterious feeling. There was a small family of dudes that looked kind of like owls, but they had fur instead of feathers. Furry owls, when you write it out, actually sound pretty creepy. But they weren’t. They toed that line between magical and creepy, like a Japanese-style *Alice in Wonderland*, staying just enough on the magical side.

I think Val felt a bit of pressure with me inspecting her furry owls, her private creative output. I can be a very discerning art critic. Well, that's not actually true. There are zucchinis that know more about aesthetics. But Val didn't know that. I think she was a little nervous, and after a couple minutes she suggested we go downstairs. She said she didn't know when her family would get back.

Val and I got up to go to the kitchen. We made ourselves PB and J sandwiches on white bread, and a third for Adrien. The bread was so white, gloriously white. I didn't have to pick any nuts or seeds out of it like I have to do at home, where my dad buys bread that would grow if you planted it.

"Is your mom okay with me being here, pretty much alone with you?" I asked.

"Yeah," Val said, "I mean, I told her you were coming over. And, honestly, she's not going to pay much attention to you anyway. She'll get home with two more boys—well, three if you count my dad—and she'll be so busy jabbering at them and making sure they don't burn down the house, she probably won't notice you're here."

"That's nice, I guess. I hate being noticed."

"Yeah, that's why you're so quiet in class."

"It's just hard for me to come out of my shell, you know?"

"She'll be happy that you're here. I think she worries, with all the attention she has to pay to the boys, that she hasn't really been paying attention to my life. And she keeps trying to ask about my social life and about you, and when I'm going to have people over, but she's really awkward about it."

"Yeah, my parents are always telling me to have friends over to my house. But there's nothing to *do* at my house. Friends could, like, sit around and *read* together and

eat carrots. That might be entertaining if it were like 1760, or if we were rabbits. Ian's got a Playstation and high-def TV, and Tastykakes. The most entertaining thing we've got is fruit-on-the-bottom yogurt."

"Yeah, that kind of sucks."

"No, fruit-on-the-bottom yogurt is great."

"I meant the situation."

"Yeah, I guess. It's a real first-world problem, you know? That your house is too neat and intellectual to be fun for hosting friends."

"Do your parents ask about me?" She asked, as we walked from the kitchen to the living room. I'd been staying after school to hang out Val. But when my parents asked why, I either deflected the question, or said something about needing to use the library for homework. But they were getting suspicious, and Sarah had pretty much told them what I was doing.

"Kind of," I replied.

Val and I planted ourselves on the couch next to Adrien, and just as we were finishing our fluffy sandwiches, the rest of the family got home.

When the doorbell rang, Adrien went to greet his sibs at the door, kind of like a dog. The boys looked like giant Russian nesting dolls, almost exactly alike but in incremental sizes. All the kids in the family, save for Chloe, seemed to have the same hair cut. The boys all had shaggy hair that ended just above their shoulders, a lot like Val's, except that theirs seemed to be that way from neglect. Val's was not shaggy, and I assumed that her short hair was a stylistic choice. Val's mom had longer hair like Chloe's, and she seemed to be wearing some makeup which I guess is normal, but my

mom never seems to bother with it. She greeted us with a quick, cursory wave, then doubled back to introduce herself. “Claire,” she said. I rose to shake her hand, and then she disappeared into the kitchen with the boys, as Val had suggested she would.

After they ate, the boys—including Val’s dad, who seemed to look and act like a mutant boy—set about demonstrating why the house appeared to be so lived-in. They ran around, and rode around on an assortment of things on wheels. They hurled balls across the room. They hit each other with various household objects. It was like some kind of deranged circus. What had been a quiet afternoon, suddenly erupted with a tempest of laughs and grunts and expensive-sounding crashing sounds.

The boys didn’t think it necessary for me to participate in their games, and I was just content to hang out with Val, as far as that was possible.

There is rarely any privacy at Val’s house. There are just too many people, and too much shit going on, for a couple to have a quiet moment together. There’s always a television blaring, and two different people listening to two different types of music. Both loud. A couple of kids are always throwing a ball, or conducting what appears to be a fight to the death, little fists and feet flying in all directions.

There is a different type of privacy to be had, however, at Val’s. And we experienced it that afternoon. There’s so much crazy shit going on, that nobody pays attention to you. The boys are too busy trying to kill each other to be aware of anybody else’s presence. And Mrs. Richard, and sometimes Chloe, is always too busy trying to supervise the kids to give you more than a nod or a smile. On that fall day, Val and I settled down on the sofa and were, aside from an occasional interruption by airborne toy,

essentially alone. It was like, I imagine, being in the eye of a tornado or hurricane, whichever of those has an eye, at peace but surrounded by chaos.

We spent the rest of the afternoon watching a marathon of a show where these guys go around to people's basements and garages and barns, and they buy old rusty crap from them, and then what appears to be a twisted garden rake is actually a valuable religious relic from the middle ages and it's worth millions. It's like Antiques Road Show if you swapped all the crusty old people for hicks with rotting barns. Val and I made bets on how much the old stuff would be worth, though neither of us was ever close.

In the evening, my mom came and picked me up. Val walked me to the door. "Later, Strudel Pants," I said.

In the car, my mom asked, "So, pups, who's this Valerie person?" My mom likes to call me "pups," which is fine when we're the *only* two people who can hear.

"A friend," I replied, "She's new. She's from Minnesota. She calls soda 'pop.'"

I'd probably like to think that my mom is more naïve than she really is. "She's a friend?" my mom prodded, "Is she... special?"

"No. She doesn't have any serious disabilities that I'm aware of."

"Aaron, that's not something to make light of. And I meant is she a *friend*, or is she...a...girlfriend?"

My mom is the very last person in the world with whom I'd like to discuss girls. Even the way she said "girlfriend" made me cringe. But I thought about how Val had introduced me to her family, and how she'd frowned at me when I'd dismissed her questions about mine. So I said, "Yeah, I guess she is."

“That’s so nice,” my mom replied, “It’s been so long since you had somebody *new* in your life. The only person who ever comes over is Ian, and he’s nice, but...” And she let her voice trail off. It occurred to me that that was a very apt description of Ian: “He’s nice, but...”

“Well, I’d like to meet her. You should invite her over for dinner. Maybe she could come over next Sunday for stew, when your grandparents get back from Mexico.”

That actually didn’t sound like a bad idea. I got the feeling that Val might like my grandparents. When we’d delivered food, she’d kept calling the old Jews “cute,” and my grandparents were old Jews. I also felt like they might have a lot in common. My grandparents were interested in art. They used to drag me to museums to look at art and old artifacts all the time. And they were always traveling places, like Mexico, to look at old ruins.

I’d have to ask my dad to make some vegetarian stew, but he wouldn’t mind. It would be better for us that way. I nodded my head and said I’d invite her.

“Great. So,” my mom went on, “What’d you guys do with your afternoon?”

“We had sexual intercourse on her bed. It was awesome.” I didn’t actually say that. I paused for a moment and said, “Nothing.” And then I changed the subject. “Do we have a garden rake?” I asked.

“I think so. Why?”

“Because it might have belonged to Charlemagne. I could sell it and pay for the car dent.”

I’d walked myself right into a bit of a trap, and sure enough, my mom took on a serious tone. “You understand that you’ve got to fix that, right?” my mom said,

recognizing the mistake I'd made, "I haven't pressured you about it, because I know you're busy with school, and that things have been...different...at home lately, but you do need to fix it. I don't want to drive around with a dented car any longer."

She hadn't even baited me into it. I'd set the trap myself and then stepped in it. This is why I always lost in GoldenEye when we did proximity mines, because I'd carpet a hallway with those things, and then think "Haha, whatever idiot walks down that hallway is going to get blown to shit," but then like two minutes later I'd totally forget about it, and *I'd* be the idiot, and I'd die in a giant ball of self-inflicted fire.

I'd been putting off the car thing, just like I put off my homework. I figured if I didn't think about it, it didn't exist. But it certainly wasn't going to fix itself. I'd gone and gotten a quote. It was going to cost twelve hundred dollars to fix. And I couldn't think of a way to come up with twelve hundred bucks. The water-ice shop was only open in the summer. And nobody wants a male babysitter, because he'll almost certainly molest the kids.

"Yep," I assured my mom, "I haven't forgotten. I'm sorry."

"Do you have a plan to pay for it?"

"Ponzi scheme," I said, and I futzed with the radio dial to see if I could find something distracting.

"Seriously."

"No. I'm sorry. I'll figure it out. Just give me a little more time."

The next Sunday, my father was very accommodating, and he made enough to veggie-chili to fill a bathtub. I picked Val up at her house about an hour and a half before dinner.

I'd expected to be apprehensive and anxious about having Val over, and about introducing her as my *girlfriend*. But, instead, I found myself feeling calm and kind of excited. I liked Val a lot, and it felt awesome when she introduced me to the intimate parts of *her* life: her family, her artwork, her boobs. And I figured it might work just as well the other way around. Or, at the very least, it would make *her* happy to meet my family.

When we entered my house, it was quiet and cold, and I was immediately reminded why I hadn't been in a hurry to bring Val there. There's nothing uncomfortable about the place, but it's just not that inviting. In the winter, we barely turn on the heat, because it's a waste of energy, and as my dad puts it, "That's why god invented the sweater."

"We discovered fire before we discovered the sweater," I say.

"Would you like to set the house on fire?" He asks, as though I were really suggesting warming ourselves by burning the house down.

"No, but we could turn on the—"

"Then put on a sweater."

"I don't own a sweater. Nobody under the age of fifty owns a sweater. Because we've now discovered the sweatshirt."

In the summer, we never turn on the air-conditioner because my dad doesn't like Freon, which is understandable. Freon is terrible for the environment, and it also sounds like the name of a bad guy from a super-hero movie. But it feels silly to live in a house

that has the capability to heat us and cool us, and then just not use those capabilities. It's like having a knife and fork and saying "screw it, I'll just eat with my hands," or having hands and saying "fuck it, I'll just stick my face in my food and eat directly with my mouth."

My mom was out, and my dad was cooking, so I showed Val my room, which was completely blanketed by dirty clothes, papers and books. She just kind of hovered outside, clearly not interested in entering. She pointed to an open spot where you could still see the carpet through the mess, and said, "You missed a spot."

I gave her a quick tour of the rest of the house, and then my mom came home, and Val and I ended up in the kitchen with my parents. My dad stood over the stove like a witch over a cauldron. Val and I sat at the kitchen table, but not too close to each other. And my mother stood in the doorway, wearing a light jacket, still holding her handbag.

I didn't really know what to do about Val's presence, so I ignored it. "Where were you?" I asked my mom. She was wearing *real* clothes, something she rarely did on weekends, when she was pretty much always in her bathrobe.

"I was supposed to meet up with Wendy Smolinski, but it didn't work out. I browsed at the Barnes and Nobles for a few minutes, then came home. Do you remember Wendy? You were friends with her son Reuben when you were little boys. I wonder what happened to him. You two played together so nicely. I wonder if you could look him up on one of those Facebook things."

It annoys the hell out of me when my mom reminds me of people I knew when I was like three years old, and she expects me to remember them, and then to be interested in hearing about them. I understand that on the grand scheme of things, this is a *very*

petty annoyance, but I'm not above petty annoyances. "Reuben?" I said, "He's dead. He was dismembered by chimps who escaped from the zoo. I looked him up on one of those Facebook things, and it said he was dead, dismembered by escapee chimps."

"Lord, Aaron, how do you think of these things?"

"I've got a gift."

"Jesus. His mother and I were going to have coffee. Well, you know I don't drink coffee, but it's an expression. But she couldn't make it. So here I am."

In the silence that ensued my mom began to look very expectant, and when I looked over at Val, I saw that she too looked expectant. I introduced them, mostly so they'd stop eyeing me expectantly. "Susan Wasserstein, Valerie Richard. Valerie Richard, Susan Wasserstein," I said, and Valerie got up to shake my mom's hand.

"I'm *delighted* to meet you," my mom said to Valerie, and she did one of those creepy handshakes where you hold the other person's hand in *both* your hands. Susan really did look "delighted." There's no other way to describe it. It was sickening. "Pups," she said, "You didn't tell me she was so pretty."

I tried not to vomit.

"Yeah, *pups*," Val said, "What's with that?"

"I didn't tell you *anything* about her," I said to my mom. They both stopped smiling. I really hadn't told my mom anything about Val at all. She knew Val's name, but that was about it. I guess Susan wanted to make it look like she was "in the know" about my life. And I guess Val was offended that I hadn't talked about her with my parents.

My mother introduced Val to the Stew Creature, with the understanding that once the stew was finished, he would transform into a man named Joe, and then they could become better acquainted.

Val and Susan started talking, and then they just kept talking. I had planned to watch TV with Val on the downstairs couch until my grandparents showed up. But my plans disappeared as the two of them just kept on yapping.

My mom asked Val hundreds of questions, *all* of which Val obliged with answers. Where was she from? What did her parents do for a living? Siblings? Oh, Adrien's having trouble in school? Hmmm... is it disciplinary or academic, though of course those two are always related at that age. Did she miss home? Well, of course she did at least a little. Her dad's family was from Quebec? Did Val know that Susan and Joe spent their honeymoon in Quebec? Of course she didn't know that. Aaron didn't even know that. Quebec City is really beautiful. Oh, that's so neat you have family there. Oh, that must be so much fun. *What* kind of dog did you say he was? He's *how* big? That's just remarkable. Who's heard of a dog being that big?

I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to do while they talked. Their conversation flowed so swiftly, it was tough to find a safe place to jump in. After a while, I stopped trying. It was kind of boring to sit there and listen to them jabber on about little boys, and big dogs, and Midwestern social customs, topics I couldn't be made to care about even if you bribed me generously. But it was also great to see my mom enjoying Val's company, and vice versa.

Val and Susan's summit went on for quite a while, and I was getting up to go to the bathroom, and to clear my head, when my grandparents came in through the garage door.

Art and Deb had been in Mexico, and they came back looking a bit tan, except that old people don't tan like not-old people. Yes, they were a slightly darker shade, and that was nice, I suppose, if you like your grandparents more well-done. But they also appeared to be a little more shriveled and wrinkly than they had previously. And I'd say it was a net loss.

Sarah came down the stairs and hugged both of them. "buenas noches, abuelos, cómo fue tu vacaciones en México?" She asked.

"You know they don't speak Mexican," I told her

"No such language," Sarah replied with a roll of her eyes. "They speak *Spanish* in *Mexico*."

But I was right about the basic idea. My grandparents traveled all over the world, not just to Paris and London, but to Hanoi, and Tokyo, and small towns in India where they don't have plumbing, or internet, only goats and life-changing game shows. But the only language my grandparents can speak is English, and they just expect everybody else to speak it also.

My grandfather set about demonstrating my point, "Mexico was moy bueno Sarah. It was moy bueno, indeed. Very beautiful." Then he put his arm around Sarah and steered her toward the kitchen. Susan made way for him, and he gave me a hug, embraced his son, and then acknowledged my mother with a smile and a nod. Deb followed him into the room, and they took seats at the kitchen table.

They didn't seem to notice Val, and they were just setting in to tell us about Mexico, when my mother interrupted. "Um, Art, Deb," she began, "We have a guest this evening." Art and Deb turned their heads in unison toward Valerie, who was suddenly under a sort of spotlight in the bright hot kitchen. "This is Valerie Richard," Susan went on, "Aaron's girlfriend. She's new to the area, actually. Her family just moved here from Minnesota."

Art extended a hand across the table. "Pleased to meet you, young lady," he said. "It's very *cold* in Minnesota. I think you'll at least like the weather better here."

"Good to meet you too," Val replied, looking back and forth between them.

"Aaron," Art turned to me, "I didn't even know you were in the market for a girlfriend."

Sarah chuckled. I tried not to. "Yep, that's where I got her. The market. And you actually met her for a moment a few weeks ago at JHR."

"Oh, I do remember that," Art said with a big smile. "Well, thanks for the help."

Grandma Deb didn't greet Val. Instead, she eyed her as one might eye a painting on the wall, trying to figure out if it was hanging crooked. When she spoke, it was to her son: "Let's have dinner. I'm starved and, I'm afraid, a lot of the food did not sit well with me in Mexico. And should we eat in the dining room?" she asked.

We usually crammed, all cozy, into the kitchen on Sundays, and I didn't think it would be hard to fit an extra person. My dad seemed to agree. "Well, I'm sure we can all fit in here, and we'll have to use a table cloth if we—"

But my grandmother hadn't really been asking. "Just the same," she went on, "I think we'll be more comfortable in the dining room. I've always liked those dining room chairs. Were those wedding gifts, or did you buy them?"

Sarah, Val and I set the table, and we had chili in the dining room. The talk, at first, was mostly about Mexico, and how, to my grandparents' surprise and joy, there was *still* a flourishing Jewish community in Mexico City. And, in fact, the Mexican Jewish population was growing. Then they talked about the food, and the weather, and finally the Mayan ruins they'd visited in the Yucatan. "We were there with my old friend David, the anthropology professor. It's amazing to think how sophisticated their civilization was, so long ago," Art was saying, gesticulating with a spoonful of chili. "Some of their structures in the so-called 'ruins' seemed more advanced than some of the hotels we were staying in, and certainly the restaurants we were eating in."

"You know, Val and I were just at the Penn Museum," I cut in, eager to present the common interests that my grandparents and Val shared.

"They have incredible Mayan artifacts there," Art replied, "It's really a wonderful collection."

"We were there on a school trip," Val said, "So we only saw the one special exhibition on the Etruscans. But it was amazing. Aaron stayed awake the *whole* time." Everybody chuckled at this. Even Deb appeared to smile. "I'd love to go back and see the Mayan stuff," Val finished.

"Yes. Yes. You should," my grandfather replied, "It's a great collection. And our friend David Glassner is a professor at the University. I don't know how much work he

does with the museum, but he's incredibly knowledgeable. We could probably arrange something of a private tour."

"That would be really cool," Val said. And she sounded sincere, probably because she'd never met my grandfather's friend David Glassner, who might be the world's least interesting person, like the opposite of that guy in those beer commercials. I get bored just *thinking* about David Glassner.

"I've been trying to get Aaron to get to know David better. Having connections at UPenn certainly can't hurt for a guy trying to get in to a good school." He ended this statement with a wink, but I'm not sure who it was directed at.

"Anthropology seems like a cool thing to study," Val said, again sounding both sincere and knowledgeable.

I don't think I'd ever heard anybody under the age of forty say 'anthropology' out loud, unless they were talking about the clothing store. I felt left out of the conversation again, but in a good way.

"It's not something we've talked about in high school at all," Val went on, "I kind of thought when I moved here and went to a private school, I'd have the chance to take learn about some things outside of, like, the national or state curriculum, or whatever."

"Hmmm," my grandfather replied, looking thoughtfully into his chili. He took a few more bites, then turned back toward Val. "So," he said, with a cocking of his head, "Valerie Richard. Where does that come from? What kind of name is that?"

"I don't really know," Val replied, hesitantly, "from a bunch of places, I guess."

She looked a bit confused, and I wasn't exactly sure where this question had come from either.

“Do you know,” my grandmother jumped in, “that in Russia, Valery is a man’s name? My sister had a boyfriend named Valery when she was in her early twenties. He was a *handsome* man, and an excellent cook. He used to make...”

And I’ll cut her off here, because the whole conversation went on pause so my grandmother could tell us about the meatballs my great aunt’s old boyfriend used to make. And although they sounded *delicious*, they don’t have any place here.

My grandfather cut her off eventually with a hand on her arm, and he turned back to Val. “So, does ‘Valerie’ come from somewhere? It’s not from Russia, is it?” he asked.

“No... I think my parents just liked it.”

“And Richard? Where’s that from? Where is your family from originally?”

This was not a line of questioning that I’d expected. My grandfather was usually relaxed and good-humored at meals, just chatting about whatever came to mind. And it had seemed like he and Val were getting along great. But suddenly he had this detective look on his face, like he was trying to uncover a secret. It made me uneasy, and I could tell that Val was getting uncomfortable also. She kept shifting her weight in the chair that my grandmother liked.

Val looked over at me for some help. But I didn’t know where ‘Richard’ was from originally, so I couldn’t answer for her.

“My father’s family is from Quebec, so I guess it’s a French name, originally. But we usually pronounce it like the English name.”

“Mhmm. And your mother? Where’s her family from? What’s her name? Or, rather, what was it?”

Val squirmed a bit in her seat, and my mom cut in. “Art. Please. What does it matter what her mother’s maiden name is?”

“I’m simply trying to get to know her.”

“Should, I, like, answer?” Val whispered to me. Her voice was urgent and she looked a bit afraid.

I didn’t know, so I shrugged again.

“Ummm, my mom’s maiden name was McLeish, but only her father was Irish, I think.”

“And her mother? Where was—”

“Stop it, Art,” my mom cut in again. “You’re *not* trying to get to know her.” And then: “Did anybody mention how good the food was?”

“Dad,” Sarah said, “Good food. I especially like the bread.”

“Picked it out myself,” my dad said with my smile, “Very low sodium for a French style bread It’s very difficult to find a bread that has such a low—”

“The chili is very good,” Deb said, “But don’t you usually make a turkey chili?”

“Val doesn’t eat meat,” I said, “Or if she did, she’d have to kill it herself, and we couldn’t find any turkeys for her to take down. Plus, isn’t it a lot of work to process a bird? You’ve got to de-feather it, and then do something to the skin with some kind of brine or something?”

Deb was perplexed by the last part, but she got the vegetarian bit, and latched onto it just as my grandfather had the name thing. “Why doesn’t Valerie eat meat?” my grandmother asked me, as if Val weren’t sitting *right* there. “Is it a religious thing?” I was going to answer, but she just kept going. “Because I really do prefer a meat chili. When I

was younger, the thought of vegetarianism hadn't occurred to anybody. There are still parts of the world where they just don't understand the idea." These comments were accompanied by some cold looks, directed at me and Val. It's hard to tell with my grandma, because most of her looks are cold, but there was definitely something sinister, or at least disapproving, in her gaze.

Val was visibly upset, her eyes wide, her face pink. And I was...surprised. And angry. Angry and trapped. I wanted to comfort Val, to tell her that some mistake had been made. That despite the various annoying things about my family, they were good, nice people, and that this wasn't usually how they treated people. And I wanted to yell at my grandparents for being so weird, and nosy and cold, but I couldn't imagine *yelling* at my grandparents under any circumstances. And I wanted to attack my parents for inviting Val over and then allowing this to happen, but I couldn't holler at them at the dinner table.

I wanted to go back to talking about anthropology, or David Glassner, or traveler's diarrhea. But that wasn't going to happen. So I kept my mouth shut, figuratively. I had to literally open it now and then to eat chili and not-too-salty French-style bread. But basically we just sat there in the oppressively clean and cold dining room, and stuffed chili into our mouths. I spent the rest of the meal alternately staring at Val, hoping she'd somehow magically cheer up, and staring out the window into the backyard, where the wind was whipping the orange-brown leaves off of the trees.

I drove Val home immediately after dinner. She was quiet, and didn't seem particularly interested in talking about it, though I'm not sure I could pinpoint exactly

what *it* was. Something had gone wrong, that was certain. But I wasn't sure precisely what had happened, or who was at fault. I just really didn't want the fault to lie with me. I hate lying with fault.

"I'm really sorry," I said to Val, just in case I *had* done something wrong. "I'm sorry that didn't go better."

"They didn't like me."

"My mother liked you a lot. And she's a tough critic."

"Your grandparents didn't."

"Yeah, that was weird. I'm sure that's not it. They're usually really nice, and, like, warm. Not physically warm. Well, they're mammalian, so they're a little physically warm, but that's not what I mean. I mean welcoming and loving, and—"

"I wasn't confused about what you meant." Val ran a hand slowly through her hair, like my dad used to do when he had hair. Val often looked thoughtful, but now she had on a similar yet different look that I hadn't seen before: a *dark* thoughtfulness, a brooding. "I'll bet it's cause I'm not Jewish," she said. "It's like *Fiddler on the Roof* or something."

"I hate musicals. I can't suspend my disbelief. The idea that all of a sudden people just stop what they're doing and sing and do choreographed dances...it's just too silly. Especially when it's on roofs. When do you see people dancing on roofs?"

"Old people can be like that."

"Can they? That seems *especially* dangerous for old people."

"My grandfather's still kind of racist. He doesn't mean to, really, but he just says racist things all the time, and he really likes to—"

“Don’t throw my grandparents in with *all* old people. They’re better than most old people. My grandfather still plays *tennis*. And he’s always supported me, and he pays for—”

“You sound like a little kid. ‘*My* dad could beat up *your* dad.’”

Her dad certainly could beat up my dad, and I perversely enjoyed the image of John Richard pummeling Joe Wasserstein. But I took offense to Val’s accusation.

“Look,” I said, “you didn’t *have* to come over. It was kind of *your* idea.”

“Oh yeah, it was totally *my* fault that your family wasn’t nice to me.”

“Shit.” I said, to nobody. I was arguing a point I couldn’t win. I try not to do this, as a policy, but I guess there’s a natural instinct to defend your family, even when they inexplicably act like dicks. But Val was right, and it wasn’t worth pushing it. I wanted her to keep liking me, and having intercourse with me.

I pulled the car up to Val’s house. Light poured through all of its windows, like they’d made *sure* there wasn’t a single dark spot. “I’m sure they didn’t mean anything by it,” I said, “You’ll have to come over again. You’re...great. I’m sure it’ll go better.”

“Yeah, I hope so,” Val said, as she got out of the car.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said.

“I guess,” she replied.

“What do you mean, ‘I guess?’ Is there a possibility I won’t—”

“Jesus. Yes. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I drove home quickly and everybody was still there. My mom was doing the dishes while Sarah and my dad sat with his parents at the kitchen table. The four at the

table were all talking and smiling like they were having a really super-awesome good time, and it pissed me off.

Grandpa Art was the first to look up. "Aaron!" he exclaimed, as though everything were great. "Glad to have you back."

"Yeah," I said, and then hesitated. I wasn't used to asking Art *meaningful* questions, and I wasn't sure how to begin. "What'd you think of Val?" I asked as casually as I could.

"I thought she was...nice," he replied, but he didn't back it with his usual grin. "Aaron," he asked, "What percentage of your school class would you say is Jewish?"

He asked this as though it were at least tangentially relevant. But it wasn't, at least not to me. Val had been *completely* right, and I couldn't quite handle it. I was furious and indignant, but couldn't think of a way to express either of those feelings without profanity.

When I said nothing, Sarah spoke. "Actually, Grandpa," she said, "Val's the *only* person in his class who's *not* Jewish. Aaron just saw her one day, off in a corner, worshipping Christ all by herself. And she just looked so lonely, and he couldn't help but take pity."

Art pursed his lips together, but chose to ignore the sarcasm. "I'm sorry, Aaron. I just thought...Don't you think you'd have more in common with a Jewish girl?"

I guess if I had a Jewish girlfriend we could both complain together about how we had to spend years of our childhood practicing to recite some archaic bullshit we couldn't *actually* read or understand. And we could both have ridiculously curly hair. But other than that, I didn't see how I'd relate better to a Jewish girlfriend. I'd have more in

common with a Beatles' fan girlfriend or an Eagles' fan girlfriend. Or a girlfriend who enjoyed microwaved frozen burritos as much as I enjoyed microwaved frozen burritos.

"I'm not even really that Jewish," I mumbled, "I haven't been to Shul since my Bar Mitzvah."

"Being Jewish doesn't make you feel different?" My grandpa asked, looking sad and droopy.

"I guess I don't really *feel* that Jewish. What's it supposed to feel like?" This was, to my surprise, an earnest question. When I thought about it, there were times when I did feel some ethereal identity I'd probably call "Jewishness." But maybe there was something I was missing, something bigger.

But Sarah just couldn't take conversation seriously. "Judaism feels like a warm sweater," she announced.

I flashed her a grin. "What's with this family and sweaters?"

"Jewishness is the warm cozy sweater of life, Aaron, each strand of wool a fellow Jew, wrapping themselves around you in a tender embrace. But if you, like, go out in the rain, the sweater will get all wet, and it'll smell all gross, because wet wool is gross, and all those wet Jews will get all mildewy. And that's what you're doing. You're taking your Jew sweater out in the rain."

Sarah could get away with the sarcasm somehow, I guess because she wasn't the one under scrutiny. It didn't even seem as though Art was really listening to her. He exchanged a concerned look with his wife, and then turned back to me. "What about a shared history, Aaron? Those who have a shared background with you? Those who have gone through the same hardships as you?"

This was not a question I could answer earnestly. “Hardships?” I asked. My life was so comically void of hardships. “*What* hardships?”

“Yeah, Ar,” Sarah jumped in again, “Remember Friday night, we got stuck in traffic on the way to Wendy’s. And it was like midnight and we were like ‘Why in god’s name is there traffic right now? This doesn’t make any sense.’ And we could *see* the Wendy’s, but we couldn’t get to it, and only the one lane was getting by. That was frustrating. I think we could call that a ‘hardship.’”

“Sarah, please,” my dad whispered.

But my grandfather ignored her again. He gave me a look I’d only seen once before, when I’d pushed my sister into a table corner at my grandparents’ house. Sarah had bled from above her eye. The look was stern, and hard. It was angry too, but in a very controlled way. I imagined it was a face he’d used often as a lawyer. It made him look both wise and intimidating, like Dumbledore on those rare occasions when Dumbledore gets serious. “I’m not talking about things which have happened to you specifically,” he said, “I’m talking about a shared history, a shared past of suffering, living at the margins of society.”

“But Jews *don’t* live at the margins of society. I’m not marginalized. Jews are doing great now. They live in *nice* places in the *middle* of society,” I said, gesturing around the ‘nice’ kitchen in the ‘nice’ house in the middle of the ‘nice’ neighborhood. “The stuff you’re talking about was a long time ago.”

“It’s not as far back as you think,” my grandmother said, breaking her silence.

My grandparents’ eyes were boring into me like some kind of high-tech Jew-guilt lasers. I looked around the room for assistance. My dad looked distressed, but not

interested in joining the argument. My mom, who was probably my best bet for help, was still busy with the dishes. Sarah was smiling like she was enjoying herself, but what could she do? She'd probably exhausted her arsenal of sarcastic jokes.

Art got up and brushed nothing off of his clothes. Deb followed suit. "I think we'll be off," Art announced, "I'm sorry that this wasn't as pleasant an evening as it could have been. We were truly looking forward to seeing the family again, after a nice but long trip."

Art gave Susan a pat on the back, and he embraced silent Joe. He hugged Sarah, and gave me a firm pat on the shoulder as he passed me in the kitchen doorway.

I didn't like the abrupt ending. "This is stupid," I said. "This makes no sense. Come on." I turned around and followed them a couple of paces. "Why does it *matter*?" I begged as they descended the half-flight of stairs toward the garage door. "I'm in *high school*."

"Maybe we sent you to the wrong high school," Deb said quietly, as she took the last step carefully.

When the grandparents were gone, my mother retreated to her room with a non-descript headache, as she often does after their visits. Sarah followed her upstairs to do homework. So I went after my father, who was still in the open, reading at the kitchen table. I set about pacing between the table and the sink, trying to figure out how to begin, but my father spoke first. "Aaron," he began, still looking down at his journal, "you need to have more respect for your grandparents."

“Me? What?” I stammered. I really hate to use the word “flabbergasted,” but that’s what I was. “What did I do? They’re just allowed to be mean, and I have to just nod and be—”

“Aaron, I don’t think I would characterize them as ‘mean.’ They just have old biases, biases that come with the territory.”

“What territory is that?”

My father’s voice got all quiet and serious. “When you grow up in a world where your people are consistently discriminated against, where your people, and people close to you, were systematically murdered, you start to feel certain ways about the world, and about people.”

I didn’t want to get into the whole “systematically murdered” part. I’ve learned over time that genocide can be a touchy subject. But I couldn’t see why any of these things should affect *me* and my life. I couldn’t shake my indignation, and I couldn’t just *not* respond. “But why does it matter for *me*?” I asked, “I’m seventeen. Who *cares* who I spend my time with? Do *you* care? Do *you* care whether or not my friends are Jewish, or Muslim, or if they...I don’t know, if they’re Mets fans. Well, I guess if they were Mets I could understand, but even—”

“Sometimes it also matters what *others* think. You’ll learn that. My parents are very important to me. You’re important to them. And I know that they’re important to you.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. My father spent my whole life telling me to question *everything*. He told me to question religion. To question societal norms. To question the FDA, and the EPA, and other untrustworthy acronyms. To question what my

teachers told me, especially if they said something positive about Columbus or Reagan. He taught me to always think critically, and to make up my own opinions about shit.

I'd always assumed he deferred to his parents because he agreed with them about most things. But now I could see that it was more than that, and it scared me. And it snapped my mind right back to the words my grandmother had uttered as she'd headed out the door, about my high school.

My grandparents helped us with everything. They'd helped my parents pay for the house. They paid for private school. It was their generosity that enabled my father to quit his job and take the non-profit one. They did these things out of love, and I'd thought that they only wanted love in return. Fuck.

That's what I said out loud in the kitchen: "Fuck."

My dad sent me up to my room, something he hadn't done in years. It was more of a suggestion than a command, and I probably could have disobeyed and stuck around, but I didn't see the point.

I went up the steps to see if I could make myself do some of the homework I had due the next day. Sarah poked her head out of her room when she heard me on the stairs. I stopped in the hallway just outside my door and leaned my head against the wall. She put on a conspiratorial smile, which I tried to, but couldn't return. "We're like the Malfoys," she whispered.

"We're evil Wizards?" I asked.

"Kind of. We're like an old Wizarding family. The grandparents are like Lucious Malfoy."

“Except he’s a Death Eater. He’s evil. The grandparents aren’t evil at all. They’re just...I don’t know.”

“I know they’re not evil. I’m just saying,” Sarah went on, “They don’t want any Mudbloods around.”

“Don’t use that word.”

““Mudblood?””

“Yeah. It’s offensive.”

“You do know those books aren’t real, right? There aren’t really any people born of Muggle parents who turn out to be Wizards, and then get discriminated—”

“How do you know, Sar? They take great precautions to make sure Muggles like you don’t discover them. And even if you did, the Ministry has people who are *experts* with memory charms, and they could—”

“Okay, okay, okay. I’m sorry I went into it.”

Chapter 10

As we’ve established, I don’t generally pay *that* much attention in school. They try to teach you so many useless things—the cell cycle for instance—and, frankly, I’ve only got *so* many brain cells to waste on stuff like that. On this particular day, the Monday after the dinner at my house, I wasn’t paying attention at all. But for different reasons. I was distracted by the previous night’s arguments, and I had them running around in circles in my head, making me all pissed off.

Val usually sat next to me in English, but I got there late and she was already seated next to Cassandra. It didn't seem like she wanted to talk to me, and I didn't try to butt in or anything. I didn't know what to say to her.

In English, we were reading and discussing the poem "she being brand," by ee cummings, the heavy-weight champion of lowercase letters and incomplete titles. The poem, if you haven't read it, is about some guy (kind of) raping a young girl, but he talks about it as if he's driving a new car. And the lines are cut and jumbled in such a way that it looks like it was written by somebody suffering from rabies. People think this is a great poem.

The classmates in my discussion group were being all giggly and squeamish about the poem, as if they didn't watch porn on the internet, or have the occasional sexual encounter themselves, or read about it in books, or see it in movies. And I was not in a chipper mood, due to the fact that I don't really know what "chipper" means, and because it was first period, and because actually seeing Val bent over her poem print-out, adorably holding her hair out of her eyes with her hand made it difficult to not speak with her.

We were reading the poem aloud in our groups, and discussing it as we went. In my group, Kristin Phillips giggled like my sister, and said, "What do you think he means when he's, like, 'giving her the juice?' Is he, like, coming? Hehehehe, hehehe teehehehe, hehehehe."

"No. He does that later," I said, "He's just fucking her harder there, with the juice."

"Aaron!" Mrs. Thompson exclaimed.

“What? What did I do?”

“You cannot you use that word in my class.”

Mrs. Thompson is known throughout the school as the “grammar Nazi.” When she asks you a question in class, you can’t produce so much as a dependent clause before she interrupts to tell you that “who” should be “whom,” or that “they” should be “he or she.” She needs to loosen up a bit. In the age of texting, she should be impressed that her students even speak in full *words*. Also, if you assign a poem about what appears to be (at least) statutory rape, you should relax your standards of appropriate language.

I tried, but I couldn’t stop myself from replying: “Well, I *can* say it. I did. Maybe what you mean is that—“

“Aaron, right or wrong, you *may* not talk to me like that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, *I* am sorry, but you’ve got to go talk to Dr. Schulz.”

“Fuck. Really?”

The class watched me as I trekked off to the assistant principal’s office. I had to walk between buildings to get to his office. It was probably raining. It’s supposed to rain on bad days, right? The walkways between the buildings are “covered” by little arcade type things, but they leak so you still get wet.

I visit Dr. Schulz relatively often, “on the reg” as my sister would say. It’s not really a big deal because my visits never turn into any serious consequences. He’s usually dealing with a fight, some kind of physical altercation resulting in injury. Or, he’s dealing with drugs. We come from an area where people tend to have money, and kids with money like to buy drugs with their money. And stupid kids with money tend to bring

their drugs to school. And Dr. Schulz has to deal with a lot of stupid kids and the drugs they bring to his place of learning. As an occasional user of marijuana, I understand the appeal of drugs. But I don't understand the popular high-school logic that says, "yeah, I need to have my drugs with me at all times, even at the place where I have the least time to use them, and can get into the *most* trouble for having them." But popular logic also says that eggplant is an acceptable vegetable.

Dr. Schulz, whose Phd is probably in the field of awesome mustaches, finds my trouble more amusing than anything else. When you're used to reporting drug offenses to parents and police, a kid who says inappropriate things in class must be a "breath of fresh air." And Dr. Schulz must especially appreciate breaths of fresh air, because the administrative office of the school is totally windowless.

When I arrived at Dr. Schulz's office, he was not there. The secretary-person for the administrative offices said, "He's not here. You'll have to wait." I suggested that it might make sense if I returned to class, and then came back to see Dr. Schulz when he was back in his office. But the school has a policy against this, as I might repeat my offense, and make *more* snarky comments in my *other* classes. They've got to keep me there, to protect the school from my inappropriate commenting, until Dr. Schulz, and his Sherlock Holmes meets Hulk Hogan mustache, arrives on the scene to lay down the law.

I just sat there, daydreaming. I came to when Dr. Schulz arrived, stood over me, and repeated my name. "Aaron W, he said, "Aaron W. Aaron W." There's another Aaron in the school whose last name does not begin with "W." I checked my watch. I'd missed two full blocks and it was almost lunchtime. I followed the assistant principal into his office. "So..." he said with a long exhalation, "What did you say this time?"

I could have responded to this question however I wanted. Mrs. Thompson had not sent me with a note or anything, but as we've established, I am a bad liar. I told the truth.

"What do you think is a fair punishment?" Dr. Schulz asked me.

"Nothing?" I suggested. "I won't do it again." We both knew this wasn't true.

"Detention?"

"Okay."

Detention is not much of a punishment. It means you have to sit in the library for an hour after school and do your homework. It keeps me from procrastinating and forces me to take the late bus, but it's not really a big deal. It's the equivalent of what they did to Martha Stewart, I suppose, when they confined her to that sort of bucolic campground for a year or so. I'd prefer to do my homework on my bed, and Martha would prefer to emulsify her lemon meringue in an All-Clad stainless steel mixing bowl, but sometimes one has to settle, when one has acted out in class or committed securities fraud felonies.

When school got out, I met Ian at his locker, as I usually do. He was trying to open it with one hand, using his opposite shoulder to keep the heaving mess of school work and old food from spilling out. I had no idea how he'd managed to overstuff a locker in only two months of school.

He greeted me with a grunt, and then elaborated, "Yo, Jeb and I are going over to his house to bake a little."

"What are you going to bake?" I hate when Ian uses slang terms for drug use. "I'd be down for some Rice Krispies treats."

“You know what I mean. You should come over.”

“You’re not baking anything, Martha Stewart. You’re smoking marijuana.”

“Don’t say marijuana.”

“Why shouldn’t I say marijuana?”

“We’re in school man. If Schulz searches my locker, it’ll take the whole afternoon.”

I declined the invitation, citing my detention. Smoking weed is supposed to be fun, but it just puts me to sleep. And if I want to sleep, I’ll just go home and...sleep. It’s free and it doesn’t burn my esophagus.

“Yo,” I said bringing my tone down to a whisper. “Do you think we’re friends because we’re both Jews?” I looked around us to make sure nobody else was listening, but I wasn’t sure why. We weren’t talking about drugs now.

“Holy shit! You’re a Jew too!?” Ian exclaimed. “Wasserstein? I had no idea.”

“I’m serious, man.”

“Look, I didn’t even know we were friends. I thought you just liked me because I have a Playstation.”

I kicked Ian’s locker, and it opened. Its contents spilled out into the hallway like a river set free by a busted dam. Ian and I stood on either side of the mess, him smiling, me glaring.

Ian admired the pile of crap on the floor like a proud father might look at his successful son. “Look,” he said, “you’re friends with Phil. He’s not Jewish.”

“But I’m better friends with you.”

“Well, I’m a better person.”

“Come on, dude.”

“You’re better friends with me because you live *around the corner* from me, and you met me when we were like two years old.”

“Yeah, at *Jewish* pre-school.”

Mr. Brian, my history teacher, walked by and told Ian to “restore” his locker to how it “usually was.” Ian and I made eye contact, but we both refrained telling Mr. Brian that the jumble on the floor was pretty much status quo.

We began the shoveling process.

“Baby girl,” Ian said to me as he wedged a binder onto the top shelf, “you’re being silly. We’re friends for the same reason people do *most* things, and meet *most* people they meet. Ease. Convenience. And, dude, it’s the 21st century. Nobody’s anything. Suzie Falcona claims she’s Italian. Her *parents* haven’t even been to Italy. I think I may be more Italian than her just because I eat more pizza than she does.”

Jeb arrived at Ian’s locker and stole him from me. They disappeared toward the parking lot, where Jeb had parked his brand new Mazda. I was just turning toward the library, to go start my detention, when Val appeared and cut me off. “Hey,” she said firmly, in a tone that stopped me in my tracks. The way she said it kind of forced me to turn and face her. “When were you going to come talk to me?” she asked.

I thought she’d been ignoring *me*, but if she said it was the other way around, I was willing to take her word for it.

I pled the fifth and said nothing, but Val has no respect for the constitution. “You couldn’t have done that forever,” she scolded, “I have your number. Come on, just

because you don't have the right thing to say doesn't mean you shouldn't say something."

"I've been trying to tell my teachers that for years."

"You can't just always put things off," she went on, and she steered me by the arm toward the buses.

"I kind of can, though," I replied. "I have detention right now, but I'm walking with you instead. And remember that essay Thompson assigned about *The Old Man and the Sea*? I haven't even started it. I haven't even read the book. I assume there's an old man, and a sea of some—"

"Don't compare me to your homework," Val said, "I'm not in the mood for your sarcasm."

"I'm sorry," I said, throwing my hands in the air, "It's all I've got."

"I wish you knew when to cut the jokes."

"Me too. And I wish you wouldn't get pissed about something that's between me and my family."

"It wasn't between you and your family," she said. "I was there."

"Yes, but the *issue* is between me and my family. I need to figure that whole thing out before I can, like, know what to say."

"You make it seem like it's a complicated issue," she said quietly, but with some serious menace. "You make it seem like they weren't just being *mean*. It shouldn't be that hard a conversation."

"It's not that easy, man."

"I'm not a man. Don't call me 'man.'"

“Especially with my grandparents. I try to talk with them about only the most trivial parts of my existence. Our last big heart-to-heart was about how most of my socks have holes in them.”

“Well then who cares what they think?”

“I don’t know. Me, a little. Definitely my parents. Look, we read *Romeo and Juliet* last year and I saw how that shit ends. It’s not good. I don’t want to die. I’m too young. And I’m particularly afraid of puncture wounds.”

“*Come. On.*”

“And if they’re in Italy that whole time, why don’t they have Italian names? Capulet? Really? Where’s the terminal vow—”

“Jesus,” Val spat at me, “Call me when you want to talk about this seriously,” and she started walking more quickly, trying to pull away from me. But she has very short legs, and I have very long legs. I had to slow down to give her the space she wanted.

Val was right, in that I don’t know when to cut the jokes. Somewhere in my mind, in one of my lesser lobes—I’m under the impression that the brain is made up of ‘lobes’—I knew that more sarcasm would only dig me a deeper hole, but that wisdom never got to the part of my brain that makes the decisions. “What if I want to talk about it seriously now?” I asked, raising my voice. “Should I, like, shout at you now, or catch up to you and talk at a more reasonable volume, or call you in a minute when you’re on the bus, or do I have wait to call until you get home, or—”

We’d reached the bus line-up, and my shouting was starting to draw attention from the people milling around the front of the school. There’s really nothing more

interesting to a high school kid than couple-drama. I'd always told myself that if I were in a couple, I'd *never* have public drama. But I tell myself a lot of things.

Val turned and stopped for about a split second. "Bye, *man*." she said, and she boarded her bus, the first in line.

I cursed at myself without *any* sarcasm as I watched Val's head bob through the bus windows. She was being overly dramatic, but if I'd just kept my mouth mostly shut, and uttered some comforting and apologetic words or sounds, things would probably have been fine.

If I had a nickel for every time I didn't shut up when I should have, well, I wouldn't have very much money because nickels are almost worthless, but it would be an impressive-looking pile of currency. Ian, by the way, once paid for a movie ticket in only nickels. He brought them to the theater in a zip-lock bag. Everyone in line behind him was thrilled.

I went back into the school, signed into detention, and sunk into one of the deep library chairs. I didn't get any homework done. I spent the time thinking about Val.

She and I hadn't really fought before. When we were first getting together, I didn't want to piss her off, or argue with her, because I felt like she might just change her mind and stop hanging out with me. Before you've got anything invested in the relationship, before you've had sex, before you've lent the other person a Japanese animated DVD, before you've admitted that you're still afraid of the dark or that you think Coldplay is a good band, it's really easy to just say "fuck it" and cut it off. It's easier to just end the rapport than it is to resolve the dispute.

But when you do have things invested in a relationship, when you've given the other person your virginity, or on a more personally compromising note, you've told them that you *really* like Coldplay, you can go ahead and disagree and fight, because you've put too much into the relationship to call it off over a petty dispute. The more time you spend together, the more you become integrated into each others lives, the more mutual friends you have, the more you care about the other person, the bigger the argument has to be for it to jeopardize your partnership. Breaking up is like untangling a really complex knot, like when I tie double knots with my shoelaces and I have to pick them apart with my teeth, because I bite my fingernails down so far that they're useless.

So you're not going to break up just because your grandparents are old and kind of anti-racist-racist. You've got to actually *resolve* the issue. And I didn't know that I was prepared to *resolve* anything. When I got into fights with Ian, we just wrestled on the floor for a while until we forgot what we'd been arguing about in the first place. But I couldn't wrestle Val. It wouldn't be a fair match up, and I got the sense that it might actually make the problem worse.

When I got home my mom was in the kitchen looking concerned. She'd been looking more and more concerned of late.

In chemistry class, Mr. Dobrinyan taught us that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. For instance, he told us, if you punch a wall, the wall punches your hand back just as hard. I was skeptical, as I'd never been punched by a wall—they were generally quite passive in my experience—but when I hit one, my hand did hurt.

Lately, with his new job, my father seemed distinctly happier and more relaxed, and as his general happiness went upwards, my mother's seemed to go downwards. So maybe Dobri and his chemistry were on to something.

With speech-impaired kids, there's a lot of paperwork, and my mother usual took this paperwork in stride. But today, as she bent her head over the table, her reading glasses balancing at the tip of her nose, she looked like the stress was getting to her, wearing her down. It made her look older.

"Why did you take the late bus?" she asked.

I felt worn out too, so I just said, "Detention."

"Aaron, you can't let your anger carry over to school. You're old enough to control yourself, to not act out."

At least she acknowledged that I might have something to be angry about.

"Do you know who just called?" she asked me, her voice softening.

After a moment of silence, she told me: "Your grandfather," And I thought that might explain why she looked so worn. "He says their Wifi is out, and he would like you to fix it."

"But I showed him how to do it last time. All he has to do is unplug the router for a second and then plug it back in. Did you say that?"

"I did say that, but I don't think—"

"Doesn't their neighbor 'work from home,' running some kind of work-at-home scam pyramid-scheme thing?"

"Mr. Feldman?"

"Yeah. Couldn't he do it?"

“He’s *disabled*. And he doesn’t run a *scam*. He runs a...you know what? Forget it,” she said, looking up at me for the first time, “It’ll take you fifteen minutes. Deal with it.”

“I still don’t know what to say after last night,” I told her, looking for a little motherly advice.

“I don’t know either, pups,” she said, and she sounded exasperated. But she wasn’t exasperated with me for a change. I should have felt good about this. It should have made me happy, or I should have felt relieved. But it had no such effect.

She was basically saying, “You’re on your own, kid.” And on my own with my grandparents had never been a problem. But suddenly, thanks to the whole Val thing, I felt scared about going over there.

My Grandparents live in an old neighborhood full of large stone houses with very high room-to-occupant ratios. They’re very proud of how old their neighborhood is. They like to brag about it, like they founded the place. Like they stepped off of a wooden ship in like 1600 and drove a Wasserstein flag into the ground. But they actually moved there when my dad was little. It was the house in which he grew up, and I find it weird to think of it that way. It’s always felt like such an “old person house,” even though it’s fairly contemporary in a number of ways.

The house itself is old and made of the stones, and it looks really *old*, probably because it’s made of stones. But the interior is very modern, full of hip, possibly Scandinavian furniture. And there’s lots of art: vases from India, paintings from Europe,

rugs from South America that they hang from the walls, which is wrong—that's not where you put rugs.

My grandfather opened the front door, beamed at me, and pulled me in for a forceful hug. He is strong for his age. And spry. He led me quickly through the house, into the office room, where the “box” was. I told him that that the “box” was called a “router,” but I don't think he was interested in knowing what the “box” was called. I guess once you reach a certain age, you just decide it's easier to assign old vocabulary to new things than it is to learn the new vocab.

“Where's grandma?” I asked.

“Mahjong,” was the one-word answer.

I dug through a tangle of cords behind the desk, unplugged the router, and then plugged it back in again. I told Art to try to reload a web page. He futzed with his old desktop and Google popped up on the screen. “Ah!” he exclaimed, “The Google loads.”

“Yes,” I said, shaking my head, “*The Google does load.*”

“It's like magic,” he said, and he clapped me on the back, as if to say, “What a wonderful grandson I have.”

“All right,” I replied, trying to avoid any real conversation, “You can use the interwebs now. I should really get a move on. I've got a lot of homework.”

But my grandfather didn't seem to have any interest in experiencing the magic of his restored internet connection. And he ignored my comment about my homework.

“Come,” he said, “I've got something for you.” And he led me out of the office, through the kitchen, and into the dining room.

My grandparents' dining room is one of those rooms that nobody ever goes in. It's full of expensive crap: nice paintings, hideous sculptures, and plates and silverware that no one ever uses. I feel like most upper-middle class people have this room. It's like once you reach a certain income threshold, you automatically receive a useless, overly lavish room, which you're only permitted to use once or twice a year. As a child, I was not allowed to enter this room, or even *think* about entering it. "Aaron, don't you even think about it," I was told. So I kept it out of my mind. And I didn't like the room, as I resented the "adult" things from which I was excluded.

Now my grandfather led me to the dining room windows, tall windows that looked out over the backyard, and I felt like we were in that room for a reason: so we could have an "adult" conversation. I was immediately uncomfortable, and shifted my weight self-consciously back and forth.

In the backyard, there were birds at a feeder, a frenzy of activity. Brown and orange leaves covered the well-manicured grass in patches. That grass used to be a mess. When I was younger, there was a jungle gym back there, and it crushed the lawn, and browned it. Even in the spring, with fresh seed and fertilizer, it didn't grow right. It was an expansive, fun backyard. I used to play out there with Sarah, and on holidays, our cousins. And when we got too old for swings and monkey bars, we played tag and touch football. My Grandparents encouraged us to bring friends, and we did. It certainly didn't matter if they were Jews. Art and Deb didn't care who was on their swing set.

But we didn't come to my grandparents' house much for holidays anymore. Our cousins had moved to South Dakota, of all places. Now *our* house was the holiday house, and my dad had taken over for Deb as family chef.

“Remember the jungle gym we used to have out there?” my grandfather asked me.

“Of course. I was just thinking about it,” I replied.

“Deb and I used to watch you and Doug, and Josh, and Sarah, and Lisa all running around. That was fun, wasn’t it?”

“It was fun,” I replied.

“Wouldn’t it be great if you were all together again? Playing together?”

I wasn’t sure it would be so great. None of us had really “played,” in a number of years. And it’s usually just awkward when I see my cousins these days. They’re nice, I guess, but I don’t have too much to say to them.

“It would be great, Grandpa,” I lied.

Art took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. He placed a hand firmly on my shoulder, holding me in place. Then he pulled an envelop from his pocket and handed it to me.

It was blank on the outside, but inside it contained a check for 1200 dollars.

“I heard you had a little incident with the Ford in a parking lot,” he said, with a little humor in his voice. I turned from the window, toward him, and he had a glimmer in his eye, the same one I used to see when I was a little kid, when he took me and Sarah out for ice cream against our mother’s wishes.

I should have been thrilled. Here was the money I needed to fix the car, and all I’d had to do was fix the Wifi.

“I pay my IT department very well,” Art said, as though he’d read my mind.

But it wasn't payment for fixing the Wifi. It didn't feel that way. It felt wrong, and I couldn't return my grandfather's smile. He was so pleased with himself, thrilled that he could make my car problem disappear. But he thought he was getting something more out of it. The night before he'd suggested that he didn't like that my girlfriend wasn't Jewish. And now he was telling me with money.

I didn't want to be manipulated. It felt uncomfortable. It was *physically* uncomfortable. I was suddenly very cold, and I felt a rush of nerves shooting up my body.

Now I knew how my mom felt when my grandparents paid for my private school, or helped her pay for the house. It made her life easier. But it also didn't quite make it *her* life anymore. My mom didn't really have a choice, but maybe I did.

"You shouldn't have to find that money yourself," my grandfather went on, "You shouldn't have worry about money now. Your grandmother and I would love to help you out."

I didn't like all this beating-around-the-bush. I wanted to just beat the stupid bush already. "I know that this has something to do with Val," I said.

"She seemed very nice," Art replied, basically admitting that it was *all* about Val. And I could feel that same indignation that Val had felt. If she was "very nice," what else did she need to be?

"But being nice doesn't seem to count," I said. "But it should count. It should count the most. Who cares if she's Jewish? I'm a kid. And even if I weren't, it shouldn't matter."

All the glimmer went away, and Art went stone cold. He pulled a chair out from the dining room table and sat down. “Your father had a gentile girlfriend when he was in college. I think they were still together when he graduated. And it didn’t work out. Because when you’re in a partnership with somebody, it isn’t just about *you*. It’s about your family, and the world around you. Your heritage *does* matter, Aaron. It makes you part of something much larger. We tried when you were young to bring you closer to it, with your bar mitzvah, and your Hebrew School education. Remember when we went to Israel?” It was a rhetorical question. Of course I remembered. Though I mostly remembered the hummus. “That was such a nice trip,” Art continued, “It makes me sad that your heritage isn’t important to you. Your grandmother and I just feel that you might get along better with somebody—”

“You have no idea who I get along with,” I said. I could feel my voice getting louder, but I couldn’t quite rein it in. “This is *bullshit*.”

“Aaron, do not swear in this house.”

“What? Am I in some kind of holy Jew zone?”

Art stood from his chair, and rose up to his full height. I wanted him to look angry. But instead he looked...sad, heartbroken. I’m not saying that he *wasn’t* angry. But he was good at hiding it. And it made me even more furious that he could remain so calm, so controlled, when I wanted to smash all of the expensive wine glasses, and overturn the table like somebody in a movie.

Instead of smashing my grandparents’ possessions, I turned and walked out of the house. My grandfather’s voice trailed after me. He said something along the lines of “Don’t walk away from me, young man,” but it wasn’t exactly that, and I didn’t obey.

Dinner that night was a little tense. I didn't know for sure, but I guessed that Art had called one or both of my parents, and filed a complaint. And sure enough, after the meal, my mom pulled me into the living room for what appeared to be a serious discussion. My father remained behind to clear the table, which is usually my job. I cautiously followed my mom out of the kitchen. We sat down on the living room couch, which is probably an expensive couch, but it's incredibly uncomfortable.

"I really enjoyed meeting Valerie last night," she began. She then paused for a moment to see if I wanted to respond. I didn't, and I just shifted my weight on the couch, trying to find a comfortable position. I already knew she'd enjoyed meeting Valerie, so I just set in to wait for her to get to the point.

"She seems like a very nice girl," my mom went on. Again she paused to see if I wanted to respond.

"Why is this couch so darned uncomfortable?" I asked, trying to change the subject. I got a sense of where this was going, and it was not going to be fun. It looked like my parents were going to side with my grandfather. "I don't get it. Comfort would be a top priority for me if I bought a couch."

"Next time we need a couch, you can buy it."

"I agree with Aaron," My father called out from that kitchen, "I've never liked that couch. I don't really like that maroon color."

"It matches the rug,"

"We bought the couch first," my father's voice replied.

"Please, Joe, we're trying to have a conversation. We talked about this."

My father emerged from the kitchen and sat down on the big chair opposite the couch. “Okay. Where were we?” he asked.

“We were talking about the chronology of the acquisitions of the living room’s furniture and decorative textiles,” I replied.

My father ignored me and went straight to the point. “Aaron, you cannot treat your grandfather like you treat your peers.”

“Noted. But Dad, grandpa said you had some non-Jewish girlfriend in college?” I thought that would flip the conversation on its head, but my father just nodded like he’d been expecting that question.

“Aaron, I think there’s something you need to understand, which I know is tough when you’re young, and everything you feel... Well, you feel it really strongly. And Valerie may be very important to you now, but she’s not part of your family.”

“I’m aware of that, and I would think you’d be pleased that I’m not dating a member of our family.”

My father didn’t laugh or even smile. He looked uncomfortable, and *he* was in the comfortable chair. “Aaron, feelings about girlfriends change, especially at your age. And we’re concerned that you might alienate the people close to you because of... a crush, or a first love.”

The guy sounded so condescending. I looked at my mom for help, but as usual, she just sat there kind of nodding along.

I stood up, and started pacing. “Look, I said. I know how I feel. I’m me. And second, your father tried to bribe me. You talk about how you treat your family members and stuff. He bribed me. He tried to pay for the car dent.”

“He loves you. I’m sure he was just showing his appreciation for your help today,” my dad said, and he sounded like he might actually have believed his own words.

My mom cut in, her voice flat and even. “Did you take it?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I’ll find a way to pay for it myself.”

I started to pace myself out of the room. “Aaron,” my father said quietly. “You may be able to pay for the car. But what about college?”

I’d been trying really hard not to think about college, even though my school, my grandparents, and now my parents, were all trying to ram it down my throat. But when I did think about college, I didn’t think about the money.

My mother cut in and said, “On a practical level, Aaron, with your father’s new...work situation, your grandparents are paying for your tuition. They’re helping us out, and you can’t...” And then her voice trailed off. When she spoke again, her voice was softer, “When your father finished his PHD, we wanted.... Well, *I* wanted to live in New York.” Her voice sounded odd, like it wasn’t quite hers, and it got my attention. “But we couldn’t afford it. And your grandparents showed us this house. Here. And it was beautiful. And the neighborhood’s great. Sometimes you make compromises, and it works out for the best.”

My father nodded along with her, and he looked like one of those bobble-heads they give out at Phillies games. My mother, however, didn’t bob. Susan’s face was inscrutable. I tried really hard to scrute it, but I couldn’t tell if she really thought it had worked out “for the best.”

For my part, I’d stopped pacing, and I just stood there in the foyer-thing between the living room and stairs, looking back at my parents. And where I’d been angry at my

grandfather before, I now felt betrayed. Earlier when my mom had said, “You’re on your own, pups,” she was right. She and Joe were siding with the grandparents, because they actually agreed with them, or because they had to. But it didn’t matter what the reason was. The result was the same.

I climbed the half-flight of stairs to my room, closed the door, and threw myself on my bed. I thought about calling Val, but decided not to. I thought about starting *The Old Man and the Sea*. I’d been meaning to read Hemingway, especially after I saw that Woody Allen movie where Ernest seemed like such a bad-ass. But when Mrs. Thompson assigned me Hemingway to read, it suddenly lost its appeal. I couldn’t think of anything else to do, however, so I opened the book and started it. It felt like an apology to Val in some way, even if she didn’t know about it.

I found I could relate to the poor, old, unlucky fisherman. But I still didn’t get the whole fishing thing. If I were the old man, and I sat on a boat and didn’t catch a fish for eighty days, I’d give up. If I really wanted a fish, I’d buy one. That’s got to be easier than holding my line in the water for three consecutive months.

I guess that’s why Hemingway didn’t write the book about me. Jews don’t fish. The Jew is not an aquatic creature. I’m not exactly sure why. Maybe that’s why the Israelites didn’t canoe across the Red Sea out of Egypt, though it also could have been the lack of canoes. Anyway, there’s that classic American image of a couple of dudes, sitting out on a lake in their boat, shooting the shit, drinking beer, and waiting for marine life to impale itself on their hooks. And those American dudes drinking beers are *never* wearing yarmulkes.

But Jews *do* date non-Jewish girls. Like Val had suggested, they'd been doing it since *Fiddler on the Roof*. Even my own dad had done it. And whatever my parents wanted to call what I felt for Val—a crush, a first love. I didn't know if it was either of those, or both. But I really liked her, and I wasn't going to break up with her because my family wanted me to.

I gave in and called my non-Jewish girlfriend.

“Hello?” she answered.

“I started the Hemingway novel,” I said. “Why doesn't that dude just go buy a fish if he wants a fish so bad?”

“He doesn't want to catch the fish for the *fish*. It's not about fish. It's about his pride and his... You know what? I'm not going to bother. You're just trying to get under my skin.”

“No. Well, maybe. I think I was actually trying to apologize.”

“For what?”

“For siding with my family. For defending them when they were being huge dicks.”

“It's okay. I understand. They're your family.”

“It's not okay. My grandpa tried to bribe me into dumping you.”

“Really?” Val asked with a giggle. “You get a good price?”

“Well, it wasn't exactly like that. And it wasn't very funny.”

“What'd you say?”

“I said no. But now there are all of these passive aggressive threats about college money and stuff. And I'm going to have to get a job to pay to fix my mom's car.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yeah, but I feel guilty.”

“Don’t. I really like you, Strudel Pants. I just don’t want this to like...change things.”

“I like you too Aaron. A lot. But I feel uncomfortable if your parents don’t like me, or—”

“They’ve got nothing against you. It’s all about me, and what they want from *me*. You don’t have to come over or anything.”

“I just don’t see...” her voice trailed off for a second. “Eventually,” she went on, “it’s going to have to be okay for me to come over to your house.”

“There are other houses.”

“Aaron.”

“I know, I know. But we can, like, keep hanging out now. We can stay together, right?”

There was a moment of silence on the line, but then Val said “I don’t know. I *want* to.”

“Shouldn’t you do what you want?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, “I guess.”

I felt a little relieved, but I didn’t like the uncertainty in her voice.

A week or two passed, and things at my house got weird. It's like the place was all of a sudden really cold, and I don't think it was because it was *literally* getting cold, though that was also happening, because the weather was transitioning toward winter.

It was as if some sort of rift had opened between me and my family. We didn't talk much at dinner. I spent as much time in my room as possible. My grandparents had only been over once, and I'd left the house and gone to Ian's because I couldn't deal with them. When I *was* at home, the house was extra quiet. My parents didn't know exactly what to do with me. They weren't going to *forbid* me from seeing Val. They just "disapproved" and I think I was supposed to feel guilty about it. And I'd say I felt *fairly* guilty.

But other than the Val thing, I was being a pretty "good" son. So they couldn't really get too pissed.

But I felt uncomfortable around everybody, not just the grandparents. I even felt weird around Sarah. It goes back to my distaste for uncertainty. I didn't really know where I stood with my parents, and I couldn't ask them how they really felt, because they couldn't, or wouldn't tell me.

Two Sundays after the Val-Stew incident, when I went to grab breakfast, my parents were both at the kitchen table. My dad was reading some kind of environmental journal and eating a pickled herring sandwich. My mom was going over paperwork at the kitchen table. She was sitting as far away from my dad as possible, or really as far away from his herring as possible, and I didn't blame her. I said good morning from *outside* the kitchen for the very same reason.

My father is the only person who's not Norwegian who likes herring. He buys these colossal jars of pickled herring that float in this mustard-oil that smells like a rotting corpse. He is probably the lone purchaser of this stuff. In fact, the ACME near our house stopped carrying this brand of herring when one of their employees, Stanley, accidentally dropped and broke a jar, and was killed instantly by the terrible stench. I haven't verified if the employee death story is true, but they did actually stop carrying the stuff, probably because there isn't a significant enough Nordic population in the area to consume all the nasty fish. My dad begged the ACME to start carrying it again, which to his surprise and my dismay, they did. So now, even if he doesn't *want* herring, he thinks he has an obligation to buy it, because he feels guilty for strong-arming the store into stocking it. Every time I turn my nose up at the pickled herring, my dad pulls the "how do you know you don't like it if you haven't tried it" shtick, which is bullshit, because there's lots of stuff I know I don't like, without trying it. I've never eaten my own feces, for instance, or read Ulysses cover to cover. There are just some things that you know will be awful, and you don't actually have to try them out.

I hovered outside the kitchen for a minute, but I was very hungry and I had to eat something. I rummaged through the various cabinets, looked in the freezer and the fridge. But it was Sunday, grocery day, and there wasn't anything edible left in the house. I wasn't speaking much with "the fam," but the lack of food made me grumpy. "There's nothing to eat," I declared.

"There's lots of herring," my father replied, still staring at his magazine. I searched his face for a hint of humor or irony, but he was serious, despite the fact that I'd

spent a pretty significant portion of my childhood expressing my distaste for pickled herring.

“That’s like saying ‘we’ve got a lot of shoes,’ or ‘Sarah’s got some meat on her bones,’” I replied, “Technically, if I’m in a bind, I could eat our shoes, or Sarah. You know what? If I’m literally starving to death, right after I eat Sarah, I’ll eat the herring. Before the shoes.”

“I find it disturbing that you want to eat your sister,” my mom chirped, also without irony.

“I don’t *want* to. I’d just choose it over pickled herring, in a pinch.” I rearranged some things in the fridge and managed to find a low-fat fruit-on-the-bottom yogurt near the back. I leaned on the counter, and mixed the strawberry goo into the yogurt with my spoon. “If I did eat Sarah,” I asked, “would you press charges?” My mom gets tired of answering this type of question, which is reasonable, and she sighed and grimaced at me, as though to say ‘who raised you to ask things like that?’

“I’d have you institutionalized,” she replied.

“Oh yeah, good call.”

I walked out of the kitchen with my yogurt and up the half-flight of stairs to my room. “You know you’re not allowed to eat that outside the kitchen,” my mom’s voice trailed after me.

“Yeah, I know,” I replied.

“But you’re still doing it.”

“Yep.”

I've found that the only way to change the rules is to break them continuously until my parents get tired of trying to enforce them. Eating yogurt in my room is not an offense worth punishing. So I figure if I do it consistently enough, they'll just get used to it. I'm not six years old, and I'm unlikely to spill the yogurt on anything. I've tried this rule-changing strategy at school by speaking more candidly than is allowed. I figure if I just continue to speak as normal people do, with lots of profanity for emphasis and self-expression, my teachers will get tired of bothering to punish me, and they'll just ignore it. It's like how you're not technically allowed to jaywalk. But everybody does it. And because it's such a small thing, it would be more trouble than it's worth for law enforcement to ticket people. I'm a proud jaywalker, in-school curser, and eater of yogurt outside of the designated yogurt eating area. I'm like James Dean in that movie I've never seen. I assume he eats yogurt all over the place in that film.

I went into my room and closed the door. I lay on my bed and spent the rest of the morning reading blog posts about the days' upcoming Eagles-Redskins game. Usually, I watched Eagles games with my dad. It was something we'd been doing since I was little. And we used to throw a football in the yard after the game, to express our excitement at a Birds' victory, or work out the frustrations of a defeat. But the previous week, my dad hadn't watched with me. Instead, he'd sat at the kitchen table, listened to the game on the radio, read an environmental journal, and nervously babbled about chemical runoff. I'd watched silently downstairs, lonely.

When I finished my yogurt, I put the little plastic cup down on the floor, but the weight of the spoon tipped it over, and put a couple dabs of pink on the light blue carpet. I said I'd be "unlikely" to spill yogurt. Sometimes you play the odds and just let it ride.

When I went downstairs to watch the game, Sarah was on the couch watching reruns of some reality show. I informed her that the Eagles were on. She informed me that she was there first.

I didn't even bother trying to kick Sarah off the TV. She'd never willingly relinquish it, and I didn't want to file an appeal to the parents, because I didn't want to ask them for anything.

I texted Ian and informed him that I was going over to his place to watch the game. I told my parents, and I left.

I pride myself on my logical thinking. I don't believe in god because, based on logic, there's nothing to suggest that god exists. I'm not patriotic because logic says that nation-states are arbitrary, temporary, and contrived. Spectator sport is my logical vice. I care very deeply about Eagles' football. *Very* deeply. To the point that their wins and losses play a significant part in the governance of my emotions.

I'm not nationalistic, but I have a regional pride that I can't shake. The Eagles are such an integral part of the emotional life of Philadelphia that in the weeks following an Eagles loss, the city's rate of violent crime, especially murder, is significantly higher than in the weeks following wins. It's like this for me too. I'm not really the murdering type, but when the Eagles lose, my week tends to be bad. And when they win, my week is usually good. I can't help it. I invest so much of my time into watching the Eagles, watching people talk about the Eagles, and reading about the Eagles, that when they lose, it destroys me.

When I was younger, I didn't really consider *why* I let Eagles' losses affect my life. I just assumed it was normal, that it made sense. But when they lost the Superbowl to the Patriots, I threw a fit. I cried uncontrollably and broke a fancy paper-weight my grandparents had given me. My mother sat me down and asked, "Why do you let a game affect you so much? It's not healthy." Usually it was my dad who was scared about health, but he cares about football too, and probably didn't want to look like a hypocrite.

"I don't *want* it to affect me," I told my mom, "It just does."

"How?" She asked, "I don't get it. You don't *know* the players. They don't know you. You have nothing to do with them. You're out of your mind." I tried to disagree about me being out of my mind. It had always made sense to me. I didn't *feel* crazy. But I couldn't explain it to her. I tried. I babbled. I muttered. But I couldn't articulate it. "So you'll admit that it's irrational?" she prodded me.

"No," I responded.

"Then explain it."

"No."

"Then admit it's irrational."

"No."

I didn't admit anything, because I was speaking with my *mother*, but also because I hadn't really come to terms with it myself.

Later that night, I lay in my bed and thought about it. 'Why do I hate the Cowboys?' I thought. They're just a bunch of guys who happen to have been drafted by that team, or been given the most money by that team. Any of the Eagles players could be Cowboys players if the draft picks had been different, or if the Cowboys had offered

them more cash in free agency. And Cowboys fans, well, they were just born in the Dallas area (some of them), and if I'd been born in, say, Fort Worth, god forbid, I'd probably be a Cowboys fan too. But then, despite this logical argument, I thought to myself: you know what? Fuck the Cowboys. And I was right (I always win arguments with myself). Fuck the Cowboys.

I did come to the realization that I was acting illogically, but I couldn't get my emotional responses to fall into the logical line. And, really, now that I've enlightened myself, it's even worse than before. Now I get pissed off when the Eagles lose. But I also get pissed at myself for *getting* pissed off when they lose. My brain is crazy. It sucks in here.

Ian sat on the edge of his basement couch, nervously tapping the top of a soda can. But he didn't open it. He seemed to have forgotten it was there. "They lost the coin toss," he told me, "Birds are about to kick off." I grabbed a soda from the basement fridge, opened it, and took my seat next to him. I opened his soda too, because the tapping was starting to annoy me.

Phil Garry was there too, in Ian's dad's recliner, but I couldn't see his face. Phil has very long hair, like he's in a band. But he's not in a band. He keeps his hair long because, he claims, long hair lends him a certain "anonymity." But I never see him and think, 'Hmmm, I wonder what anonymous person is behind all that hair?' Instead, I think, 'Hey, it's Phil.'

From a neutral perspective, it looked like it was going to be an easy Eagles' win. All the commentators before the game picked the Birds to win. The Eagles are usually a

pretty good team. And the Redskins are the kings of bad free agent signings and racial insensitivity. They generally have a pretty bad team. Also, the game was in Philadelphia, so it was, according to the pundits, a forgone conclusion that the Eagles would spank them.

So Ian, Phil and I knew that the Eagles would lose. The Skins drove down the field and scored an early field goal. Then, on the ensuing Eagles' possession, a batted ball was caught by a Redskins linebacker, who took it back for a touchdown. And before the Birds realized that there was a football game going on, they were down 10-0.

At halftime, the score was the same, and the talking heads on the TV said "Expect the Eagles to wake up in a big way in the second half and erase this small deficit."

Ian crushed his soda can into the table. "I don't understand," he bellowed, "You've got a full week to prepare for the game. You don't have any other important engagements. There's nothing else you need to do. Everything you do for the whole week leads up to this, and then when the game comes around you're not *ready* for it? Fucking goddamn fucking horseshit fucking... goddamn it." He threw the crushed soda can across the room, paused for a moment, and then walked over to pick it up.

The throwing of the soda can nicely symbolizes a key difference between Ian and me. I have a great excess of foresight. Every time I consider taking an action, I think about each and every potential consequence of that action. Ian doesn't seem to understand that actions *have* consequences. He threw the soda can, not realizing that he'd have to go across the room to pick it up and recycle it.

I felt oddly apathetic about the game, strangely numb, because my mind was occupied with foreword thinking. Would I talk about the game with my dad later, or

would it be too uncomfortable? Would my mom keep pestering me about the car-money thing? Would my grandparents come over for dinner? And if so, what excuse could I use to get away?

I felt generally crappy, and I wanted to talk to somebody. But Val got pissed when I complained about my family stuff. And then when she got annoyed with me, I couldn't talk about it with my parents. And it's hard to talk to Ian in general.

Earlier in the week, I'd tried to talk to Ian about the issues with my family. He started off all sarcastic. He said I should "run away from home and go live in the Alaskan wilderness, like the plot of that movie with Emile Hirsch." I told him that that was a true story. That guy really did die. I kept pestering him until, eventually, Ian broke down and spoke seriously. And then I regretted it.

Ian's parents are fairly old, and he has three older siblings. But they're all like ten years older than him, and they've already moved out of the house. They've got jobs and spouses and mortgages. Ian's parents are kind of "checked out." They pay attention to Ian's life, and they love him, but the family doesn't do a lot of talking, and they never do stuff as a group. When I finally got Ian to talk, he looked at me, his face blank, and said, "Dude, I don't know what to tell you. I don't think I'm really the person to talk to about the whole family communication thing." And then he went on, staring into a bag of chips: "And don't ask me about your stupid girlfriend either, cause I don't know. How am *I* supposed to know?"

I felt mean and selfish, and we didn't say anything for a while. We just played Madden in silence. We didn't even trash talk. The only sounds were the crunching of

snacks, and the occasional exclamation from the digital commentators. After a game or two, I said, “Sorry, man.”

“No,” he said, “It’s cool. I didn’t mean to be all...negative. I should probably be helpful when you want help.”

And then I had the sudden urge to give him a hug, but I refrained. Instead, I went upstairs to get more Chex Mix.

As the pundits had suggested, the Eagles fought their way back into the game, and tied it at 10. But just as we were entertaining the idea that they might win the game, they muffed a punt and handed the ball to the Skins deep in the Eagles’ own territory. The Redskins kicked a chip-shot field goal and won the game 13-10. It was one of the more heartbreaking losses I’d witnessed, at least in the regular season.

Ian ranted and raved enough for the both of us. Phil just stared at the ceiling and ran his hand through his greasy hair. And I just felt strangely relieved. I’m not exactly sure why. It’s like, since I was already upset, the Eagles might as well lose, so everybody could be upset *with* me.

“All right,” Phil announced after a few moments of silence, “I’ve got to get to the library.”

“What are you doing there?” I asked. I hadn’t known Phil to knowingly share a room with a book.

“I work there,” he informed me.

“Really?” I asked, out of both surprise and excitement. “Can you get me a job?”

“It’s not what you think,” he replied, “I know you like books, but you don’t get to read or anything. You just put books on shelves.”

“I’m familiar with shelves. I can do that.”

“And old ladies ask you really annoying questions. They’re like, ‘where’re the Fiction books,’ and you’re like, ‘under the sign that says Fiction.’ And they’re like ‘I can’t see that far. I have arthritis.’”

“They can’t possibly say that,” I said. “Arthritis is a—”

“Dude, I don’t care. The point is that the job—”

“I need money. Do they pay money?”

Phil looked at me like I was a nut. “Yes, they pay...money. It’s *really* boring.”

“I love boredom. Ask your boss.”

“She’s my aunt. She’ll hire you if I ask nicely.”

“Sweet. Thanks, dude,” I said, and Ian shot me a death-stare. How dare I act happy following an Eagles’ loss.

We all left Ian’s house together. Phil jumped in his car to go to work. Ian was going on a run to calm himself down, which I don’t get, because I find running to be excruciating rather than cathartic. If I want to feel like I’m going to vomit out all of my internal organs, I’ll eat some herring, and I won’t have to leave the house.

I walked home, and for the first time since I was aware of football, I wasn’t thinking about the game that had just transpired. I was thinking mostly about my new job prospects. At the very least, I could tell my mom I’d found a job opportunity. And even if I didn’t ultimately get the gig, she might get off my ass about it.

Chapter 12

Part of writing a story is “pacing.” This is a bit like running a long race. I’ve never run a long race, but this is what I’ve been told. Basically, if you run really fast at the beginning, you won’t have the energy to finish at the end. Insider’s tip: you save *even more* energy if you decide not to run at all.

In a story, you’ve got to do the same thing. You can’t tell the whole story up front, because then there’s nothing left to say at the end. I seem to have the opposite problem, which is that I get so sidetracked trying to tell the story that I can’t get off the starting blocks. I’m like the Hare when he stops to nap, except that instead of stopping in the middle to sleep, I stopped about a foot into the race to talk make bad jokes about pickled herring.

And the whole thing with the Tortoise and the Hare is horseshit anyway. Slow and steady doesn’t win the race. The only reason slow and steady wins is because it’s competing against fast and intermittent. Fast and steady would kick the shit out of the slow and steady any day.

Anyway, we’re going to fast-forward about a month, a month in which I continued to avoid my own stupid house. I wasn’t home much after school because Phil did help me get a job at the local public library. I actually took a bunch of his hours, and I worked most days after school. And when I wasn’t working, I hung out after school with Val, and we did our homework together in the library. It was weird because the job made it so I had much less free time, but because I was doing school stuff with Val, I was more productive than I’d ever been.

Work, by the way, is not fun. I don't recommend it. Despite Phil's warnings, working at the library *sounded* super. Libraries are quiet. I like quiet. Libraries have books. I like books. But in reality, the library wasn't quiet, because people were always having *really* personal conversations on their cell phones, very loudly. And when you're shelving books, which is what I did, for hours, it doesn't matter that they're books. You could be laying bricks, and it would basically be the same thing, except that bricks don't usually have to be arranged alphabetically.

Also, I don't like watching homeless people masturbate. That's another reason not to work in a public library: you run into many fewer masturbating homeless people.

The local library used to hold a certain magic for me. I remember going to "storytime" with my parents and grandparents. And we'd sing songs, and read books. And they had a pretty awesome Curious George stuffed animal that I loved, because Curious George is awesome—that fucker is just so damn curious. But the library magic disappeared very quickly, and my good memories were replaced by the grating sound of patrons' cell phone conversations, and images of the infinite book carts waiting to be shelved.

I did, however, get paid money. I turned my earnings over to my mom, and I was making a *dent*—hahaha, get it?—in the money I needed to fix the dent. I think my mom was a little proud that I'd actually gotten a job, instead of taking my grandparents' money.

My parents and I continued to give each other the silent treatment, with one exception. The only thing my parents forced me to talk about was college. When it came

to college, they wanted me to “shoot for stars.” My mom even used those words. My parents seemed to feel like I should go to a top ranked university, but I couldn’t tell if they wanted that because they thought my life would be better that way, or if they wanted that because then they could tell everyone that their son went to a top ranked university.

“What about the University of Pennsylvania?” my dad asked me one night. “It’s one of the best institutions in the world, and it’s local.” *His* father had been funneling college brochures into our house, kind of like those Hogwarts letters Harry Potter gets at the beginning of the *Sorcerer’s Stone*. Most of them were for highly selective schools that I was unlikely to get into. Many of them were for UPenn, where my grandfather had gone, and where he knew “people.”

We were at the dinner table one night, eating quinoa, which according to Wikipedia “is a grain-like crop grown primarily for its edible seeds.” I’d never heard of it.

“Too much meningitis at UPenn,” I replied, “Plus, I’m holding out for a basketball scholarship somewhere.”

“You don’t play basketball.”

“How hard can it be?”

My dad put his silverware down, and took on a lecturing tone. “Aaron, the university you attend can make a big difference in your job prospects, and in which career you choose. What do you think you’re interested in doing?”

I couldn't think of anything off the top of my head that I actually *wanted* to do. A career implied work, and I didn't like working. I liked leisure. I liked just thinking about stuff. I liked relaxing.

"He's not interested in *anything*," Sarah said, "unless he can get a job making corny jokes."

I continued to say nothing, partially because I was operating on a "no-talking-to-family-members" policy, and partially because she was right. I wasn't really interested in anything.

"What do like in school?" My dad asked. "You like learning German, don't you?"

"There are like eighty million people who already speak German. They're called Germans. I can't have a career as a German."

"That's not what I was suggesting."

"I know. I was making one of those corny jokes Sarah says I'm interested in."

"You *are* interested in those," my dad said with an unenthusiastic chuckle.

I unenthusiastically ate more chicken and the "edible" grain-like crop known as "quinoa," which, according to the Wiki, is "closely related to the tumbleweed."

MFS was on the same page as my parents. The school, which calls itself a "Quaker, College Preparatory School," was busy preparing us Juniors for college. We all had to meet with the Guidance Counselor to discuss our "post-graduation plans," which meant college for pretty much everybody. I *really* didn't want to think about college. I wasn't going to go to college for another year and a half, but apparently, before you can actually *go* to college, you've got to think about the SATs, prepare for the SATs, and take

the SATs. Then you've got to take them again because you had a really bad nose itch that distracted you during the Reading section. Then you have to think about what colleges you want to visit, and then visit those colleges, and then think about how you liked your visits even though you can't remember which was which. And then you have to *apply* to the colleges. Ideally, you should get started on this process as soon as you learn to walk.

One morning in late November, I was called into guidance to take the Career Aptitude test. This was part of the pre-college process. They sat me down at a computer and I had to answer multiple-choice questions, and then the computer told me which occupation I should choose. The only question I remember was: "Would you mind working with blood?" I certainly would mind, but I think I answered "no," because I wanted to see what the blood-related jobs were. Anyway, I spent like an hour taking this test and at the end it gave me a short list of suggested careers. The first was Airline Pilot. But the test hadn't asked: "Are you scared shitless every time you board an airplane?" Airline Pilot was followed by Mail Carrier and Seaman. I started laughing when I saw Seaman, and Mrs. Biederman came over to see what was funny, and I had to play it off like I thought there was something hilarious about Mail Carriers. "Males are heavy," I said, "I think I'd rather be a female carrier."

"It's too bad the program didn't suggest Comedian," Mrs. Biederman replied.

"So, are you going to be an Airline Pilot?"

"I'm scared of flying. The Jew is not an aeronautical creature."

I don't know that the test did much, other than solidify my conviction that standardized tests are useless. But I already held that conviction fairly strongly.

When we were in the ninth grade, we took these ERD things—unless they were the GSSEs. I asked if they “mattered” for anything. I was told that they did not. So I filled in random bubbles and was done with each section in about five minutes. And I got to spend most of the day just reading and relaxing.

I did not do well on the tests. Completely arbitrary bubble-filling is not the optimal way to take a multiple-choice test. It helps to read the question, and sometimes even to consider the possible answers. I finished below the 10th percentile in most sections. I was, however, in the 60th for Reading Comprehension, and I was very proud, as I had neither read nor comprehended a single word of that section.

Either way, afterwards, I had to have a really awkward conversation with Dr. Schlutz. This was before he knew me. He sat me down and had to figure out whether the test scores meant that I was stupid, and that I was totally incompetent in every subject except Reading Comprehension, or that I was a jerk who couldn’t take the system seriously. I was worried that I was going to get in trouble, but he was actually very relieved to learn that I was just a smart ass, and that I wasn’t several years behind in my knowledge and aptitude.

After school, I was in the school library with Val, in our usual spot. The library is a bright, open, colorful space, but it has a couple of nice nooks and crannies. There are a few comfortable chairs in a corner near the reference books where very few people go, probably because everything that’s in a reference book is also on the Internet. And we tended to cozy up over there and do homework, or stream TV shows illegally online.

“My birthday is in three weeks. Dec. 17th,” Val informed me, and then quickly added: “I’m not telling you that just to, like, tell you. My parents got me tickets to see Coldplay for my birthday. The concert is next Saturday. Do you want to come see them with me?”

“No,” I said, because honesty is important in a relationship. That’s what I’ve been told, anyway.

Val had her whole body curled up in a big chair, kind of like a cat. She had her knees pulled up over her face, and I could only see her eyes. “Why not?” she asked, “...It’s my birthday.”

“I’m kidding,” I lied. “Of course I want to go. I love Coldplay. Best insipid soft rock band on the planet.”

“I know you don’t like Coldplay. You should want to go with *me*.”

“I do, that’s why I’m excited to go, with *you*. It could be any band... It could be...” I tried to think of a band I disliked more than Coldplay. “I don’t know...The Wiggles. No, I like The Wiggles. I don’t know...Doesn’t matter. Let’s do it.”

I was actually pretty excited about the prospect of celebrating Val’s birthday with her. I put on my best reassuring smile and she looked fairly reassured. “Did you take the Career Aptitude test?” I asked her.

“Yeah. This morning.”

“What’d it tell you?” I asked.

“Number one was Visual Artist.”

“Shit. I think I may have taken the test wrong.”

“Why? What’d it tell you?”

“Airline Pilot.”

Val started laughing, and her eyes lit up. “But you’re afraid of flying.”

“It didn’t ask about that.”

“Stupid test.”

“So,” I asked, “What do you actually want to be? Do you want to be an artist?”

Val stopped giggling and put on this thoughtful introspective face she uses a lot. She gets serious, and her eyes unfocus, and I feel like I can see the gears turning in her head. It’s like I can *watch* her thinking. “Yeah,” she said, after a moment, “I think I’d like to go to art school, anyway. Or design school. I think design school. I want to do Graphic Design.”

I was surprised by such a confident answer, though I shouldn’t have been. I pretended to leaf through my history textbook, while my wheels spun. “How do you *know* that’s what you want to do?”

“I just picture myself doing it, and it looks like fun. And there’s a lot you can do with it: animation, advertising. You can work with architectural stuff. And I think I’d be good at it.”

“You would,” I mumbled, because she would.

“You don’t picture yourself doing things, like job things?”

I didn’t. I pictured myself having sex with famous people. I pictured myself pitching for the Phillies, playing seeker for Gryffindor, touring with the Beatles. Nothing realistic. “I think I’m going to be German when I grow up,” I said.

“I think you might be getting ‘career’ confused with ‘nationality,’” Val told me with a giggle. And she uncurled herself, reached out, and put a hand on my knee. I continued to stare at my textbook. “Also, I think it might be a little late for that already.”

“I want to be, like, in some rye,” I said, “Like in that song, with the children coming through the rye. And I could catch them. I could be the catcher in—”

“You know,” Val said, “you spend a lot of time making fun of the stuff we read in school. And you make fun of me, and anybody else who actually thinks about it and takes it seriously. But I have this theory—I’ve talked about it with Cassandra—that you think about it the most. More than anyone. And when you go home, when you say you’re playing computer games, or watching the Flyers, you’re actually thinking about the stuff we read in English class.”

“Prove it.”

“I can’t. I’m never at your house.”

The mention of my house gave us both pause, and there was an awkward moment of silence.

I was still preoccupied by this college idea. I had no idea that Val was already thinking about it, and I felt left out, or left behind. “So,” I asked tentatively, “Do you know, like, *where*, you want to go to school?”

“My dad went to college in Canada. My parents want me to go to school there too, because tuition costs a *lot* less.”

“I think you can pay in Maple Syrup.”

“You *can’t* pay in Maple Syrup. But it’s cheap.”

“I like Maple Syrup.”

“Okay, Aaron.” She took a deep breath. “Anyway, I don’t really want to go to school in Canada, because I’m from here, and I feel like if I got a degree in Canada it might be harder to start a career here. But I don’t really know.”

“What about me?” I asked.

“What about you? I don’t know where you want to go to school.”

“No, like, what about us?”

“Yeah, I don’t know.”

This created an even more uncomfortable silence, and Val shrank back into her chair, and curled up again, armored like an armadillo.

I’d opened up a figurative can of worms, and it was clear that neither of us wanted to deal with those worms. I tried to put the worms back in the can. “You know what?” I said, “If we’re honest, I’ll probably become independently wealthy through the invention of a line of sunglasses for dogs.” Val smiled at me, or at least I think she did. “And our lives will be changed so drastically by my entrepreneurial genius that college will be irrelevant.”

“Probably.”

“And we’ve got a whole year before we have to actually *apply* to colleges. And one of us could die from a poisonous snake bite. I mean, think about it,” I said, “What are the chances that we’ll both make through the next year and a half *without* dying of snakebite?”

“Slim,” Val admitted. And she was still smiling a little, but I couldn’t tell if it was a genuine smile.

I closed my history textbook, and pulled out my laptop to check my Facebook. But I did some quick Googling first. “They already make sunglasses for dogs,” I told Val. “I’ll have to invent something even stupider.”

Later in the week, I got a text message from my grandfather. I’d taught him to text about a year earlier, and he texted me often for about a week afterwards. But the excitement quickly wore off, and I don’t think he’d texted me since. He, did, however, have a very wonderfully distinct texting style. His texts were all long, written in complete sentences of lovely prose. He even signed them. At the end, he’d write “Sincerely, Grandpa,” not understanding that since the text came from his number, I already knew that it was from “Grandpa.” And it’s not like I could have confused one of his texts for, say, Ian’s texts, which usually read something like “Bro, lez get hiiiiiiiiii.”

His new text read: “Aaron, I am hoping that you would telephone me at your earliest convenience. Thank you. Sincerely, Grandpa Art.” I think he texted because he thought I’d be more likely to call him if he took the first step using *my* medium: the text. It was like some tiny concession to me and my generation of confusing, texting, tweeting kids.

The text had its intended effect. We’d had to cut down our family-plan minutes, so I waited until I got home from school. I called from the home phone in the kitchen, where Sarah was doing something delicious-smelling with the oven.

“Aaron,” my grandfather answered, “Good to hear from you.”

“Hi, Grandpa. Good to hear from you too,” I replied, and it *was* nice to hear his voice. I couldn’t remember a time when I’d gone longer without speaking to him, not even when he was traveling.

“Listen, I know we’ve had some trouble lately,” he said, “But I’ve arranged something very nice, and I think it’s worth shelving our disagreement for it.”

“Yeah?” I said.

“You know my friend David Glassner, the professor at the University of Pennsylvania?”

“Well, I don’t *know* him,” I replied, suddenly suspicious. Sarah futzed with some buttons on the oven, then took a seat at the kitchen table to eavesdrop.

“Yes, yes,” my grandfather agreed, “You don’t *know* him. Well, I’ve arranged for you two to get to know each other better. He’s going to come over for dinner next Saturday evening.”

“At *our* house?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Do my parents know about this?”

“Of course.”

I put the receiver down for a moment, made eye contact with Sarah, and mimed shooting myself in the head. Then I picked the phone back up. “I’m sorry Grandpa,” I began, “But I’ve got plans next Saturday.”

“Your parents already assured me that you were all free. And I’m sorry, but David’s already agreed. And he’s doing us a big favor. He knows all the right people over there. It could really help you out. This could be great for your future.”

I knew there wasn't much I could do, so I just said, "Okay." Then I said, "I've got to go, Grandpa, I think Sarah's burning something in the oven." This comment threw him off enough that I was able to get off the phone pretty quick.

"I'm not burning anything," Sarah told me.

"I know," I replied, "It smells delicious," and I went over to the oven to inspect.

"Raisin bread," Sarah informed me.

"You're quite the bakist"

"Baker."

"I believe it's bakist."

Either way, Sarah was going through a baking phase. I wasn't sure why. But I wasn't complaining. It was way better than her vegetarian phase, her makeup phase, or her environmentalist phase where she refused to flush the toilet, and insisted that we all eat dinner in the dark like it was some kind of séance.

Sarah had circumvented my dad's health food policy by taking innocuous ingredients like flour and eggs and turning them into scandalous cookies and brownies. My father was proud of Sarah's "initiative," and he seemed to make an exception for homemade junk food.

Lately, Sarah had moved on from brownies and blondies, to bread. The whole kitchen was covered in flour, and that included Sarah, whose hands, arms, and face were powdered white. She looked like a girl on the cover of a Betty Crocker box, which I guess is always Betty Crocker. So, she looked like Betty Crocker.

"Betty," I said to her, "I'm tired of everybody treating me like a child, and then expecting me to act like an adult. It doesn't seem fair."

“You want them to treat you like an adult?”

“No. I want them to treat me like a child, so I can act like one.”

Sarah just looked at me, totally deadpan.

“I don’t want to grow up, Sarah,” I told her, “I’m like Peter Pan. I just want to hang out, fuck Wendy, and then kill Hook. And be a boy forever.”

“He doesn’t *fuck* Wendy.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m just saying that’s what *I* would do, were I he. And I’d fly. He does fly, right?”

“Yes,” she said with a sigh, “he does fly.”

“All this stuff about college, with the parents, and the stuff with the girlfriend, and the fact that I’m supposed to know what I want to do...in the *future*. Anyway, Jesus, why am I talking to *you* about this?”

It was a rhetorical question, like the ones my mom asks. But Sarah thought for a second, and then answered. “Because I’m *here*, and because you can’t really talk to any of *those* people about it.”

I ignored her too-true insight. “You were kind of right about the whole Malfoy thing,” I told her.

Sarah got up, and started cleaning flour and specs of dough-stuff from counter. I didn’t think she was going to reply at all, and I got up to leave the room. But then she said, “If we were wizards, this counter would be sponging itself.”

“You’re an under-aged witch,” I told her, “So *no*, it wouldn’t, not unless you want to be cited for using magic outside of school.”

“Jesus, Aaron. It’s a *book*.”

I didn't bring up the David Glassner thing at dinner, because I was afraid to talk about it. I didn't know how to broach the subject. And everybody else seemed to be having a nice meal. Sarah's bread was fantastic, and the rest of the family was basking in Sarah's talent as a bakist, and my father's talent as a buyer of ACME pre-roasted chicken.

After dinner, Sarah was in her room doing homework, and my dad was at the kitchen table with his computer, doing stuff with computerized graph paper. I decided to talk to my mom, whom I thought would be both the weakest, and the most sympathetic figure. She was in her room. I knocked. I was admitted. She was in bed watching a television re-run on her computer.

"Mom," I said, "I can't do this dinner with David Glassner. Why did you agree to that?"

She paused her show, and the room became very quiet. "You know the answer to that question."

"I can't do it."

"Pups, I'm proud of you for paying for the accident yourself. And I'm proud that you took responsibility and started working. But this is something you've got to do. It won't be that bad. Dr. Glassner will talk about how great the school is. You'll nod and talk a little about yourself, and how much you would like to attend the school. It'll please your grandfather, and it'll please your father. It's a hoop. Sometimes in life you have to jump through hoops."

“No, mom, it’s Val’s birthday. Or, it’s not really, but she has tickets for a concert for her birthday. I said I’d go with her.”

“Tell her you can go another night. You said it’s not actually her birthday?”

“They’re a big band. They just play the one night. I’m supposed to drive. I just kind of assumed I could. I knew about this *before* I knew about this college thing. *Please*. I’ll do the Glassner thing. I’ll be perfect. I’ll act like I care about *everything* he says. Just on some other night.”

There was a silence, and I could almost feel a shift in my mom’s disposition. She sat up straighter in the bed. She pursed her lips together. “I’ll try to make it an early dinner, okay?” she said. “Your grandparents can usually be convinced to have an early dinner. Does the concert have an opening act?”

“I’m sure.”

“You might miss it.”

“Thanks, mom. I really appreciate it.”

Chapter 13

Dr. Glassner arrived at 5:30 with my grandparents, looking exactly as you’d expect a professor to look, except that his jacket wasn’t tweed. It was tan and it had little leather elbow pad things, the purpose for which I can’t possibly imagine.

Dr. Glassner is exactly like my grandparents, except that where my grandparents are interesting, engaged people capable of normal conversation, Dr. Glassner is boring,

and disengaged, and he has trouble making eye contact. I sympathize deeply with his anthropology students.

When he speaks, he likes to leave long pauses in between sentences—or right in the middle of sentences—which at times makes him sound sophisticated, but at other times makes him sound like an idiot. For instance, when we were all seated at the dining room table, my father asked him, “Dr. Glassner, would like some asparagus?”

Dr. Glassner then replied, “Yes, I would love some.” And we all thought that was the end of his sentence, but then after a good second or two, he said, “asparagus.” But it was so long after he’d uttered the first three quarters of the sentence, it sounded like he was just saying the word “asparagus” randomly, to see how it sounded. This was not an isolated incident. The whole meal was like this.

Basically, I sat there, while my grandfather prompted Dr. Glassner with questions about the University of Pennsylvania, which Dr. Glassner obliged with answers, but they were questions and answers that were all in the glossy booklets my grandfather had shipped to my house. “Tell Aaron about the faculty at the University,” my grandfather would say, brimming with excitement.

“The faculty is....” Dr. Glassner would begin, brimming with indifference, “...great.....It’s simply world class.”

One of the nice things about the dinner was that nobody asked me anything about me: what I was interested in, what about the University might appeal to me, what I thought I might like to study. My dad asked me if I liked the asparagus, and I told him that I did, because I enjoy asparagus.

I just kind of nodded and said “mmhmm,” and I tried to make as much eye contact with Dr. Glassner as possible, which wasn’t very much eye contact. And otherwise, I spent the time checking my watch. The concert was supposed to start at 7, and the meal took *forever*. It felt like every time the old professor spoke, he took about five minutes. And then there were five minutes of general eating and chewing. And then my grandfather would ask another question. And then Dr. Glassner would wait five minutes. Then he’d answer for five minutes. And eventually it was approaching seven, and I started to squirm in my seat, and check my watch more ostentatiously. I made eye contact with my mom, and I think she tried to say “I’m sorry,” with her eyes, but it’s hard to read eyes.

We started clearing the table at about 7:30, and my mom excused me. “I’m sorry,” she said, “But Aaron has a concert to go to. It’s his girlfriend’s birth—”

“Ma!” I cut her off. I really didn’t want to have to stick around longer for a lecture about my “heritage,” but my grandmother didn’t miss the opportunity.

She jumped in and said, “Ahh, yes,” like she was just remembering that I had a girlfriend. “What’s your little girlfriend called again?” she asked.

I was annoyed, so I said, “What’s she *called*? You mean, what’s she named?”

“Yes, yes, what’s she called?”

“Chava,” I offered.

“No, that’s not it.”

“Hodl.”

“No, it’s Hilary, or Kathleen, or—”

“Tzeitel “

I ran out of Tevye's daughters, and after a pause Deb said, "Ah, I remember. It's Valerie," as though she hadn't known the whole time. "Did you know that in Russia, Valery is a man's name?"

While this exchange was going on, my grandfather was giving my father a quiet lecture about how it seemed a little "odd"—and by "odd" he meant "rude"—that I was leaving a dinner set up "for my benefit," even though the dinner was *over*, and Dr. Glassner looked like someone should really get him home and put him to bed.

Amid the passive aggression, I slid out the garage door, though I could feel my grandmother's gaze following me. I shot Val a quick "Sorry about the tardiness" text and got in the SUV.

I realized as I drove that I was tired and sore from sitting stiffly in the dining room chair, and all I wanted to do was relax. I'd have preferred to just sit on the couch with Val and listen to Coldplay on her iPod.

I'm not the biggest fan of live music, even when I really like the band. It's very loud and my ears ring for hours afterwards. The sound technicians also tend to have the bass and guitar really loud, and the vocals very quiet. I want the melody to be the most prominent thing, like it is in the recording. I understand the appeal of seeing a band you love in person. I just wish they would fix the balance, because I often leave a concert thinking I should have just saved my money and listened to the band's music at home. And that's if I can think at all with the numbing ring-sound in my head.

But the Coldplay concert wasn't too bad noise-wise. It was at a big arena, the same building where the Flyers and 76ers play. I'd give you the name of the place, but by

the time you read this, it will have changed. It has a new corporate naming sponsor about every eight minutes. The name of the place changed three times during Coldplay's set.

Val was a little grumpy on the way there, but when we got inside and saw that we'd only missed the opening act, she didn't seem too pissed.

We had floor tickets, and we were late, so we stood at the back of the standing-room section. I think it was actually easier for Val to see this way—most of the shorter people were standing toward the back—as she wasn't up front in a mass of tall people. “Seems kind of racist that all the short people have to stand in the back,” I said to her, as a way of expressing my sympathy.

“Short people aren't a race,” she said.

“What about the Oompah Loompahs?”

“They're made up. Sorry, but there's no such thing as an Oompah Loompah.”

“I guess they're a different *species* anyway, not a race. It's moot, so we can just ignore your ridiculous assertion that they aren't real.”

The concert was attended by a mixed crowd. There were a lot of high school and college students, like us. But we were interspersed with twenty-somethings, and even some middle-aged couples, some of whom had brought their children.

The concert wasn't particularly exciting. But it wasn't bad. The crowd was subdued. We didn't have to worry about, say, mosh pits. Everyone just kind of stood and listened to the music. And the music itself was quiet enough that sometimes you could hear somebody singing along off-key. This detracted from Val's enjoyment but added greatly to mine.

Near the end of the show, Val and I were toward the very back of the standing-room section, where the crowd was the least dense. We were dancing. Not dancing like you do at a club, and not dancing like you do at prom. Just kind of swaying back and forth to the music, with our arms wrapped around each other. Our heads were bent slightly forward, and sometimes our foreheads would touch, or she would nuzzle my nose with hers. I didn't really want to *dance*, but it was nice to hold Val. We painted a picture, I'm sure, of a blissful couple. And I felt pretty damn blissful, with my hands clasped together, resting on her lower back.

And then something very surreal happened. Still, when I replay it in my mind it doesn't feel like reality. It seems like a contrived moment out of a melodramatic movie, a dark scene, tinted slightly with sepia, accompanied by overly emotional music—like Coldplay. But it happened, so here it is:

As Coldplay finished their set and strolled off stage—to stand around and then return for an encore—a family of four who'd been standing just a little in front of us, started making their way through the crowd to the exit. Maybe it was somebody's bedtime. Maybe they wanted to beat the traffic. Maybe they'd simply had enough Coldplay. A determined girl of about twelve led the way, and she dragged her younger sister along behind her. Their father ran a hand through his thinning hair as he tried to keep track of the daughters' little bobbing heads in the throng of people. At the end of the domestic procession came a frazzled woman in, I'm guessing, her early forties. She was tall and thin, had rather gaunt facial features, and large bags under her eyes. As she passed, she turned toward us, and said urgently—and I'm giving this to you verbatim—“Cherish your young love. Because it fades.”

Neither Val nor I reacted immediately. After a moment of dazed bewilderment, I looked around us to see if there was somebody else she could have been talking to. But I knew it was us. It had to be. We were the only people in the area who appeared to be experiencing “young love.” The only person reasonably close to us was a thirty-something year-old guy who was drinking two beers simultaneously, one in each hand. He didn’t appear to be in love, unless you got “in love” confused with “very drunk.”

Coldplay came back on and started playing more music. I nudged Val, but she didn’t seem to want to dance. We just stood there, waiting for the concert to end.

The woman’s comment, as I replayed it in my mind, felt deeply intrusive. I guess because it felt like *she* knew something about me that I didn’t know. I felt stripped down, exposed. If this woman could look at Val and me, and see something in us that moved her to speak, and to speak in such an urgent, dire tone, what else could people see?

It seemed inconsiderate of Coldplay to just keep playing music, as though everything were the same. It’s weird how that works. Most of the time, you can’t help but feel that you’re the center of the universe. But you learn in a moment like this, just how insignificant you are. I could have received a text, for example, saying that my father had died. I could have then bellowed in anguish at the top of my lungs, and nobody would have noticed. I could have tried to call home, hoping that the text was a joke, or a mistake, but nobody on the other end would have been able to hear what I was saying. And Coldplay would have just kept playing. The guy near us would have kept drinking. Your little crises don’t matter.

Just to be clear, my dad’s fine. That was a hypothetical crisis.

When the music stopped, we joined the sea of people oozing slowly toward the exits. I tried to play it off like strangers always give me bizarre, piercingly personal advice at rock concerts. “That was weird,” I said, acknowledging the strange mom. And then I tried to change the subject, keep it light. “Why didn’t they play that song about the color? You know, the one where it’s all blue. Or all green. Or red? No. Orange?”

Val wasn’t interested in the joke. “It’s yellow,” she said. “And I’m actually kind of pissed they didn’t play it.”

“Oh yeah. It’s all yellow.”

“I like that song. Don’t—”

“I like it too. It’s one of my all time favorite color-themed songs.”

“Please.”

“Wait, but I had a really good line about ‘Purple Haze.’”

“Not interested.”

Val didn’t seem interested in any conversation at all. I’d gotten pretty good at reading her facial expressions and body language. But it was dark on the concourse and in the parking lot, and I couldn’t really see what was happening on her face, except that she appeared to have a decent-sized zit growing just under her lower lip. In terms of body language, she was walking, but I don’t know how lingual that is. Seems more locomotive. Either way, she strode purposefully through the parking lot, with her head down.

In the car I looked over at her again. She did indeed have a very nice pimple below her lip. Her face was otherwise impassive. I asked her how she’d enjoyed the concert. She mumbled, “Okay,” and turned away from me. She stared out the window while I drove home.

When I pulled up in front of Val's house, all the lights were off. It was late. I tried to kiss her goodbye, but she signaled with a mumble and a wave of her hand, that I should come inside. I got out of the car and I followed her up the walk.

We sat on the couch in the living room. Val's family were asleep upstairs. We sat silently for a few minutes, with the television on in the background in lieu of overhead light. Val lay stretched out, with her head in my lap, looking up at the flickering reflections of the TV on the ceiling. "Do you think she's right?" she asked me. Does love go away? Does it die?"

The Val I knew had always been so sure of herself, confident in nearly everything she said or did. She carried herself with a kind of secure nonchalance that made it seem like she had everything under control. She knew the answers to her exam questions. She knew the right thing to say to her friends, when they were upset. She knew what she wanted to be when she was older. I hadn't known her to be unsure about anything. But there she was, staring up at me, eyes wide, asking *me* for an answer.

I didn't have much time to think it through. "I don't know," I said. I wanted badly to reassure her. But this just wasn't a question to which I had a ready answer.

But my response, or lack thereof, was not enough. Val wanted more. She demanded more. "That's not good enough," she said, and she began to cry. "You've got to say more than that." I had seen her cry only once before, when she'd heard about the death of Erin Lynch's mom. I hadn't known what to do then, and I didn't know what to do now.

But I figured I had to try. It was kind of my job. "Well, I have been thinking... just now..." I started.

“And?” She replied through a couple of snuffles.

“Well, nothing you do is as exciting the second time around, right? Like if you go on a roller coaster, and it’s great, once you’ve ridden it ten times, it’s not quite the same. There’s no way you can repeat that same feeling. I kind of *do* feel like everything fades over time, in some way. Even the moon wanes,” I finished, and pointed toward where the sky would be, if the ceiling weren’t there.

“But then it waxes again, idiot.”

“But then it wanes again.”

“Fuck you.”

“What? Why? What did I do?”

Now Val sat up, crossed her legs, and stared at me in a fierce, challenging way, her tear-streaked face contorted with anger. “So I’m a roller-coaster you ride and then get tired of?”

It occurred to me that maybe this is why I didn’t know what I was “interested in” in life. There weren’t any things I liked to do over and over. When I did things, I got bored with them, and wanted to try something new. But I couldn’t say that to Val. And I wasn’t *bored* of her.

“That’s not what I’m saying at all,” I said, trying to backtrack. “You asked me a question, and I tried to give you an honest answer.”

“So why don’t we just break up now, if we aren’t going to keep feeling this way?”

“What are you saying?” I asked. I didn’t want to break up.

“Look,” she said, calming down a bit, “I’m not threatening you or anything. I’m serious. Think of it as an abstract question. Why? Why stay together?”

I took a deep breath and looked out the window. Sure enough, because the world has a tendency to work out this way, the moon was in the sky. It was in one of those in-between periods. I was pretty sure it was a gibbous of some sort, but I couldn't remember exactly how the lunar phases worked, and didn't care. Fuck the moon. Who gives a shit what phase it is in? When does that affect anybody's life? But, of course, people are always looking up at the sky searching for answers. Because God's supposed to be up there, spinning that old moon around the earth, keeping the lunar phases in order, keeping those stars burning, and micromanaging the details of seven billion people's lives. Busy guy (or gal).

All this cynicism, and yet, where does the Godless adolescent turn? To the heavens just like everybody else. I stared out the window at the big old moon, pleading with it for some sort of insight. How do you comfort the crying girlfriend? How do you answer questions for her that you cannot answer for yourself?

The moon, because it's an asshole, was too busy waxing (or waning) to answer my plea. But it graciously bestowed upon me a sense of calm. I took a couple more long slow breaths, and I spoke as I ran my hand through Val's hair. "I don't know, S.P.," I said, "But I do know that something a crazy lady said—"

"She didn't look crazy."

"Okay. Well, I don't think that something a perfectly sane lady said at a concert should be the basis for a decision so...big." I didn't have the answer just then. But I felt like it was just around the corner, waiting to be found. "You ever have a big fight with someone, and you're so fucking pissed off, and then you go to sleep, and you feel much

better about it in the morning?" She nodded. "Let's just leave it for now. I don't want to break up with you. You're important to me."

Val didn't respond. Her face was blank, unless you count the colorful reflections of the television. She stood up, and I followed. "Let's sleep it off," I began again, awkwardly, "Maybe tomorrow we'll know all about relationships, and the meaning of life too. Or maybe the weird mom woman will just seem like less of a big deal."

But Val was already on her way. She gave me a squeeze of the hand on her way upstairs. I guessed that the hand squeeze meant good night, and I let myself out, which I'd never done before, and it was fairly confusing, because I couldn't figure out how to lock the door in such a way that it would stay locked when I opened it to leave.

Usually my head is so jumbled with crap. At this particular time, there were all sorts of things going on in my life. School. College crap. The grandparents thing. But as I walked to the car, my head felt empty. I spent so much of my time cramming my head with ideas and theories and facts, so that if somebody wants to know the capital of Bhutan, or the name and location Pittsburgh Pirates' AAA affiliate, I can tell them. I pride myself on being a quick thinker. I like to think that if I want to, I can puzzle through any problem, and I can do it fast. But I was lost on this one, and it made me feel empty and inadequate. When I got in the car, I found I couldn't even recall the AAA affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

I drove home and went to sleep, feeling useless and a little scared. It didn't provide much consolation when I remembered, just as I was drifting off, that the Pirates' AAA farm team is the Indianapolis Indians.

Chapter 14

When I awoke, as you might have guessed, I did not feel any better. I wasn't suddenly lousy with answers to life's important questions. I was lousy with needing to pee really badly, and lousy with desire to check the previous night's sports scores. I peed first. Then I turned on my computer to check on the world of sport, but my ass-hat of a laptop decided that there was an IP-address conflict going on. I've got no idea what an IP-address is, only that my computer gets very upset if there's a conflict pertaining thereto. So I went to the laundry room to reset the wireless router, or the "box," as my grandfather called it. I don't know why this fixes the problem, but it does. I also don't know why we keep the wireless router in the laundry room. Neither the laundry machine nor the dryer is a wifi-enabled device. The laundry room is on the lowest floor, and all the wifi-enabled devices are on the highest one, so if you want your Internet to work well, you've got to sit in the TV room, or in the laundry room, or on the stairs outside the laundry room.

I reset the router and ran my Internet browser through its usual paces. I called Ian as I did so, hoping that he could lend me some of his brilliant insight, or at least make me feel better about *my* lack of insight.

I started the conversation off with an inane discussion of the previous night's Flyers game, which I had not seen. I was a little afraid to broach the subject that was actually on my mind, and I felt stupid for being afraid to talk to my best friend about something important.

"I've got a question, man," I began.

“Ten inches,” he replied, and I remembered why I was afraid to talk to my best friend about something important.

I picked up my laptop and carried it out into the hall. I sat on the stairs outside the laundry room. “What do you know about love?” I inquired quietly.

“The thing I make with your mother?”

“You don’t. But yeah, that one.”

Ian’s voice took on this patronizing tone he likes to use to make himself feel superior to me, and he said, “Awww, is my baby girl in love?”

“No. My best friend is.”

“I’m your best friend.”

“Well, my other friend.”

“Phil?”

“No. God damn it, asshole.”

So I filled him in on the whole concert thing, and the part with the creepy lady, and the part where I sat on the couch while Valerie cried in my lap and I didn’t know what to say or how to help. And the fact that I didn’t know what I was “interested in,” and the whole awkward thing with Val in the library about colleges.

Ian’s response was: “You went to a *Coldplay* concert?”

“Come on, man.” I said, annoyed. I guess this is how it is for other people when they talk to *me*.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be a dick,” he said, “But I’m not really the person to ask. You know that.” He finished this thought sheepishly, and I started to feel bad that I’d

asked him. “You guy are good together,” he went on, “I tend to think you guys will last longer than your standard high school thing.”

“But how long is that?”

“I don’t know. Who cares? Do you want to *marry* her?”

“No idea.”

“Well, then why worry about it now?”

“Aaron,” somebody shouted, somebody inside my house. But the split levels made it hard to tell where exactly that person was.

“Let me call you back,” I said to Ian, and I hung up.

“Aaron, did you reset the internet?” The person in my house shouted. It was Sarah. Her voice sounds a lot like my mother’s, through the floors anyway, but I could tell it was her by how whiny she sounded.

“Sure did,” I called, as I got up and started up toward my room.

“Well, now I don’t have internet. I was in the middle of a show. It says it’s an IP-address conflict.”

I turned around and headed back toward the laundry room. “It’s like musical chairs with these things,” I hollered, and I was pleased with that characterization. I liked the idea of our computers playing musical chairs in cyber space, trying to grab an IP-address before they were all taken. It made the computers seem human, and it was comforting to think of them that way. I reset the router again.

“How about now?” I called.

“Stop shouting across the house,” my dad shouted.

“You just shouted across the house, just now, to tell me that,” I shouted back.

“I’m back on,” Sarah called.

I went upstairs to my room and I called Val. I wanted to see how she was doing, and I thought she might be amused by the IP-address musical chairs idea. For the first time since I’d called her outside Ian’s to tell her that I liked her, I was nervous as the phone rang. I got up and paced back and forth.

When she answered, I informed her that my sleep hadn’t been particularly enlightening. She said that hers had been, “a little.” I recounted the IP-address conflict situation. She just kind of “uh-huh-ed” me. Her voice sounded flat, but I couldn’t tell if she sounded upset or tired. “I feel like there’s something weird going on,” I said. “I feel awkward talking to you and I don’t like it. Do you want to go get lunch, like go to the diner or something?” I asked. “Or maybe I could just go over there and we could watch a movie or something.”

The silence at the other end of the line made me feel uneasy. “Hello?” I said. “Miss Richard? You there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” she said, “I can’t go to lunch now. You were right about sleep in a way. You’re right sometimes, even if it’s less often that you’d like to think.”

“Yeah. So? Speak. Elaborate.”

“Well, you’re right that I change every time I sleep. Every day I’m changing. Every day I’m different in some way. And I was thinking that if I’m a little different every day, and you’re a little different every day, what are the chances that we’ll change in the same direction?” I started to stutter a reply but she cut me off. “And let’s say we do change together. Do we want that? Do I want my, like, growth, to be tied to somebody else’s?”

I wasn't quite processing what she was saying on a sentence-to-sentence level. I was jumping ahead, trying to follow her line of thought to its logical conclusion. I didn't like the conclusions I saw. "I actually *don't* change very often. I'm a static person." I said.

She let out one little chuckle. "That's not true, Aaron. And the more I think about it, if we're changing, and this whole thing, between us, if it's temporary, then it doesn't make sense. Because, think about it. Your family isn't temporary. Your grandparents are going to be your grandparents forever."

"They won't be around for more than another decade or so," I said, but I didn't even find my own joke funny. It was sad.

"Even then, they'll *still* be your grandparents. Family is forever. That's what Chloe always tells me when I don't want to help my mom with stuff, or when I don't want to hang out with my little brothers. Your family is more important. If it bothers your family that we're together, why cross them? Why make them feel like you don't care? Why make them upset over something that's probably just for the short term? We're in *high school*. You can't break up with your family."

"Are *we* breaking up?" I asked, feeling like I knew what she'd say in response.

"You're not going to respond to what I said?"

I hadn't fully listened to what she said. I was preoccupied with my own question.

"Are we breaking up?" I asked again.

"I think we should," Val replied.

“This sucks,” I said, trying not to cry. I tried to remember the last time I’d cried. And then that song “Big Girls Don’t Cry” came into my head, and I giggled to myself a little, which confused the hell out of Val.

“Are you laughing at me?” she asked. I ignored her, hoping that she would assume that I *was* indeed laughing at her.

I realized I’d been talking fairly loudly. I lay down on my bed and covered my head with my pillow to muffle the sound of my voice. “This just isn’t what I had in mind last night when I was like, ‘Hey, let’s sleep on this, and we’ll think more clearly in the morning,’” I told her.

“I’m sorry it’s not what you had in mind. I don’t like it either.”

“But you’re the one *doing* it.”

“Not everything’s supposed to be fun,” Val told me pedantically, “Sometimes you do things because they make *sense*, even if it’s not exactly what you want.”

I put my phone down next to me, and turned over onto my back. I stared upward toward the ceiling, but I still had the pillow over my face, so all I saw was darkness, with a little bit of blue-tinted light at the edges of my vision. I could still hear Val’s voice, but it sounded tinny and far away. “Look, I’ve got to go,” she said. “Chloe and I said we’d go run some errands for my mom.” I didn’t reply. I felt it was immature to say nothing, but I’m not above immaturity. “Hello? Aaron? I’ll see you tomorrow, okay? Uh, Okay. Bye.”

I watched the time-of-call numbers on my phone stop. Then the screen went back to the home page, which had a wallpaper picture of Val’s pet bird, Jacques Cousteau. In the picture, Jacques was wearing a little pirate’s hat that Val had made for him out of felt

and construction paper. He'd hated the hat, and right after I'd snapped the picture with my phone camera, he'd torn it into little shreds.

I spent the first part of the afternoon on my bed doing homework, trying not to think about Val, which of course was impossible. I knew it would be, but I still tried. I felt like I had in the fall, when I'd liked Val, and I'd stalked her on Facebook and sat around trying to picture her naked. And it had tied my stomach in knots thinking about her Facebook, or her naked body. And now I knew exactly what she looked like naked. And I knew her Facebook username and password. I was *all over* her Facebook. But when I thought about her body, and about my presence on her "timeline," it tied my stomach in tighter knots than it ever had.

I'm sorry that I don't have a better simile than knots. I don't know anything about knots. But I assume you know that sensation, that combination of nerves, anxiety, and impending doom. Anyway, that feeling was making me physically sick to my stomach. I felt like I might spew flaxseed.

At some point, Ian called me back, because I'd basically hung up on him. But I ignored his call.

About midway through the day, I abandoned my homework. I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking about Val, so I got up and searched my bookshelf for something to read, something to distract me. I picked up *The Trumpet of the Swan* by E.B. White, a book I hadn't read since I was a little kid. But it was still on my shelf because every time my mom made me go through my stuff and give away old things, I refused to relinquish it. "I'm going to read it again," I told her.

“You’re almost an *adult*,” she’d told me the last time I’d insisted on keeping all of my Roald Dahl and E.B. White books. “At least in terms of what you read.”

She was right, and it made me kind of sad. Other people have old stuffed animals, or a blankie, or a model car, things that connect them to their childhood. Like the teddy bear Val picked clean. But I don’t have any of those things. I felt like, if all my favorite kids books disappeared, it would cut me off from the days when I was a wee child, reading about *The BFG* and *Stuart Little* with my mom, and my dad, and my grandfather. So I kept them, and told myself I’d read some of them again. Never *Stuart Little* though. Solid book, but I can’t get over the basic premise, where human parents give birth to a mouse. That makes no sense, and it’s really creepy.

In the front of my copy of *The Trumpet of the Swan* there was an inscription from my grandfather. It said: “To Aaron, on the occasion of your seventh birthday. You do not have the problem of this swan. You make plenty of noise. But I hope that you will enjoy the story nonetheless. Love, Grandpa,” And he’d drawn little pictures, one of a swan, and one of a trumpet. The trumpet was bigger than the swan, but otherwise they were fairly good drawings, cute and whimsical like the little critters Val drew in her sketchbooks.

Val had said that family was “forever.” I didn’t know about “forever,” but my grandpa had written the inscription more than ten years earlier. And he *was* still my grandpa.

I spent the rest of the afternoon reading the book. Louis the swan learned to write, and to play the trumpet, and he went to summer camp, and he paddled with the Swan Boats in Boston, and he hung out at the Philadelphia Zoo and played music at a nightclub. And I know that swans can’t really do any of those things, but I was somehow

able to fully plug myself into the book, and I didn't even consider the impossibility of a swan playing trumpet at a nightclub.

Chapter 15

We know that rejection sucks donkey balls, but this particular rejection was on a different level all together. When a girl says, "I don't like you," you know what you've got to do: get over it. But when she says she *does* like you—she might even *love* you—but it just doesn't "make sense" for you guys to be together, you *don't* know what you're supposed to do. Or, at least I didn't. It was ridiculously uncomfortable.

In first period, the next day, I had American Lit. When I entered the room, Val was sitting there, just like on the first day of school. But this time, I didn't sit next to her. I sat on the other side of classroom, next to Tyler Nguyen.

When I sat down, I looked at Val and she looked at me, and then we both looked away. And I caught Cassandra looking back and forth at the both of us, wondering what was going on. This uncomfortable head-swiveling pretty much summed up the whole school day.

It was excruciating to see Val everywhere I went, and not be able to say anything to her. For example, in my Biology class, Mr. Stopes said the word "pussy." He meant to say "pus-y," meaning "full of pus," but it came out like "pussy," and the whole class laughed uncontrollably. And it was funny to watch him afterwards, torn between correcting himself, which would indirectly acknowledge that he'd said "pussy," or just ignoring it and pretending that it had come out just as he'd intended.

When I left class, I thought ‘I can’t wait to tell Val about this.’ And I saw her two seconds later when I went to my locker to exchange my history books for my German ones. But then I remembered that she wasn’t my girlfriend anymore, and I didn’t know how to approach her. Val was so close, yet so far out of reach. It was much worse than if she were just not in school at all. Two days ago, I could have gone over and kissed her, ruffled her hair, and called her a silly name. Now I couldn’t do any of those things. I wasn’t sure if I was even supposed to wave hello.

At lunch, I sat with Ian and Phil and Hannah Gold. But Val sat with Cassandra a few tables over. I kept my head down, ate my bagel, and waited for someone to ask what the deal was. “Why’s Val eating with Cassandra?” Hannah Gold asked.

“They’re working on some thing for English class,” I said.

“What thing? I’ve got Thompson too.”

“I don’t know, Goldy Locks. They’re both, like, super-students. Maybe it’s some extra-credit shit.”

Hannah looked skeptical. Thompson wasn’t the kind of teacher to give extra-credit of any kind. I kept my eyes on my food. I didn’t want to catch my friends sending each other concerned glances. “Is this why you were asking me about love?” Ian asked.

That kid has no filter.

“Dude, shut the fuck up,” I told him.

“What?” Phil asked, between snaps of an apple.

Ian knew he’d screwed up, but he’s not a good actor. “Nothing, Philbert,” he said, unconvincingly, “It doesn’t concern you.” But anytime you tell somebody that something

“doesn’t concern” them, that just makes them want to know about it even more.

Especially if that person is Phil.

“How come nobody ever tells me anything?” Phil asked. That wasn’t a question to which any of us had an answer. It was undeniably true that Phil was always the last person to know about things, but I’m not sure why.

“I’ll kill you, Ian,” I told him. I figured I should take out all my frustrations on him. “I’ll castrate you right here and now, with a blunt object.”

“Really?” Ian asked, chuckling at me through a really scrumptious-looking roast beef sandwich. “You’re going to take out my balls and saw them off in front of everybody, right here?”

“I’d like to see that,” Phil said.

“You want to see my balls?” Ian asked, “Phil, if you’d just told me so, that could have been arranged ages ago.”

“I don’t want to see your balls,” Phil sputtered. But he was trapped. I went back to my meal and was silently thankful that Phil had brought the conversation away from my breakup. I knew that Ian wouldn’t let Phil get away with his slip-up. Ian’s torture of Phil would consume the rest of the lunch period, and it might spill over into the hallway after school.

“Philbert,” Ian said, “First you say you you’d like to see my balls. Then you say you *don’t* want to. So which is it? You’re sending me mixed signals here.”

Phil had to be careful, because if he didn’t play it right, he *would* see Ian’s balls. Just a year earlier, Phil and I had both seen Ian’s penis at a rock concert. We were standing near the front of the crowd, right near the stage. And there was this super tall

dude who kept swinging his arms around and hitting people with them. He hit this girl next to us square in the face, and he didn't even notice. The girl was kind of cute. It might have been a good move for Ian to step in and say, "Are you okay? That's guy's a jerk. Here, let me help you." But Ian didn't do that. He decided that the best plan of action was to pee on the tall guy's leg. So, in the middle of the packed, sweaty mob, he took out his wiener and peed all over the dude's pants. The only people who noticed were me, Phil, and the girl. The girl was an interesting combination of amused, shocked, and totally revolted. I guess I was all three of those things also.

After the concert, I said to Ian, "Dude, what the fuck?"

"I had to pee," he replied. "You think the girl was impressed?"

"With what? Your dick?"

"No, with my balls."

"She didn't see your balls."

"No, balls, like, gall. Guts. Cojones."

"Okay, I got it. And no. Or, if she was, that's not the kind of ballsy move that gets the girl. When you ask a girl how she met her boyfriend, she never says, 'He peed on someone's leg in front of me.'"

Okay, I think that's enough about Ian's genitalia. Let's have a space break.

Over the next few days, I worked at the library a lot. I found that the monotony of shelving books relaxed me a little bit. It usually bored me. And it still bored me, but this was a comfortable boredom.

When I was at home, I retreated into my room more and more, like some kind of old bearded recluse. My parents kept wondering why I wasn't at Val's, or why she wasn't at our house. Or why I wasn't on the phone with her. Or why I didn't talk about her at dinner. They persistently asked, "Why haven't you gone to Valerie's?" Or: "Why hasn't she been here?" Or: "I don't ever see you on the phone with her. Is everything all right?"

I couldn't even think of good lies. I'm such a bad liar. I'd be like, "She's really busy," but then that prompts the question, "With what is she busy?" but I hadn't thought ahead enough to come up with an answer to that, so I'd just stand there looking dumb and feeling sorry for myself.

In the evenings, I could hear them talking about me. What was wrong? Was it Valerie? Was it something with my friends? Was it because the Flyers' goaltending couldn't stop giving up stupid goals? I answered their questions through the door, because my room's not sound-proof. Every time they talked about it, I'd say, "I can *hear* you. And it's *nothing*. I'm fine. Leave me alone."

And they'd say, "We *are* leaving you alone," which was technically true. They were talking in hushed tones, but even hushed tones carried far enough to reach me in my bunker.

On Saturday, my mom dragged me out of my room—not physically—and we went to drop the car off at the body shop. I paid in cash, and it was cool to hold 1200 dollars of cash. I felt like some kind of high-roller, except I wasn't playing blackjack or buying a lot of cocaine—that's what I imagine one does with lots of cash—I was paying to fix a dent I'd made in a car because I was annoyed at my little sister. I couldn't even

remember what I'd been annoyed about. Whatever. We'd only had to drive around with a dent in the car for like three months.

We walked home from the auto-repair place. It was early December, but it wasn't that cold, probably because there's a gaping hole in the O-Zone layer and lot of cows farting in Nebraska. It still felt like autumn, except that the trees were bare, and when the wind blew, the leaves stayed glued to the ground, partially decomposed.

"Val and I kind of broke up," I told my mom.

"I know," she said, "Sarah told me."

Stupid Sarah. I guess when you go to the same high school as your sister, that kind of thing was bound to happen. But it's not like I was going to keep that from my parents forever, anyway.

"Your father told your grandparents."

"I'll bet they're thrilled," I said, staring at the soggy leaves under my feet.

My mom laughed a little bit, and smiled at me. I hadn't seen her openly smile in a while, and it was nice in that uncomfortable, how-do-I-feel-about-this kind of way. "I wouldn't say that they were thrilled. I'm sure they've had breakups before, though it's been at least fifty years or so." I think she enjoyed picturing my grandparents as young people, dealing with some kind of hardship, even if it was a teenage breakup. "Aaron," she went on, slowing down a bit. "I'm really sorry. I understand that breaking up is no fun. It can really hurt. And I'm sure it doesn't make it any better that your family feels...differently about it."

I thought about it. And she was right: the whole breakup thing should have felt worse when my family was not-so-secretly *happy* about it. It should have felt like another

betrayal. But I didn't feel any extra hurt. "At least somebody's happy about it," I said to her. And that's how I felt. If I was going to have to miss Val, I might as well get my family back in return. I might as well get to sit through dinner with them, without having Grandma Deb staring curses at me like some kind of evil witch.

We walked in silence for another minute or two, over the train tracks that used to run back and forth between the suburbs and the city. They still run that way, I guess, but no trains run *on* them. Instead, they're littered with empty cans of Bud Lite and Natural Ice, the standard byproducts of underage drinking.

"Any thoughts about winter break?" my mother asked.

"Most of my thoughts are about winter break," I replied.

My mom took a deep breath and pushed on: "I know Art and Deb wanted to take you to visit colleges. But I think you've made it clear enough that you don't want to do that." She finished this last bit with a conspiratorial smile.

"It's not that I don't want to visit colleges. I probably should at some point, right? I just don't want to visit the ones they *want* me to. Or, maybe I do. I don't know where the hell I want to visit. Are they going to pay for college?" I asked. I was a little nervous about the response, though, and I kept my eyes down on my sneakers, which were wearing down at the toes.

"Frankly, Aaron, I think they will. And I'd rather see them pay for it than see you burdened with a lot of debt."

"But what if it doesn't cost that much?"

"It will."

“Not necessarily. The guidance counselor says that if I go to more of a safety school, or just a school in-state, it can cost ‘a fraction’ of the price of a fancy private school. I’m not good with math, but I think ‘a fraction’ means ‘less.’”

“Aaron, you should go where you *want* to go. Where you’ll be happy. This isn’t a decision to make based on money.”

“But what if what makes me happy is being able to control my own, like, money stuff?”

It had sucked to pay for the car. And I didn’t like working at the library. But there was something about handing the cash—the cash that I’d earned—over to the auto-body guy, that made me feel grown up. Well, my mother had been standing next to me, but I’d felt *relatively* grown up.

“Let’s go visit Penn State,” I suggested.

I thought my mother would object, and she was silent for a minute, her face impassive. But after a moment, she said, “All right. How’s that first weekend? We could leave Friday the 16th, and come back that Sunday.”

I was about to object. I don’t keep a planner or calendar, but I thought I had plans then. And then it dawned on me that the 17th was Val’s birthday. “Yeah, that’s good,” I said.

“Central Pennsylvania is beautiful,” my mom informed me. “Do you remember when you were about seven, and we went to Tuscarora State Forest, and you cut your knee on the dock? You were so excited to get in a paddleboat, you just couldn’t contain yourself, and you slipped trying to run onto the boat. We wanted to go find first aid, but you cried because you wanted to go on the boat. So we just let you go, bleeding.”

I did not remember that. And boats don't tend to excite me, but I took her word for it. I suppose there could once have been a time when I got really psyched about boats.

Chapter 16

On Friday the 16th of December, my mother and I hopped in the newly rehabilitated SUV and drove to Pennsylvania State University, which is in the middle of *nowhere*. When you grow up in Philadelphia, you get a false sense of Pennsylvania. I'd always seen it as a liberal, progressive, urban place. But then you drive out into the middle of the state, and it's very green, and people wear camouflage, and they fly the flags of their favorite NASCAR drivers.

Pennsylvania is short and fat. We drove west for hours, and only got about halfway across the thing. If I'm going to drive that far, I expect the locals to have strange accents. At the very least, the license plates should change. But when we arrived at Penn State, our car fit right into the lot of Keystone State vehicles.

The campus looked a lot like a college campus. There were old stone buildings with columns. There were old brick buildings without columns. There were hideous contemporary dorm buildings that reminded me of cellblocks. There were big open spaces, where you could imagine students walking to and from class, or sprawling out on the grass. But there weren't a lot of students. It was the end of finals, and the only people present were weary-eyed creatures, stumbling slowly across the "quadrangle," looking dazed and lost.

The weather didn't help. It was precipitating. I'm quite anti-precipitation. I understand that it's necessary. But I find it unpleasant. It wasn't exactly snowing, but it wasn't raining either. It was like a misty sleet. My mother and I bought a disgustingly expensive Penn State umbrella, which we shared. I found this embarrassing, and I tried not to make any eye contact with the college kids we passed.

We picked up a pamphlet at the admissions office, and then we gave ourselves a "self-guided tour," which means we wandered around aimlessly, saying things like, "Oh, that's a pretty building," Or: "I'll bet this place is pretty in the spring."

I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to be looking for. What information was I supposed to be gathering? What about this stroll was supposed to help me decide where I wanted to pursue my higher education?

I posed these questions to my mom.

"It's not a science," she told me, "You're just supposed to see if you can imagine yourself here. Can you imagine yourself here?"

People are always saying things like this. They ask, "Can you *imagine* this? Can you *imagine* that? Can you imagine growing up in an age without the Internet? Can you imagine living in sub-Saharan Africa? Can you imagine if you won the lottery?" And I can imagine all of these things. How hard is that to do? And I know it's just an expression, but it's a silly one.

"I can imagine myself here," I told my mom. "I can imagine myself in sub-Saharan Africa."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just one of the many things I can imagine."

We walked up to one of the stone buildings, and climbed the steps to stand under some columns, where we could get out of the sleet-stuff. My mom folded the umbrella. I leaned against one of the columns. I pulled my arms out of the sleeves of my jacket and wrapped them around my body to warm myself up.

“Pups, I’m proud of you,” my mom told me.

“For what?” I asked.

“For the grace that you—”

“No. No. Stop there,” I interrupted her. “If you’re proud because I’m *graceful*, I don’t want to hear about it.”

“No, listen to me. I’m proud of the way you’ve handled *all* of this stuff. Your father and I set out to raise independent-minded children. And you’re showing me that we have.”

“Well, good work. I’m independent-minded as shit.”

“Aaron, I just—”

“Did you really want to live in New York City?” I asked quietly. I surprised myself with this question. It wasn’t something that had been on my mind. I’m not exactly sure where it came from. Maybe it was the wistful way my mom was talking. Like when she said she was proud of me, there was pride in her tone, but also sadness, maybe even some regret. And I’m okay with my mom being worn down by paperwork, or the smell of herring. I don’t get upset when she gets migraines. But the idea that she could be legitimately *sad* was unpleasant.

My mom only hesitated for a second. “Yes,” she said. It was odd for her to be so open about that kind of thing.

“Do you regret coming here? Or, not here specifically. But you know what I mean.”

“No. But just because I don’t regret it, doesn’t mean I don’t want something different for you. I want you to do what makes you happy. And if that means you sacrifice what you want in order to please your family, fine. And if it means you don’t, that’s fine too.”

I looked at my mom with what was probably a fairly scrutinizing look. This was not the mom I was used to, except that her hair was her weekend usual: all over the place. She just smiled back at me. A sixth-sense of mine told me that she wanted to hug me, so I stepped out from under my column, into the sleet, and started up one of the slushy paths across the quad.

We got home late the next night, Saturday, after Sarah and my father were already asleep.

On Sunday morning, I stumbled out of my room at about eleven am, and found my sister in the kitchen, covered in flour. It blended into her dark black hair and made it look like she was graying. There was a small pile of flour on the kitchen floor too. “How was your trip?” she asked.

“Wet.”

“Want to bake with me?”

“I don’t think the parents would appreciate us doing drugs in their house,” I said. She didn’t get it, and I was pleased about that. “What are you baking?” I asked.

“Not sure yet,” she replied.

I looked her up and down, smirking. “You just figured you’d powder up, in preparation?”

“It was an accident. The flour’s on the top shelf, and it... Never mind. Let’s bake something. What are we baking? Any ideas?” Sarah asked, and she walked over to the counter where there were two cookbooks, one open, both lightly dusted with flour.

I actually did have an idea, and this surprised the hell out of my sister. “Let’s make strudel,” I suggested.

“Yeah?”

“It’s traditional. It’ll do our ancestors proud.”

“They’re dead,” was Sarah’s response.

“Only literally, and in most other senses,” I said, and I walked over to the open book and flipped through the index looking for strudel.

“Is strudel even *good*?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t think so,” I replied, opening the book to the strudel recipe.

“Then why do you want to make it?”

“Look, do you want my company or not?”

“Well... Honestly, I asked to be polite, but sure, I mean—”

“Okay, let’s do it. Let’s get started. After I have some coffee. And I need to poop. But after that.”

Sarah and I spent the afternoon making apple strudel, which meant that *Sarah* spent the afternoon making strudel. I spent the afternoon alternately watching the Eagles game, and keeping Sarah company in the kitchen. We called my dad, and he bought canned apple filling at the grocery store. And when he got home, after the groceries were

put away, he did a good job of not hovering. He pretty much stayed out of our way, probably because he liked the idea that his children were doing something *together*. And he didn't want to jinx it.

In the early evening, we turned the kitchen over to the Stew Creature, and it made stew.

The grandparents came over around seven, for the first time since they'd heard about my breakup. And they tried not to act differently around me, but they couldn't help it. Their smiles, instead of looking forced and sad, were wide and open. Their grins were unbridled, for those of you who like horse metaphors.

Their hugs were warmer, too. Not physically warmer. Just more firm, more squeezey. My word processor tells me that "squeezey" is not a word. But that's what the hugs were, and I'm sticking with it.

At dinner, which we ate in the kitchen, my grandfather asked about the college trip. "I heard you visited Penn State University this weekend with Susan," he announced.

I tried to figure out what tack he was taking, but his face didn't betray his feelings.

"I did," I replied.

"I don't know about their academics, but they've got quite the football program," he said.

"I guess it depends on how you feel about pedophilia."

"Excuse me?"

Apparently Grandpa Art had missed that story. "They have an Honors College," I went on. "My guidance counselor thinks I could get into it, depending on my test scores."

“That sounds nice,” he said, between spoonfuls of stew, “But don’t underestimate the doors that, say, an Ivy League school can open for you.”

My mom put down her spoon, and was about to say something, but I cut her off. “I never underestimate doors,” I said. “But were you aware that Penn State has the world’s largest alumni network?”

“I was not,” Art replied. “It sounds like you’ve done some research.”

“It’s because I’m independent-minded,” I told him with a smirk.

Sarah snickered. My grandfather looked confused, but then he grinned a little. “You always have been. You’re your father’s son in that respect.”

I shared an eye-roll with my mother, and I got up to get more water. Grandma Deb silently handed me her empty glass as I rose.

While the refrigerator refilled the cups, I changed the subject and asked my grandfather about *The Trumpet of the Swan*. “Do you remember you wrote an inscription in the front of my copy?” I asked him.

His face lit up, especially around the eyes, and he said, “Of course. I remember reading the book with you too,” he said. That part I didn’t remember. “And after we finished, we went to the Philadelphia Zoo together. As I recall, some of the swans in the book live there, at the Philadelphia Zoo. So you said hello to them. We had read about them, and there they were. You were beside yourself. It couldn’t have been cuter.”

I couldn’t picture myself getting super pumped about some swans. But I took his word for it.

“You were always so enthralled with reading. When you were little, I always knew if I couldn’t think of something else to get you—a new action figure, or whatever was cool at the time—I could get you a book. And we could read it together.”

“But now, who needs books when there are tapestries?” I said.

“Well,” my grandpa replied, a little bit taken aback, “I don’t know what you read now, *if* you read. And I can’t read *with* you. It’s different.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. And of course I knew it would be ridiculous if my grandfather still read books aloud to me. But I would appreciate some books as gifts, even if they were the *wrong* books. I could just slide them onto my shelf. I wouldn’t have to hang them on my wall like the tapestry, or sit them next to my bed like the telescope. But I had always been interested in reading. There was *one* thing that I hadn’t gotten tired of immediately. It’s a shame you can’t be a *reader* when you grow up. That’s not a job.

“If you’re still interested in reading, you’ll like college. At a good college, that’s what you do. You read, and you—”

“Grandpa,” I cut in, “can we talk about something else?” I was tired of the whole college thing. I never said I wouldn’t *like* college. The idea of it appealed to me: the independence, the ability to choose what you *wanted* to read, instead of having Mrs. Thompson assign you stuff. But I was tired of thinking about it, and especially tired of talking about it. “Let’s talk about the Eagles game,” I suggested. “Bad loss today.”

I was the only one who’d watched the game, and that discussion didn’t last long. But then we talked about some other random things, and I wasn’t the *subject* anymore. I got to be a participant, and it was nice. It was comfortable. We chatted about my dad’s ideas for improved water clarity in the Delaware River. And we talked about how Sarah’s

friend Edna, the one *without* the big tits, had developed an eating disorder of some sort. And we just generally talked about *stuff*. We spent a decent amount of time discussing my grandparents' broken toaster. Was it really broken? Should they buy a new one? If so, which kind? How many slots did they need? Two? Four?

My grandparents were very pleased with the strudel, my grandmother in particular. She talked all about how her mother used to make strudel from her grandmother's old recipe, and the smell of the confection would waft down the hallway, and neighbors would come over and eat the strudel. And she told a joke, which I will repeat here, because it's a funny joke, and because my *grandmother* told a *joke*:

“Old Bernie is on his deathbed. He is moments from dying. And his wife, Sadie, is there with him, holding his hand. And old Bernie says to her, ‘Sadie, before I go, I have one final wish. Please, could I have just one last taste of your wonderful, delicious strudel?’ And Sadie says, ‘I’m sorry, Bernie. It’s for the Shiva’”

That is the best and only strudel joke I’ve ever heard. And the only joke I can remember my grandmother telling. Also, if you don’t get it, you can Google “Shiva.”

In history class, Mr. Brian taught us that in the 19th century, men and women lived in different spheres. They put all the women in one sphere, the home sphere. And all the men were in the working sphere. And then some women were like, “We’re tired of our sphere. Maybe we could, like, come hang out in your guys’ sphere too?” And the men were like “No. Fuck off.” I think that’s a fairly accurate summary. I got most of the credit for that short answer question, and the only points I lost were for using the F-word.

I couldn't make myself care deeply about 19th century gender politics. But I was intrigued by the idea of "spheres," because it struck me as an accurate and interesting way to think about our lives. We really do live in multiple spheres—or three-dimensional spaces of some sort. My parents, for instance, spend tons of time together in the home sphere, but then they go off to work and have entirely separate lives in their work spheres. My grandparents have mostly left the work sphere, and aside from JHR, they live their lives almost entirely in the one space.

And I realized, when I thought about it, that I'd always thought of home and school as two *very* separate spheres, spheres that never should, and rarely did overlap. But you can't realistically compartmentalize life like that. Sometimes you see your teacher at the grocery store. Sometimes your two worlds just bleed together, physically, and emotionally.

After that stew dinner, the nice one, the one with the strudel, I found myself feeling content, and confident, and comfortable again. And when I went to school the next day, I didn't feel so nervous and unsure of myself. When I saw Val, I wished her a happy belated birthday, and I talked to her in class, as though we hadn't spent a whole week giving each other the silent treatment. I wrote "fuck" on a History test. I mercilessly made fun of the yogurt stain Ian inadvertently put on his crotch.

When school let out, I approached Val at her locker. "Hey, can I come over for a just a few minutes later this afternoon?" I asked. "Will you be free? I just want to talk to you for a second." I tried to put as much urgency in my voice as possible, so that it sounded like there was something grave I wanted to talk about, something truly significant, so she wouldn't refuse.

Val wriggled her way into a puffy jacket and pulled a hood over her head. She peered out at me from her little cave. “Yeah. That’s okay. We can’t talk now?”

“No.” I looked around at the hallway at the kids shuffling back and forth past us, on the way to buses, to sports practices. Lots of prying eyes and ears. “No,” I repeated, “I’ll come by after dinner. Just text me when you’ve got a minute.”

“All right,” she repeated. I couldn’t help but think that she looked adorable all bundled up. And I felt a pang of longing somewhere in my gut. Maybe I was just hungry.

My least favorite thing about winter is that I never know how to deal with my winter coat in the car. It’s cold out, so I wear my jacket outside and I get into the car and buckle my seat belt. And then I turn on the heat, and the car gets warm. I get all hot and stuffy and I want to take my jacket off, but it’s really difficult to unzip it and get out of it while I’m wearing a seat belt and driving the car.

Val texted me around seven, and I drove over there. I pulled up to her house and called her cell. “I’m here,” I said.

“Don’t come in,” she replied, and my stomach tightened. “I’ll come out. There’s a floor hockey game going on in here, and I feel like we’d both be in danger.” I relaxed as I pictured that game, the four boys crashing into one another, throwing each other over furniture, firing real, hard rubber pucks through the living room airspace, Claire and Chloe hollering in vain at the athletes.

After a minute or two, Val came out of the house and made her way down the walk toward the car. It was chilly out, but she only wore a long-sleeve shirt and jeans. It was a very windy day, and it blew Val’s hair all over the place. She picked up her pace

about halfway, because it was awkward for us to make eye contact while she walked and I waited, but it was also weird for either of us to pretend to pay attention to something else.

“Hey,” I said when she got in. I’d been rehearsing my lines in the car. “Hey” was the best opener I’d come up with.

“Hey,” she said. “It’s freezing in here. Don’t you turn the heat on?”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because then I’d have to take my jacket off, and it’s very difficult. I’m not Houdini.”

Val just shook her head in a knowing way.

“I wanted to talk to you,” I said, “and wish you a happy birthday.”

“You did that already.”

“I know, but that was in the school sphere. And even though I *saw* you today, and all last week, I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Yeah. I know.” She seemed tentative, afraid, or nervous. Or just cold. Or a combination of those things. I couldn’t tell if she wanted to get out and go back inside, or if she wanted a hug.

When I looked across at her, Val seemed very far away. The car felt huge. The distance between the two front seats, across the console, was vast, like some kind of vehicular Grand Canyon. A month or so earlier, we’d had sex in the very same front seat, as the back had been full of my mom’s stuff. The front seat had felt tiny and cramped.

We were like contortionists, stretched and bent in strange unnatural ways. I had no idea which of my body parts were where. I think I honked the horn with my spleen.

The size of the car hadn't changed, but the situation had.

"You made my family happy," I told her.

"That makes me sad. Don't tell me that."

"Okay," I said, and changed the subject. "I like to read."

"I know you do."

"But I've never gotten tired of it."

"That's great."

"I think I'd like to write. I think I might be good at it."

"I think you would."

Outside, the wind gusted through the uniformly-planted, housing development trees. The barren branches bent and groaned. It was one of those days where the wind is strong enough to make your car sway, especially if your car is giant box.

"Bad segue, I know, but I still like *you*," I told her. I still feel close to you."

I would have liked it if Val had looked at me while she listened, or while she spoke, or at all really. But she just gazed forward, and down a little bit, like there was something interesting going on with the glove compartment. She seemed determined to remain dour and serious. "I like you too," she told the glove box, "I feel close to you too. But you're pretty much the *only* person here I feel close to. And that scares me. I like that I know you. And I'd like to keep knowing you. It was childish when we weren't speaking last week. And I want to be your friend. And I want you to be mine. But I think we both need—I don't know—*full* lives. Because we *aren't* really children anymore."

“Right. Two spheres. Maybe more,” I said. “They can overlap. They can.”

Val finally looked at me, but it was a look of confusion.

I reached into the back seat and grabbed the leftover strudel I’d brought her as a birthday gift. I had it wrapped in napkins, and I’d taped an index card to the outside of one of the napkins. “I wrote you a poem on the card,” I told her.

“No you didn’t. Not a real one,” she said without looking. “If you wrote a poem, like a serious poem, I’d be in the twilight zone, looking for the real Aaron, the one who called T.S. Eliot a ‘fuckface’ in front of the teacher.” She closed her eyes and smiled to herself, then opened the card. “This is more like what I was expecting.”

The poem read:

*Roses are red
Violets are blue
Here’s some shit I sort of baked
Because it’s your birthday*

Val opened the strudel. She laughed and rolled her eyes at the same time. “Do I have to put it in my pants?” she asked.

“No. That would ruin it. I brought it so you could try it, since you’ve never had it.”

“Is it good?”

“No.”

“Why don’t we have cake?” Val suggested, and she pointed out the window toward her house. “My mom bought this awesome cake. There’s still some left. Danny already ate most of the chocolate shavings off of it. But it should still be tasty. Also, I’m very cold. So you either need to turn the car on, or we need to go have cake.”

Cake sounded good to me, and the invitation sounded even better. I followed Val out of the car and into her house. Val and I sat in the kitchen and watched the floor hockey game, while we ate the remains of a truly scrumptious chocolate cake. I was at the fridge looking for milk, when Val mumbled, “Would you want to go to the beach with my family next week?”

“Huh?”

“We’re going to Cape May. My mom said you could come, but then we weren’t talking. And it’s Christmas, but since you’re a Jew and all...”

I hate the beach—it’s all sandy—but of course I wanted to go. And I should have been thrilled to have been invited. But as I searched the depths of the fridge for milk, I was wracked with anxiety. If I went, what was I going as? A friend? A boyfriend? An ex-boyfriend? And if I were going as a friend or an ex-boyfriend, would that make a difference to my family? The uncertainty sucked, but I did my best to ignore all of it and just answer the question: Did I want to go to the shore with the Richards? I did. So I said, “Yeah. You are aware that it’s *December*, right? The water’s going to be like eight degrees, Kelvin. Wait. Is that really hot or really cold? I can’t remember. Because I mean cold. It’s going to be cold.”

“Yeah, I don’t really think we’re going to go in the water,” she said with a chocolate cake-filled grin.

I returned to the table sans milk—they had no milk. “Then what are we going to *do*?” I asked.

Val tried to explain to me that they weren't planning on *doing* anything. The Richard family didn't go to the beach to *do* beach things. They just went there to *be* there, to experience the shore, to be one with the shore. I didn't get it.

It turns out that Val's parents believe that the beach has some of kind of mystical "puissance," a kind of life-force-energy. They think that the sand, and salt, and sea breeze have some sort of magical healing powers.

Incidentally, "puissance" sounds like something a French person might spread on toast.

I was skeptical of the beach's medicinal powers, so Val related a family story to me:

Val's dad's brother, her uncle Robert, had lung cancer. The cancer was growing like crazy, and the doctors prescribed all kinds of different medicines, and Robert did all kinds of clinical trials of new drugs, and went through radiation therapy, and chemotherapy, and dance therapy, and speech therapy. But nothing worked. The doctors told him that he was going to die in a few months, at, like, age fifty. He decided that if he was going to die, he wanted to live the rest of his life on the beach. So he quit his job and moved to a beachfront property in Nova Scotia. And he sat on the beach all day from sunrise to sunset, eating toast with puissance.

Uncle Robert sat on the beach every day, waiting to die. But he didn't die. He'd been told that he would get weaker and weaker, and sicker and sicker. But he felt stronger and stronger, and healthier and healthier. Instead of *sitting* on the beach, he found himself strolling, taking long walks, exploring the beach and the nearby cliffs and crags and bluffs, and just generally reconnecting with the world of beaches and shoreline rock

formations. At some point, he strolled inland to a hospital to find out why he wasn't dead. They ran some tests and found that his cancer was receding, like the ocean just before low tide. After another year of beach walking, the cancer was in full "remission," and he moved to a more populated part of Nova Scotia, and started working again.

So, Val's parents believe that what you should take away from this story, is that the beach has supernatural healing powers. "There must have been something about living near the sea, and being in the sea breeze all the time, that did something to make his cancer go away," Val explained to me, with a straight face, as she took our cake dishes to the sink.

"There are *no* controls in that experiment," I responded, "Have you been in science class? There are *so* many independent variables. How do you know it was the beach, and not his medication just taking a long time to start working? It could have been a change in the stresses of his life. It could have been pure dumb luck."

"But my parents have always said that—"

"Your parents aren't doctors. And they're out of their minds. Is there any other weird witchdoctor stuff your family believes in that I should know about? Do you guys all sit around in the evening with leeches all over your bodies?"

Val was a little hurt by my attack on her family's belief in beach voodoo. Nobody likes to admit her family is crazy. Even though everyone's family is crazy. But as I poked gaping holes in the Richard's beach therapy idea, the craziness of it did seem to slowly dawn on Val. She didn't *want* to hear what I was saying, but once she had, she saw that I was mostly right. "It's just one of those things you're told as a kid," she said in her

defense, “And you believe it because it’s your parents telling you, and you think *everything* your parents say is right.”

“I understand,” I told her. “When I was in kindergarten, we were learning about dinosaurs and paleontology. The teachers taught us all about how people found dinosaur bones under the ground. And they took us out in the schoolyard to dig for dinosaur bones. They said to look for wet spots on the ground. That’s where dinosaur bones usually are, they said. And sure enough, there were fucking *dinosaur bones* in the playground. And I took one home and it sat on a shelf in my room for like seven years. I just assumed that my teachers and parents wouldn’t lie to me, and that I had, like, a stegosaurus fibula on my shelf. But then when I was twelve or thirteen, and I finally actually thought about it, I asked my mom, and she told me that it was a pig bone. The teachers just went to a butcher and bought bones and put them in the ground for us to dig up. It shattered my whole world belief system.”

Val laughed at me. “You were *thirteen* when you had that realization?”

“Or twelve.”

“If you’d found dinosaur bones, a museum would have wanted them. You’d have had paleontologists and museum curators all over your kindergarten.”

“I know that now. I didn’t when I was six.” Embarrassed, I tried to swing the conversation back to the topic that made Val look like the idiot. “So who in your family has cancer?” I asked.

“Nobody. We’re not going because somebody’s sick. We’re going because it’s fun, and it’s...like...”

“Full of therapeutic hocus-pocus?”

“Maybe it’ll cure you of your annoying nitpicking.”

“That’s incurable,” I told her.

And I would end the chapter right there, except that I feel it’s important to inform you that Team John and Adrien won the floor hockey game. They defeated Team Danny and Mike 8-6, although not without some controversy surrounding whether or not the ceiling fan was in play. And, I’m pleased to report that only 1/3 of a lamp was broken. There is a sizeable piece missing, but it still functions as a lamp.

Chapter 17

My family used to go on vacation over winter break. We used to go to the beach in Florida, but I really do hate the beach. Sand is uncomfortable and it gets *everywhere*. If you wear a pair of shoes on the beach for two minutes, those shoes will have sand in them forever. And salt water defeats the purpose of water. Water is supposed to be cleansing, but after you swim in the sea, you’ve got to wash off in fresh water. People like to read on the beach, but I’d rather read inside, where the sun doesn’t try to broil me. I fussed a lot about the beach. I also don’t like flying. I fussed about that too. “If humans were meant to fly,” I said, “Darwin would have evolved us to have wings.”

“I don’t think you’re understanding evolution properly,” my father replied. But we stopped flying to Florida.

Then we changed, and we’d go skiing for a few days instead. But my dad didn’t like skiing because it was dangerous. “The entire idea of skiing is to try to keep yourself from going faster,” he said. “There’s just too much anxiety involved, and too many knee

injuries. Nobody over the age of twenty-five should be allowed to ski.” So we stopped skiing, despite the fact that skiing includes hot chocolate, and hot chocolate is great, particularly if there are marshmallows therein.

These days, over winter break, we stay around here and complain about Christmas: its music, its commercials, its ridiculous decorations, how Jesus was actually born in the summer, how it’s basically an old pagan tradition that has nothing to do with Christianity. That may be the *only* thing everybody in my family can agree about. And the resentment of Christmas may be the only Jewish tradition we hold ourselves to.

When I was a little kid, people would always ask me, “So, Sonny, what are you going to get from Santa this year?”

And I’d say, “I’m Jewish.”

And they’d say, “But you still celebrate Christmas, right?”

And I’d say, “I’ll bash your face in with a tire iron.” That was the one time my mom wouldn’t get angry at me when I was rude, and I savored it.

Naturally, my parents were surprised when I asked them if I could go to the beach with Val “for Christmas.” I asked them right when I got back from Val’s house. They were both in the kitchen, working at the kitchen table.

Susan looked pleased, “That sounds nice. Cape May is such a lovely town,” she said.

Joe looked confused and concerned. “For *Christmas*?” he asked.

“I’m thinking of converting,” I told him, “just so I can see the look on Grandpa Art’s face.”

This did not amuse my father. He paused for a moment to reposition himself in his chair. “Does this mean that you and Val are...reunited?” he asked, as awkwardly as he could manage.

I would have squirmed in my seat, had I been sitting down. But luckily, I was standing, and as I didn't know the answer to the question, I didn't have to formulate a decent response. It was clear that I was allowed to go to Cape May, and that's what mattered. So I just shrugged and went down to the lowest floor to catch the end of the Flyers' game.

Cape May is a pretty coastal town at the far southern end of the Jersey Shore, on a little peninsula that juts out toward Delaware. The town tries, and mostly succeeds, in maintaining a quaint and historic feeling. It's full of old Victorian houses with wrap-around porches, bay windows, and those big circular turret-like rooms. I think that's the technical term for them: “turret-like.” Val's family rented a large, but non-Victorian house a few blocks from the beach.

Cape May is quiet most of the year, but it was extra quiet and old-timey in December, when there were few people around, and few cars on the road. There was a cool mist that hung over the town, which gave the place a cinematic feel.

We spent the week wandering around the little town and in the nearby nature center, getting taffy stuck in our teeth, and sitting on the beach finding creative ways to stay warm in the icy sea breeze. Val's brothers really enjoyed flying kites. They did that a lot. I thought it was cool for the first five minutes or so, but after that, what do you do?

You're like, "Okay, there it is, up in the sky. That's neat." But then what? I don't understand how that can be a week's entertainment.

I did get to spend a lot of time alone with Val, just kind of walking around. It was a nice feeling, strolling through the town with her beside me, both of us all wrapped up in sweatshirts and jackets. It was cozy, walking close together to stay warm. I would even say that we did some "canoodling," if I felt comfortable using that word. Sometimes when everybody else was out at the beach, we'd get the house to ourselves, and we had a lot more privacy than we ever had at home, where there was always at least *somebody* around at Val's house or mine. The privacy, the close proximity, and the lack of anything else to do, led us back to physical intimacy—which is my diplomatic way of saying that we boned on the couch.

I thought that this was a wonderful development, and I was proud of myself for not thinking too much into it, for not being so damned neurotic. I wasn't thinking ahead and asking questions like, "What does this mean? Where is this going?" And it was liberating not to ask questions like that.

But Valerie wasn't so liberated.

One clear evening toward the end of the week, Val and I found ourselves on the couch in the living room of the beach house—the couch was my bed for the week. We were snuggled up together, cozy and comfy, and I felt great. I was feeling playful, and I was making jokes, and trying to tickle Val. But she wasn't having any of it. She wasn't even *listening* to my silliness. She was staring out of the tall bay window at the end of the room. "Remember the moon?" she asked me wistfully.

“Do I *remember* it? I see it right now,” I said, pointing out the window where a crescent moon shone just above the roof of the house next door.

“I mean do you remember the conversation we had about it. And about, like, us.”

I did remember that conversation, and I told her so.

“I just keep thinking,” she went on, “Well, I guess I just don’t understand what the *point* is. I like you. I like being with you. But what if it’s not, like, *worth it?*”

She was asking herself at least as much as she was asking me, though I still felt like I was supposed to reply.

But I didn’t have an immediate answer. I gazed around the room, searching for one. And I found myself blaming my environment for my lack of a quick response. How was I supposed to think properly in a room that was so tackily decorated? The various table and shelf surfaces of the living room were cluttered with hideous knick-knacks. There were chipped seashells, and *two* lamps *made* of chipped seashells. There were some picture frames containing generic photographs of beaches, most of which clearly weren’t anywhere near Cape May. Lots of them contained palm trees. There was a fucking *monkey* on the beach in one of them. I felt like the photographs were probably the ones that had come in the picture frames when they were purchased, the ones you’re *supposed* to remove and replace with your own.

I decided I’d do what I did on tests and quizzes: just make it up as I went along. “Tell me, why do you *do* things?” I asked, more pedantically than I meant to. “Why do you do the things you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you believe in god? Or some divine purpose behind your actions?” I knew that she didn’t believe in any such thing.

“You know that I don’t.”

“Okay, so then you do things because they make you happy. Or they make you feel good in some way. I don’t know that there has to be a ‘point.’ Sometimes you can just do things because that’s what you *want* to do, because that’s what feels right.” I didn’t exactly know where my destination was, but I liked the path I was taking, so I kept talking. “People don’t tend to break up while they still like each other, right? It sucks to break up, so they wait until it falls apart and they can’t hold it together any more. I don’t think there’s a ‘point’ in looking ahead and waiting for that to happen. So just enjoy the...whole...thing. And then if it falls apart, it falls apart.”

“Wow. You put a lot of thought into that,” Val said, though it wasn’t true. And she took her eyes off the window and looked up at me.

I tried my best to look wise, but I think I mostly looked goofy. “Yeah. ‘Thoughtful’ is my middle name,” I replied.

“Ha. On opposite day.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard anybody mention ‘opposite day’ since I was like eight years old. When I went to day camp, they had an ‘opposite day,’ and I wore my underwear on the outside of my pants, and they told me it was inappropriate and I got in trouble. They said I was supposed to wear my clothes *backwards*. And I was like, ‘Why didn’t you assholes call it ‘*backwards* day’ then?’”

Val shook her head. “As Thompson would say, ‘Be precise in your language.’”

“I hate that woman,” I said.

“I know you do. You hate most people.”

“Not true. I don’t know *most* people. Most people live in Asia or Africa.”

“I meant the people you know.”

“Well, be precise in your language, Strudel Pants.”

Val slid her arm under my hoodie and wrapped it around my bare chest, squeezing me tight. She leaned her head against my shoulder and we fell asleep that way. Or, rather, *she* fell asleep that way. I can’t sleep sitting up, so I just sat there for a while, counting the hideous pinch-pots that adorned the room’s various surfaces. And then I roused Val, and she trotted off to her room, so her parents wouldn’t wake up in the morning and find us intertwined on the couch.

I awoke a few hours later when Mike and Adrien emerged from their room to watch the 6:30 am re-run of *Bakugan Battle Brawlers*. This was the week’s routine, and although I didn’t like waking up so early, I sort of enjoyed the anime cartoon (though I’d never admit it).

On this particular morning, I was sore, probably from sleeping strangely on the couch. And my right arm was *completely* asleep. It was totally numb. I smacked it a bunch with my other hand and marveled at the lack of sensation. I could have chewed through it at the elbow and I wouldn’t have felt a thing.

When I was at summer camp, our counselor taught us a trick he called “the stranger.” This is where you intentionally sleep on your arm, and then when you wake up, your hand is asleep, and you jerk off with the sleeping hand, and it feels like somebody else is touching your penis. I’ve tried this trick, and I don’t recommend it. First of all, it

doesn't feel like somebody else is touching your penis. It feels like *you're* touching it with a hand that's asleep. And second, in order to accomplish "the stranger," you've got to sleep on your arm, which is uncomfortable. And if you're like me, and you squirm and change positions in your sleep, you've got to try this on a number of consecutive nights to achieve the desired result.

When I woke up at the shore house, I didn't masturbate with my sleeping hand, because *Bakugan Battle Brawlers* was on. The anime cartoon *Bagukan Battle Brawlers* may be the least erotic thing in human history. I don't think I could *ever* get aroused during *Bakugan Battle Brawlers*, even if I weren't sharing a couch with seven and nine year-old boys.

When Val emerged at 8:30, she joined us on the couch for the fifth straight *Bakugan* episode, just in time to see Dan, Drago, and Zenthon defeat Rockfist. But they were still having trouble with the Chaos Bakugan. It was craziness. Zenthon was battling pretty well though. "I love Zenthon," Adrien declared.

I chuckled to myself, and looked toward Val, but she had gotten up to go get herself a bowl of cereal. "Will you always love Zenthon?" I asked Adrien for my own amusement. "How do you know your love won't fade over time?"

"Because he's awesome," Adrien told me.

It was tough to argue with that. Objectively, Zenthon *was* awesome. He flew at super-speed and spat white fire at his opponents. "I admire your perspicacity," I told Adrien, and I got up and followed Val to the kitchen for a bowl of Quaker Oat Squares. "Your brother is wise beyond his years," I told her.

"They don't like it when you say things like that, things they don't understand."

“Yeah, well, we’re even then. They make me watch that anime show, and I’ve got no *idea* what’s going on. Except that Zenthon’s a bamf. That’s the only thing that’s clear.” Val shook her head at me. “Don’t shake your head at Zenthon,” I cautioned, “He’ll burn you to a crisp. And with your height, you’d only be able to attack his legs. But guess what? His legs are super-strong and reinforced. That’s where his protection is strongest. He’d take you down to Chinatown, or Japantown I guess would be more—”

“Zenthon needs to shut up, or I’m going to pour milk through his circuitry,” Val informed me. So Zenthon shut up, doused his Oat Squares in 1%, and refrained from didactically explaining to Val that Zenthon is a *summoned* creature of Drago’s powers, and therefore has no circuitry.

I brought my bowl back to the couch, and took up a perch on the armrest. I munched my breakfast and cheered on Rafe and Paige as they used their horn to defeat the Chaos Bakugan.

Chapter 18

I’ve been told that you should end a story before it drags on. Don’t wait around and try to make everything neat and perfect. Bring the story to the most cursory, but acceptable resolution, and then cut it off before you get carried away. Basically, I don’t need fill in every detail, and answer every unanswered question.

When I feel that the story is told, which is about now-ish, I just need to end it. And it doesn’t really matter if the reader’s confused by the ending. I think you get extra points if you confuse the reader, actually.

Look at *Inception*, that DiCaprio movie everybody else loved. Nobody could figure out the ending with the spinning top. Was he still in a dream? Was he still in a dream within a dream within a dream? Were those his real kids? Was the dreidel going to just keep spinning? Or was it going to fall?

A book is supposed to end like *Catcher in the Rye* does. His sister rides a carousel and then, bam, it's over. And you're like "Where's the ending? What *happens*? Wait, was he in a mental hospital the whole time he was telling the story? What the fuck?" That's how it's supposed to work. I asked my sister if she'd be willing to ride a carousel, but she was like, "Where are we going to find a carousel?" And she had a good point, as I don't know the whereabouts of any carousels.

I'm not good with endings or goodbyes. I always say goodbye to people too soon. Like, I'm at somebody's house and I say, "See ya," but then it turns out I have to use the bathroom. So I use the bathroom, but then do I, like, say goodbye again? Or do I just say nothing and expect everyone to act like I'm already gone? Or, I'll say goodbye to somebody at the lockers at school, but then it turns out that we're both walking to the buses, in the same direction, and I'm not sure if we should keep talking, or just ignore each other. It's an uncomfortable situation.

But I'm just going to relax and end the book how I want to, without any dreidels or merry-go-rounds, or uncomfortable goodbyes

Writers, when asked, often say that they write because "they have to." They feel that their stories are urgent, that they simply *have* to be written. Their work bursts out of them like water from a geyser, or a smoothie from the blender when you forget to put the cap on. That wasn't the case with me here. I didn't *have* to write this book. I could have

done lots of other things. Maybe that's why there's nothing particularly *urgent* in here, why it wasn't full of vital insight or revelation. And I'm truly sorry if you feel shortchanged. In my defense, it wasn't *my* idea for you to buy this book. That one's on you. And frankly, I think that even if this thing doesn't change the face of American literature, even if it doesn't change how you see the world, there's some good stuff in here. In fact, read it again. It'll be even better the second time.

When I told Ian I was writing this thing, he laughed at me and said, "Haha. No fucking chance you finish that shit," which is where most of my motivation has come from. So thanks for that, buddy. He also bet me that I wouldn't have the balls to end my book with the word "poopface." So, Ian, here it is: Ian Goodman is a big poopface.