

SETLIST: A MEMOIR

by

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Setlist: A Memoir follows me as a young musician in a fledgling rock band struggling for success while also struggling with a variety of family issues: my mother's worsening neurological disease, my strained relationship with my father, my sister's death from cancer and other deaths in the family, my own self-doubt. The hopes and promises of being in a rock band push me forward despite tragedy's constant pull backwards. This is a memoir that shows a young man growing up, clinging to music as a way to hold steady as the turbulent new world of adulthood—one filled with loss and uncertainty—rushes around him.

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1. “The Fault”

The year my mother got hurt at work and sick with nerve pain, the year my parents separated, I met Bryan on the school bus taking us to third grade. He wore black shorts, black t-shirts with WWF ironed-on wrestlers’ faces chipping off them. He wore black shoes with tall white socks. He had a crew cut and a muted smile. It was easy for us to become friends because we liked all the same stuff. The same anime television shows, the same card games.

We both loved stories. He had hundreds of them which he claimed to be true—like how he climbed through the vents to steal an opponent's best card at a card tournament he entered; like how he watched dirty versions of the cartoons we watched where the characters had sex; like how his family had just moved back to Pennsylvania after years spent in Wyoming; like how his brother worshipped the devil and played in a death metal band and how he hadn’t been seen in a long while; like how Bryan was conceived backstage at a heavy metal show in the 80s. He told every story with conviction and made the mythology of the world he lived in come alive. I followed him, believed every single word he said, and he didn’t seem like a mystery to me at all. I felt like I had known him my whole short life.

I didn’t get his phone number, but he told me where he lived. So one Saturday in the fall of 1997, a day after snow had blanketed the streets and sidewalks, Mom drove me to his house. I hoped he would be home. I knocked on his door and Bryan’s dad opened it. He had curly blond hair that dangled past his waist. He was probably smoking a

cigarette, was probably shirtless. I asked if Bryan was home and Bryan came to the door and let me in. He asked his parents if I could stay.

They ordered pizza for us, and Bryan and I went to play outside in the new snow until the pizza came. Bryan suggested that we mess with the delivery guy. We covered the slab of numbers on his house with snow, in hopes that he'd miss the place or take an extra few minutes to figure out where he was, where we were. I don't remember if he was lost or late, but Bryan and I laughed and ate pizza and laughed about the story for years.

Bryan showed me his bedroom—a bare bunked bed between a closet and a pair of narrow windows—and the spare room next to it where he housed all his action figures in a long wooden chest. Plastic Pokemon figures that you could get in Burger King kid's meals on shelves lining the walls. Bryan and I made up games: spread his hoards of action figures out across the floor, had them crawl over pillow and blanket obstacles to fight each other as the sun came out, glared off the dirty windows in the late afternoon.

Bryan's house was so different than my own home. Things seemed to be in place there, stable, consistent. The clumps of dust stayed latched to the edges of the hallway carpet, the curtains stayed still, the doors to Bryan's parents' and sister's rooms were always closed. His house smelled stagnant, like smoke and wood and oil that spilled through the old radiators, and when I went home that night, I smelled too.

It was rare that both Mom and Dad were home at the same time. Before they separated, Mom worked seven to seven overnight shifts as a nurse at Easton hospital, and sometimes worked the day too, then came home, napped, and went back to work. Dad did construction—he had started his own business, Watson's Home Improvement—but after

a few solid years of business, jobs had become rare. The two of them took care of four kids, Melissa (14), me (8), my brother Andrew (7), and my little sister Jessica, only a year old. We all lived in a big house—three stories—full of furniture and mirrors and pictures blanketing the walls, baskets holding potted plants hanging from hooks in the ceilings. Floral wallpaper accented the burgundy walls. Velvety soft black and green couches, bay windows edged with billowing red wine curtains. The fridge, the pantry, the cabinets, the shelves leading down into the basement were always packed with snacks. On holidays, there were baskets of Easter candy and big meals and shimmering presents spiraling out from under the Christmas tree and into the living room.

There was a big front porch that Mom and Dad painted blue, a terraced garden out front that wrapped around the house to the patio in the backyard. There was a pool and a deck that Dad built, a treehouse and swingset that Dad and my uncle pieced together one night—one of my earliest memories—a fence and two garages at the end of the yard that Dad put up. It must have been expensive to keep that home together for us. It must have been so much hard work to keep it all together for so long. They must have said *yes* to nearly everything we asked for.

We lived in Whitehall, a suburb of Allentown, Pennsylvania, and part of the Lehigh Valley: three small cities in eastern Pennsylvania and their suburbs that spiralled out from the highways into quiet neighborhoods with clean sidewalks, new developments with huge, empty yards, family owned mini-markets and pizza shops. For Mom and Dad, there must have been something honest and attractive about the area that made them want to stay when they first moved there in the early 90s. Hardly any crime. Lots of kids Melissa's age. Industry was fading and the ruins were everywhere—the abandoned

Martin Tower executive offices of Bethlehem Steel and decaying blast furnaces along the river; the defunct Dixie Cup Factory in Easton with its huge model cup sitting crooked on top—but the values of hard work and raising a family were passed down.

We lived on East Union Street, a wide road with a few scattered homes, some of them tall like ours, most just one story with vinyl siding and orange brick, a small tree or a some hedges in their front yards. East Union intersected other streets like it in each direction until, half a mile east, there was the Lehigh River and then the Lehigh Valley International Airport. In clear weather, you could see the planes sinking through the sky below the sun, getting ready to land, or better yet, sweeping across the sky over the Lehigh Valley, then disappearing, the thundering wave of escape fading slowly with their trails of exhaust. I loved to swing in the backyard in the summer, and watch them all day, just wondering where they were going, wondering with excitement what it might feel like to be somewhere else. To the north there was West Catasauqua, where Bryan lived, and then Catasauqua. To the west of our home, our neighborhood of ranch homes wound around Jefferson Park, where we went to summer camp, around the Lehigh Valley and Whitehall Malls and ended at McArthur Road.

MacArthur Road was a four-lane highway that bisected Whitehall and surged downhill into Center City Allentown. Strips of shops clung to either side of the highway and always seemed to be popping up and growing taller, and in one of those malls was Jacob's Music, an old place with a glass front and a tiny neon sign. At school, my older sister, Melissa started playing the saxophone in the middle school band, and I told Mom that I wanted to play like Melissa. Since it was the first year the elementary school offered band, they only had a few instruments for rent. A few trombones, some flutes, a

tuba. Someone had already claimed the only saxophone, and when I told Mom, she called the school. She asked if there would be more instruments later in the year or if I could borrow one from the high school or middle school bands. “He needs his own instrument if he wants to play the saxophone,” the band director must have told Mom, because Mom took me to the music store.

We must have walked through the store between all the instruments hanging on the walls. The brass ones in the back shining like gold. Electric guitars dangling from the ceiling. Everything smelling like just-opened packages. Mom asked for the prices. They were several times more than she was expecting to pay.

“Who can afford a two thousand dollar instrument?” she asked the clerk. “Can we rent one?”

“No rentals available,” said the clerk.

So Mom took me to another store down MacArthur into Allentown. The prices were the same. There was always next year, she reminded me.

I remember being glad that I couldn’t join the school band. I had more time after school to hang out with friends, and learning to read music, like we’d started to do in music class that year, was hard for me. I just couldn’t remember what the symbols meant and how the notes on the staff translated to what they sounded like. But I had just convinced myself that I didn’t care. Melissa practiced her saxophone in her room on the second floor. I wasn’t sure what I wanted more desperately: to play music or be like Melissa.

It seems to me now that in my memories of that house, Melissa was either in her room or out of the house entirely. This was in the early 90s, and Mom and Dad were still together,

and seemingly still happy together—or maybe this was before the point I realized they weren't happy anymore—and when Melissa started high school, they rewarded her with her own phone line running straight up to her room. She'd stay on the phone all night with her door closed to us. She'd be away during the day.

On weekends, she slept in. Until ten, eleven in the morning. Even noon. Mom slept through the weekend days too, recovering from her night shifts, while Dad took care of Jessica until Mom woke up, then went to fix a neighbor's roof, install a kitchen in a house a few blocks away. I spent most of my time outside with Andrew, wandering the alleys with friends, playing football in their backyards, playing Nintendo in their rooms. Andrew was about my height then; I was a bit skinnier, a bit blonder, but most people asked Mom if we were twins when she took us on walks around the neighborhood in the evenings, walking Jessica in a stroller.

Andrew and I didn't act like twins, though. We didn't wear the same things or get along. We fought a lot. I dislocated his shoulder twice pulling him off the top bunk of our beds, he bit my ear. I smashed his nose with a plastic shovel toy; he kicked me in the neck, yanked his foot back and ripped apart the gold necklace I'd gotten for my birthday. We were always fighting about something, until years later when we weren't. Dad would break us up and ground us and say to each of us that, "one day your brother will be your best friend." It made us fight harder.

We played together because we were close to the same age, but we were too different to be best friends. Andrew was more inclined to do reckless things than me. One year Mom gave him a hundred dollar bill for his birthday. He took it to the market to buy candy and carried it around the neighborhood until he lost the remaining ninety-three

dollars. I was more inclined to get out of the way of trouble, while Andrew liked to face it head on. Repeating the words of something he'd seen on t.v., he threatened one of the girls down the street until her parents called the police on us. We sat on our beds and the cop asked us if one of us told her that we would, "slit her throat." I didn't know what that meant and neither did Andrew.

Once, for fun, Andrew hopped over the saplings in the park in front of the apartments down the street until he knocked one out of the ground and a landscape maintenance guy chased us all the way home. We hid under our beds, but Mom and Dad found us and made us confess. Andrew lied and lied until Mom and Dad didn't believe a thing he said even when he was telling the truth. Even when I was telling the truth, we'd get in trouble, grounded, yelled at. If something ended up lost or broken, it was us. Most of the time, it was just easier, less dangerous, to be out of the house, roaming the neighborhood. Andrew and I stuck together.

Melissa did her own thing. At age fifteen or sixteen, she got a job at the pool in neighboring Catasauqua, got her first boyfriend, spent time with her friend Jill who lived across the street, practiced field hockey at school. Sometimes, on my way downstairs from the attic room that Andrew and I shared, I would peek into her room when she was out. There was a bed, a big white desk in the corner. A tower of Shirley Temple VHS tapes in white plastic cases against a wall wallpapered in sky: clouds scattered ceiling to floor. A big poster of a twenty-something Jonathan Taylor Thomas on the back of her door. Two long white shelves that stretched from one corner to another topped with random things: a collection of troll dolls with wild neon hair, a few framed photographs, a dreamcatcher (did she make this in school or at church?) dangling from the edge of the

bottom shelf near the door. A dreamcatcher. It seems so symbolic now. All the memories of childhood that seeped through. The yarn tied in specific shapes to keep bad dreams away. What good dreams did Melissa have then, at night, phone hung up, window open and breeze drifting in, Crayola Crayon ceiling fan blades swirling the warm air around her. All those days are beautiful—when I remember them—cloudless, bursting with the warm breath of summer. Perpetually lovely and living and full of us all. These memories like a song that keeps playing in your mind after its over. They pull me back.

Around the time I met Bryan, around the time Melissa started playing the saxophone, I found my parents' Elvis tapes and listened to them constantly. I did Elvis impressions for them, "thank you, thank you very much." I learned all the words to "All Shook Up" and "Heartbreak Hotel," watched a library-rented copy of *Jailhouse Rock* over and over again. Dad bought me an Elvis biography with tons of glossy pictures, stories about how he famously walked into Sun Records and changed popular music forever, how nobody thought he could sing, how fate had had his mother buy him a guitar for his eleventh birthday when, really, he wanted something else.

Mom and Dad bought me a guitar for my ninth birthday, and I wasn't expecting it. At my birthday party in the kitchen of our house, everyone crowded around the table. Andrew and I next to each other, our legs swinging because our feet couldn't reach the floor yet. Dad, with his black beard, standing, hands in jean pockets, probably in a Wheels of Time Car Show shirt. Mom with her big smile and golden hair up, darting around the kitchen to get everything everyone needed. Grammy sitting at the end of the table, smiling, in her thick glasses, her short hair just starting to grey. Uncle John? Maybe he was outside, after telling me and Andrew some goofy jokes, holding a cigarette with

his hand that was missing parts of two fingers, staring up into the dreamy bright sky, knowing or not knowing his fate and all of our fates. I can see him: balding head, thick brown mustache. Melissa? Melissa smiling like Mom—a smile so big she had to close her eyes to get it all out—hair bouncing off her shoulders. Everyone I'd known in the short time I was alive crowded around the kitchen table under the streamers and glistening aluminum balloons bobbing into the ceiling. It was spring and warm. The sun shone through the kitchen windows. Mom brought out a big, oblong leather case. I opened it, and it was a guitar.

I must have asked for it. I must have been asking for it all along. After Mom couldn't afford the saxophone. I must have wanted to be like Elvis. To sing and strum and move and make people happy with music. I held it in my hands for a long time. I remember holding it. And then I didn't know what to do with it, so I put it back in its case, took it upstairs to my room.

When Gram and Uncle John left, I chased their cars to the end of the block, like I always did, laughing and panting as they drove away.

Mom got hurt at work, lifting and flipping a person during her night shift. She herniated a disc, and had surgery to repair it, but she had to take a lot of time off of work.

Money probably got tight. Dad was having a hard time finding odd construction jobs, and Mom was probably pressuring him to kill the business, get some job security. Mom was missing so many shifts because the pain in her back had moved to her hands while she recovered from the surgery. Her hands had started burning. Fingers ached and swelled, like false alarms sounding and nothing could shut them off. Then her arms and legs and her whole body. Her muscles shifted and twitched. The wiring of her nerves

shorted and sparked across her body. She burned and ached with electrical pain and soon Mom was back in the hospital.

She saw a pain specialist. The surgery had gone badly. Nerves had been damaged. RSD is what they called it. Reflex Sympathetic Disorder: nerves firing pain impulses at will. It's going to get worse, they must have told her, and it did. She had a malpractice suit on her hands and, all of a sudden, an inability to work and support her big family. Mom and Dad must have been devastated.

Dad must have felt the pressure. Watson's Home Improvement folded and Dad had to look for new employment. Where was the money for Mom's pain medication going to come from? How were they going to send Melissa to college in a few years? How were they going to pay property taxes and buy food?

Mom and Dad started arguing. Fighting. Over money? Over taking care of all of us and still trying to work? Over Melissa growing up and out? She wanted to go see her friends now. She wanted a car now. When Melissa turned 16, Dad helped her buy a cheap car from one of our relatives and she drove Andrew and me to the mall before the engine sputtered and died and Mom and Dad fought over that too.

All of a sudden, they told us they were getting a divorce. All of a sudden, Dad moved to our unfinished basement. He slept on a futon that smelled like old, wet carpet crammed between towers of overstuffed shelves. He cleaned himself in the industrial shower he had installed in his workshop, before leaving out the basement entry. At night, I sometimes wandered down the creaking wooden steps to watch a football game with him on his six-pack-sized black and white television as he drank a few beers. We sat there, quiet in the sullen glow of the little t.v. burning beneath the ceiling rafters.

Mom and Dad hit each other. Called the police on each other. The police escorted Dad out and I cried so much, and he told me he'd come back and get me.

Dad moved out, got himself an apartment in a small building in the next town in front of the silos of an old cement plant. He kept looking for work. Melissa, Andrew, Jessica, and I visited him on weekends. There wasn't much space there: only a den, a bathroom, a bedroom. He made us big bowls of spaghetti and sauce because that was what he had. We slept on the floor, huddled alongside the bed, listened to baseball games hum through the television until he got another apartment. Andrew and I shared bunk beds and Dad left the radio on, let the fuzzy AM pop tunes of the fifties and sixties fill the room while we slept, and the music helped me sleep.

At home, after Dad left, Mom painted the walls of my and Andrew's attic bedroom all the colors of the rainbow—like Melissa's Crayola Crayon ceiling fan—to give us a new perspective. The wall along the stairs, she painted ocean blue and hung fish netting knotted with sea shells to remind her of her favorite place—a place she hadn't been in years. The other walls became shaded with deep hues of forest green, violet, red; the ceiling turned a bright yellow in the midday sun when Mom was finished. Sunlight blared through the four windows, reflecting along the sills, casting fleeting rainbows of dust onto the hills of stuff strewn across our room. The economy-sized air conditioner Dad had installed tapped like a metronome during the summer. The iron railing he put in chipped silver paint. The place felt empty, dead silent, without him.

When Mom wasn't sick, lying down, she filled the empty spaces of our house with things. When she felt good enough to get out, she bought things at thrift stores, yard sales. Sent old stuff to the basement, and when the basement was flooded with things, she

sent them to the attic. Stacks of blankets and old clothes in boxes and bright teal plastic garbage cans with no lids. Holiday decorations: pumpkin-shaped Halloween candy buckets, plastic angels as tall as we were that you plugged in and they lit up your lawn. We shoved stuff under our beds, behind our bedroom door, on one half of each of the thirteen stairs leading to our attic room.

Mom stayed in bed longer every day, and the mess in our room grew into a mountain of clutter. Flowers of magazines grew from the soil of dusty cardboard. Pencils and pens, like weeds, sprouted in all containers. Trees of dressers and cabinets rooted themselves in the terrain of Clutter Mountain and bloomed with fruit of old clothing. There wasn't much room for us, so Andrew and I played in the yard most of the time. Or we played video games in the living room. Or we went to Bryan's house.

At Bryan's house we draped quilts across his lofted bed because the three of us decided we wanted a clubhouse for our new club—BAM, for Bryan, Andrew, Michael. We spent lots of time there camping below Bryan's blanket-wrapped bed. We played board games and card games until eleven o'clock, gambling marshmallows or Pixie Stix that we'd bought from Kotsch's market at the end East Union street. We watched television and wrote stories and hosted our own radio shows, speaking into the microphone of Mom's ancient tape recorder about the new Green Day album about kids at school that didn't like us and we didn't like back. About cartoons we watched and books we read. We ate Death by Chocolate ice cream while Bryan's parents smoked a carton of Camels downstairs. Sometimes, Bryan led us to believe that his parents would rather have had Bryan go somewhere else than bring friends to their place. Or maybe it

was Bryan who just wanted to get out. Sometimes it seemed that the three of us felt out of place everywhere.

We rode our bikes around Whitehall, looking for a space to build a clubhouse. We eyed empty plots of land, overgrown with wispy grasses, colored with old truck tires and smashed, splintering particle-board furniture. We looked under the bridge that crossed the river into Catasauqua where spaces between homes in Darktown, a single street of houses looming over the creek, sat vacant. We sat below tangled weeping willows in the park down the street, beneath the pine in the corner of Bryan's yard. We looked in the dusty windows of the abandoned bakery and made plans.

One day, Andrew and I realized the potential of our attic room: the sloping walls, the low ceiling, the neat coves along the one wall, the mountain of materials with which to build. We started off by mining for all the fabrics of the house. We pulled the cushions from the couch in the garage, the seating from the patio furniture. We dug for each blanket in the recesses of our room, each towel in the dirty wash baskets downstairs.

We turned Mom's stuff into a fort. Flipped the mattresses on their sides. Pushed dressers together to make a second story. Made secret passages with secret entrances behind sheets and blankets tacked to the ceiling. We spent all our time there, sitting near the windows and looking out across the neighborhood, watching our neighbors grill and smoke through the summer, as if they were plotting to attack our fortress. We'd spend our days planning on defending it from the outside, but really, what I was most afraid of was what was happening below us, on the first floors of our house. Our family and what had started happening. Things kept changing, and there was no way to stop it now.

After Dad moved out, Mom met Mark through a former coworker. Mark was a tall, skinny guy with big glasses, a stubbly beard, and a black crew cut. He was friendly, with a soothing voice. He tossed me the ball in the back yard and I told him I could hit it over Dad's garages, because sometimes I could hit it that far. I ran the bases: the big pine tree that shadowed the top of our house, the pool, the cherry tree, and then back to the patio. I could have played like that for days without doing anything else, and most days, that's all I wanted. Since Andrew spent a lot of time inside now, playing video games, since Melissa was away at work the huge house was pretty much empty of us. Mark tossed me the ball for hours until it was time for him and Mom to go. I sat on the blue front porch as the sky turned pink and waited until I saw Mark's maroon van pull down the street to drop Mom off.

Soon after Mom and Mark got together, they had news for Melissa, Andrew, Jessica, and me: Mom was pregnant, and she and Mark decided to name their daughter Bethany, and soon I'd have another younger sister.

Sleeping in the fort, I had dreams that Dad broke in after he moved out. But when I would find him downstairs, he'd just be sitting on floor like he used to, back against the couch with his arms up on the cushions. He'd be watching football, drinking a beer, not talking. Or I'd find him in his garage workshop building something, cutting a piece of wood and watching the race on the t.v. mounted to the wood wall. Or sometimes he'd just be coming back to get something he forgot to take with him, trying to get back into those garages, trying to pull something from his past back to him. He'd ask me to let him in. Why did he always ask me? Couldn't he ask Mom? Melissa, even? But he'd ask me to open up that door to the alley that led to the dual garages or to let him through the front

gate into the yard. I was scared I might get in trouble or scared he wanted some sort of revenge on Mom for making him leave, and I felt all the weight of keeping our world balanced. I felt like it was somehow my fault the ground was shifting under our feet. I felt like it was my responsibility to keep it all together. The dreams would end with me running out of the yard down the alley or around the block because something always chased me until I woke up.

Melissa graduated high school and during the summer, she worked at Red Lobster and the Catty Pool, saving money for her first year of college. She met Mike at the pool and they started dating. Mike was as tall as Dad, clean-shaven, with a crew cut, and a pacifying voice. He always seemed excited, like he was a part of something. He liked playing with Andrew and me, though we must have been annoying to Melissa. Mike said things like “right-on” and “rad,” and parked his dirt bike in Dad’s garage.

Melissa left for college in Tampa, Florida to be a marine biologist, to be in the sun, to be near the beach and Mom supported her, but Dad had things to say about. Marine biology? Where were the jobs in that? And couldn’t she go somewhere up here? New Jersey or Virginia? What was so much better about Florida? It was more expensive and far away. I couldn’t even imagine how far away Florida was. It was somewhere planes went.

Mike had started at Penn State the year before, and she and Melissa dated even while they were eleven hundred miles apart. They saw each other in the summer and on holidays and breaks, with the promise that they’d move in together after they both graduated. They’d move to somewhere they could both go to graduate school. They drove twenty odd hours to see each other.

When Melissa left to start school, Mom left the door to her room open. Let the sun shine through the huge windows and light up the hallway. Andrew and I didn't know it would be the last summer we would be living in Whitehall on East Union Street. Mom's health turned. She couldn't walk us to the bus stop anymore, couldn't get out of bed to help us with homework, couldn't get up to clean the house or make us dinner. She needed us to live with Dad, so she could get better. She cried and cried, but she wanted to make the best decision for us. She and Dad made the arrangements through the court and told us what would be happening.

At the end of the summer, after I finished fifth grade, we'd be going. We were moving? I couldn't understand that soon we'd be living somewhere else. Everything I'd ever known had happened in that house. Every birthday party and Christmas. Every important thing I could remember. All my friends lived around here, down the street. Nick and Jason and Josh and Zack, all only a few blocks away.

Things were changing so fast. Dad took us to visit Ellen, someone he had started dating, who lived near Nana and Pop-pop an hour away in Schuylkill County. And it seemed like the next time we visited her, Andrew and I were cleaning out her empty house, everything already packed and loaded into a truck and on its way to Whitehall.

Dad and Ellen married that May, and in preparation for Andrew, Jessica, and I all moving in with him, he and Ellen bought a house on the busy road at the edge of Whitehall. It wasn't far from Mom's, only a few miles, but it felt like an incredible distance. They even managed to stay in the same school district. Dad and Ellen tried to make the transition as simple as possible for us.

And there it was. This house would be our new house, Dad told us, when we went to visit him. We'd live here until we graduated high school. A line of trees shielded the house from the loud road, all the cars whizzing by at fifty, sixty miles per hour, constantly passing the house, humming like a short-circuiting electric fence. And on the other side of the road, there wasn't anything but a steep tree-dense hill that landed in cornfields stretching endlessly westward. We had a few neighbors, spread out across the cross street that meandered up a steep hill, but I didn't meet them for a long time after that. There weren't any kids our age in that neighborhood. Dad cut down the trees that leaned into the powerlines and bent over the house, ominously, sprawled them across the yard until he had time to carve them up for firewood. It felt like Dad had bought a house in the middle of nowhere, and we were trapped there on all sides.

The new house was falling apart when we first saw the inside. The upstairs bath sunk into the floor and leaked into the kitchen. The kitchen cabinets peeled off the walls, all the ceilings cracked and caving in. Dad made it his project to fix the place up, make it their own. It was his new project. His old project was Mom's house. He used to fix things there, but never completed his work. Like the bathroom door that never locked right; the shelves in the hallway closets that weren't nailed down, the entertainment center with a handle on the side where there wasn't a door to open. He wanted to remodel every square inch of this house. It would take him years, but this was Dad's second chance. When he and Ellen were ready to retire, they'd sell it for twice as much as they paid for it, move to somewhere warm.

We moved in with Dad at the end of the summer: Andrew, Jessica, and I. The first few days we lived there, Dad and my grandfather and my uncle cut up the kitchen and the

living room, yanking out the cabinets, slashing apart the walls with hammers and axes and crowbars. Dust everywhere. Piles of wood and insulation and ash. I started sixth grade, Andrew fifth. Jessica started kindergarten.

Bryan started skateboarding. And Andrew and I tried that too. He told me about his kickflips and ollies at our shared lunch table. Brought in how-to books that showed pictures of the best skateboarders doing their most famous trips. He told us about the next decks he would get when he had the money, about the next bearings and wheels and shoes he'd buy at the mall on the weekend. Andrew and I wanted to skateboard too and on the weekend Mom bought us knock-off skateboards that came in boxes from the department store and we took them to Dad's place. We skated across the concrete floor of Dad's garage—his Watson's Home Improvement sign looming over us, hanging on the cinderblock wall—before he and Ellen got home from work. We jumped off the porch and onto the sidewalk, scratched the concrete with our boards, ripped the paint from the decks and gashed the cheap wood.

Bryan started listening to punk rock and Andrew and I tried that too. We listened to MxPx, Blink 182. Then classic rock: Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd. Then heavy metal and grunge: Chevelle, Metallica, Nirvana. We were angry. Pissed about something, though we didn't know what yet. It was because we all wanted to be in different places. Andrew and I wanted to be back at our old house—Mom's house—the house where we grew up, where our whole family was still together.

Dad had gotten things together, and now we visited Mom on weekends and everything was different. Dad didn't let us walk to friends' houses. Dad didn't let us play video games. Dad didn't let us stay up late or drink soda or eat ice cream. Dad had us do

chores on weekends until we liked being in school more than we liked being at home. And we hated being in school.

After we moved to Dad's, he seemed angrier than I'd ever known him to be. Maybe it was because I was around him more and more on the weekends, in the mornings before school when he'd wake us up at five because that's the time he left for work outside Philadelphia. He clenched his fists, ground his teeth, growled and pounded on things. He made me and Andrew do work through all of our free time. He had us vacuum three floors of new carpets. Had us wash our clothes, had us wash the dishes, scrub the shiny new vinyl floor in the kitchen, clean the cat litter boxes that smelled and stung like ammonia. He yelled if we touched the walls. Yelled if we left the lights on. Yelled if we didn't wipe down the baseboards after we vacuumed the carpets. Yelled if the chairs in the kitchen touched the walls or touched the chair rail when we moved them to clean the floor. Yelled if our rain-wet shoes soaked the brand new hardwood. Yelled if we mentioned Melissa's name.

Worst of all, when all we wanted to do was be with friends, Dad made us help him fix the house. In masks and goggles that itched and made our faces sweat and hurt, we smashed up the old drywall in the rooms he gutted, bagged up the moldy insulation, painted the walls when he was done. At home—this was our home now—Dad made us work.

At school I went through the motions. Suddenly school wasn't fun anymore. Being home wasn't fun either. Everywhere, there were rules. Rules detailing exactly how Andrew and I had to act at home: what time we had to go to sleep, how long we had to brush our teeth, where we needed to do our homework and when. Dad typed up chore

sheets and posted them on the refrigerator. He left us notes in the morning about extra things for us to do when we got home from school. There were rules about what we had to do after school: CCD on Mondays, Boy Scouts after school on Tuesdays. We had to do what Dad called a “physical activity.” I wanted to play baseball, so Dad had us both join. Andrew didn’t like it, and after two seasons, I got bored too. I liked running, so I joined cross country and liked it a lot. Dad made Andrew join too, but Andrew couldn’t keep up, and he quit without telling Dad, and walked to friend’s houses after school.

We had to get jobs if we wanted anything of our own. That was the rule. Paper routes first, then also jobs as cashiers at the local food store. Dad had rules about what we could do on weekends. If we weren’t working at the foodstore, we had to work with Dad and Ellen cleaning the house until the evening. When Andrew and I started dating girls, Dad made rules for that too. We could see our girlfriends for three hours Saturday nights—no more than three hours— unless, of course, we got grounded for breaking any rules, for not doing some chore or not doing some chore correctly, for talking back, for watching television after school, for getting Bs on our report cards. Dad liked to use the word *indefinitely* whenever he grounded us. It meant we’d be grounded until whenever Dad felt like letting us be ungrounded, semi-free again. We could go to Bryan’s if time allowed and even stay over Friday nights, but we had to be home by six the next morning to start working for Dad.

Meanwhile, Mom was hurting, disabled, unable to work. She couldn’t afford to keep the house on East Union Street anymore, so when I started seventh grade, she sold it and moved to Mahanoy City in Central Pennsylvania, a little mining town in the mountains

with only a few long rowhome-lined streets. She rented an apartment from a cousin I'd never met and the radiators made the place smell like burning carpet.

She and Mark hired a moving company to move all of Mom's stuff. The things left in the garages she had a company remove and sell. The things in the attic, the company packed up, drove west. When Dad dropped us off there the first weekend after she moved, Andrew, Jessica, and I walked into a sea of square boxes piled to the twelve-foot ceilings. We couldn't see the walls. A narrow path led to the kitchen. A narrow path led to the stairs. It seemed like Mom was trapped up there, in the bedroom of that house in the middle of the mountains in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by boxes and boxes of things. Dad agreed to meet her halfway—every other Friday night at the Sunoco in Fogelsville—so we could spend time with her there.

After school one day that year, I pulled my guitar out from under my bed. I was probably grounded from t.v., grounded from computer, grounded from whatever else Dad could ground me from. I'd had it for years without ever trying to learn how to play it. I strummed the strings and heard the jumble of notes all competing with each other for attention, not working together, and wondered what it took to make this thing make music. The chord sounded like things crashing together. I wanted to solve that puzzle.

I had a book that illustrated the basics of guitar playing—tuning, simple chords and rhythm. It took me three hours of carefully turning the pegs, to tune it the first time. Something suddenly made me want to play. My guitar was something that had come with me from Mom's house, from my past.

Maybe I wanted to play because Bryan had started learning to play on his dad's old Ibanez acoustic, and he'd told me about it at our lunch table one day. He'd been in a

bunch of bands in the 80s and 90s and was looking to start a new one. He dressed in tight shirts and pants, wore his curly blond hair down to his elbows. He worked as an x-ray technician for a family-owned welding company, but on the side, Bryan's Dad was musician and a DJ. He hosted Karaoke at clubs in Catasauqua, Northampton. He played guitar, bass, and sang, and he had an Ibanez lying around that he used to play in the 80s that Bryan used to learn. He showed Bryan the basics. Taught him the blues. Taught him some Kiss songs. Bryan learned power chords and showed me. Bryan learned some Nirvana songs and some pentatonic scales in A and E and he showed me.

The next weekend we spent at Mom's was a month later because Mom didn't feel good enough to get us her last visitation weekend. She'd been sick. Throwing up. The new medicine didn't sit well with her. She was seeing a new pain specialist in South Jersey now, a three hour trip each way, and sometimes just that trip made her exhausted for days. And then the medicine made her nauseous, dizzy, and weak.

Dad drove us and we met her just as night began to fall. She was fifteen minutes late. We were supposed to meet her at six and her van pulled into the gas station at 6:15. She told Dad she had been in a lot of pain, had to take some medicine and then lay down for a while. It was just what she had to do now. She couldn't push it, or she'd hurt herself worse. She had to take her time. Dad listened, but wasn't happy. He gave her the benefit of the doubt, but could he have known what was happening to her then, after they'd been separated five years already?

"Meet me here at six on Sunday," he said. "And don't be late or I won't meet you here anymore. You know the court said I didn't have to. It's your responsibility to get them on your weekends."

“I know, Dave. I’m sorry,” Mom said. “I told you. I had to take medicine. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

Mom smiled at us, gave us all big hugs: me, Andrew, Jessica, and Bryan. She said we could bring Bryan, since she knew we didn’t get to see him as much as we used to, when we lived with her. She said we could bring our guitars too, and Bryan and I loaded them into the back seat of her van.

On the way into town, we passed the strip mines and their piles of gravel and coal sitting at the foot of the rounded Appalachian Mountains. We passed the auto shops—cars parked across the lots and in the grass around the garages. We passed the closed down gas stations and the World War II Memorial Tank surrounded by a white picket fence and the carports with rusting tin roofs and the towering pine trees behind the brick churches. Then the homes of Mahanoy City—two long chains of them on either side of Centre Street that seemed to pop up from the mountain—with their white vinyl siding, their raised concrete porches and tin awnings and cornices and gables. And just as quickly as they popped up, they sunk away, and we were at the end of the city at Mom’s new house, the road trailing off into the trees in the distance. Where were we? It seemed like we were miles away from everything. It seemed like we were in some wide open space, miles from everything that made us feel trapped.

It seemed like most of Mom’s stuff had been organized by the time we got there too. We could see the living room now: the couch from Mom’s old house, the entertainment center. Mom’s big mirrors and picture frames were all hanging on the walls again. In the kitchen, the picnic table we used to have in our backyard, a refrigerator,

narrow white cabinets that reached to the ceiling. It looked like it would work. It could be a new home for us.

Mom lay down, exhausted from the trip, said we could eat anything we wanted, watch anything we wanted, go for a walk if we wanted, do whatever. She had to take some medicine and sleep a while. She filled the biggest cup she had with ice and Diet Coke and shuffled upstairs, said she would be up in a while to visit with us. That was fine with us. We wanted her to feel better, and anyway, while she slept, Bryan and I could play guitar.

Bryan had a song he'd been working on. An open D chord. And then he slid that chord a few notes higher, moving his hand up the fretboard, and then a few notes higher and then went back to D. It was slow, kind of groovy. It was the first original thing he had ever written, and it sounded cool to me. We wanted to write lyrics for it. Something about Wyoming, where Bryan used to live. Something about its empty, wide-openness that attracted us like a fresh start. "*Sweet Home Wyoming*," we'd call it. It had to be funny, of course. The three of us had been writing parody lyrics to other songs in hopes that one day we could be a band and play our versions of those songs. We named our future band Runaway Losers. And then changed it to Aisle 7. And then to Cream of Mushroom. And soon we'd need a new band name.

The lyrics didn't come to us right away. The music seemed to push the words into the background when we had started learning guitar, when we had started playing together. I played what Bryan was playing. The D, G, A. He played a riff on top of it. How do we write a chorus? Hold the chords longer? Move to different chords? Play those same chords backwards? How do we write a bridge? And where do we put it? Should we

play the verse faster? Bryan and I showed Andrew what we were playing. He wanted to get a drum kit and learn. Or maybe a bass guitar. He was going to ask Dad and Ellen for an instrument for Christmas. And then we could be a whole band.

Mom got up when Uncle John knocked on the door. He snubbed out a cigarette on the porch and came in, asked us how we were. He had come over to help her fix something since now Mom only lived a few minutes away and her brother had promised he'd come over if she needed help with anything. Even when Mom still lived in Whitehall, Uncle John drove down from Frackville to help her get the house in shape to sell. Fixed things in Dad's workshop. Cleaned and covered the pool for the last time. Opened that strange triangle door in the deck that Dad had put in to give access to the pool filter to tinker with pipes and shut everything down for good. I remember how strange it was that my uncle was there, helping Mom with all those things that Dad had put together and should have been taking care of.

Mom and Uncle John talked in the kitchen, and now he seemed stressed, rubbed his bald head and walked outside to smoke often. Did his back hurt then from shoveling hot asphalt into the streets? What did he think of Dad? And Mark? Was this about Mark not moving in with Mom, but instead living in the guest house attached to his parents' house in New Jersey? Was he upset with him? What did Mom think of all this?

I was relieved that Mom and Uncle John wanted to listen to the song that Bryan and I wrote. Bryan and I strummed the chords, played them in sync, to my surprise, since we'd just started learning to play, since we'd just started playing together, since we'd just written the song—if it could be called that. We played the whole song through, unaware of what would happen at the end of our first performance, unaware of how it might

change us entirely. Mom clapped and Uncle John smiled and said, “that was good, that was very good,” and when Mom went to take medicine and lie down again, and Uncle John was about to leave, he wiped his head, put his hands softly on my shoulders, and looked me straight in the eyes like he always did, as if he were looking through me, into a future me, reminding that future me to look back on this past me and remember all the times Uncle John looked at me sternly and said slowly and with all the sincerity he could muster, “I love you, Michael. And I’m proud of you. I’m proud of all of you kids. You’re all so smart and you can do anything in this world that you set your mind to.”

I smiled and laughed, looked into my shoes, maybe because it was the gravely serious manner in which he always said this—each time he left us after a visit—so that the exchange seemed, kind of, overly dramatic. But he was sincere. He made it a point to say these things (in case something ever happened?) every single time he saw us. So I took it to heart. I really did. I didn’t yet understand how important it was to have someone give me permission to do what I wanted to do and love doing it. “I’m proud of you,” he said again. And then closed the front door behind him.

There was something he told us before he left. Something important. From then on, Bryan and I wanted to be famous. We wanted to play in a rock band and tour the world and be famous. But, Uncle John had said, “you’ll never be famous.” But he meant it in a good way, like fame was somehow a burden, something we didn’t want to dig ourselves into because we’d never get out alive, intact, still ourselves. “You’ll never be famous, and this is why,” he said. And I don’t remember what he said after that. I wish I could remember. Not because I want to know how to be famous—there couldn’t have

been a simple answer, and even if there was, Uncle John couldn't have known it. I wish I could remember just one more thing Uncle John said to me.

Bryan, Andrew, and I slept on the floor of Mom's living room. It was cold outside, almost winter, and the radiators clunked on and off and leaked warm, dry air. Bryan and I talked for a long time about the future. Could we really make a band? Could we really write songs and go play them for people and make a living out of it? Bryan's Dad had done it. He toured Ohio, Bryan told me.

But Bryan didn't want to be just like his dad. He and his mom drank a lot. Stayed up late on weekends and sang karaoke in their living room. They smoked cigarettes and partied the whole time they weren't working.

"I try so hard to get homework done, but they are always so loud and I have to leave the house. I walk to Andy Mark's house or Dave Phillips' and spend all Saturday and Sunday there playing the guitars," Bryan said.

"Isn't Dave Phillips' in Allentown? Do you really walk that far?"

"Yeah, every day we have off from school. It's just so hard to be home when my parents are doing this stuff. I don't want to breathe in their smoke anymore. I can't go downstairs to watch t.v. downstairs because my mom always passes out on the couch. I can't stay upstairs in my room because they are just too loud."

The lights were off, and it must have been past midnight. The air was staticy and the blankets sparked when I shifted. I didn't know his parents did all that stuff. And this was the time when everyone was starting to experiment with that. In eighth grade everyone we hung out with at school—except for each other—drank, smoked, did

whatever they wanted because their parents were away or their parents didn't care or their parents were too busy.

“We don't have to do any of that stuff, man,” I said. “We don't have to be them.”

Bryan seemed reassured that I didn't want to be my parents either. We were still figuring out who we wanted to be, and who we wanted to be was either our parents or not our parents. Or maybe the good qualities of both worlds. Mom let us do what we wanted whenever, but Dad got us to school and church. Dad wanted us to learn how to be responsible, but Mom wanted us to learn how to be free. Bryan's parents didn't help him with his homework, but they were glad that now he had turned to music.

It must have been close to dawn when we fell asleep, focused, motivated. We were headed in the right direction.

It seemed like every time we met Mom that winter, she was late.

When we went to meet her, I'd be afraid to look at the clock on Dad's truck dashboard. Every minute was closer to Mom coming, I told myself. Every minute was closer to getting away from Dad's house, a minute closer to Bryan and I writing new songs and starting our band. The sunlight slowly evaporating, the sky beginning to purple. The headlights of cars would glide down the mountain and get brighter, begin to merge and smear the outline of the winding road. Jessica—age seven then—Andrew, and Bryan sat in the long backseat, two acoustic guitars squeezed between them. From the front seat, I'd watch each new set of headlights come into focus, morph into some unfamiliar car or van and whiz past us, down across the rolling hills and into the valley. I'd memorized the shape of Mom's headlights by now and every set that passed wasn't hers. The gas station's overhead lights would pop on and it'd be night. But Mom always

showed up in the end. Half an hour, forty-five minutes later. No matter how late she was, Dad would wait for her.

Dad would wait. He would wait and wait. But Mom always got there just in time. “One more minute,” Dad would say when she arrived, “and I would have been out of here.”

“One more minute,” Dad said.

Minutes passed. I didn’t look at the clock. I just wanted to get away from Dad. He was angry. He was always angry at us now. Andrew and I would have to work twice as hard the next day because Dad would need to keep busy to keep from being so angry. And Dad being busy meant we’d be busy too.

Weekends at home now, Dad woke us at six to clean the garage or rake the yard or patch the drywall of the kitchen ceiling. He had us work the whole day, paid us with a five or ten dollar bill, but we didn’t want money then. We didn’t want to do those things. I was thirteen then. Andrew was twelve. We just wanted to hang out with our friends. Play games. Listen to music. Write lyrics to three-chord songs we’d been writing on guitar.

Mom wished she could get us out of there. She told us all the time. She wished she never got hurt at work. She wished the surgery didn’t damage her nerves. She wished she could have kept the house where we grew up, kept us all there together.

Melissa wished she could get us away from Dad too. She wanted us to visit her in Florida, at the University of Tampa where she was in her second year of college. Jessica was still too young, but Andrew and I, we could have flown down. Mom wanted to take us all down there in the summer—for a vacation. But Dad wouldn’t talk to Melissa—

something about a father's day card she forgot to send, something about a phone call—and he wouldn't let us go. No matter how much Mom begged him to forget about that stupid argument, he wouldn't let it go. He wouldn't let Mom take us to see Melissa either. "She's just like your mother," he'd say whenever we mentioned her name, as if she and Mom were accomplices in tossing Dad out of their lives and Dad was sure he had been wronged. It wasn't until years later that I learned that Melissa was born before Mom and Dad got married, that Dad adopted her when they did, that Melissa's father had the same name as a famous racecar driver but had been in jail for years. There seemed to be something about Melissa and Mom that frustrated Dad—because they shared it and he didn't—made him feel exiled when we all still lived together. And when Mom was late, it seemed like those feelings of estrangement resurfaced, frustrated, and angered him again.

Dad wound down the window, put his arm on top of the door, clenched his teeth. His anger pulsed through the truck like a wave, like something about to engulf us all. My heart thudded, my legs bounced off the floor. Cymbal crashes stumbled from the radio speakers.

"One more minute," Dad said again. "One more minute, and we're going home."

Another minute passed.

I thought of the ways Dad would yell at Mom when she arrived, the ways that he would threaten to never meet her again. How would we get to Mom's then? When would we see her? And what if she didn't show up this time? He never actually did it before—but it would happen: he'd drive us home after an hour of waiting, sit us down on our beds in

our shared room and tell us how much our mother was hurting us, stomp around the house and slam doors and curse her for days.

Will we ever see her again? Mom can't drive the two hours to Dad's place in Whitehall and two hours back to central Pennsylvania. Not with the burning pain. Not with medicine she's taking for it. The risks of blood clots in her legs. The medicine that makes her fall asleep at the wheel.

Suddenly, we were speeding out of the parking lot and jerking onto the road, heading back towards home, and my stomach collapsed. I didn't want to look at Bryan. I was embarrassed. I didn't want to look at Dad. I was scared. The way he drove. Jerked and sped around turns like a racecar driver. I sat as still as possible, hoping that maybe Dad would just forget that we are there in the car. But he yelled at Mom as though she was sitting next to him. He yelled at her like she'd heard it all before and no matter how much louder he yelled, she would never understand. He banged the dashboard with his fist.

“She's letting you kids down,” he said.

We didn't say anything.

I keep my head turned, eyes pulling me out the window.

Then Dad was quiet. Everything slowed down. The cool mountain air whistled through Dad's window and whipped around our faces. I was tired. I didn't say a word to Bryan, though I wanted to apologize. I didn't have the energy. I leaned against the window and slept.

When I woke up, we were in a Blockbuster parking lot. Dad told us to come in with him and pick out a movie. Then we picked up two pizzas. “Bryan can sleep over if

he wants,” he told us after a deep breath and heavy sigh. We didn't say anything for a while; then, on the way home, a subdued round of “thank you”'s.

Dad went to bed when we got home, let us have the huge basement room for the night. Let us watch television. Let us use the computer, and we copied all of Bryan's CDs, Bryan copied all of ours. Dad didn't give us a bedtime. When had that happened since we started living with him?

I knew that the rest of the weekend would be miserable—shoveling mulch into wheelbarrows and dumping it across the gardens that surrounded the house, combing Dad's huge yard for sticks and rocks, then mowing it for hours. Andrew and I wanting to get the hell out of there, wanting to be at Mom's, wanting to be free from work, from Dad's anger, then just wanting everything to go back to the way it was years ago. But we could never go back to how it was. I felt suspended between the time our family had been whole and the future I wanted to make for myself. I think that in that moment, when we could all feel that the world had long been shifting incrementally underneath us, when Dad just didn't have enough energy to stay in character and keep us moving forward like he did, he must have felt that way too.

2. “Resolving”

Mr. Moyer, the eighth grade art teacher, kept a guitar in his room on a stand near his desk. Sometimes he’d pick it up and walk around the classroom, strumming and singing songs about the students who didn’t do their homework or about projects we were working on. Sometimes he’d let students play his guitar, if they got their projects done early and he wasn’t playing it himself.

I picked it up one day and played a Green Day song I’d just learned. I played some songs by Nirvana that everyone knew, and Jaime—a girl at my table with long brown hair in a ponytail and freckles on her cheeks—asked me to teach her how to play. I showed her how to hold the pick between her thumb and pointer finger. I showed her how to hold her arm over the guitar and where to pluck the strings and how each fret made a different note. I showed her how to play a Metallica song, just by plucking some open strings. I showed her how to play “Smoke on the Water” on the low E string, moving her fingers up the fretboard, and she would laugh when she’d drop the pick or she’d play a wrong note or she’d miss the fret and the strings would buzz.

We talked about music in all the classes we had together. She liked The Beatles, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, a funk band. Blink 182, a punk band. And other bands I’d never heard of and wasn’t sure I’d like, but I’d listen if she’d ask me to. I wanted to like the same music she liked.

On a field trip, she sat next to me on the bus even though she was still dating someone in the class. I put my CD player headphones over her ears and could feel her electricity running through me when I touched her. I had her listen to Nirvana’s “Serve the Servants,” and “School” and she showed me her booklet of CDs, a lot of them burned

onto shiny red and orange discs, the names of the songs and bands sharpied in a smooth handwriting across or around the edges.

I learned a Blink 182 song on guitar and showed her during art class. I played The Cars' "Just What I Needed," and Led Zeppelin's "Over the Hills and Far Away," and she helped me finish my art project and drew pictures on my notebooks. I started wearing black t-shirts with band names written across them. I started wearing skateboarding shoes and a studded belt and spiked wristbands and a wallet chain. I didn't know who I was trying to look like, but I wanted to look different. It was about time I was different. I wanted to be cool now. I wanted to be noticed. I wanted Jaime to like me.

Free period, two or three times a week, Jaime and I would walk down to Mr. Moyer's room and I'd play guitar for her. Show her some new songs. Sometimes, she'd show me a new one she'd learned how to play on her own, but mostly, she wanted to watch me. She wanted to sit close to me on one of the art tables that no one sat at—our knees so close to touching—while Mr. Moyer graded projects, while the dandelions outside the art room windows began to break through the dirt out into spring. She smiled and laughed at my dumb jokes and listened to me play.

She gave me her phone number the last day of eighth grade on a blue post-it note. She told me to call her, kissed me on the cheek.

In her dad's basement—was it our first date?—Jaime's friend smacked Jaime's brother's drum set sporadically and laughed. Jaime grabbed sticks and slapped the cymbals too. I told her I was in a band and she said she could be our drummer. I wasn't sure about that, but she said she could learn, that her brother would teach her. The sound of the bass drum thundered across the barren concrete floors, between the plain concrete

walls. Her parents had just built the house a few years before, and now, Jaime's parents too were going through a divorce. The house they'd built together, they would sell. It was already nearly empty. Jaime's mom already lived in a town a few miles away.

Jaime's first floor had hardly anything in it, except for a couch and a television. We kissed and held hands under a blanket and watched movies. Each time I visited her, her dad disappeared into the garage until Dad picked me up in the afternoon, took me home to work on the house for the rest of the weekend.

Dad had Andrew and me help him finish painting our new room on the second floor, the final touch before we could move into it, the summer before I started ninth grade. It was much bigger than the one downstairs, and over the winter, we'd helped him put it together. We tore apart the drywall and threw the pieces into giant piles on the floor where dust rose into the room like fog. We listened to the classic rock stations on Dad's big black radio. The Beach Boys, The Who. The Cars, The Eagles, The Beatles, the insulation came out and then we stuffed the garbage into big black bags and rubbed our itchy eyes with our shirt sleeves. We wore scratchy white masks and sweated through our shirts.

I thought about Jaime constantly. How she hugged me when I came to her summer softball games; how good it felt to kiss her in the park behind the baseball field down the street from Dad's house. Kiss, Yes, we gutted the slanted ceiling too and Dad cut out old beams and we hauled new ones through the hole in the wall where the big window was going to be: Genesis, Journey. Kansas.

Sometimes the room felt empty, endless, impossible. Dad worked extra hours during the week, then came home and fixed the house all weekend. He didn't get a break.

He went to bed early with the help a couple of beers. He woke up early with the help of a couple cups of coffee. He growled when something didn't work: when something was wired wrong, when something was measured wrong, when something didn't fit.

Andrew and I thought it was our fault when he explained how to do something—how to draw a chalkline, how to level a board, how to sand the spackled nail holes—and we just didn't get it. If I did something wrong, I feared not being able to see Jaime. I feared not being able to visit Bryan like Andrew and I had been doing Fridays through the summer..

Dad woke us up at six on Saturday and Sunday because he needed our help, but we wanted to do things other kids wanted to do. We were building new worlds then: music, girls, friendships. But Dad wanted us focused on the immediacy of his goal of finishing the house, of physical labor: the top-heaviness of a hammer, the way a piece of wood should be sanded down its grain. What is this new shit? Good Charlotte? Alice in Chains?

He didn't understand the world we lived in.

Watching movies in Jaime's Dad's basement, lying, kissing on the hard blue sofa, the whole place smelled like a stinging car air freshener. Or maybe the swelling fragrance of model glue and pastels? Incense to drown it all out? The sweet berry scent of her hair. Elliott Smith's "In the Lost and Found," then Jaime's dad would come back around, drive me home through the thick night, Jaime sitting on my lap in the back seat.

Aerosmith, Dad on the roof and me and Andrew inside, Dad wedged the skylights into the ceiling and we held them in place. Deep Purple, Great White. Black Sabbath we hung drywall with short nails with dull, flat heads. Grateful Dead's "Touch of Grey"

reminded me of weekend nights. Van Halen's "Summer Nights" helped me get through weekend days. Andrew would climb out the bathroom window and sneak away to see his girl friend on weeknights, and by Saturday, I'd be dying to see Jaime. Electrified with anxiety and awe and addiction. But there was work, first. Always work.

Second there was The Beatles: "Across the Universe" on Jaime's grandmother's porch in a storm, the sweet scent of pine needles in summer rain. Her grandmother is away. Saturday evening. The taste of Jaime's lips, lingering on my lips. Then home, and I know I had to wait another week because that was Dad's rule.

But I had this urgent urge to touch her body again (Green Day's "Welcome to Paradise" stuck in my head—or is that cliché?). To feel her cheeks against my hands, her lips against mine. Jaime got a guitar, so I brought my acoustic to her dad's new place in and taught her some chords: a G; a C; a D. I showed her where to put her hands.

Then she showed me where to put mine downstairs, as we curled into each other, into the sofa and didn't come up to breathe (Red Hot Chili Peppers: "Soul to Squeeze"?). We were intoxicated: drowning in each other.

At home, Andrew and Dad and I spackled the seams and sanded the walls and swept and sucked up the dust and dirt with a noisy shop vac that screeched as it scraped the floor. Bob Dylan. David Bowie. Ozzy Osbourne. I felt pulled across the town to her.

The Atari's cover of "Boys of Summer."

Jaime turned sixteen and bought a purple car and drove twenty minutes to my house to see me for five and drove back before her Mom, before my Dad, got home from work. On weekend nights, she picked me up and we went to the movie theater, sat on that

grassy hill between the neon strip malls (Billy Joel's "Summer, Highland Falls") and ate pizza. Then ("Over the Hills and Far Away") we kissed our way through the movie.

At home, sick again with longing to touch her. With Dad, I painted the walls blue and the new carpet was blue too. Before we moved any furniture into the room, I lay there, the plastic odor of brand-newness singing, and I watched the stars come out one by one through the skylight.

Dad and Ellen bought me an electric guitar—a shiny black and white one—and a tiny amp for Christmas, the second or third Christmas I'd asked for one. They didn't want me to play loudly and worried about the volume of the amp, so I kept it so low that I could barely hear what I was playing. I would sit in my bedroom Andrew asked for a drum kit or a bass guitar for his thirteenth birthday, and Dad and Ellen bought him an acoustic bass that he could plug into an amplifier. Andrew spent all his time after school learning, taking hours to learn and practice the Red Hot Chili Peppers Greatest Hits album until both of us could play the whole album through in sync.

Every weekend we didn't go to Mom's, Dad let Andrew and I go to Bryan's house Friday night to sleep over and play music. Unless we were grounded. Or unless he just didn't feel like taking us over or letting Bryan's family pick us up. Andrew and I stayed on our best behavior on Fridays, did our chores more thoroughly than during the week, got all our homework done for Monday during school. We didn't want to leave anything to chance.

At Bryan's house, Andrew messed around with Bryan's Dad's electric bass, a faded black Fender from the eighties, while Bryan and I played our guitars. All we would need now was a drummer.

One night, Dad dropped us off at Bryan's, and to our surprise, in the tiny room at the end of the hall where all of Bryan's old toys had been, there was a drum kit. It was arranged sideways so it could fit, the cymbals brushed against the window. I'd seen pieces of one in music class, but I'd never actually seen a full drum kit: three drums and cymbals raised on silver stands, a stool with a CD player and headphones resting on top, a bag of drum sticks on the floor. It seemed to represent that critical piece of a rock band: the loud part. It was permission for me and Andrew and Bryan to get loud. It was the piece that drove the music outward, made it official, complete.

Bryan showed us what he could do on the drum kit, played some beats he'd been learning. But when Bryan's Dad got home from work that night, he offered to play drums for us, and I couldn't wait to hear what we sounded like as a full band.

Bryan's Dad—cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, permed blond hair bouncing off his shoulders—sat down in the little room and tuned the drums, whacked the cymbals, and we moved amplifiers—Bryan's Dad's bass amp and Bryan's two guitar amps—into the narrow, wood-panelled hallway. Bryan showed us his new guitar: the one he'd just bought with his first paychecks from Prime NDT—learning how to x-ray welds at the welding company his dad worked for too—a Randy Rhodes Signature Jackson V. It was beautiful. Black and silver and shining, the body of it coming to two sharp edges that made you feel like you were wielding a weapon, made you feel like there was some physical power to the music you were playing. He stood in the doorway of his bedroom, looking to his dad for cues. Andrew and I stood in the hallway in front our amps.

We strummed a few D chords. Played through some covers we'd learned together, listened to how each of us fit into the song, how each of us had a distinct part, how the

band—the mythical thing we had made—couldn't exist without any one of us. We were creating something we'd only dreamed of creating. Had we even dreamed of this before it happened? And it all seemed so coincidental. Each of us learning a few chords on our instruments. Bryan's Dad getting home early from work that night, excited about his own musical endeavors, Dad letting us visit Bryan. We played "The D Song," that song that Bryan and I had written on our acoustic guitars at Mom's place in Mahanoy City. And now there was Andrew's bassline underneath it. And now there were drums that gave the song power, made it press forward and ring in our ears. We played it through again and again, Bryan's Dad thwacking away on the drums, the three of us squeezed into the hallway, standing sideways so our instruments didn't hit the walls. We played like that all night, and it felt unlike anything I'd ever felt before. It felt like I was part of something huge.

Mom's headlights slid down the mountain and the big black box van with the sweeping emerald stripe materialized on the dark road and pulled into the gas station. Mom was only five minutes late, the earliest she'd been in a year. It was Easter Vacation and Bryan came with us again, this time for a five-day weekend.

At Mom's place, the Christmas tree was still up—it had been there for a year and a half already—fanning out across the dining room, decorated in green and pink plastic Easter Eggs on strings. Underneath were half-filled tubs of random things, open boxes like last year's Christmas presents stacked at the base of the staircase, along the walls. There was the narrow kitchen with tall cabinets, the picnic table used as a regular table. An attic with sloping walls, long windows in strange places.

Mom said she'd love to take us to the mall, but maybe the next day. She was in a lot of pain. Her hands were swollen and a shiny pink color. She looked tired. I got her a Diet Coke filled to the brim with ice, and she went to lie down, take some medicine, watch television in her bedroom.

Andrew, Bryan, and I played would play guitar late into the night, then wake up at six in the next morning to watch the full hour of rock music videos on MTV. I loved those new rock bands made of people from old rock bands from the eighties and nineties: Audioslave was Chris Cornell of Soundgarden and Rage Against the Machine; Velvet Revolver was Scott Wylan of Stone Temple Pilots and Guns N Roses. I loved Alien Ant Farm's cover of Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal;" Puddle of Mudd's "She Hates Me;" System of a Down's "Aerials." We watched and watched and ate cereal and it was a beautiful new day.

I did the dishes for Mom, made her some hot tea, and then Andrew, Bryan, and I walked across the street to the Dollar General and bought milkshakes and army men and pixie sticks and played video games and card games that we made up—drew up all the cards on neon-colored card stock. Mom slept. In the refrigerator there was the pizza we loved that was only sold around there in three sharp white cardboard boxes. We dug in. Andrew brought Mom some on a paper plate with a fork and knife. We took the bags of dollar store army men to the attic and set up fortresses of stuff—boxes of old magazines, black bags of clothing—and played the games Bryan taught us. We rolled the dice, moved the figurines across the wild terrain. Rolled the dice again. Knocked down each other's men, until one of us had conquered the whole attic. We looked out the

narrow, dusty windows across the wavy lines of row-homes towards the mountains, the strip-mines, and then we played music again. We wanted to record some things.

“Is it alright,” Mom asked, “if we go to the mall tomorrow?”

On Sunday, Mom took us to Church and we sat in the back corner near the exit. It was Easter, and Mom handed out wintergreen mints and smiled to us all and said she was so happy that we were there with her and that just knowing we are close made her feel complete. The preacher talked about Mel Brooks films and how they related to Jesus coming again. I didn't quite get it, but he had everyone laughing and feeling saved, and being there with Mom and Andrew and Bryan, my little sisters, made me feel so comfortable and safe and new. The sun leaned through the stained glass and echoed shapes across the backs of pews, across the teal carpet. It warmed my shoulders. It was spring. The smell of incense rang in the air. I couldn't even tell Mom how happy I was to be there. But Mom hurt. Her legs cramped, and she wiped sweat from her forehead and under her chin and her neck. She needed medicine and rest.

We left halfway through the long service, slipped through the glass double doors out into the world, out into the cool wind tossing the new green leaves of the birches on the corner. We piled into Mom's van and headed home. I was thankful. We still had two whole days left.

Before the next practice, Andrew and I quietly pulled our guitars from under our beds, packed our cables, our picks, our tuners in our bags as Dad and Ellen sat downstairs, drinking beer. The hum of six o'clock news funneled up the stairs and into the kitchen as we set it all at the back door.

At 6:00, I stepped down the basement stairs.

“Dad, Bryan’s sister Sabrina is coming to pick us up soon.”

The news echoed through the room.

“I need you back by six o’clock tomorrow morning,” he said, “not a second later.”

His face glowed in the dancing indigo light of the television screen. “We have lots of shit to get done outside.”

He gulped some beer.

“We’ve got to weed the gardens and pick up all the sticks in the yards because pretty soon it’ll be time to mow them again.” He didn’t look at me.

“Okay,” I said, trying to hide my excitement.

“Six o’clock. Not a second later,” he said again as I scrambled upstairs and out the door where Andrew was waiting on the back porch with our guitars.

Whenever Dad didn't say “no,” we took it as a “yes.”

Sabrina pulled her black Chevy into the driveway and Andrew and I were waiting there, standing in front of the garage under the clear night sky. We loaded our instruments into the back seat, and she backed out of the driveway, moved us to the edge of town where she and Bryan lived.

Sabrina was Bryan’s older sister, about Bryan’s height with long, black hair. She was in her final year of high school, living in Bryan’s attic. Bryan spent a lot of time with her watching movies, going to the mall. Sabrina even planned on teaching Bryan how to drive. When he wasn’t spending time with Andrew and me, he hung out with his sister. They were only a few years apart, close enough in age to like the same things, still living in the same house together. Bryan was lucky. My older sister was a thousand miles away,

busy with college. I hadn't seen her since the holidays, and even then, it was only for a few hours. He was lucky to be able to spend time with his sister.

Sabrina parked the car on the steep, narrow road—the tightest street in all of Whitehall where cars parked halfway on the curb, where clumps of tall row homes leaned against each other over the sidewalk. We thanked her and sprinted up the concrete steps to the front porch, and Bryan helped us bring our stuff inside.

Every band practice, I watched the clock. The earlier we got to Bryan's house, the more time we had to play. Unless Bryan's Dad—Andrew and I started calling him “Bryan's Dad,” as if that was his name—got home from work late or was too tired after a twelve-hour day at the welding company to drum for us. We sat on the teal couch and waited for Bryan's Dad to come. We talked about new songs we'd heard on the radio—Nirvana: “You May Be Right” (previously unreleased), Red Hot Chili Peppers: “Can't Stop.” We talked about the upcoming high school talent show, about the website that Andrew had started working on for our band. The curtains in Bryan's house were yellow and closed. The birch wood-paneled walls glowed behind the pale lights of two lamps above the couch at the back wall. The air conditioner in the front window clunked. Everything was yellow and dusty and smelled of cigarettes and Andrew and I loved it. Bryan's house had become a haven for us.

Then suddenly, keys crunched in the door and clicked as the bolt pounded and retreated. Bryan's Dad opened it, and the three of us froze. My heart beat like a double bass drum in my chest. My temples throbbed, my fingers tingled. This is what I'd been waiting for for weeks: permission to be loud and crazy and myself.

Bryan's Dad closed and locked the door. He turned toward us and paused.

We all waited for him.

“Go ahead and set up,” he said waving the keys toward the staircase. We had graduated to the living room, since it was more spacious, but we had to bring everything downstairs. The three of us sprang forward, grabbed the banister and bounded up the stairs. We bolted through the hall to the drum room. Andrew and I didn’t know how to take apart the drum set or put it together yet, so we let Bryan handle it. He unscrewed the knobs, handed us each a piece. We learned their names. First the small drums—the hanging toms, the snare, the floor tom. Then the cymbals—the high hat, the crash, the ride. The hardware—drum stands, cymbal stands; the bass drum pedal, the high hat pedal, the cardboard for beneath them to catch the grease. The drum throne.

We let the bulky bass drum go until last. Andrew and I picked it up and wobbled down the narrow hallway, angling it to fit beneath the panels of the low drop-ceiling, between the walls of the staircase. There were framed pictures hanging crooked on the walls. Photos of Bryan, his sister, his mom and dad. There was one where they all sit in front of a fake saloon backdrop, all dressed in cowboy and cowgirl clothing.

I backed down the stairs, holding the drum up to my chin. There was one of Bryan's brother, Tim. No one knew where he was anymore. He showed up every few years looking for a place to stay between gigs.

Bryan shoved the wicker coffee table and the old brown recliner to the edges of the living room, and I wondered what it must have felt like for Bryan not to talk to his brother. My brother was someone I talked to everyday about everything and then Andrew rested his side of the bass drum onto the carpet, and I let my end down. Bryan slid the crash cymbal onto the metal rod of its stainless steel stand, tightened the wing-nuts and it

was like we'd been doing this our whole lives. Putting up this stage to perform on. It came so easily to us. The tape recorder sat in the kitchen, brand new high definition tape inside, recording. Old-fashioned red light on.

Andrew and Bryan hauled Bryan's amp, Bryan's guitars into the living room as Bryan. Andrew grabbed the heavy orange leather bag from Bryan's dad's trunk and the two of us yanked the entangled cables from it, extracted guitar cables, microphone cables, power-source cables, plugged them all in making constellations of cords across the wide room. We put microphone stands where the dust gathered along the wall of audio equipment rising to the drop ceiling. Bryan's parents' stereo system ran through an amplifier and into four-foot speakers at either end of the room. We connected all our amps, all the mics to the mixing board for the amp. On top of the entertainment center: cassettes lined up like dominoes, more CDs and CD wallets, CD binders, loose discs, Kiss action figures: an untidy heaven of music.

We tuned our guitars and Bryan's Dad ambled down the stairs after his shower, his puffy blond hair hanging to his bare gut. He pulled a cigarette from a pack—adjusted his broad glasses—and rested it in his mouth. He sat down on the drum stool. He turned the key to tune the toms, before he lit the cigarette. This is how every band practice started, each action closer to us playing, each step building momentum in my heart like a snowball rolling until I could strum the first reverberating chords of “The D Song” and let all that pressure out. I could breathe again.

Bryan would come in with the lead riff. Andrew would play bass finger-style, carving out his line that walked, then skipped and slid around our melodies. Then, crash!

A cymbal strike and Bryan's Dad was suddenly tapping the beat on the high-hat with one hand, lighting a new cigarette with the other. We were rolling into the chorus.

We played the chords again and I could feel the blood pulsing through me. My skin tight to my bones. I could feel every square inch of it in the rhythm of the song. This music, like some medicine hitting my brain, healing some wound. The music pulsing through me like a drug. I was high. Music was making me high. If I tried to stop playing, my fingers might have just kept on moving. My feet—hot in my shoes—would have kept on moving. My wrists cramped and I loved that feeling too. Learning the song again after a month was like remembering where I came from. That house on East Union Street, the sun shining all around it.

I strummed a D chord and Bryan filled the empty space with the sounds of his dad's ancient Crybaby effect pedal: wah, wah, wah, wah, rolling his foot across the pedal. Then C and Andrew let the C ring out. Bryan's Dad tapped the hi-hat, opened it and closed it quickly so the metal sound sliced the air like the opening of a soda bottle. Snare, s-snare, s-snare, Crash! Then we were all playing the G before Andrew led us back to the D with a walk up the fretboard.

Yes! The four of us sounded great together, much better than last month's practice. Bryan went into the solo with the distortion fuzz from his amplifier, his fingers hammering the fretboard, his foot pedal rocking back and forth wildly. He shook like there was something inside of him trying to get out. He mouthed the syllables of his solo, spoke each note. Bryan's Dad dropped a stick, took a sip of his beer, then plucked a new stick from the pouch at the side of the snare. Andrew's head moved back and forth, rode the easy beat to the end of the song.

We clapped and laughed as we finished, as if we've just played a concert to thousands of people, because it was the first time we played the whole song through. We had a finished song and it felt as though we'd run a great race after months of training. But there were many more races: more songs to write and rehearse. We had started some sort of journey. We were on the way to something.

Later we'd take a break, order pizza, relax in the kitchen. Bryan moved cases of water from the counter to clear room for the pizza. Andrew and I shoved the piles of old bills, some empty water bottles and beer cans off the kitchen table to make room. Bryan's table was a booth connected to the wall. There was a massive poster of deer in the woods above it, the grass, pale, the deer, pallid pink, everything scarred with the yellow of cigarette smoke, under the kitchen light. It was such a strange place, but I loved it then and still do. It felt like home to me.

I remember when Bryan told me he was moving back to Wyoming. His parents couldn't afford to pay rent or his dad had lost his job or the house had been condemned. Bryan never got his story straight on that one. But it wasn't long after I met him. And we played in my yard, climbing the big pine tree. Bryan didn't know when his family was leaving though, and he never gave me a date. It always just hovered over us like a looming summer thunderstorm. We kept hanging out together, anyway, but for a while, I must have just been getting ready to lose him. For a while, I must have just been expecting him to disappear. Like all my other friends seemed to. Like how some of them smoked weed now down by the dump and skipped school and got into fist fights with kids from Andrew's grade. Or my other friends who just found hobbies—reading and running—and we just didn't see each other anymore in school. And maybe if Bryan had

disappeared, I wouldn't have loved music so much. I wouldn't have loved stories. I wouldn't have had ambition like he did. I wouldn't have had some way to escape the tension between my parents and everything that happened after that.

I remember Bryan's Dad leaning against the fridge sometimes, in between sets of our practices against the picture-magnets of Bryan and Sabrina. He'd adjust his glasses, draw a new pack of cigarettes from a carton on the counter, fix one in his mouth, gaze into the blanched rectangle light in the drop ceiling.

"You guys sound damn good," he'd say.

It felt so good to have that encouragement. I felt like there was no way we wouldn't make it big. The question wasn't if; it was when.

I don't remember when I started wondering about Bryan's Dad, though. The way he was living out his music dream. He could play guitar, bass, drums, and sing. Why did his bands never make it? After a while, did he want other things, besides the music, the travelling, the performance of it all? What other things could you want? That's all I could think about then. But maybe he was still living his dream, and this was it: watching his son make music. Maybe that was what he wanted all along.

"We don't sound like anyone else," I said.

"You guys sound damn good," Bryan's Dad said again and everybody agreed.

When we stopped playing, the world was an insane, unreal quiet. I could feel cotton growing in my ears. My entire body rang like a bell. My limbs were suddenly jello. I felt my blood surging like rapids through my hands and feet even though I wanted it to slow down and sleep. I always felt like I could keep playing through the next day. I

always had a hard time sleeping knowing the next day I'd be up by 5:30, working for Dad by 6:30, dreary, sick to my stomach, head pounding.

He pulled the tape out of the tape recorder, wrote our band name in pen: "Actinoid" (some cool-sounding Periodic Table word about radioactive elements). He set it on the entertainment center and we listened to what we'd played as we cleaned up.

For the first time in a long time I felt like I had a place to be. I felt like I'd uncovered something about myself I hadn't quite known yet. But now I was positive of it: I wanted to be in a rock band. I wanted to play and write rock music. I had to do it. It was the way out of everything bad. It was the way out of Dad's place where I felt oppressed and trapped. It was the way out of the future that he wanted for me—was I really supposed to be a priest or a doctor? It was the way to get money to pay for Mom's medicine or buy her some new treatment. There was a chance Mom might get a settlement soon, but it had been seven years since she'd gotten hurt. She was on so many medicines now, I didn't even know what they were or why she needed them. But I knew they were expensive. I knew that was why Mom needed to sell the house and move far away to somewhere cheap in the middle of nowhere. I knew that was why she didn't have money for food. Some weekends, we stayed at Dad's because Mom had no food. Music was the way I could make everything better for everyone.

Andrew and I would sleep on Bryan's bedroom floor get up before dawn. I tried to keep my eyes open but my eyelids kept sliding closed. The sun seeped through Bryan's brown curtains and onto the closet door where he kept all his guitar equipment now. On his door he had hundreds of pictures of guitars and names of guitar companies and famous guitarists that he's clipped from magazines and pasted there. We gathered our stuff and

floated downstairs I always felt like a tuning fork smacked against the sidewalk the mornings after band practice.

The bold sunlight outlined the pines, wedged between the houses across the road and blazed the sky, stung my eyes, as we loaded into Bryan's Dad's van. Everything still felt new then in the sense that I knew it would soon feel old, far away, replaced with the less immediate—schoolwork, house cleaning and home improvement: things I couldn't see the end results of, things to which I couldn't find a source of motivation.

The grass in the empty lot next to Bryan's house was overgrown, heavy with dew, falling on itself. What was Bryan's story? Someone had died there, and after he died, they tore down the house and left the lot? Or was it that the house had just fallen down? Sometimes it seemed like things were ready to fall in at any minute, then.

It was early spring and the morning mist crept down the steep hill of Columbia Street, overlooking Allentown. Bryan's Dad shifted his glasses up and down the bridge of his nose before he turned on the car. He leaned forward like he was trying to read something and his springy river of blond hair rolled down the back of the seat. Bryan said he was going blind, but Bryan's Dad didn't believe it.

He wiped the fog from his side mirror, bit down on a fresh cigarette, and popped in the tape we recorded the night before. It clicked and fizzled in the cassette player. Andrew and I leaned forward as we started moving. I felt my throat constrict. My arms and legs tingled. I closed my eyes and the weight of my head seemed to ebb and flow through me, but I couldn't sleep. I shivered. Bryan's Dad drove below the stoplight on MacArthur Road, the purple clouds, rimmed in orange, glowed and drifted over

us. Past the church with the old sign that said, “Picnic Friday, Free Meat,” the streetlights dimmed and flickered off all around us. A new day. Bryan leaned back.

I imagined what the song would sound like with words and tried to improv a melody in my head. The notes just bobbed in the air and sunk into the ocean of sound coming from the stereo. I listened to the echoey clean chords, the empty space between them, the metallic bursts of cymbals as bright and crisp as church bells. I listened to every screech of Bryan's overdriven guitar solo. I'd memorized it by now (there was the roll up the fretboard; there was the note that squeaked. Was that intentional? I'm sure it was; it sounded perfect there). Our music sounded exactly like what I'd hoped it would sound like.

By the time Bryan's Dad pulled into the driveway, we'd finished half of Side A. We got out and suddenly, I could smell the smoke leaking from our clothing, and I knew Dad would ask why we smelled like smoke. He asked it every time we came home from Bryan's house. Did he think we were smoking cigarettes? Did he always expect we were just getting into trouble?

Bryan helped us carry our guitars to the back porch in silence. Dad waited at the back door while we brought in our equipment, sipping coffee—we were late—staring past us like a black and white photograph of some Civil War general.

I watched Bryan walk back to the van. His crew cut was new. He used to have long, greasy brown hair and his new haircut reminded me that things had changed: Mom used to live in Whitehall and Andrew and I used to live with Mom and Bryan came over every day of the summer. But it wasn't like that anymore. I didn't want to go inside, but I did. It was 6:15. We almost made it.

At the movie theater, Jaime and I picked whatever movie ended the latest. The movie before us ran long, so we sat in the lobby on the floor against the violet carpeted walls, holding hands, thankful for an extra ten minutes together. We'd been dating for a few months then, spending Saturday evenings at the movies or the mini-golf course or Jaime's grandmother's house at the edge town.

I brought my cassette player with me to the movie theater. I fumbled with it in my pocket, not sure when to ask, and then pulled it out like a ring and said to Jaime, “do you want to listen to something my band recorded?”

She smiled and said “okay” and put the headphones on.

“It’s called The D Song,” I said, and then turned toward the front door because I was nervous. I held her hand and watched the people walk in and out of the tall glass doors. I watched them stroll into the arcade, wait in the lines of the snack stands, dissolve into the long, dark halls. I hummed the song in my head, the way it sounded on the tape.

She tapped me on the shoulder and I turned back to her and she handed me the tape player softly like she was handing me a fragile baby animal. She took the headphones off and rested them on her lap. Her brown hair up in a ponytail, tossed over her shoulder. Her long eyelashes reminding me of summer. And that summer, galaxies of freckles below her eyes. Her hands, still dry and rough from the winter, were the most beautiful I'd ever felt. I loved the way I felt then, holding those hands in my own. I wanted to hold them all the time. I wanted to kiss her hands. She was a song I desperately wanted to learn, and it started with her hands.

“It's not my kind of music,” she said, “but I like it.” And she smiled at me sweetly, contemplatively. I smiled back and asked her what she liked best: the part where

Bryan soloed? The part where Bryan's Dad dropped a drumstick and did a roll with one hand? Andrew's baseline with the one strange note? I told her—and I was sincere about it at age fifteen—that the song was going to change music forever. I squeezed her hand. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to hold her. I wanted to play songs for her.

We were both kind of wishing then—even at such a young age—for something long gone and far away, and getting up to get in line for the movie, something sunk in me: I got the feeling that she didn't really like the music after all. That maybe the song wasn't perfect. But she did like me.

At the end of summer, Andrew and I each brought our savings to practice in ones and fives—lunch money, chore money, money from our new jobs delivering papers—and gave Bryan's Dad the thick stack of bills. He sat at the computer desk in the corner, on the old piano bench that he used as a seat. The light from the kitchen cast across the wood-paneled walls. Bryan's Dad adjusted his glasses and pulled out his credit card. He used it to buy the home recording station we'd been dreaming about—the one on clearance that we'd spotted a few practices ago in a magazine—the one with tens of shiny steel knobs in rows, sliders on tracks for sixteen recording channels. The one with mic inputs and cable line-outs. A digital mixer. A CD burner. It looked official and high-tech on Bryan's computer screen when his dad confirmed the purchase. Delivery would be six to eight weeks and then we'd recorded our album: one take for each song, five area mics set around the room, near each amp and two for the drum kit. We would record vocals over top and Bryan would mix, burn it all to a CD. Andrew would design the cover art, drawing a picture of the hallway where we'd had our first practice, and then we'd sell a

couple copies at school, on the bus ride home. Mom would listen to each song with a wide smile on her face as she did the dishes.

I could sense that things were about to change. Pretty soon we'd have a singer and CD. We'd play our first shows. Bryan and I were only fifteen; Andrew, only fourteen. We had so much time. Bryan's Dad told us how he was in the process of getting us a spot at an upcoming local festival where his band was headlining.

One Saturday night, Bryan's Dad's new hair metal band practiced downstairs where we practiced, and so we stayed in Bryan's room, out of the way. His band started showing up, knocking on the door, and bringing in their equipment. Bryan's Dad showed us the new stage-light display that he bought for his band's performances. It looked like a stoplight turned on its side resting on a massive plastic tripod. It hunched over in the corner, brushed the ceiling.

Andrew, Bryan, and I pulled ice cream from the freezer, headed upstairs. We played board games in Bryan's room, but really, we were restless, not being able to play music. I could hear the ring of the electric keyboard. The thud of the bass drum. The band warming up. ACDC. Joan Jett. Eddie Money. I didn't like it. I didn't like not playing.

"We should write something," I said to Andrew and Bryan.

Bryan lay on the floor holding his guitar to his chest. He strummed some goofy, out-of-tune chords with a Pete-Townsend-signature windmill motion. Andrew didn't have an instrument to play.

"Seriously," I said, sitting rigid on Bryan's bed. "How are we going to get anywhere if we don't write new stuff?"

Andrew and Bryan didn't say anything. They were tired. It was late already. It was loud downstairs.

"Look, we never get to practice, so we need to make the most of the time we get together."

Bryan played the first few notes to "Stairway to Heaven."

"What if we learn a cover song?" I said.

Bryan sat up. "What kind of cover do you want to do?" Bryan asked. "We should probably pick a more modern song. We haven't done much of anything outside of the sixties and seventies." We'd been playing through Cream's "White Room," Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" at practice.

Andrew agreed. Now we were getting somewhere. We skimmed through Bryan's CDs to find something.

"What about a Red Hot Chili Peppers song?" Andrew asked, still laying on the floor with his eyes closed. We settled on something of theirs from the early nineties and listened and tried to play it, but it was in a different tuning and sounded all wrong. After a few minutes, Andrew lay back down and closed his eyes. Bryan lay on his back and picked some strange pattern of notes in an uncountable rhythm.

I was getting frustrated. The practice downstairs was now in full swing, shaking the house with each beat. I could hear Bryan's Dad singing through the floor.

"I don't understand what's wrong with you guys," I said.

I paused.

"This is what I want to do with my life. How are we ever going to get famous if we can't even play a single song together?"

They didn't say anything again.

"This is what I want to do with my life," I repeated, heart pounding, throat constricting. Is that stupid? All I wanted was for us to be a band all the time.

Later Andrew fell asleep on the floor, and when Bryan's Dad's band left for their gig, Bryan and I grabbed our acoustic guitars and went out to the front porch. We sat on the cool concrete steps. The night was clear, and from the hill that his house sat on, we could see through the pine trees, past Whitehall to the scattered lights of the city. Outside, we smelled the smoke seeping from our clothes and watched the blinking dots of planes drift overhead between the stars. It would be autumn soon. Could I sense it back then—time passing too quickly?

We arpeggiated some chords and talked.

We talked about school and girls. We plucked some C chords.

We talked about how Bryan was tired of his parents living the way they did. How they stayed up every night drinking and smoking. How he couldn't get much sleep or focus on school. He talked about how he started skipping class a lot last year, just staying home, enjoying the time while his parents weren't there, spending his hours strumming wide open chords on his new Gibson Les Paul Studio. He'd been learning to play drums too and maybe one day he could be our drummer and if we could just find a singer, things might fall into place like how we always expected them to. We could make it big. We played some bright A7s.

We needed new spaces. We talked about renting an apartment when we would go to college in a few years so our band could practice all the time. We talked about where we might go. We talked about my Mom getting better, finally getting married to Mark,

and how she might be moving to New Jersey from Mahanoy City, an hour closer to here, or even Whitehall. Wouldn't that be great? Mom back in Whitehall. We could practice there. She'd let us. We leaned on some sad E minors before believing in some hopeful D majors.

We talked about gigs. About the world beyond those things: the city with all its bright lights and scrunched-up houses on scrunched-up streets; the prospect of playing music at clubs and bars. We wondered if our parents had failed us in some way. Or if we had failed them. Had they run out of time to turn us into who they thought we should be? Had we failed to change ourselves into something we'd always wanted? Who were we supposed to be? What were we trying to find? That chord! Go there!

Let's just play and find out.

We watched each other. Pulled together with notes. Stitched some fabric in the air. We wanted to play this song for Andrew. I wanted to play it for Mom, Dad. Without words, the song said exactly what we felt. There was the ringing steel against the quiet of midnight in the suburbs. There was the hopeful chime of harmonic notes of strings depressed on fretboards. Chords pulled apart in so many directions, then resolving.

We sat on the concrete steps until one or two, when the wind picked up and pushed clouds across the night sky. It got chilly and we named the song "Sanity." Everything felt urgent, like life and death.

We needed to play the song for someone. Anyone. Someone had to hear it. It was beautiful. It was perfect. When we opened the door, Bryan's Mom was there, feet up on the couch. She was drinking. The television was on loud to drown out the air conditioner.

Bryan asked her if we could play the song for her. She fumbled with the clicker, trying to turn the volume down, until she finally just turned it off. She smiled when it was quiet.

Bryan and I pulled up some wooden stools and sat next to the coffee table. We played “Sanity” the same way we had played it outside, but somehow, it didn’t feel right. The guitar didn’t feel right beneath my fingers. The song didn’t feel finished. The notes didn’t quite match up when we played together. I felt defeated when we finished playing it. Why didn’t it sound right?

But Bryan's Mom told us that it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard and smiled and lit a cigarette.

I was exhausted, and Bryan’s mom leaned over the edge of the couch to tell us:

“You two write some beautiful music together. Keep writing it.”

I didn’t see Bryan for two years after that.

3. “Reinvent”

Mom moved into the tiny house Mark rented from his parents in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, and when I turned 18, I decided I couldn't to live with Dad anymore. I was on my way out the door, when Ellen asked me to clean up the cat shit on the dining room carpet. I didn't have to do what they wanted me to do anymore, and she yelled and I yelled back, and then, all of a sudden, I was out the door, climbing into Mom's van, cops on Dad's porch step telling him there was nothing they could do. I was 18, after all. I could go where I wanted to go.

All of a sudden, it was Dad yelling to me, “don't ever ask me for anything again,” me feeling the words tear through me as if he'd just told me I was never his son. I needed my own space and couldn't he see that? I just wanted them to take one big step back. That was it. I was 18, and I wasn't asking for a lot. Mom would let me do what I wanted to do. I didn't think about how I'd have to drive an hour to and from school in Pennsylvania every day. I didn't think about how I'd have to quit my job and find a new one in New Jersey. I didn't think about how I was going to get all my things out of Dad's house—my electric guitar, my amp—I just left Dad there, talking to the cops on his porch, Ellen with him. Mom pulled out onto Mauch Chunk Road, out into the darkness.

At Mom's, I made a path through the ocean of boxes in the basement, cleared the half-filled tubs of stuff off the bed, found some sheets and blankets and went to sleep.

What I learned that summer was that Mom was getting sicker, faster. She was on more and more medicines and the drugs made her fall asleep more often while doing things. She lay in bed most of the day breathing stuttering, syncopated breaths. She started

having seizures. Sometimes I opened her door and watched her breathe for five, ten good minutes while she slept to make sure she was okay.

Gram and Gramp, Mark's parents lived in the house attached to Mom and Mark's. They started coming over during the day to check on her while Bethany was at elementary school, while Mark worked at the chemical plant. One day they found Mom in the bathtub screaming, unable to be calmed down. They call an ambulance. Mom didn't remember any of it.

Mark told me that it was some combination of pain medicines that Mom took for her RSD—her chronic neurological disease—that put her in what he dubbed “the zombie state.” Was it the antispasmodics with the anitconvulsants? The antidepressants with the antiarrhythmics? Suboxone with Ritalin and Valium? Mark knocked on the door if Mom was in the bathroom too long. Bethany—nine now—learned to do this too while Mark worked until the early morning. It seemed like someone always needed to be awake to make sure Mom was okay.

Mom would fall asleep folding wash in the basement. She mumbled to the dryer as she leaned against it. She pulled the cord to the dusty lightbulb when she left and slurred a “goodnight” to me as she floated up the stairs. I said goodnight, and suggested she go lie down.

“Mom, you're falling asleep,” I say.

“I'm just finishing the wash, honey.”

“Love you, Mom. You're the best, Mom.”

She closed the basement door softly.

The fan buzzed on the basement's concrete floor, and I saw things float across the room. What time was it? Six in the evening? Two in the morning? I heard loud bangs upstairs: Mom wandering around the house, barely awake, tripping on things. She would rearrange the piles of boxes and bins in the living room, underneath the kitchen table, constantly shifting the wall of plastic tubs lining the narrow hallway. I hadn't lived with Mom in seven years. I didn't get it. Had Mom always been like this?

I got a job at the department store in the Phillipsburg Mall, stocking shelves four in the morning until one. The mall, off the highway, a beacon of dim parking lot lights rising in rows from the black grass at night. At 3 a.m. I would coast along the winding roads of Harmony, past the silhouette of First Presbyterian Church, past the lone gas station on 519. Oceans of cornfields waving in the hot, dark wind. I felt lost.

At eight, the thirty of us would take our break. I ate my cereal and downed two iced coffees, sitting in my car, listening to the radio, thinking of the music I'd love to write again. As the sun came up, the pink clouds evaporated, the smokers standing outside the store smear their final cigarettes into the golden pavement and hovered inside. I worried about Mom at home, but I didn't want to admit that work is a haven, a getaway.

Before I could turn off the car, an unfamiliar song popped from the radio. Crisp chords, in sync with the bass and drums, silence between bursts of sound: like someone tiptoeing into a room—silence punctuating space between steps. Two steps. Now three steps. I got caught up in the strange rhythm which turned into a gallop of crunchy guitar chords and a punchy bass and drums combo. I was mesmerized. I sat still. The singing didn't come in until the third minute and when it did, the singer shrieked about "Temples

of Syrinx,” “hallowed halls.” It was so strange: the words, the heavy chords, the sudden changes of pace. It picked at my brain, stuck in my ears.

“That was Rush,” the DJ says. “2112.”

When I got back to work, the song clicked and restarted each time I sliced open a new box.

Rush.

Bryan had me listen to them once.

Last Sunday was the first time I talked to Bryan in a long time. Sometimes I would call his house, but his dad would always say he was away. Baltimore. Upstate New York. He was busy checking the welds for a giant new pipeline up there.

I filled the empty space on the shelves with Corn Flakes. The lights were low. We’d do our work almost in the dark. Wordlessly. Soundlessly. One person per lane. The exit sign burned orange at the end of the cereal aisle.

So much had happened. How did he get my number?

“Really? You’re going to be back in Allentown?” I said.

“I’ll be there tomorrow. I’m staying for a few weeks. Then they are going to send me back to New York. I figured maybe you, and Andrew, and me could play some music while I was around. I haven’t played guitar in so long.”

Neither had I, I told him. And we both needed to play again.

That afternoon I went to church at St. Patrick's church in Belvidere, a town a few miles north of Harmony. Mom wanted to go, but she couldn’t get out of bed today. Her legs

were swollen and the swelling swallowed her knees. She told me to go without her. To pray for her.

I stood in the back of the packed building, behind the pews and rubbed my eyes to keep them open. I didn't sit down because I know it would be harder to stay awake. My feet were sore. The air smelled of cherry wood. The tang of metal holding Holy Water. The afternoon light tripped through the stained glass windows, turning the pews, the people in front of me, the tall stone Jesus hanging on the cross on the wall into a kaleidoscope of color. I watched Jesus on the wall. Royal blue, now grassy green, now parallelograms of purple and rhombuses of red dancing across his face. I watched the holy, glistening geometry, listened to that soothing voice preaching salvation, and it felt good.

I prayed for Mom. I was going to see Bryan tomorrow. I prayed to have a band again.

I left when the mass was nearly done, after the priest finished his sermon, and I walked down the marble steps of the church to the wide sidewalk. I walked back to my car and the sunlight sunk into my neck and shoulders. I walked past the Cape Cod homes with deep front yards, beneath the sycamores reaching out, over the street—like friendly hands ready to pull me through to something.

My favorite part about going to church was the slow drive home along Belvidere Road. Cornfields along the right, tiny ranch homes behind crimson barns between breaks in the pines along the left. In the evening, the sun-baked husks in a blood-orange glare. The breeze from my car blowing waves along the fields' weedy edges. I have the distinct thrill of going somewhere.

I pulled into the driveway. The oak tree in the front yard shaded Mark's van in front of me. The breeze scattered the branches and stirred the chimes hanging at the door. At night I could see nearly every star in the night sky. There were no streetlights for miles each way down Belvidere Road. Only moonlight, a single front porch light. There were few houses. Mostly limitless fields and farms. It was evening, and Bethany watched television in her room. Mark was asleep in his computer chair, puffy headphones around his neck, digital fish swimming across the screen. He'd been reading about Mom's disease again. He was always reading about it, trying to understand, trying to figure out every possible way to help her. She lay in bed.

Sundays I would get up at three, dress for work, climb the stairs from my basement room. I'd open the door into Mom's narrow kitchen, and sometimes the window would be open, the freshly washed and ironed curtains in the door and window parted, sterling moonlight flowing between them. The counter sparkled. There were new pictures hanging on the wall of all of my siblings. There was the smell of clean linen, of apple dish soap. It felt like Sunday. It felt like home. But when did Mom do all this?

The little light above the counter was on and cast a shadow on Mom. She sat in a chair, her right arm on the table, her left dangling off it. Her head rested on her chest.

"Mom," I whispered and tapped her shoulder. The glow of the microwave's digital clock was the only light in the room.

"Mom," I said again.

A bowl of pudding lay upside down next to the table, the dog carefully lapping up the gooey stuff spattered across the vinyl floor."

"Mom!" I tapped harder and finally she sat straight up with a dramatic gasp.

“What? I was just resting my eyes,” she said and started to drift off again, her head leaning forward, her arms beginning to slip from the table's edge.

“Mom, you're falling asleep again!”

Peanut, Mom's dog, lapped up more pudding. He bat at it, slid it into the table leg. Mom leaned into the table.

“Mom, why don't you go to sleep in your bed?” I asked her. “Mom!”

She snapped back into the chair and looked forward, stunned.

“Okay, okay, I just was getting something to eat.”

I helped her clean up the pudding. She said she wanted to do the dishes before she went back to bed, but they were already done. Mark was awake now and said he would keep an eye on her. The two of us got her into bed. Got her her medicine. Turned the television on for her.

Work was slow. Only a small order to be stocked, one of the smallest trucks of the year. Everyone would be sent home by 10:30 and I had no problem with that. My jeans were glued to my legs. I smelled like cardboard, ink, and sweat. Like I'd worked. I'd worked hard.

I drove home to Mom's house to pick up Andrew. He still lived with Dad at the time and visited Mom every other weekend. This year would be his last year of highschool, of living at Dad's place. He was ready to break out. It was different when there were two of us there. We could cover for each other. We could commiserate with each other. We could write songs in the hour between us getting home from school and Dad getting home from work. Now Andrew was there by himself. I would pick him up

whenever I'm wasn't working. We'd go to Starbucks, walk around the mall, listen to music.

I put my new CD in the car stereo: *All the World's a Stage*, a live album I bought on my break. The overdriven guitar kicked into the first lick of "Bastille Day." The drummer rolled, the singer howled the words in a soprano. Suddenly I was itching again to pick up my guitar. I was itching to sing. I turned left at the stoplight, went under the old stone bridge, crossed the one-lane route 57. Suburban New Jersey. I wound down the windows, and the sweat on my face dried and stuck to my heavy eyelids. Air burst through the car like music, whistling as it swept up my arm like a stream of water, changing pitches with each move I make, changing tempo. I could feel the chords tingling in my fingertips. I could feel the muscles in my hand remembering how to make those chords. I needed to play them again.

It was still early and for the first time in a while, it felt still early. Mom finished up some dishes as I walked in the door.

"How was work?" she asked. Her voice was tired. Her eyes closed half way, before she caught herself and they darted open in a spasm.

"It was good," I say looking out the window. "Since I got out early, I think Andrew and I are going to Bryan's house to hang out. He's finally home, and we haven't seen him in a long time."

She picked her hands out of the cold, grimy water and carefully dried them on a towel. They were puffy and bright red, swollen hands. She grimaced as she dried them. Her hands were burning. That's where it all started. The burning in her hands spread through her limbs, her face, her back. Her muscles contract and shake and everything

burns. The cold water engulfed her hands in invisible flames. I didn't understand it at all, but I tried my best to recognize how she was feeling. There was so much to worry about. What if she fell asleep washing the dishes? What if there were knives in the milky dishwasher?

I should be doing something for her. Doing I don't know what: the dishes? Cleaning out the hallway? Making her dinner? I shouldn't leave Bethany alone either.

She grabbed her big cup of Diet Coke and filled it with ice. The Christmas clock above the sink mumbled "Silver Bells" for eleven o'clock.

"Love you, Mom, you're the best Mom ever," I would say every time I left her.

"Love you, son. I'm just glad you're home now."

After a while, Andrew and I checked to see if Mom would be getting up soon. I opened the door and she was hunched over a bowl of lucky charms tipping milk onto the comforter, the television up too loud.

"Hey Mom," I whispered.

"Mom." I tapped her. She wasn't breathing again.

All of sudden she inhaled a deep breath and sucked a few abbreviated ones, like she was drowning. She jolted up and smacked her cereal across the bed.

Suddenly she's wide awake.

"I was just resting my eyes," she said.

"Mom, you were sleeping. You were leaning over the edge of the bed. I didn't want you to fall," I said.

Mark walked in. "Is there anything I can do for you, Mother?" he asks.

I can't understand why she doesn't believe me when I tell her she's falling asleep. I sigh.

“Thanks, Mark,” she said. “I just spilled my breakfast, I'll get it.” Mom tore the bed sheets up at the corners and handed them to Mark.

“I'll get it, dear,” he said, rested his crossword on the nightstand. “I'll throw this in the washer. We'll put some new sheets on here and you can get some rest.”

He balled the sheets and comforter and took them to the basement. I stood in the doorway. I had to tell her. We were running out of time with Bryan.

“Mom, Andrew and I are going to Bryan's house and then I'm going to drop him off at Dad's tonight.”

“Okay, well,” she pulled the new sheets around each corner. “I'm going to try to be awake in a few hours so if you guys want to come back for dinner before you have to take him back to Dad's that would be nice.”

Bryan's place was an hour away and Mom had been in bed the whole weekend. I knew she wouldn't be awake for dinner. There probably wouldn't even be dinner. She was just too sick, and why didn't I help her more? Why couldn't I make dinner every night when I came back from work? Instead of going to sleep—I always felt like I was trying to fall asleep and just couldn't.

I could remember back before Mom was hurting, when she and Dad were still together, when Andrew and I were toddlers and whenever Mom would go anywhere, she would bring us home little trinkets or toys, action figures and baseball cards. No matter where she would go, when she came back, she'd have something for us when she came back like an apology for leaving us, like a thank you for letting her go do what she

needed to do. I could remember a few weeks before when Mom was feeling fine, and we went to Cold Stone for ice cream. A few good hours for her. Everything felt normal then. She wasn't sick. She wasn't in bed the whole day. I wondered how many of those days were left, how many I'd missed already living with Dad. I always felt that no matter what I was doing then, I was doing the wrong thing. No matter where I was, I should have been somewhere else because what if something happened to my family?

“Okay, Mom,” I said. “We'll try to make it back for dinner.”

When we got to Bryan's, I asked how he was doing, how his parents were doing. His mom got drunk one night and tried to get a restraining order against his Dad, but instead, he got a restraining order against her—because, after all, she was the drunken, abusive one—and she was forced to move out. Bryan's Dad had the ugly duty of taking care of her new puppy she bought on a whim until she came back. It's was a lanky mutt with wiry, white hair and black spots. It pissed all over the house and the best Bryan's Dad could do was keep it gated in the upstairs hallway while he was away. Bryan's Dad still played drums sometimes, Bryan said. He had a new cover band. I hoped he was going somewhere.

We didn't talk about much else. Andrew was in his last year of high school; I was in my first year of college. But we didn't have time to talk about those things. We plugged our instruments into our amps and played. I played a slow riff on the low E string with big steps between the notes, some octaves. It sounded like something the bass should play, so Andrew drew up a countermelody on the bass, working up the fretboard instead of down, playing harmonics like a lead guitarist would. Bryan worked his way into the riff, digging around the melody with each note, pulling space apart with sudden

crescendos and decrescendos of his wah pedal. Then I changed to chords. A. G. C. A. Leaving wide open space between each one, letting them echo into the room.

Bryan's curtains were open today, the only time I can remember. And was his dad working Sundays, late shifts again? The sun barreled through the glass and crashed into the stiff, brown carpet. Andrew shifted to the highest octaves, mimicking a haunting vocal melody. I watch the drop ceiling, waiting for something. Cars passed by the front porch inaudibly—I could feel their shadows pulse across the walls. The clouds dipped in front of the sun, and the room got dark, then light again as they floated on, faster.

It was darker again and I plucked each note of the chords, leaving their tops cut off—suspending them—dangling them like clouds over an empty suburban street. Bryan wahs around us, surrounding us, his foot working the pedal diligently.

We got back to the verse, easing into it—and was music more like praying or doing drugs, meditation or addiction?—Bryan's lead part tying Andrew and I together, but the melodies, driving us apart. We could feel the tension in the chords in our fingers.

Upstairs, the dog howled and barked. In Bryan's backyard, the grass was so tall, it choked itself, uprooting the concrete walkway to the garage. The weeds ate their way through the fiberglass garage door, tearing the links from the fence. A glare bore into the knobs of Bryan's pedalboard: the ones with the treble turned way up. The overdrive pedal. The volume. The action figures collect dust on the T.V.

I hadn't talked to him since I moved out, and what did we have to talk about? Mom was still in bed, sick with pain, I was sure. We had to make something before she woke up, but the song just wouldn't settle down. We tried desperately to control it, to bring the melody back to something we could ride away on, but we couldn't.

The drums slipped out of tune in the heat of the upstairs back room and we went back into the chorus again.

Maybe I should have stayed home with Mom. Maybe this is just a waste of time—I haven't done this in so long—a quick high for a long and troubling hangover.

Our first album cover looked like this: the tube light shining a champagne glow across the top of the wood-paneled walls, the open bag of cat litter in front of the bathroom doorway in the hallway where we had our first practices years ago. It was called *Songs from the Hallway*. It had been so long. Did we want to make a new album now? Did we have to start over?

The notes charged each other. The notes tumbling forward with serious momentum, and we tried to hold it back. The living room was changing colors, wind picking up and smacking the branches of the trees outside into the shudders of the windows, the sun burning yellow holes into the parted curtains, burning holes into Bryan's work clothes hanging at either end of the front window's curtain rod, burning bright red stains into the carpeted floor, static electricity from the television yanking dust from the air and our heads were balloons filling with buzzing helium.

The ceiling was out of tune. Bryan was out of tune.

Bryan would go back to work in a few weeks. They would shove him up and down the interstate. He would hold onto the steering wheel and listen to his partner blather about hookers and cocaine. Do Bryan's parents remember his name? Where have they been?

Andrew's guitar strap pulled against his shoulders, and he tried to stand straight. My wrists ached. I was dizzy as we got back to the chorus. Everything was new

with those chords: blue green, like the clouds this afternoon, like my Jaime's eyes. Should I have gone to see her instead? I haven't been with her in a few weeks. Work. Work. Sleep. Work. Am I tired? Sick? Are we tired of each other?

I played the chords, I plucked their notes, I felt their tonal bodies. Jaime's long, slender eyelashes, her swarms of summer freckles. We would kiss for hours in the park, behind the dugout of the baseball field. We would sip a shared soda and eat our sandwiches. We would hold each others dreams and touch them carefully with our fingertips as the sky pinked and purpled and bubbled into night. We would squeeze into the passenger seat of her car and hold each other. And weren't we both starting college now? Wasn't that the plan we had made to be together?

And then the song ended suddenly, each part jerking from it like electrons in an unstable atom. And where could the song go? That was what we talked about then, not where had each of us been and where were we all going. We called it "Reinvent." We needed a new drummer if we were going to make this work. We needed a new band name. We needed a singer.

My phone rang, and it was Mark. In the way he said, "hello," from deep in his throat, the letters lingering on the roof of his mouth, I could tell he's angry. And he was never angry. What was wrong? My fingers still vibrating, I put the phone to my ear.

"Your mother said you guys were coming back tonight for dinner. Is that true?" he asked.

It was almost six. I'd forgotten about the time. Andrew needed to be home soon or Dad would call to yell at Mom about the definitions in the custody agreement. About how Mom never got him back on time.

“She said you were coming back before you had to take Andrew home at seven. She didn't want you guys to leave in the first place, you know that. This is her visitation weekend, not yours, Michael.”

“What?” I said. I was startled. I felt like I'd been hit in the face or I'd tumbled down the stairs, and my head got heavy.

“I wasn't—”

“You better start to think about what you're doing. Every weekend going to visit your friends instead of your mother. She's very sick, you know, and when she has the opportunity to spend time with you, you need to take advantage of it.”

“I thought she was—”

“You promised that you'd be home and you broke that promise.”

He hung up.

I would lay in bed in the basement waiting to fall asleep. I'd done a lot of waiting to fall asleep that summer. The would dog bark at ghosts outside the living room windows. He would stand with his front paws on the back of the couch, his nose between the lacy crimson curtains, pressed against the glass. He watched the wide yard through the hazy dark. He must have known something was going to happen.

I'd drift off between barks, between Mom's shouts reprimanding the dog, between boxes sliding across the floor, between the clock in the kitchen slurring Christmas songs in August. The batteries were dying, and the tunes sounded scattered, like an echo through a dream. I started leaving the lights on when I went to sleep.

It was ten o'clock when I heard the crash against the floor and the scream. I'd been expecting it the whole summer. Mom fell off the bed. I knew it immediately.

I sprinted up the basement steps, through the kitchen and into her bedroom. Mom was leaning against the wall, lying halfway through the doorway.

“It's broken!” she cried and held her left shoulder tight against her chest.

“I heard it crack,” she says, “Oh, it's broken!”

What was I supposed to do? She screamed and I raced to the hallway closet to look for a pillow case for a sling. I couldn't find one.

“Mom, where are the pillowcases?” I asked.

“In the closet!” she cried into the wall.

I was sweating and shaking like I was the one who has fallen and broken his shoulder. I tried to tie a knot in the corner, but my hands were too big and they shook and my fingers wouldn't bend or work right. Mom kept screaming in pain, Bethany there now, kneeling on the floor, trying to comfort her.

“I'll call Dad at work,” she said calmly, as if this happened every day.

In the emergency room, the doctor had Mom sit in a chair next to the bed. He asked for allergies to medications and she cried out eight or ten and said there were more written on a sheet of paper that she kept in her purse. Mark pulled it out and handed it to the doctor, then leaned against the wall, hands clasped in front of him, in quiet reverence. Bethany sat in a chair in the corner doing something with her phone. She had her Steelers cap on. She had just turned ten.

The doctor asked Mom about the medications she was taking. She had a list for that too. She recited two dozen or so drugs, their uses, their side-effects, whether or not they could be taken with other drugs, why and when they were prescribed to her, when and where the last time she took each of them was.

The doctor scribbled some stuff on a paper, stuck it into a manilla folder and sauntered out of the little cubicle of a room. I was supposed to be at work for two in the morning. I wished I could quit and just sleep.

An hour later, I was still shaking. Mark watched the television strapped to a shelf in the corner. He said how nice it would probably be for me to sleep in tomorrow and smiled. I try to make myself smile. He seemed at peace with something. Was he waiting for this too? And now this ordeal is finally out of the way? But now what?

The doctor came back. He asked Mom how intense her pain was on a scale from one to ten. She said eleven. “My pain is normally a ten,” she said.

She must have felt like she was being cooked over a pit fire. Burning alive is thought to be the most painful way to die. She didn’t deserve that. She didn’t deserve to burn alive for the rest of her life.

She took a fistful of pills and then she was nodding off.

“This is how it's been for a year or two,” Mark told the doctor as Mom slept. “The medicines knock her out, but she needs it.”

The doctor nodded, left again.

I took a deep breath and watched Mom sleep in the chair, her head rolling on her shoulder, then snapping back. Mark made a joke about the “dirty linens” basket, something from a Seinfeld episode. I admired him. His patience. He lived with Mom through unbearable sickness and minimal health. He made sure he was there for her, always. I wondered if there was better health along the way. I hoped there was for his sake and Bethany's sake too. I wondered how Bethany would be in high school. I wondered if I would ever have time for music.

On the way home from the hospital, Mom slumped in the passenger's side seat, in her new sling. We stopped at Wendy's. Mark got Mom a large Diet Coke just in case she woke up on the ride home. I should have been heading into work, but didn't. I should have been excited to start college the next week, but I wasn't. I just wanted to play music. I wanted to write songs. About Mom. About how Bethany wasn't scared. About how I was all the time.

I faded in the car, and nodded off. Mark said something to Bethany about letting God control it all as Mom snored in the front seat. I was so tired, and it was comforting to let someone drive me home. The rhythm of the tires on the roadway, the melody of the humming engine puts me down. I leaned my head against the hard, cold glass of the window.

The chords to "Reinvent" followed me like a ghost. When school started, Jaime and I fought, then made up, made out on her bunked bed above her roommate doing biology homework at her desk. The chords in the chorus arpeggiated and augmented with a crystalline reverb. When Bryan called me on the phone at the end of my second semester, I hadn't heard from him in a year again—he'd been working hundred-hour weeks, living in shitty motels in the suburbs of New York, watching movie after movie through his off hours, eating at roadside diners and burger joints—the chords to "Reinvent," like pools of water after rain, echo.

Bryan put on some weight. He wanted to change that. He hadn't played guitar in a long while; he wanted to change that too. Bryan desperately wanted to dedicate his life to something, and I felt that way too. I needed music to translate that world for me.

Jaime and me. I could feel the pounding of the overdriven pre-chorus in my temples, power chords thumping forward, disregarding warning signs, praying to be understood and taken care of.

Then the chorus. Open, inviting, persuasive chords. Everything slowing down, opening up. But it had to collapse into the ending chord progression, the solos. The song would always lose control and crash into its own ending. Unless we rewrote it.

I was afraid of doing what Bryan was doing: working hard at something he didn't love. I told Bryan that Jaime and I were planning on living off campus with Jaime and some friends the next school year. I told him we'd be more than happy to have him live with us.

I visited Mom every weekend, and the song kept going. Where was it going? I could hear the solo in my head scaling those thudding chords. The chorus at the end, full of self-doubt. Self-doubt pooling like rain on the sidewalk. It was starting to pour again. I could see it through the smudged dorm windows. Bryan said he'd love to move in with us.

Finally. Finally, Mom got a work settlement after a decade of being sick. Finally, she was able to start the ketamine drip treatment she'd been waiting to start for years. We'd heard so much good about it, everyday Mark reading about it, Mom telling us that people have literally been cured of RSD. With Ketamine. The drug they use to put animals to sleep.

To sleep.

The more severe option was to induce a coma and give Mom the drip that way, keep her out for days. The success rate was high, but we all worried that she might not wake up. Mom was so scared. We were all scared. But then there was another option.

The doctors can prop her in a chair six hours a day, administer the drug like any other IV, keep her awake. She started in the spring, could feel it working right away.

In the spring, I proposed to Jaime in her dorm room as she awoke from a nap, as the cold rain smacked the window. She said *of course*, and we tumbled forward.

Finally. We were moving into an apartment together: me, Jaime, Bryan. There was a big open room in our new place where we put our band equipment, where we wanted to have practice. A week after we moved in, Bryan decided he wanted to be our drummer. He didn't have to do it. He was so good at guitar—better than I was—but he wanted to have a whole band. A complete band. We could be a three-piece. A power trio.

We walked into the music store near the mall, walked past the rows of guitars, the aisles of amplifiers, to the drum room. Pyramids of drums in fire engine red, electric blue make a brilliant, sparkling, resonating city. He inspected the wall of cymbals, glittering gold. The place buzzed with voices and rang with the sounds of keyboards, twangy plucks of steel strings. The smell of new rubber, of painted wood. I quit my job.

Finally, I could sleep.

I was awake. And there was Jaime next to me. And downstairs was Bryan. He spent the day putting the kit together, arranging it over and over, tuning the drums again and again, switching toms, cracking cymbals. In the late afternoon, Andrew and I began “The D Song,” those meandering chords Bryan used to roll his heels to in his dad's living room. Bryan settled into the drum seat, adjusted the pedals, reinvented his Dad's old beats.

4. “Help Wanted”

Turning into the car wash, a Chevy slammed into the back of my car. I asked Jaime if she was okay, and she said yes, but we were both shaken up. I got out, in the middle of Route 191 north of Allentown, south of the cement plants in Nazareth, to talk to the driver of the car that hit me. I asked her if she was okay, and she said yeah and chuckled like she did that sort of thing all the time and silly her and woops. She looked my age—eighteen—and she said that everything looked okay and she didn’t think we needed to call the police, but I did anyway.

We filled out the paperwork for the cop. Jaime and I were already late. We wanted to leave before rush hour. It would be a long drive to Pittsburgh [five hours] and we wanted to get there before nightfall. Melissa was graduating with her Master’s Degree in genetics from Pitt, and we would be meeting my whole family at her apartment out there, staying for the weekend to celebrate, then driving back Sunday night for Jaime’s Monday morning final. I hardly got to see Melissa—both of us being so busy with school a thousand miles away from each other. Every minute there would count.

My bumper was dinged, but the car seemed okay, and I resolved to pay close attention to it as we drove out. We stopped at Subway. Then Jaime would nap. There was hardly any traffic highway heading westbound; just islands of trees starting to bloom on a horizon of rolling fields. I left the radio off, listened to rhythm of car. I loved long drives. I loved the way the sun set in front of us and exploded into a supernova of reds and pinks and yellows. The colors would settle into a deep purple in the middle of Pennsylvania, and even the darkness, the highway headlights felt so new and inviting.

Melissa greeted us with a big smile, a round of soft hugs under the bright, buzzing streetlights, showed us where to park. She lived in the center of the city, at a busy intersection, across from a gas station and min-mart which seemed tiny between highrises. Bunches of people walked down the streets and talk loudly. Traffic buzzed all around us.

Her apartment had a big living room with windows that faced the walls of another building. There was a small dining room, a narrow kitchen with a washer and dryer in the pantry. Melissa asked us what fun things we wanted to do the next day, but all I could think about was how cool her apartment was. I couldn't believe it was the first time I'd seen an apartment of Melissa's. I hadn't been to the place where she lived since before she started college in Tampa and she still lived with us at Mom's house in Whitehall. And here she was, seven years later, graduating with a Master's Degree from Pitt. Did I notice that I'd gotten taller then, even taller than her, standing in her narrow kitchen as she showed us around, told us she'd just gone food shopping and we could eat whatever we wanted? Had I noticed how we talked to each other then, like adults or friends who hadn't seen each other in a long while? Did I think of those times she used to lock Andrew and me out of the house when we annoyed her and her friends when Mom was out running errands? When had I grown up?

Melissa and Mike, Melissa's boyfriend of several years then, made breakfast the next day, and after that Andrew, Jaime, Melissa, Mike, and I all went to the park for Frisbee Golf. It was hot and bright and sunny and Mike showed us how to throw the different weighted frisbees for different distances.

Melissa gave us a tour of Pittsburgh on the way home. She named the neighborhoods as we crossed the bridges, climbed the steep hills and wound down roads shaded by oaks and maples. Oakland. Squirrel Hill. She showed us the places she'd been, and I tried to hold onto those names.

She loved it there, but she and Mike still wanted to move back to Florida, back to the palm trees speckling the Tampa streets, back to the neighborhood she'd lived in during her time at the University of Tampa, back to the places where she and Mike fell in love. I was so excited to have my own new apartment in Bethlehem, just a few blocks from college. Me and Jaime and Bryan. Andrew wanted to move in after he graduated high school in June. I could hardly imagine the whole band in one place without some sort of extreme excitement, without the idea that some dream was actually coming true.. We could practice all the time. It was what we'd always talked about growing up. The new apartment had a big room in the middle of the first floor where we could have band practice, where we could hang posters of our favorite bands and write songs that even they couldn't write. Melissa's place reminded me of all that, and that place reminded me that I wanted to do succeed in the way Melissa was succeeding: with college degrees, my own place.

At night we all met at an Italian restaurant with windows that were actually doors and opened up into the warm night and made you feel like you were somewhere European and romantic. My sister was going in the right directions. She really had it all. Someone who treated her well. A beautiful apartment in a beautiful section of Pittsburgh. A graduate level education. Dreams of moving somewhere warm: something to look forward to and work and live for.

Sunday morning, all the masters students presented the theses they'd been working on for three years. We sat in a white room with a big projector screen, and the students pointed to tables on charts on the screen, explained their significance. Mom wasn't feeling well. Her RSD pain worsened from sitting so long, and by the time Melissa began—she was the last to go—Mom's medicines had kicked in and kicked in hard and she was bobbing in and out of sleep. I looked from Melissa back to Mom, trying to will Mom to keep awake, trying to understand the science behind Melissa's presentation. Then there were songs and riffs of songs popping up and fading away. Then there was the worry of driving home later tonight popping up and fading away. Then Melissa smiled and her presentation was over. The clapping woke Mom up and we headed over to Carnegie Music Hall for the graduation.

We all funneled into the back row. An orchestra played in the pit and the crammed hall got hot. Mom wiped the sweat from her face and neck, and I worried about her not feeling well and having to leave.

Finally, they called the names. Hundreds of them. And "Watson" would be near the end. We took pictures and video, met Melissa in the lobby where the marble walls made you feel like you were far below ground or in some European cathedral. It seemed like nearly everyone was there—except Dad. Mom had surely told him about the graduation, and I wondered if he even thought about coming, thought about ending that stupid grudge. But no one mentioned him.

At Bahama Breeze, Melissa and Mike ate and laughed and drank with Mom and Mark. Jaime and I started getting worried. On the way to the restaurant, the rain had started and

become steady, a hot mist blanketed the lines on the road. We had left our car parked in the city and had to catch a ride back to Melissa's apartment with Mom.

There's was a big storm coming, and it was almost ten. I should've driven to the restaurant myself, but I didn't think we'd be out this long. I asked Mom if we could leave soon, but no one was ready to go. I just had a bad feeling about driving through the night. They were enjoying themselves. They didn't get to see Melissa often.

I asked Mom if we can leave soon again at eleven. The worst of the storm—a long band of severe thunderstorms was heading east. If we didn't leave soon, Jaime and I would be stuck driving through it the whole way home.

When we finally got to the car, it was pouring: big drops splattering across the windshield. We said goodbye to everyone just before midnight. On the highway, it came down so hard, that it was a challenge to see. Tractor trailers whizzed by sending wakes of rainwater crashing into the side of the car. The wind picked up. Rain lashed the car, and I had to slow down, leaned forward into the wheel to see. Jaime tried to study, tries to read through her textbook by the light of her cell phone.

We stopped at the first rest stop, and it was raining so violently that we couldn't see the lines in the parking lot. The drive home looked ominous, endless, but we had to get through it.

By two, the rain hadn't slowed down. The road seems to be full of only trucks racing through the night, splashing tidal waves across the highway. They cut across the lanes and swerved to pass me. If I didn't go fast enough, they would swallow me. The storm would swallow me if I went too fast. The night would swallow me. The trucks surround me, box me in, then skate away.

There was something dangerous and deadly coming. It was coming then. Something impossible. Something you never expected and I don't know how I knew it then, but did. Something heavy in the pit of my stomach that told me to stay on the lookout.

Jaime studied on, the light of her cell phone highlighting shuffled pages of notes. I couldn't blink or we're dead. And even if I didn't, maybe it would end up that way anyway.

Andrew, Bryan, and I practiced in the house for the first time, and then the next time, the neighbors said we were too loud—cymbal crashes slicing through the paper walls—and called the police on us in the middle of a weekday. The big room in the new apartment wouldn't work after all. We hadn't counted on that at all.

Suddenly we needed a new practice space, and Bryan suggested his dad's garage. I could already feel what it felt like to be in a garage band. Like being *a garage band* was the first step we had to take toward a future full of achievement.

The practice space that was his dad's living room, of course, was taken by Bryan's Dad's new 1980s cover band, Bang Bang Betty—Bryan's Dad on bass/vocals. It'd been a few years since Actinoid practiced there—with Bryan's Dad on drums instead of Bryan who was on guitar, Andrew on bass, me on guitar and vocals; the three of us just starting high school. The nostalgic feel of playing again welling up inside me.

One Friday night we went over to Bryan's Dad's place in Whitehall to see if the space would work. Bryan's Dad met us at the entrance to his yard and we walked to the garage. A waning cigarette in his mouth, he fumbled through constellations of keys,

bringing them close to his eyes, pulling up his glasses—then pushing them back down—to examine them. Back and forth. Back and forth. A jumble of low clouds leaked a warm summer rain. Finally he found a key that worked, knocked the door open with his shoulder.

Inside there were garbage bags and boxes—some empty, some filled with other bags, wet and collapsing—piled on an oily concrete floor. The plywood walls were bright orange and spongy-looking against the dark blotches on the floor. Andrew, Bryan, and I—the new band—stand there with Bryan's Dad as the evening sun beamed through the clouds and smeared the dirty windows with a yellow glare. A desire to play music again pulsed through me and turned my bones to jello. I dreamed of our old band's practices in the Bryan's living room. I could feel the residual tug of my father not approving. I could feel the residual shove of the music, the harmonies between all of us.

“If you clean it out you can use it, no problem,” Bryan's Dad said, taking a drag.

Bryan went in, and Andrew and I followed him. We always seemed to follow Bryan. He always knew where he was going.

Andrew and I rolled some rotting truck tires out the door and down the steps into the tall grass. Bryan lugged out two soggy black bags and tossed them against the hip-high chain-link fence. Bryan's Dad stumbled and dumps a box into the yard and Bryan ripped open one of the heavy bags to see what was in it. It was filled with old grass clippings. They all were.

“When's the last time you mowed the grass?” Bryan said. It was the middle of summer and the grass was leaning against the highest links of the fence for support,

cross-hatching the concrete walkway, beating against his back door, swamping the concrete porch.

Bryan's Dad leaned against the doorway. "It's been a while," he said softly and grinned through his cigarette.

While we worked, every once in while, a car passed by, heading down the narrow alley behind the garage—tires crunching on gravel—and we could see its shadow through the teal fiberglass garage door. The weeds around back had become thick trees piercing the door, cinching each link of the chain fence. We tried to get the garage door open, to make it easy for us to move our equipment in and out, but it won't budge. Andrew cut the weed-trees away with an old hacksaw he found on the workbench in the garage and we pushed and pulled at it, but we still couldn't get the door open. Another obstacle. We'd just have to lug the equipment through the sideyard and bring it in the other way.

The clouds glazed the sky and a steady rain began to fall as we worked. I swept the thick, black dust from the wooden planks of the floor. Bryan hid the empty propane tanks in the rafters in the ceiling. We unrolled some thin, white carpets across the concrete and all of a sudden, the place was clean, empty. We stood there and admire what we'd accomplished already, working together. The rain echoed across the roof. Our voices echoed across the room. We were buzzing. We couldn't wait for band practice.

The next day we were back at the garage. A smell like old, wet newspaper, or leaves in an autumn rainstorm seeped out when we opened the door. It was just before noon, and the neighborhood was mostly quiet. The pines swished in the wind, the screen door to

Bryan's house tapped the door frame during gusts. Between breezes, the air is hot and lays thick in on us.

In the alley, I hopped into the bed of Bryan's truck and hand Bryan, Andrew, and Rudy—our new guitarist—amplifiers, guitars in cases, bags of cables, cymbal stands, drums. They grabbed armloads and lugged it all around to the front of the garage. In minutes, we were unpacked, setting up. We tightened the knobs of the steel cymbal stands, turned on the mics, put the PA system speakers on stands in the corners. A waterfall of wires flowed from an outlet on a ceiling rafter, down to the floor.

I strummed a chord and Andrew jumped in with a bass line of a song that we'd played once or twice before in the living room of our apartment. We didn't have lyrics yet, and the title was just a bunch of numbers. It had a bluesy feel to it, a pressing bass line, a few wide open chords, a lot of strange time signature changes [7/8, 12/8, 14/8]. Rudy tuned his guitar, his curly red hair hanging over face down past his red goatee. He picked up the guitar line and picked a lead melody above it. Bryan slapped a cymbal and dove into the song too.

Bryan's Dad opened the door and leaned against its chipped-wood frame, hands in his faded jean pockets, his plain white t-shirt tucked into his pants.

We kept playing, and he listened and waited.

The sticky morning breeze shifted the air in the room, and the four of us strummed and smacked our instruments, our fingers growing slick with sweat. The air conditioner in the window hummed. Bryan's black shirt was soaked through already, and a stick slipped through his fingers and bounced off the plywood wall behind him. He

laughed and swiped a new one from a pouch at his snare and brought us to the end of the song.

“You guys sound damn good,” Bryan's Dad said before any of us could say anything.

The four of us smile and laugh and scratch our heads or look to the dusty floor, our cords sprawling across the concrete and carpets between amplifiers like arteries connecting organs: life support. Why were we doing this anyway? What was the world like outside music? And why didn't we want to be there instead, with all the others at school, partying and drinking and waking up late on Saturdays? What had infected us, made us addicted to playing?

Now the microphones sprouting from the boons of the mic stands like long, heavy limbs, were pressed down by the thick air. Bryan's Dad asked how we were doing, asked about our new guitarist. We introduced him to Rudy. He wanted us to open for his band soon. At the Whitehall Fall Festival. At the Garfield Hotel in Northampton where Bang Bang Betty were a monthly staple.

We play a new rendition of “The D Song,” the song Bryan and I have played since we first started jamming together. Bryan's Dad watches as Rudy plays the solo his son had written, as Bryan plays the part on the drums that he wrote. Bryan beats harder on the snare, crashes further into the cymbals than his dad did. The swollen wooden sticks bend with every solid hit. There is something in Bryan's Dad's face as he stares into the band's direction with his smile that suggests pride. His son is sharing in this thing that he has loved above all other things in his life. I wonder if Bryan recognizes it. Bryan's Dad studies us, studies the music as if it's been his life's work to watch us grow.

He seems satisfied, so proud of Bryan, of us all for sticking with our passion. I'm so lucky to play with these guys, and I think I realize it then. Everything I write grows exponentially better when they add something to it.

Andrew and I play the same parts we've played for years, the same chords we constructed a half decade ago. Andrew's bass line with that strangely right wrong note, my twangy clean D-position chords moving up to the fifth and seventh frets.

From "The D Song," we go right into a new number starting with Andrew slapping at a G octave on his bass. He bends over his guitar, long black hair dangling in front of his face. Light shining in through the narrow windows, coloring a white rainbow of dust ending at Andrew's feet. His thumb pops at the strings as his other hand moves up the fretboard. Bryan whacks the low toms and follows the rhythm, sweat dripping from his crew cut onto the snare now. Rudy scratches his string with the side of his pick and slides down the fretboard making the sound of a dive-bombing jet.

The verse is a bright melody: poppy, but heavy and driving with the slap bass and crashing drums. Rudy starts singing his new lyrics with too many words crammed into each line, but none of us really mind. We finally have a singer. It's taken us years, but we finally have a singer, and it feels great. We ride through the final riff and Rudy plays a solo to bring the song to a neat close.

"Was that an original?" Bryan's Dad asks after the final chord and cymbal crash.

"Yeah," I say wiping my moist hands onto my jean shorts. "It's called 'Help Wanted'."

"I like it." He says, thinking something to himself. "It sounds like a good band name too."

“Yeah, well, we all kind of need help, so it works,” Bryan says and follows his statement with another drum roll and cymbal crash.

“You are all a bunch of great kids and very talented,” Bryan's Dad says and pulls out a cigarette and rolls it between his fingers, starting into it, satisfied.

We are on a roll with writing new songs and every practice they sound tighter. By fall, we start recording an album. We bring Rudy's laptop to the garage along with our recording station and mixers. We set up several mics in the room, some around the drums, some in the corners, some dangling in front of each of our amps. We play through each song, record most of them in one smooth take. If there are errors, we will edit them out later. We will try to get this album done as soon as we can, so that we have something to hand out at shows. We need to schedule those too.

Rudy mixes the songs at my apartment near school after classes, deep into the evening. Three of us stand in the wide open kitchen, Bryan sits on the dishwasher. The recording unit sits on the table. Andrew, Rudy, and I scribble out lyrics and write new ones on crumbling pieces of paper. Papers cover the table and chairs, the floor. Rudy marks the tracks, names them: track six on Song One is “Rudy's Vocals.” Track Two is “Mike's Guitar.” Track One, “Bryan's Drums.” Track Five, “Andrew's Bass.” We name the songs: “Help Wanted,” “Remember,” “Reinvent.” Songs four, five, and six become a trilogy about the end of the world, and Rudy deletes the gaps between those songs so they run together smoothly. Songs nine, thirteen, fourteen are covers: Weezer, Neil Young, Jimi Hendrix.

Jaime, designs the cover art—a rocky Martian desert—and watches television in the front room between bouts of homework. Rudy hooks up a mic, sets the songs in

motion and sings into the thin walls, the forest green cabinets with the doors that won't close all the way. He sings through the back door and out into the yard, the grass growing tall and old. He sings into the middle room of the first floor where we line the walls with piles of band equipment in black cases—circling a secondhand pool table—cover each inch of drywall, each centimeter of ceiling with posters of rock bands—Black Sabbath, Rush, Pink Floyd, Nirvana—concert tickets, thrift store records—Led Zeppelin: *In Through the Out Door*; Elliott Smith: *From a Basement on a Hill*; Kansas, Yes, The Who—pictures of guitars, rock music magazines articles, drawings of elephants, stickers, fast-food receipts.

Rudy sings in and out of classes and we follow him with backup vocals. Rudy sings through the college cafeteria, through the long drives home to the New York suburbs, sings to the dead industry of the city where we live. The frozen blast furnaces. The rusting chain-link fence that surrounds the defunct steel plant sleeping along the Lehigh River. The barbed chain links at the top tear off his back pocket as the five of us hop over. Jaime stays on the outside, walks along the train tracks circling the plant, looks out for any cops. Amy, Rudy's girlfriend, brings her new camera and follows us in. In our black and brown sweatshirts, our long curly hair, our beards and goatees, we wander the grounds of the plant and pose for promo shots.

Amy directs us as the sun sets behind the railroad into the wide forest. We pace the concrete, slip into long warehouses with hundreds of glass panels missing from their windows. The concrete ground echoes each step, mirrors each note of our voices. Ivy climbs to the rafters of the ceiling and Amy snaps more photos.

We climb the blast furnaces. Walk along the rickety catwalks unmaintained for twenty years. Amy takes photos from the ground. Individual shots. Group shots. Shots from below us, above us. Photos of us staring away into the metropolis of the machinery in the night. We climb down and out of the complex, walk up the long empty road away from The Steel. There are crumbling stone buildings on either side sleeping in wide fields of tall yellow grass. There is an arching green steel bus stop, graffitied in reds and blues, white and black bubbly letters like song lyrics on steel paper. Amy shoots pictures there, with us standing beneath the bus stop. Now we are sprawled across the sidewalk under the streetlight, mixed up with the phantom clank of steel, the punching of time cards, the building up, the breaking down, the drive home across the bridge. There are “Help Wanted” signs in the windows of gas stations, pizza parlors, a convenience store, like omens. The neon signs in the city below crackling like fireworks.

We name our band Help Wanted. We print the labels, the cover art, and assemble the albums in the middle room piecing together piles of papers, jewel cases, a stack of burned CDs, hot out of Rudy's computer. Jaime screen prints us shirts, paints the ink onto the screen, piles the finished products in our official merch box.

Are we in love with the music or just afraid of living out lives of mediocrity? Are we in love with the band, or just the idea that gets us away from school and work? Are we in love with the music or afraid that college might not just be a back-up plan?

At our first gig in Allentown, we bring our equipment in through a side door next to the bar. The place is an old warehouse. There are two loading bay doors with concrete tracks that slope upward toward the bar. There are steel i-beam pillars. The stage is a carpeted steel riser spotted with small strips of duct tape. Someone tightens things on a

beat-up black drum kit, and we introduce ourselves: we're Help Wanted. He's got short, disheveled hair, a slanting mouth and a lazy eye. He mumbles into the drum stand.

“You guys put your shit over here,” he says directing to us put our amps in front of the headlining band's amps.

“Once your done, you can move your shit offstage and get the hell out of here so these fuckers can set their shit up.” He points to the tall stacks of amplifiers at the back of the stage. He scans the stage with his one eye. The other eye continues to stare into us. “We gotta do this shit fast so we can all get the hell out of here, got it?” he says. We nod.

He has another band put their amps in front of ours, and it looks silly to me to have ten different-sized amps on a small stage. But that's how it goes, Bryan tells me, that's what they do at these places. It doesn't matter much; I'm just excited to be able to play somewhere. To have the opportunity to share this music, and then it hits me like a crashing wave: we are finally playing a show. After years and years, we are finally playing a show. Soon there will be more shows, another album. Shows in Philadelphia, New York, a minor record deal. A major record deal. A tour of the United States. It's all coming together now. We are setting it all in motion. It's all going to happen fast, so brace yourself.

My heart beats hard and my whole body pulses in rhythm. I want to sing my favorite Rush song, tap the drums on the steel railing as I help Rudy and Andrew bring our guitars in and line them against the wall. Other bands begin doing the same. We wander around and chat with them once all our equipment is in. This band is from New York: indie rock. This band is from Bethlehem: an acoustic trio. Not our styles, but the

musicians are amiable, candid about their inexperience with the Lehigh Valley music scene. We will all test these waters together. I feel so fresh and new, like the sun's morning glare showering the trees in front of Bryan's Dad's garage. This is like a dream.

Jaime sets up our box of merchandise on a table near the bathroom as people begin to wander in, say hello to Andrew and Rudy: people from their dorm. Bryan's Dad shows up, talks with us some, smiles a lot with his eyes wide and glazed beneath his thick glasses. He tells us how proud he is, how he can't wait for the show. I'm thinking now about the times when he used to play drums for us as we talk to him. After a while, he heads to the bar.

Some of Bryan's coworker's appear. Bryan introduces them to us. Even before they've heard us live, they tell us how much they love our sound. Bryan must play our CD for them all the time: in truck rides to work sites, on the stereo in the warehouse. The sound guy—the guy with the lazy eye—asks us to hop on stage for a soundcheck.

First, Bryan beats the drums, then Rudy, Andrew, and I rigidly strum our instruments, repeat numbers into microphones. Some people from my classes walk in. Now some tall guys in studded belts and tight jeans.

My Dad in a new leather jacket as we begin our first song around nine o'clock. I haven't seen him more than a handful of times over the past two years. Once when I kicked myself out of his house; once at my high school graduation; once moving into my college dorm. The drums thunder behind me, and I strum a heavy chord, but nothing seems to emerge from the sound system. Andrew slaps into the intro of “Help Wanted,” and the speakers behind us rumble and buzz in clusters of notes. The sound guy—in a

little box at the other end of the venue—frantically turns knobs, pulls some levers. It looks like he's going to drive a train into us.

I still can't hear my guitar, and I turn to Rudy. He looks back and shakes his head at me. We keep playing. Rudy leans into his microphone and sings the first verse. I look back out into the crowd. There's Dad again, watching us.

His beard is starting to grey and this winter I will be broke and he will pick me up from school, offer to let me shovel his long driveway—even though he's got a snowblower—for twenty bucks. Twenty bucks is more than he's ever given me for anything. And I will still feel resentful for the lost time in high school, time he blocked me from friendship, from family, bore into my persistent dreams of being a musician, and for what? I'm playing the riff now—I'm here now—but I still can't hear it through the buzzing speakers, and it's itching me badly, but I keep playing. Dad will offer to buy me food, and I will still be resentful and pick out the more expensive boxes of cereal out of spite, and for what? Why couldn't he let me go to band practice without a fight? Get out of the house without feeling guilty? Visit Mom without feeling guilty? Visit Melissa.

We'll yell at each other in the car ride back to his house where he will offer to heat me up some leftovers, make me something to eat, and I will still feel I deserve more than a few bucks to shovel the icy driveway. Rudy digs the words from the chorus, and then something happens: the guitars erupt through the speakers and the bass disappears from under us.

My guitar strap snaps from my instrument, but I catch it just in time for a chorus. The cord has been unplugged—I must have stepped on it—and I try to push the cable back into the guitar, but it won't stay in, and I try to press the guitar into my body, hold it

up with hip and knee and keep playing the riff. I try to act like nothing has happened as the song wraps up. And then something happens where Dad tells me to stop thinking that he's always trying to hurt me, and he will be saying in a roundabout way that he's sorry, that he's made mistakes. Is this what I've been afraid of? Making the same mistakes he's made? What if I make some mistake and he never talks to me again? What if I forget to send him a card?

Years later, on Andrew's deck in South Philly, Andrew makes us burgers—Dad, Ellen, Jessica, me. Dad just moved to Connecticut for a new job, and we rarely see him anymore. He calls us and asks us when we can drive up and visit. He offers to pay for hundred dollar train tickets, offers to pay for our gas, promises he will send us home with food. He drove five hours this morning just to see us for an afternoon.

We all drink beer and laugh and talk about what we've been doing: Andrew and I are both in graduate programs. Jessica is in her first year of college. We drink beer, and the sun has gone down and the skyline is lit up across the rooftops and we talk about growing up.

"You were all tough," Dad says and smiles, watches blinking dots of planes pass over the glowing skyline.

"We made mistakes," Ellen says, "but only because we were trying our best to be the best parents for you kids."

"Pop-pop didn't show a lot of emotion growing up," Dad says, "and maybe that's why I was the way I was. Because that's what I learned from Pop-pop. But no matter what, every night, I made sure to tell you kids I loved you. Pop-pop didn't do that too

much, and I wanted to make sure I did. If you get a chance,” Dad says, “give Pop-pop a call. He hasn’t been doing well.”

When he gets home, he texts me to let me know. He says, “We’re here. I love you.”

Does this even matter? What does this say about us? About him? About me? I will offer to shovel his driveway for free, but I'm not sure why yet, and he will still give me the money and drive me back to college with a carful of food.

Now he's there, standing in the back, but there. I wish, he would have been at just one band practice. I wish he would have taken the time to see where all this was coming from, where it was taking me. How Andrew and I built these walls of sound out of his arguments with Mom, out of Mom's illnesses, out of restless high school days in and out of the counselor's office. Where was Dad while Bryan's Dad watched us grow, watched us turn the turbulent outside world into something ordered and simple? This might be the first time Dad's ever seen me play my guitar. His beard is luminous, almost white under the lights. His hands sink deeper into the pockets of his leather jacket.

I have to use Rudy's backup guitar for the rest of the show. It hangs below my hands, my moving fingers, doesn't feel right on my shoulders. Bryan drops a stick. We rewind, and start the second song over, but no one seems to notice. Does anyone notice? Does any of this matter?

I can't hear my backup vocals now through the buzzing monitors facing us, though the guitars and bass are now audible in front of the drums. The lights build a wall of glare in front of the stage, and it becomes hard to see anything past the stage. It becomes hard to see the clumps of people stationed around the room chatting to

themselves. My head is beginning to swell with sound and throb and Rudy I walk around stage for the third number, playing notes above the rumbling drums and bass.

My vibrating body settles, and the notes become easier to pick. The sweat on my palms dries, and the guitar becomes easier to grip. But suddenly it's over. The buzzing washes in and out of my ears as the sounds around us dissolve. The lights come on fast, the room becomes this ordinary place again and we are scrambling across the stage, clearing away our stuff so that the next band can play. Sweat drips from my long, wavy hair as I un-duct-tape my cables—Andrew and Rudy do the same—wrap them around my arms, shove them in my bag. Bryan hops off the stage with a drum, sets it against the wall—near Jaime and Amy selling our makeshift merchandise—then pops up the stage stairs two at a time to grab another. His black shirt and baseball cap are soaked through with sweat.

I find Dad. We talk for a minute, but he's got to get going, he says, and I'm disappointed that he can't stay longer, talk about the music. The truth is I never even expected Dad to show up. But he was there the whole time. I just didn't see him.

Mostly everyone leaves, and new groups of people funnel into the venue as the next band runs through a soundcheck, begins tuning their guitars, strumming them for the lazy-eyed sound guy. Dad's gone. I'm suddenly exhausted.

We practice through the winter in Bryan's Dad's garage, playing through one or two songs until Bryan's electric heater—warming the room to just above freezing—trips the circuit and the whole room got dark and silent. Bryan huffs and runs through the freezing rain drizzling the tall grass in the yard and inside his dad's house to reset the breaker. We stick our hands in our pockets and under our armpits to thaw them out. We practice until

our fingers won't move right and we get frustrated and can't play anymore and we want to find a new practice spot.

One day after practice, Mom calls me to tell me Melissa had cancer. It was out of the blue.

Melissa has cancer? She has lumps. Big lumps. And the tests come back positive. "But there was hope because they had found it before it had spread through her lymph nodes," Mom says, "and maybe, with a mastectomy and chemotherapy, she'd be okay. She can definitely make it." Mom sounds composed, bold and sure even. The most positive about anything I'd ever heard her speak about.

I didn't know what to say or what to think. I didn't know the questions to ask. Cancer was a word I'd only seen in science textbooks and on commercials for epic bike rides and runs, hundreds of people smiling and crying and wearing pink, the sun warming their shoulders. Didn't she look healthy the last time I saw her? Wasn't she into health food and running through along the trails of Pittsburgh's Schenley Park? In this modern world, could people still die of cancer. It didn't seem likely to me then.

Until Dad called me one day after band practice when the weather was terrible: the ice building up on the roads, cars sliding across the highway and spinning into each other on backroads on the news.

"I need you to bring your brother here tonight. Six o'clock. It's very important," he had said and cleared his throat into the phone. And why didn't I tell him then that Mom had already told us? Mom had already told us that Melissa had cancer, and wasn't he going to tell us the same thing? Did he really think he could control even something like this? I didn't want to hear this from Mom, and I especially didn't want to hear this

from him. Weren't things finally getting good? Mom was doing so much better, her ketamine treatment finally freeing her of some of that strangling pain. This music that I loved was finally starting to take me somewhere, finally starting to mean something to other people: we had fans who came to our shows, who bought our albums and t-shirts and connected to what we were creating. Just when I was about to escape into the world I'd always hoped for, Melissa got cancer. Melissa had cancer. There was a real possibility that she would die, that this world would be fractured forever, but I couldn't think about it. Even when Ellen invited us inside and told us that Dad was upstairs, that he'd thrown his back out. Was it that cancer was something that just didn't feel immediate? That this idea of Melissa getting sick didn't feel immediate? Or even just that Melissa didn't feel immediate, living hundreds of miles away for most of my life.

I couldn't think about cancer until I saw Dad lying there on his side beneath the silky violet covers, and suddenly a hot wave of anger pulsed through me. Even if it wasn't the case, I felt that Dad was making this about himself, lying there, injured. It was a show. He'd be okay in a couple days, but my sister had cancer. Melissa was going to die from cancer, and he was fine. He was fine. Why didn't he do anything to stop it?

Dad tried to sit up to talk. He propped himself on an elbow and squinted toward us, didn't bother putting his glasses on. The rain, turning to balls of ice, slapped the skylights as the gray sky churned.

"What I'm about to tell you is going to be very difficult," Dad said. He inhaled through his nose and propped himself higher. I couldn't look at him.

"Your sister, Melissa, has cancer," he said in a low voice. The room dim. The sleet clanking the walls, the windows, the fucking skylights. Those fucking skylights he

made us put in here. When we should've been being kids; when we should've been visiting Melissa with Mom those years she flew to Tampa to see her and Dad wouldn't let us go.

“It's stage four. Stage four cancer. I don't want to scare you guys,” he said, “but this is bad. Most people don't survive.”

“Your Aunt Debbie survived as long as she could with breast cancer. She made it eight years, and I was with her the day she died. You should go see Melissa as often as you can.”

He breathed deeply through his nose.

How could he not take us to see her? How could he not even let us travel to Florida with Mom? All because she didn't send him a father's day card five years ago. Some stupid refrain he kept repeating in his head about her needed to ask for his forgiveness.

I feel sorry for my father, lying there in pain, humming rehearsed words. A radio stuck on the same channel all his life.

Or maybe he really was trying then. Trying hard to escape his performance of the tough father. Somehow, I could sense everything falling apart. I pushed it down. I needed to get the hell out of there. I didn't care how cold it was. I needed to get back to writing songs in Bryan's Dad's garage.

5. “Just Breathe”

When I come home from work on Sunday night, Bryan and Rudy are in the middle room. They are doing something grand. There are things scattered across the pool table: scraps of copper wire, rolls of tape, papers, polish, two guitars. All of our amplifiers are resting on kitchen chairs sitting around the pool table, and as I walk in the door, they shine like silver moons beneath the dangling lights of the middle room. I'm caked in sweat from a long work day. My backpack sticks to my back and shoulders, and I need to peel it off, rest it next to the couch. Rudy leans over the table and Bryan drifts into the kitchen to grab a glass of something. I take slow, measured steps, trying not to disturb them. Whatever they are doing, it seems important.

I lock the door, turn around and Rudy notices me, yanks a guitar from the table and holds it by the neck, smiling widely. It's mine. The pickguard has been removed—something I wanted to do for a long time. The black body of it has disappeared. It's suddenly silvery and textured. There are streaks of neon greens, deep blues, vibrant yellows curving about the guitar like rogue waves. Behind the guitar, through the posters on the walls. The room has exploded into a fireball of color.

I suddenly recognize that it's all duct tape, and the heaviness inside me dissolves and I feel light and warm. My smile grows, and Rudy just stands there, grinning, still holding the guitar in one hand out in front of him, and Bryan walks into the room and stops mid-step through the doorway. I don't care that I need a shower, that I desperately need sleep. I want to listen to those tracks we've been working on—the new ones we've been writing at band practice. I want to play our whole first album. I want to drive to Bryan's Dad's garage and have a band practice right now: eleven thirty at night.

“I fixed the strap knobs that kept falling out,” Rudy says, “and I re-soldered your cable connection so it won't fizzle out anymore.”

We are all still and smiling, eyes darting to one another to see who talks first.

“Oh!” Rudy loosens up. “And we covered your guitar in duct tape!”

We all burst like water balloons. We laugh for what seems like hours.

We clean up the mess, sit on the couch. Rudy and I jam in A. Begin a new song.

The Battle of the Bands is at a place called Brenda and Jerry's, a long building off a backroad that wraps around the airport, around the whole Lehigh Valley. The Battle has rounds. This is round 1: the local qualifiers. One band will advance and play here again at the regional qualifiers next month. The winner of that show plays at the finals at the Starland Ballroom. The Starland Ballroom's an epic venue in Jersey. Rudy's seen big bands there. The prize is \$20,000 worth of gear and a record deal.

Melissa and Mike are coming to the show. They are in the area and they can't wait to see us play.

At home we write songs in between classes, on snow days, late at night. We email each other riffs or call each other to jam. I've got lyrics and a few chords. A choppy chorus with a cut bar. Three hours later, sitting on the couch we are finishing up a song about a town disintegrating above an unstoppable mine fire: “Just Another.” With Amy on acoustic guitar, Andrew on bass, and me on electric, we give a heavy blues song about a building burning [“97579-2”] a smooth jazz intro, Rudy playing in scales loaded with half-steps lilting above us. We put “Help Wanted” to a waltz beat. We drop tune to D for “The D Song” and chop up the chorus and pre-chorus, give it a metal edge. Underneath

my riff Rudy writes the chords to and later, in the kitchen Andrew and I sit at the table and tab out the bridge, an alternating frenzy of riffs in six- and seven-eight.

Next practice, we've got the basement of a college hall reserved. The space is big and has great acoustics for recording. Bryan adds a messy drum part to the bridge of the song we've been working on that makes the six beats and seven beats take up the same amount of time—did we just invent some new time signature, perfect some subtle tempo change?—and Rudy adds solos filled with dives and harmonics and strange effects until we are recording things with microphones in garbage cans and in closets and in sinks and on stands being yanked down the basement stairs [a few takes to perfect that one]. We add lyrics about the San Andreas fault shifting and things breaking down and the world changing and we call the song, “The Fault.”

We break from recording to get pizza. Bryan says he wishes he could do this every day. Piece together the puzzles that are our songs. We are music mad scientists running experiments on sound. We are finding what ridiculous things we can fit together into the collages of our songs. But they are still poppy after all that. They are still marketable. They've got solid verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus formats. They've got catchy riffs. They've got catchy lyrics. They've got something to them. Something big. We've got a big sound and we all believe in it. We trust each other. We love each other. Things are changing and we are ready for the changes.

I'm not ready to admit that Melissa has cancer. I haven't talked to her since Christmas. I don't want to jinx anything. I don't want to ask her how she's doing because I'm scared. I'm scared she'll say, “I'm not doing well.” I'm scared she'll say, “I'm dying.” I'm scared she'll die. I don't know how cancer works. I don't know how one talks to someone

with cancer without talking about cancer. I don't know what I'm supposed to do for her to help her.

But I want to see her. I want to hug her and tell her I'm praying all the time for her. Or tell her I'm sorry, I haven't been praying enough, but I will.

Melissa and Mike sit in the front row and take pictures and clap and hoot. The lights go dim. We begin the last song. Andrew puts his bass down, picks up drum sticks and stands behind the kit. He and Bryan start pounding away and it sounds like Bryan has six arms playing across the kit in a sweeping motion. Strobe lights flash with the rhythm. Mike whistles and shouts. Rudy and I play some thundering chords and Bryan rolls across the kit until Andrew makes his way back to his bass. Then we burst into the song. The chords, the snare clicking like machinery, the bass running across the landscape of the song. The lyrics are about moving forward. Technology infringing on humanity, nature. The song is called "Progress."

We have this round in the bag. Everyone is into the song. Everyone is bobbing with the rhythm of the chorus, the chaos of all these parts coming together. At the end of the song, the instruments drop out, and the vocals remain for the last chorus, and that's how the show ends. With crisp harmonies. With everyone clapping. With people absorbing the music. It's the best show we've played. And Jaime is here for the show. And Melissa is here for the show.

Melissa didn't look like she had cancer when she and Mike came to the first round of our Battle of the Bands at Brenda and Jerry's and sat in the first row. But what did cancer look like? Melissa looked like Melissa. She smiled and was excited to watch us play. She and Mike took pictures and cheered for us as we played our intro into our

new song, “Progress,” Andrew standing in front of the drum kit and playing the drums opposite Bryan, the strobe lights flashing across the stage. We had come a long way with our stage show, now playing long, epic songs with lots of dynamics, vocal harmonies, and crazy guitar solos. We burst into antics that included Bryan playing a gong, Bryan and Rudy switching instruments for a song, the four of us kicking over the drum kit at the end of our set.

When the show ended, we picked up Bryan’s kit and packed up our stuff.

“You guys put on a really rad show,” Melissa said as we stood in front of the stage when all the lights burst back on and we waited to see who would advance to the Regional Round of the Battle of the Bands. She hunched a little in a way I hadn’t known her to. Mike snapped some pictures of the band, and Rudy took some pictures of Melissa, Andrew, Jaime, and me standing against the wall. Melissa didn’t look like she had cancer. But what did cancer look like anyway?

“You guys sounded really tight,” Melissa said, smiling. “The other bands weren’t nearly as tight as you guys were.”

“Yeah, you guys just sound cohesive, you know. Really professional,” said Mike. “I’m glad we could make it.”

I was glad they could make it to. They would drive back to Florida the next day though, and I still didn’t understand anything that was happening to my sister. I didn’t understand that soon she’d be starting radiation therapy, chemotherapy. I couldn’t understand the way the medicine would make her nauseous and weak and kill even the good cells of her body. The days of work she would miss for therapy, the time with friends she’d miss as she lay in bed and tried to sleep through the pain. The hours Mike

would spend rubbing her back, assuring her that he'd always be there for her and that they could get through everything together, despite those fights they must have had, each of them nervous, fearing in their bones that one day they'd be alone.

But our band advanced to the next round, and in that moment everyone was happy, and our minds were all on something else. Our music had done something, if only for a few hours. We sounded tight, professional. We could still win it all.

We take some pictures. Andrew and me. Melissa, Andrew, and me. The band. The band and Melissa.

Melissa buys a CD. She buys a shirt. We are all the same. The same as we've ever been. We're all growing up, further apart, but we are all still family. We are still the same family. Melissa can't have cancer. Nothing here is near the end. Everything is just beginning.

We win and advance to the next round.

Melissa and Mike fly home tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll get back to recording.

We don't make it to the finals, but there is another Battle of the Bands in August at the Sterling Hotel in Allentown, a place where we are a regular act. The summer is full of band practice, more recording in the basement of our college hall. More pizza. More late night vocal recording sessions. More lyrics. More pieces of songs popping up between us. Melissa is starting chemo. We've got most of an album. Jaime and me aren't seeing each other as often. We are arguing over stupid shit. We are moving into a new place. An apartment above a hot dog shop. Jaime is getting a job there. Melissa is probably losing her hair. Mike is probably bracing for the worst. Melissa is probably praying a lot. Mom

is probably praying a lot. We've got a bunch of songs over six minutes that take a long time to practice, take a lot of concentration to play, take up a lot of space in our minds.

Andrew signed us up to play at Moravian College's Relay for Life in April. We went in the evening to check in and find out what our time slot would be and how long we would play. There was another band already playing at one end of the fieldhouse: two guys playing guitar and singing. The sound echoed through the fieldhouse and wrapped around us. There were hundreds of people here already. Some stood against the walls, talking and played beanbags or did crafts in the center of the building or walked around the track, all in pink or white t-shirts with names written across the fronts and backs in sparkling glitter letters. It seemed like a giant party celebrating the lives of those who had suffered with cancer.

It should have been solemn to see all those people who had been affected by cancer—and now I was one of them too—but all I could think about then was how great the acoustics were in that fieldhouse. How good we would sound when we went on and tore into our first song. How many people we would be playing for. It would be our biggest, best sounding show, we were sure of it now, listening to the band on stage finish their set to a thunderous round of applause. And all this was for a good cause. The Relay gave me hope that Melissa could beat cancer too. All these people walked to the tune of their loved ones memories and lives still being lived. It was extraordinary, and I couldn't wait to go on.

But we would go on at six in the morning, after all the vendors had packed up their food stands and games, after the student government had ripped down most of the pink streamers and banners and popped most of the pink balloons. There were few people

left in the building, and those left were so exhausted from walking and being awake when they should have rested and thinking about their loved ones stricken with this monster illness, that when they walked by us, they covered their ears and wished we would go away. We could see it on their faces. They just wanted this time to themselves, to think their way into another world blooming with the impossibility of death. They wanted to hear the prayers they said inside their heads and hope with all their being for the health of their fellow brothers and sisters and then, just go home to sleep in their warm beds. We played well and sounded so good and our songs echoed across the fieldhouse and back to us. All the new ones we'd written and begun to record sounded perfected, like studio recordings. We sounded like we were playing a stadium packed to the brim with fans, but, really, we were just loud and out of place.

Why couldn't we have played the night before when everyone was still hopeful, cheerful, smiling, rallying with the dream that the impossible could still happen? Now, The Relay was nearly over. And everyone left was sinking into the harsh reality that this was a world where people suffered and died and often that suffering and death was random and pointless. And that random and pointless death was like an anchor on a ship we all sailed together and sometimes it would be impossible to move forward and other times, we'd drag that memory along with us through the sand for better or for worse. Either way, we'd always have a piece of ourselves wedged in the past because we got to know and love someone before that someone died.

Our music couldn't change that or even numb it. We cut our set short, packed up, and left as everyone funnelled out the front doors. It was 8 o'clock in the morning of a

beautiful and temperate spring day. The ginkgo trees behind the fieldhouse just starting to bloom. But I felt defeated. We had a chance to do something great, and we'd missed it.

Somehow, without much practice, we made it to the second round of Sterling's Battle of the Bands, and that show would be the next day. It felt like we were coming together as a band again. We sat out front on the tailgate of Bryan's truck as the sun set and talked about getting shows in Philly, New York. Rudy would contact the Starland Ballroom, a decently-sized venue in North Jersey. Andrew had some places in Philly. I packaged a demo and mailed it to smalltime record companies along the east and west coasts, sent it to some bars in Philly and Chicago. Things were looking up again. And the prize package for this Battle of the Bands included three grand in cash and equipment, hours and hours of recordings studio time, a music video to be recorded at the Sterling. If we could win this it would be a huge kickstart for us.

In the bathroom of the Sterling Hotel, a guy washes the blood off his bare, hairless chest as I wash my hands. I say "nice set." His crimson mohawk glistens with crusty hairgel under the bright lights of the bathroom. Graffiti blankets the wooden stall doors and a roll of wet, unraveled toilet paper sits decomposing beneath the sink. The whole bathroom smells of urine and beer.

"Thanks," he says, "a lot goes into our show. We spend a lot of time preparing." He seems sincere.

"It shows," I say, nodding. This is how they see their way through to the big time. Crazy, but okay.

I scrub my hands again and again, adding soap, staring at the stickers blanketing most of the mirror. *Plethora* is Brian's band—we called him “Plethora Brian” to differentiate him from our drummer, Bryan. *Necromance* is Jeff's band. We've played shows with both of them here before.

The guy slaps a sticker for a band called Demon Dog Semen on the crowded mirror, pops a cigarette in his mouth, and strolls out. I dry my hands and blow my nose.

Before we go on, we run our equipment up the iron grate staircase in the alley and through the back door. We set up on the side stage in less than five minutes, taping cables to the floor, tuning our instruments, arranging our amps, plugging in our pedal boards and testing our effects, sweating from the humid August air, the pressure to win—to make some sort of musical revelation.

I always feel like we are running out of time. How we ran out of time in high school. Next year I will graduate college and that time will be lost too. What else will we have to hold the four of us together? Bryan will work again, travel up and down the east coast? Jaime and I will move somewhere to go to graduate school. Philadelphia? D.C.? New York? Pittsburgh? What will I do then? What will I do with no band? With no music?

What am I going to school for? I don't want to be here, but I don't want to work at Target for the rest of my life. Isn't there something in between? Isn't there a way to make this work. We've got to make it big now. This is our chance. We are all together right now. We are playing well. We've got great material. And people need us. Mom needs us. Mark needs us. Melissa needs us. What can we do with the success, with the money from fame to help them? We can pay for Mom's treatments. Pay for Melissa's

treatments. We can save them. We can save us all with our music. We are going to make it somewhere. We have to. We have to help everyone somehow.

We end our set covering Neil Young's "Rockin' In the Free World" featuring Andrew's slap-bass and Bryan's beating of the low toms, my and Rudy's harmonizing vocals. It's the first encore we've ever had. There is a sea of heads bobbing up and down through the glare of the spotlights shadowing the crowd.

A few people congratulate us on a good show. They mention our odd chords, our quirky rhythms and harmonized vocals. We hand out a stack of CDs.

We are all still under twenty-one, so after we pack up our equipment, we sit at a table across from the eighty-foot bar—apparently the longest on the east coast—adorned with neon lights outlining beer brands and washed-up musicians drinking themselves back in time. Eleven death metal bands beat and screech their way through thirty minute sets. Fake blood splatters from sweaty, hairy faces onto the crowd pressing against the stage. None of these bands are as tight as we are. None of them are as talented.

Skip, the owner of The Sterling—a short man with glasses and an American flag bandana covering long, grey hair reads the results at around one in the morning: "First place with a score of 29.5 out of 30: Help Wanted." Five of six judges give us perfect scores.

We talk with Skip, with Jaime, and our fans, about our prize package as the other bands, the crowd funnel out of the building. The air conditioners drone like tired bees. We win thirty hours of studio time and a music video. Bryan's Dad says he damn proud of us.

In my dream, Melissa lead Andrew, Jessica, Bethany, and me into a nuclear power plant in the middle of a sun-soaked field of tall, waving grass. It looked like the grounds of the Kennedy Space Center—where Melissa had taken us earlier that summer when we went to visit her—lined with tall chain-link fences topped with barbed wire. But this place was quiet. Until we walked into a building with one of the reactors, and someone chased us out saying we'd get cancer. We'd get cancer if we stayed here another minutes, and then I woke up.

The next day Mom called me and told me that Mike proposed to Melissa and they were going to get married on the beach.

Mom calls me to tell me that Mike proposed to Melissa. Melissa, of course, said yes. She's so excited. Melissa's been waiting for it. Desperately waiting, but she's had other things on her mind. They can beat the cancer. They can beat it. They can beat it.

"They want to get married on the beach," Mom tells me. They live in Florida, but both of their families live in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. They want to get married on the Jersey Shore. They want Mom and my stepfather, Mark, to check out the hotels in Cape May, to check out the ballrooms, to taste-test the catering, the wedding cakes. Mom and Mark are excited. They'd do anything for them.

"Planning the wedding will take her mind off of the chemo, that's for sure," Mom says. She's positive. She's always positive about these things.

"This is going to be the thing to turn everything around," Mom says. "I'm so happy Mike proposed. He loves her so much," she says. "He must love her so much."

Mark loses the job he's had for 33 years at the chemical plant. Even with Mark's unemployment, Mom and Mark have next to no money. Weekends I go to see them, I go to the grocery store to buy food. I ask Bethany what she wants, as we walk down each aisle of the store. I tell her to pick things out. She says she doesn't need anything. But I put stuff in the cart for her anyway. What else can I do?

Mark doesn't get health insurance anymore either. No more treatments for Mom. No more Ketamine drip, and her health starts declining again.

Mom has to pay full price for all her medications now. There's one she desperately needs to kill the pain, but she won't have the social security money for it for a few weeks. I've been working at CVS for a few months. They meet me there after my evening shift. They give me \$200 in cash, so I put the rest of the bill—\$700—on my bank card.

They both apologize and apologize. If Mark only had a job. If Mom just didn't have this shitty disease. They will pay me back. They promise.

Bryan's Dad books us a gig at the Garfield Hotel in Northampton opening for his band. It's the week after we win the Battle of the Bands at Sterling that we play there. The place sits across from the old Roxy Theater on the town's main street which wraps around the row of brick half-doubles, the veterans' memorial park at the town's center. Outside of town there are strip malls sinking into the landscape, then disappearing into an infinity of cornfields. Northampton looks like it's on the fringe of nowhere. But Bryan's Dad promises us a big crowd.

The hotel looks like an old west saloon on the inside. The wooden stage sits high off the ground in a cove below an archway carved with intricate designs. There are a few

card tables and chairs which seem disproportionately small in the spacious room. The sun is still vibrant when we load our stuff into the Garfield. It's an early show.

Our band takes the stage for a sound check and soon after we start our show. Bryan's parents sit at the bar in the back, talk with a few of Bryan's coworkers. The tables and chairs remain empty for a few songs before Bryan's dad's bandmates, some balding guys in tight leather pants, come in and stand in the back around the bar, huddle around the table by the door. Why haven't we been able to bring in fans? Why haven't we been able to get people at every show? Or even most shows? We sound so good? Where is Jaime? Where is Amy? Where is Florida Steve?

Midway through "The Fault," someone from the hotel comes through the door and stands right in front of the stage, arms crossed. At the end of the song, he leans in to the stage and looks up at us. Is he fan? Does he like the way we sound? Maybe he heard us walking by and thought to himself, "I need to see what band is making that killer sound."

"You guys are going to have to keep it down. Management next door says you're too loud."

"Too loud?" I ask.

"Yeah, you guys are too loud."

"How can we be too loud?"

"If you don't turn it down, we are going to have to cut the sound."

We play one more tune and get offstage. Bryan's Dad's band is set to go on in an hour.

And it takes them about an hour to set up. We can't drink so the four of us sit at a table and watch Bryan's Dad and his band set up their elaborate stage of equipment. They have towers of colorful spotlights shining across them. They've got fog machines controlled with foot pedals. They've got pedal boards loaded with effects. They've got a keyboardist. They check the mics and strum a chord and the mix sounds great.

People start to funnel in, grab drinks, sit at the tables, and crowd around the stage. Where were all these people for our show? Don't people want to hear original music anymore?

"My dad just doesn't get it. He's living in some dream where he thinks everyone likes his music and everyone wants to see his band play covers," Bryan says out of the blue while his Dad tries to figure out why the smoke machine won't stop spraying smoke into the room.

But it seems like his band does have fans. People *do* want to see him play. Do people want to see us play?

I don't know what to say to Bryan, so I say, "yeah," and watch Bang Bang Betty burst into their first song. Bryan's Dad jumps around with the guitarist, his long hair whipping across the microphone as they play, "Dirty White Boy."

"No one wants to see his band play," Bryan says, leaning close to me to shout over the thundering song—we weren't this loud—"no one wants to hear covers anymore. He's living some fantasy where he still thinks he can make it."

Bryan puts his chin into his hands and stares into the floor below the stage. Does Bryan really think that? His dad seems happy to be where he is. Does Bryan still think we can make it?

Plethora Brian asks us to co-headline a show at the Washington Theater, in Washington, New Jersey in December. We haven't played a show since August. We haven't practiced in months. We were supposed to play a show at Brenda and Jerry's in November, but we couldn't get anyone to come. Bryan backed out. I backed out. Andrew and Rudy went and played an acoustic set.

Bryan stops talking to us for the most part. When Andrew and Rudy were late to practice, he and I load all the equipment into his truck. He slams doors, but he doesn't say anything to anybody. He's been working a lot—sometimes 90-hour weeks at his uncle's company. He doesn't have much time outside of work, and he doesn't like to waste it waiting for us to show up to practice. He doesn't like waiting for us to write songs. At practice sometimes, while the three of us try to put a melody together, he stares into the plywood walls. He hangs his head, keeps a beat with one stick on the snare.

We all think we can fix the band. More time signature changes. Less time signature changes. Less riffs, more chords. More riffs. Tune everything down. Add more effects. Get rid of the effects. Get rid of one guitar and have one us just sing. Add more guitar harmonies. Add more vocal harmonies. Add more bass and drum harmonies. Practice more. Practice less. Don't practice at all. Take a break for a few months.

It's twenty degrees and snowing when we arrive for the show. No one is there when we arrive. Bryan's getting tense, walking around the parking lot, waiting for someone to open the doors. He seems like he just wants to get it over with, so he can go home, and not have to deal with us.

When Plethora Brian arrives, he has bad news: he tells us we are playing first, though we were expecting to play later on after more people had arrived. Bryan is starting

to get really tense. He rolls his eyes. He gets red in the face. He doesn't talk to any of us as we bring our equipment into the building and set up.

The venue is an old theater with a wide stage. It's drafty inside, maybe fifty degrees on stage. There's ten or fifteen people there all sitting in the seats in the middle, but there are a thousand empty seats around them, tiny cones of yellow from the dim wall lights shine across them. We play a song we don't have lyrics to yet, one we haven't really finished. "Apple Sandwich:" a funk song. We cover Billy Joel's "Movin' Out," Michael Jackson's "Billy Jean." But we can't really hear the vocals because there aren't any monitors. The guitars are too loud. Too trebly. Bryan keeps dropping sticks, plays the songs really fast. We stumble through the rest of our set and get the hell off stage.

We pack the drums in the back of Bryan's truck, snow still sputtering from the sky, making the parking lot slick. We pack the rest of our equipment into Rudy's car. Bryan leaves. Rudy, Andrew, and I stay, sit in the middle of the auditorium and watch Plethora Brian lead Plethora through a set of hair metal songs, an Alice in Chains cover, a Metallica cover: "For Whom the Bell Tolls."

The mix is good. The vocals are good. Plethora Brian has a good range, has a raspy, confident voice that fits the sound of the band. They have about forty fans right at the stage banging their heads and singing the words. Maybe a break from each other is what we need. To regroup. To realize how much we all need each other and the music.

Mark's mom has cancer. It all happens so fast. In May, Andrew and I drive to New Jersey to see her. She's thin. Pale. She has a tube running into her nose to help her breathe. Andrew and I tell her how we are doing in school. How our band is doing. We've been

playing some pretty tight shows lately. Decent crowds too. We are getting somewhere, we say. She smiles a lot and nods off.

Mom tells her that Melissa has cancer. Gram seems assured, though, gives us wisdom: “She’s young,” she takes a deep breath. “She’ll make it.” Gram smiles, goes to sleep.

These are the last words I hear from her.

Gram passes away a few days later. I listen to “The Patient” over and over and over again on the way to the funeral. *Is this a test? It has to be. Otherwise I can't go on.*

Everything is so sudden. Mark’s father goes through the motions. Arranges everything. Organizes the funereal meetings. Meets with the pastor a lot. Gramp is an elder in the Church, and they do what he wants.

Gramp goes to Dunkin Donuts after the service for Gram for a dozen and drives home. Goes to the Bagelsmith for his regular breakfast. He’s hiding something. The pastor knows it. Mark wants the pastor to say something to Gramp, but he won’t. Gramp has a lot of power in the church. Maybe even more power than the pastor.

Gramp is hiding something. Gramp cheated on Gram with an old friend. He’s going to live with her at the Jersey Shore now. Gramp threatens to evict Mark for not paying rent. He sends him certified letters from the Jersey Shore.

Stories come to light. Memories are reconsidered. Mark is shattered and enraged. Mom is sick with everything going on. The house attached to Mom and Mark’s—the one Gram and Gramp had lived in for fifty years—is empty, dark. The curtains are shut tight. The wind chime on the porch tolls in the little bursts of breeze. The bird feeder Gram used to fill to attract the robins in the yard is empty, endlessly spinning on its string.

Mark tries to kill himself by swallowing all of Mom's percocet. Twenty-four pills.

Enough to kill him several times over. But Mom finds him in time. Calls an ambulance.

They pump his stomach. They save his life. They keep him in the psych ward of Warren hospital for a while to relax. To rehabilitate. Andrew and I visit him. Bethany makes him promise to never try it again. She needs him. Mom needs him. Mark knows it. He agrees with her. We all need one way or another. In some ways, he's the person that holds us all together.

Melissa calls him. Says she wants to visit. Says he's been a great father and she needs him. She's getting better.

First checkup after chemo to see if there is any cancer coming back. The test comes back negative. The cancer is gone.

Second checkup: no cancer.

No cancer.

Her hair starts growing back.

We meet her for dinner at Panera when she comes to visit Mom in the spring. She looks good. She asks Andrew and me to play some songs at her wedding in June: "What a Wonderful World," and a new Pearl Jam song. It's got some beautiful finger-style guitar. Andrew can play the vocal line on bass. It's called "Just Breathe."

"It's about a person dying," Melissa smiles—says the words like they are only words—"but I really love the sound of it."

6. “Remember”

In June, Melissa got married in Cape May, New Jersey on the balcony of a tall hotel overlooking the beach, the thundering, blinding Atlantic ocean. It was early afternoon and the water shimmered like glass in the sunlight. The heat settled, moist and thick on Andrew and I, like hot snow—and we could feel our faces melting—as we sat at our guitars, facing everyone. The day was raw beauty: bright and hot as if it were the first day that ever was and days had not yet begun to lose their brilliance.

Andrew and I start to play a new song by Pearl Jam called “Just Breathe,” and everyone turns his head toward the top of the aisle—back towards the entrance to the balcony from the hotel. Our notes ring through the audio system. It’s such an honor to play music at your sister’s wedding. It’s such an honor to do the one thing you know you’re good at for someone you love. Especially after everything our family has been through. Mom and Dad’s divorce. Melissa’s long-gone cancer. Our arpeggiated chords whistle in the breeze as the bridesmaids in electric blue dresses tip-toe down the aisle latched to smiling groomsmen. It’s such an honor to play at Melissa’s wedding. And then there’s Melissa. In an ivory gown cascading across the aisle like a wave bursting across the shore. She wears a wide smile. Mom shuffles with her, wiping tears from her eyes. It’s been such a long journey, but this is a beautiful, perfect day.

But I can’t stop thinking of “Just Breathe,” the way Melissa explained the song to me—“It’s about a person dying, but I really love the sound of it”—a smile of anticipation on her face when she asked Andrew and I to play it at her wedding. How could she not know? How could she pick that song even after the cancer? Even after her impossible

recovery? Wasn't she testing the cosmos? Pressing fate somehow? How could she forgive the universe or forgive God for those years lost, those prime years taken from her? On her face, I can see that her cancer is a lifetime away, some necessary task completed and lone-gone like learning to write her name. It's out of the way for good.

Andrew and I finish the song and put our guitars down and file in with the groomsmen. While saying his vows, Mike cries. It was so hard to deal with the cancer. To fight and love at the same time. But they made it.

The summer sun glazes the hall with a warm orange glow, washing over the baby blue patterns on the dance floor, the golden curtains. The bride and groom dance down the center aisle and everyone claps and cheers and toasts and drinks. I've never had a drink, but Melissa wants me to try it: she wants me to enjoy small parts of life more. She told us beforehand: this was going to be her perfect day and she wanted everyone to be happy. This is the time to do it, she reasons, before you've got to do everything else. So I head to the bar and order Melissa and Mike's signature drink: Blue Crush. It tastes like Raspberry Kool-Aid, but bitter. I sip it slowly, but then I get another one. And another as Melissa and Mike dance to Nat King Cole's "Unforgettable." Slowly. The song goes on and on and we watch them spin around, hover around the room as the sun lays the shadows of parted ballroom curtains across the floor.

The next song, our aunts and uncles dance and Gram—Mom's mom—smiles, watches everyone from her wheelchair. People clink glasses and Melissa and Mike kiss and everyone claps. The DJ plays the chicken dance—tradition on Mom's side of the family—and Mark dances with Uncle John and Gram dances with napkins on her head and everything laughs.

All of a sudden, it's time to go. Melissa walks Andrew and me to the front of the reception hall, before we leave, past the round tables of rowdy guests finishing their deserts or dancing in suits and dresses. Melissa, smiling, shows us to the party favors: little golden pails, like ones you use to dig in the sand. The memory of cancer floods back through me as we talk and my head throbs. We've lived so far from each other—she in Florida, I in Pennsylvania—and only really see each other on holidays, maybe a few weekends she and Mike trek north for family matters or business. I swear I'm going to get down to visit her more and we both smile, and hug and say our goodbyes.

When we get home after a three hour ride, Jaime and I make love in our shadowy trapezoid room and I feel so sure of good defeating evil, of health defeating sickness, that I sink into a deep sleep of satisfaction, as if a handful of unanswerable questions have just been answered for me, and, satisfied, all there is left for me to do is sleep.

And then one day, Help Wanted disbands. We don't break up as much as we drift apart. There's tension of course, pressure to devote so much time and energy to the music and the shows and the writing of new songs. There've been plenty of arguments over the previous months about practicing in the frigid garage in winter and then early in the morning on Saturdays at school, show locations and our small fan base, but overall, I think we still all want to be friends. It's not like we aren't young, like our chances to start a band have all been used up. We can get back together again to make music. I think we all still love making music. Listening to music. Listening to our favorite bands. So, I ask Bryan, Andrew, and Rudy if they want to get together to see Rush play at the Allentown Fairgrounds in August, and we all buy tickets together.

Rudy, Andrew, and I are busy with classes and schoolwork at the college as soon as school starts, and Bryan becomes busy with weightlifting again—something he hasn't done since his wrestling days, days before I even knew him. Bryan and I still live in the same place, of course—the tilting wood-paneled apartment above the hot dog shop—and even after the band breaks up and a few friends and recent graduates of Moravian College invite Jaime and me to live with them in an apartment closer to school, I still want to stick around Bryan. All the magic of being in a rock band—some magic of childhood, remembering my family all living in that big house in Whitehall—clings to Bryan like a long shadow for me. I love him like a brother. He's been my best friend since third grade. We learned how to understand our parents together. We learned how to grow up together. We learned how to play guitar together. We started a band in middle school with Andrew on bass and Bryan's dad on drums.

I love Bryan like a brother and so instead of me moving out, we both move in with Jaime and Vicky and Fisher into a tall row house with strangely-shaped rooms that stick out and get stuck in the branches of the trees lining the road. It's spring in eastern Pennsylvania: always such a strange time of parking lot snow mountains and bare trees in a brand new warmth. Endless mud puddles that slice across the soccer field and the sidewalks between the stone block buildings. Jaime and I get the big trapezoid room on the second floor. Vicky and Fisher claim the attic. Bryan takes the room with the private bathroom and we all get along well at first.

There's a bar on the first floor. Nothing fancy, just a couple of pieces of plywood nailed together and stained. The top is covered with vinyl tiles and the evening sun coming through the window, makes it look splintered and yellow like something that's sick. The

landlord asks us if we want it. He says it was his daughter's and that she lived here for a while and that it's a piece of shit and she was supposed to take it when she moved out. I think we should get rid of it. Make more room for Bryan's gigantic projector screen. And I don't drink anyway, but Vicky and Fisher and Jaime want to keep it. This is our last year of college, they reason. So we keep it and put it in the corner and clean it up and we all go to the liquor store and stock the dusty wood shelves with whiskey and vodka and schnapps and seven flavors of rum. This is our last year of college: we need to learn how to drink before we have to learn how to do everything else.

Bryan wanted to learn how to dress. His wardrobe was like mine: a few baggy black t-shirts plastered with rock band logos and some jeans. He had a plastic tub of work clothes: button-down blue shirts, and thick navy work pants. Most of his time, he spent at work or the gym, but now he wanted to meet people. He wanted to get people to notice him. He wanted to go to bars. He wanted to get laid.

Vicky and Fisher obliged him in his quest to make himself over. They take him to the Lehigh Valley Mall one Saturday in the early summer when the new heat sticks to you like old heat and you feel as though you've lived in summer your whole life. They take him into hip stores and help him pick out bags and bags full of tight jeans and striped polos. And when he gets home, Vicky and Fisher want him to show him off to Jaime and me, show us the new and improved Bryan Shumway.

Our friend Shlee is over, visiting. It's her first free day since having the baby. She wants to go back to school soon, she tells us. She wants to finish her degree and get a teaching job. She's independent and proud of it. And Jaime and I are proud of her and happy for her. Natalie is healthy and beautiful and Shlee couldn't be happier. But Shlee

doesn't like what Vicky and Fisher have done to Bryan. She doesn't like it at all. She tells us. They are trying to change him. They want to make him into something he's not and maybe Bryan doesn't know any better or maybe Bryan doesn't know what something he is anyway. At first, I'm alarmed too. But I laugh. He doesn't look like Bryan. But maybe he's seen something in himself that he can improve and he's not afraid to do it and, in that case, good for him. Or maybe it's all about getting laid. Either way, good for him. If this is the way he sees himself finding someone, then he should go for it. He deserves someone.

Bryan's lifting buddy, Schmidty, wants him to go with him to bars, but first, Bryan needs to learn how to drink. So Vicky and Fisher and Jaime and Bryan and I sit at our thrift store kitchen table, the air conditioner blowing waves of spiny-cold air across the chipping veneer and into our faces. Vicky mixes something up in a tall yellow plastic cup and hands it to Bryan. He takes a big gulp and says it tastes like fruit punch.

There's something about Bryan that makes him do everything he does with two hundred percent effort. When we were young and we skateboarded, he spent hours learning the tricks, researching skateboard companies and competitions, riding through town with other skateboarders, visiting new skate parks. He put all his saved money towards gear: decks and bearings and grip tape and spare boards and skateboarding shoes and black hats plastered with skateboarding company logos and black shirts plastered with skateboarding company logos and skateboarding video games and skateboarding books and skateboarding magazines and little plastic finger skateboards. He did the same thing with other things we were into.

A few years back, when he and I moved in together, we started randomly riding our bicycles on long treks across the Lehigh Valley. After a couple trips, he spent his money on the most expensive bike he could find along with other gear: cycling gloves and a special water bottle, special reflectors and athletic clothes and a comfy-looking bike seat. He looked up recipes for high endurance bike treks and made uber-healthy granola bars for us to eat on our trips. We talked about riding across Pennsylvania, up and down the Pacific Coast Highway along California's coast. And then one day—it must have only been after a few weeks—we skipped our ride, and that was the end of our ambition. Bryan left his bike to rot in the backyard, instead of keeping it in the house like he used to, and every time we moved to a new apartment, the bike got tossed in the yard to be eaten away by the elements. It was as if he'd never wanted to ride at all. He'd moved on to something else.

When we began learning to play guitar, he'd shut himself in his room and practice scales for hours. He'd learn difficult solos. He'd buy guitar magazines and cut out pictures of guitars and amps and tape them to his walls. He'd buy black Fender Guitar shirts and black Gibson Guitar shirts, and when he saved up his money, he'd buy a new guitar: an Ibanez. A Jackson Randy Rhodes Model Flying-V. A Gibson Les Paul Studio Deluxe with limited edition in-lays and pickguard. A Line 6 Special Edition 150-Watt Combo Amp equipped with footswitch pedalboard and programmable soundbank. This is something that I always admired about him, and to some extent, shared with him—a sporadic yearning and ambition. But since I never had the money to buy new equipment, he shared all his with me: he let me ride his skateboard, he let me borrow his blue Ibanez for band practice. This unbridled ambition was something that made him a stellar

drummer for our band for a short time. But that something that also drives him, I think, into isolation. He goes all out to the point of exhaustion, and when he can't do it anymore, he drops it completely, seems to forget it all, seems to regret and resent it. As if he'd never known and loved it with the whole of his being.

One of Bryan's other trademarks is being able to chug a thirty-two ounce Gatorade in four seconds. This is how he drinks alcohol. He gulps down the first and Vicky thinks that maybe it wasn't strong enough. So she puts two shots of vodka in this time. He downs it like a Gatorade. So Vicky extracts from the refrigerator three trays of bright red Jello shots that she and Fisher concocted this afternoon, and she and Fisher and Bryan and Jaime each do three of them in a row. And then Vicky makes another drink for Bryan. And then he takes three more Jello shots by himself and crushes the little plastic cups with his thick hands and puts them on the table in front of him. His cheeks turn bright red.

"I don't feel anything. I still don't feel anything," he says.

Vicky cautions him to slow down, but he drinks another drink. And then another. Everyone is tipsy, if not drunk, and Bryan still doesn't feel anything.

He doesn't feel it until it's too late. And when it hits him, it hits hard. He smiles and laughs.

All of a sudden: "My head feels really heavy," he says and we all laugh and watch him.

He puts his head down on the table.

“I can’t lift my head up,” he laughs and then jerks his head up and smacks it off of the cabinet behind him. He keeps laughing as he runs his hand through his crew cut.

“This is so weird!” he says. “This is awesome.”

The capillaries on his face seem to be exploding and his cheeks bloom like spiny flowers. And as he laughs, he says, “This is so weird,” over and over until those words crash into each other and he can hardly talk. This all happens in minutes.

Bryan mumbles and Vicky asks what he’s saying, but he mumbles back. I’m starting to get worried. I’m starting to sweat. Is he going to be okay? He can’t talk or move right. He needs Vicky to take him upstairs, and Vicky seems to know what’s going to happen next, so she takes him right through his bedroom into his bathroom.

Bryan pukes before the bathroom is ready for him. He pukes across the floor, all over toilet with the lid closed. Pools of red from the Jell-O shots, like blood. Vicky knows what to do. Jaime and I go to our room when the retching stops. But then we hear banging, and I go to make sure he’s okay. Vicky is still there with him, watching over him. He’s lying on the floor of the bathroom. What if he passes out, chokes on his vomit like Jimi Hendrix? This is my best friend here, sick and lost.

I’m angry with him too. Why would he do this to himself? If he has time for this, why doesn’t he have time for music anymore?

I ask Vicky what’s going on. But Vicky assures me everything will be okay. She’ll clean him up and get him to bed. It’s normal. It’s all normal. He’ll be better in the morning. She snaps some pictures of the disheveled, wretched-smelling bathroom on her phone and helps Bryan into bed. But Bryan wants to sleep on the floor and he rolls out of

his bed and crashes onto the hardwood. He's passed out on the floor, now, breathing short breaths, emitting—like a dying star—thick, violent waves of stench: vomit, alcohol.

Vicky strips the comforter from his bed and gently lays it across him, like a picnic blanket on a rolling hill.

“Are you sure you want to stay here, honey?” she asks Bryan.

“I'm good!” Bryan yells to assure her, his clammy face smushed into the cold wood floor. I think about Rudy and Andrew. How I miss the four of us together making music, the practices in Bryan's dad's garage. The burst of energy after a great show or the completion of a new song. Andrew's bass lines thundering through the speakers. Bryan's drums crashing around us. Rudy's lead lines lilting over my rhythm lines. I wake in the middle of the night to check on Bryan, and he's still breathing, his face is still stuck to the wood floor. I miss Bryan.

I miss Bryan.

All of a sudden it's summer. The windows of the house, plugged with seven air conditioners, rattle endlessly.

Now that we don't have the band, Andrew, Rudy, and I hang out, find other things to do. Andrew asks me if I'd like to do a radio show with him at school. “We can just play prog rock for two hours and hang out,” he says. And it sounds like a great idea. Since the band broke up we haven't spent much time together.

We get dinner together more. I bring my guitar to his dorm and we jam. Play old songs. We visit Mom and Mark together. Drive to Dad's. Help him remodel his basement for ten bucks an hour. I meet him at the radio station every Wednesday night at six.

Tonight it's raining, the sidewalk in front of the campus center buildings is flooded, the buildings of campus dark and shadowed, draped in fog.

Andrew asks if I want to make any announcements, say the names of songs over the radio. But I'd rather just sit here, hang out, listen to music, talk about music with him. This is how we know each other best. This is how we communicate. This Wednesday is ridiculously long song night. There are four songs on the slate for the next two hours.

Jaime opens the door, with her dinner, and joins us.

Rudy and I listen to "Hold It In" one more time—up loud—so the bass, the palm-muted guitar chords shake the SUVs frame and make the dashboard buzz. It's a song we came up with the a few months ago—the first song we've written since Help Wanted days—and now Rudy, after recording each part himself and mixing them together, plays the demo for me in his car.

"I love that part!" I yell across the center console—across the cymbal crashes splashing from the speakers every third beat, and Rudy nods and stares into the car radio, scratching his chin. The song fades out, and a new song pops on. One we used to play every day: "The Fault."

Rudy kills the car engine, and we step out into the gravel parking lot.

"We could even re-record some Help Wanted songs. Re-do the bass and drums and finally have studio quality recordings," he says as we head for the wooden bridge to the gravel toe path between the old canal and the river. The wood is hot and dry in the August heat, chipping barn red paint chips into the stagnant green water. The path is narrow and rocky and shaded by river birches growing along the bank. This is what

Rudy and I have been doing lately in the time that used to make up band practice: walking along the trails and talking about our music.

We had this idea for a new band: just Rudy and I, writing and recording all the music. Each song will take a long time to produce with only two people, but each is going to be perfect. Rudy has some new software for his computer. We've got a tiny basement room with wood-paneled walls, a tile floor, and a drop ceiling—the basement of my new apartment. Most importantly, we've got time.

I'm not watching and I trip on a rock as we begin walking and my ankle stings. Rudy asks if I'm okay and I say “yeah.” Then he points out the rails slithering through the high grass along the canal as though he were a hunter tracking locomotives: “Those tracks used to be part of the Lehigh Valley railroad before they were bought out by Conrail.”

In the early afternoon, the heat simmers on the railroad tracks and shimmers off the faded white siding of little houses along the road. I hum the 3-4 time pre-chorus part of our new song.

“And so they stopped using the track in 1982—since the Reading Railroad had purchased the track along the opposite side of the river. And now it sits here, begin eaten by weeds.”

“Hmm.” I nod and a squirrel scurries up a tree. “That's kind of like a metaphor for our previous bands.”

“Yeah,” he says walking through the brush to get a closer look at the train tracks.

“You see?” Rudy crouches down along the rails and points out the imprinted name of Bethlehem Steel, a local steel giant, now defunct. It's one of the main attractions

in Bethlehem: the ruins that is. I remember when the four of us—Andrew, Bryan, Rudy, and I—hopped the fence at dusk and took band promo photos. We climbed along the rusty steel-grate causeways connecting the towering blast furnaces and wandered through the old half-mile-long mill buildings and warehouses. I put the five hundred or so pictures to the music of one of the last songs we recorded, “Just Another,” each picture only lasting a fraction of a second so that it looked like we were all moving like robots. There weren’t enough photos to finish the video though. Lately, I’ve been busy with work, but Rudy’s been calling me up to talk and we’ve ended up wandering the Bethlehem Steel plant in the middle of the night, the bright neon lights from the new casino downtown spotlighting the blast furnaces.

Rudy brushes some leaves and twigs from the rail. The rails burn with shining steel on the tops where the trains had ground them down. Pits of rust etch the blood orange sides. If you ask him, Rudy can tell you that the rails are made to rust for some reason. Then he can open the trunk of his car and show you the four-foot rail he pulled out a trash heap behind the old station near the college.

I stand up and glance down the track to where it disappears into the forest behind the little white houses. There’s a signal tower with missing signals and lights, and Rudy wants to observe it, but I’m on a music high, and I don’t want to come down yet. I get this feeling again that if we can just produce one solid album of professionally-sounding songs, things will fall into place. I want to put an album together with Rudy. We can produce it in my basement. There’ve been bands who’ve done the same thing. Boston, for instance. Finally, there won’t be any disagreements or problems: just us piecing the music together part by part.

“So I think that Progress is probably the only one that doesn't need any work. We could just record that one right away,” I say.

“Yeah that's the only one where you and I actually agreed on everything. Although Bryan's drum part was a little weird. Aha! Steelton!” Rudy hops up, then crouches closer to the rail. “I knew that these were made at the Steelton plant, and not the Bethlehem plant.”

Music, Rudy. Let's talk about this music. Let's do this. Let's write an album.

He's still crouched, examining the rail, scanning the history books in his mind.

“We should probably start heading back,” I say. “It's going to be getting dark soon.”

“Yeah. You're probably right. We could make a long list of songs to record at home.”

We turn back at the Palmer Township line, and make our way to Freemansburg where we had picked up the trail. The algae in the canal clings to the banks, the canal reflecting big clumps of setting sun. I want to go home and hold my guitar and mine for strange notes. I want to hear Rudy's harmonies, his fresh guitar riffs reinventing my chords.

I couldn't stand not being in a band anymore, and afternoons after class I started looking through musicians' ads on the internet. If Bryan wasn't going to play anymore, I needed to find a drummer. Someone who would have the same connection with me that Bryan did. Someone who could tell when I was going to shift into the chorus, when I was trying something new.

I posted an ad, but I kept looking. I found a guy offering free studio recording at his place in Allentown. I ask Andrew if he wants to go, and he says “sure” and we head over the next day. His place is on a busy street at the fringe of the city where yards begin to shrink and, closer to Center City, dissolve into the concrete foundations of future row homes and strip malls. Cars buzz behind us and sail into Allentown. We knock on the front door, but the guy comes to the gate of his fenced yard. He's tall—maybe 6'4”—with a big gut and beard. He's not wearing a shirt.

“Come on in,” the shirtless guy says, and invites us into his yard. We follow him to his tall, leaning brick garage. He opens the door to a skeleton of a room: only wood studs and a concrete floor. Another round, shirtless guy is winding wires through the studs, kneeling beneath a plywood staircase. There are puddles of dust that stretch across the floor in the light from the open door, the spotlights glaring across the room. He greets us with a wave and a “hello” and a smile, and then we follow the first guy upstairs. With each stair the air grows heavier with heat and moisture until it feels like we are walking into a room of molten jello. Andrew and I leak sweat from all our pores.

There are no windows in the attic, and no ventilation. The rafters of the room slant and meet the floor at either end. Roofing nails poke through the wooden ceiling and make the whole room look like a makeshift iron maiden, slowly closing in on us. But there are layers of soundboards stacked against the dipping rafters, on shelves tucked in the triangular corners. There are flatscreen monitors on carts of power amps and mixers. There are disassembled drum kits and racks of keyboards and guitars in guitar cases and guitars on sprawling stands and amplifiers spread out across the room as if

they'd just been tossed their to fill up space. The place is beautiful. It's almost like heaven.

“So basically,” he says, stroking his bearded chin, “I'm just about finished with this studio, and I need some bands to use as guinea pigs. I need to record some musicians and get my name out there. Here's my card.”

He hands us his card. His name is “Roxxx.”

“All the recording and mixing would be free,” he says scratching his head and wiping the sweat from his ears.

We tell him we'd need someone to play drums and he says he has a guy who can play along with us in his drum room downstairs. “I just have to finish soundproofing and we'll be good to go.” The guy downstairs yells something up to the tall guy, but I can't understand his muffled words.

I look at Andrew. He doesn't say anything, but he wears a face that says “we've got to leave,” and I'm starting to think this is all kind of weird and that we should get out of her too, but then the tall guy asks what kind of music we play and what kind of band we were in before.

“Prog rock,” I say.

“Oh, great,” he says. “Do you have a CD?”

I hand him a copy and he slips the CD into one of the disc drives in his computer. For a second there is an ethereal silence. I swear I can hear myself sweating and I can feel sweat soaking the back of my shirt. I'm starting to get dizzy from the heat. And then a gong thuds through the speakers like an alarm clock and the drum beats of “Progress” explode into the room. I can't help but smile a wide smile. Everything comes back to me

then: the feel of my fingers on the fretboard, the thickness of the air in Bryan's dad's garage, the feel of my feet switching effects or tapping the beat, the anticipation of playing the songs at shows. My throat constricts and I want to sing those lyrics again. My blood thuds through my veins with the beats.

"Now," he pauses. "I can even go back and make all this better if you want." He gives us a fatherly look of concern, wipes his hand across his hairy chest.

He looks back to his computer. Neon waves tumble across the display. The guy turns some knobs and slides some sliders up down on their tracks and all of a sudden the spikes of treble are smoothed away. Now sweat rolling like rivers down the guy's bare gut as he launches his hands across the soundboard, tweaking the sound and Andrew and I watch him intently. Now the middle of the song is filled out, the bursts of bass trimmed. It sounds like a new song or a song recorded in a big studio with fancy microphones sprouting from the floor, with padded walls, with separate rooms where producers peel apart the songs and put them back together and cut them into vinyl.

He turns to us as the song plays on: "I've been saving to buy all this equipment for twenty years." The guy says. "I did my rock band thing back in my day, but now it's time to help others do their thing. It's always been my biggest dream to build a home studio," he says and smiles an honest smile. Is this what success looks like? A lot of hard work and here it is: this guy has his own studio. I can work this hard. I can do this.

Something hits me like a truck and I remember Bryan's dad, after band practice with him on drums years before Bryan learned to play the kit, leaning against the veneer counter in Bryan's kitchen in the hazy yellow fluorescent light at midnight, drinking bottled water, talking about his dream of putting a recording studio in his basement,

Andrew and I anticipating the new studio all shaken and buzzing with band practice, me thinking of all the songs we'd record, all the time we'd have to play, Bryan telling us—whenever his dad would rehash these age-old dreams—that the thing would never happen, that his dad never did the things he said he would do no matter how simple or hopeful or promising they seemed to be.

And then I think of Bryan on drums in the garage, Bryan's dad coming to watch us practice—things repeating themselves. Bryan and I talking so many times about how the one true thing we wanted to do in our lives was make music, how music felt so important to us in that there were avenues to connect with others that music allowed us to use. Music was an escape from the world and way into it. Music was everything. Music was why and how we were friends. Things repeating themselves: Bryan lying his head on his snare at band practice while Rudy and Andrew and I tried to come up with some new riff. Bryan not wanting to play the show (and I didn't either) in Bethlehem, to only ten people during that snowstorm. Bryan tired of not getting far with so much work. And maybe, he was thinking what we were all thinking. And maybe we were all sick of trying to think what the other three were thinking. Maybe Bryan was doing what his dad had done and hadn't realized it. Or maybe he was doing what his dad had done and he realized it and it bothered him and he wanted out—he didn't want to become his father, work for the company his father worked for after his band was close to success, but failed? Maybe he was quitting while he was ahead. Or maybe there just wasn't enough time anymore. Or maybe it was that thing that Bryan did, when something stopped being fun and new to him—like when he quit skateboarding? like when he quit bicycling and

let his expensive bike rot in the yard—and maybe he was ready to drop it all as if it had never happened and move on to something new.

That might be what Bryan wants, but I need to be in a band again. I need it. I need it to survive.

Andrew and I talk about it in the thick attic heat of the tall guy's garage, looking at his card, looking at our old album. Sweat dripping from the long curls of hair hanging over our faces. We want to make those songs again, record new ones.

“We'll give you a call,” I say, and the tall, shirtless guy smiles, politely leads us out of his studio garage into the sudden shower of cold summer heat pulsing through his backyard. Andrew and I walk to the car and talk. Driving home we decide what we really want is to just play together again. And if Bryan doesn't want to anymore, we'll find a new drummer.

I put an ad on the internet—“Looking for Drummer”—and the same day someone gives me a call.

“I saw your ad and all the influences you had, man, and I thought it was just way too perfect,” he says. The names Rush, Dream Theater, Tool, Foo Fighters play through my cell-phone speaker like music. I'm sitting at my desk, but when we start talking, I've got to stand up. The house is quiet, except for the creaking of the wood floor, the endless humming of air conditioners. I open the curtains, and through the window I can see birds resting on powerlines, the sun exploding through the tree limbs and spattering across the road. It looks hot out. The world is an unexpectedly beautiful place.

“I've got chops,” he says.

“I mean, I’m a little older than you guys,” he chuckles, “but I can play the hell out of a drum kit,” he says.

“Why not?” I say. “As long as you’re good. Are you busy tomorrow?”

“Nope,” he says and the next day, he shows up with his drums packed to the ceiling of his electric orange SUV. He knocks on my door and introduces himself. He’s a little taller than Andrew, clean-shaven with a crew-cut and a soft-voice. He says, “nice to meet you; I’m Dave” and shakes my hand and smiles politely as I introduce him to Jaime. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he says to her.

Dave is from Macungie, a good forty-minute drive from Bethlehem. He asks me about school and I tell him that Andrew, Rudy, and I go to Moravian College and I tell him I work in the Art Gallery down by the Theater on Main Street and he seems excited and tells me to say hi to the theater director if I see him. He used to work with the backstage there, but now he’s a union stagehand for the city. It’s nice to work around music, he seems to be saying, but what he really wants to do is get back into writing it, playing it, producing it.

During the last days of Help Wanted, I found a way to reserve the basement of the English building for a practice space—a low-ceilinged cafe called The Doghouse that no one seems to use—by putting the name of a graduated former-student-government-member friend on the room request form. No one seemed to notice, or maybe they do notice, but don’t care, and I walk over and get the key while Dave drives to the parking lot across campus. Andrew meets us there and we unload Dave’s stuff into the building, walk back to my car and drive our stuff over. Rudy can’t make it on such short notice, but he says he will be available next week and seems excited enough.

In The Doghouse, I play the riff to “Hold It In,” the song Rudy and I have been working on, and show Andrew the notes. Dave works something out while we play. It’s in a drop tuning and the riff resonates with Dave’s neat drumming across the cymbals and snare, his extra low toms and bass drum and the song seems to thunder along like a freight train. He speeds it up and we follow him into the fast tempo and the riff clicks into a groove with all of us in sync until the three-four chorus smashes the rhythm and heavy chords and cymbal crashes explode through the room.

Dave likes the song a lot. We play it through a couple more times. It’s getting late then, so we pack up and talk. He seems like a nice guy. Level-headed. Compassionate about music. Maybe overly polite. He wears a slick smile and drinks Perrier and calls practice “rehearsal” and asks us, each time he sees us, “are you happy?” But overall, Andrew and I really like him. He’s older than us, but he doesn’t look much older. And he’s got connections, he tells us. And he can play, it’s true. He’s what we are looking for.

I can’t wait to practice with Rudy next week.

Dave talks about work while we pack. He’s a stagehand working for a company that sets up concerts across Eastern Pennsylvania, and he mentions the Rush show at the Allentown Fairgrounds this coming weekend. Andrew, Rudy, Bryan, and I are going to that show and Rush has been my favorite band and Andrew’s favorite band for a long time.

“You should get us backstage passes,” I say, jokingly.

Dave slips his cymbals into a cloth case. He smiles and looks like he’s thinking and says he would need to talk to some people, but that he probably could.

“Really? There's no way,” I say.

“Oh yeah. We're all union guys. We do favors for each other.”

He smiles.

I'm stunned.

“There's no guarantees, but I'll pull some strings and let you know.”

Rudy parked the car in the sloping fields of the Allentown Fairgrounds. The last deep power chords of “Hold It In” lingered, strung across the heavy August air, and I couldn't wait to play the song we'd written together with a full band next week. But now, we stepped out and into the tall, damp grass of the Allentown Fairgrounds. No one was around. It was the day before the fair began; the day before we'd see Rush play there and follow Dave backstage.

We walk around the perimeter of the arena until we find an open gate and walk in. There's a long grandstand that looks like the ones they have at racetracks, a tin canopy reaching over the seats. In front is a muddy expanse sloshing against the concrete stage. The cement-colored sky begins to churn and leak rain. Early fall.

“I'm guessing,” Rudy says, “that there's probably only enough space here for thirty, thirty-five rows at most. That means our seats are just about in the center of this pit.”

Wow. And Dave is going to get us backstage. I haven't even told Rudy the great news yet. They still haven't met.

“I wonder what it looks like from up there,” he says.

He heads past the concrete steps of the bleachers, past the bucket seats holding puddles of day-old rain, and moves across the muddy grass toward the stage. He climbs

up the front and walks around below the jet-black scaffolding dangling the lighting tracks, the black backdrop curled up like a sail.

“How do I look up here?” Rudy asks and I laugh.

“Wouldn't it be great to play here, man?” I say looking up at him looking around. “Even to open for somebody? Can you imagine even saying we played on the same stage that Rush played on.” I think about how the place will be packed tomorrow for the concert. The thunderous music, the people, the lights, the smells of pretzels and beer and pooling rainwater and smoke will fill this place and burst our senses.

“How do we get our band here, man?” I ask.

Rudy scans the grandstands. The evening sky behind Rudy—through the stage scaffolding—looks like machinery.

“There's not a bad seat in this place,” he says and hops down and strolls toward the seats.

And we can go backstage tomorrow. And maybe we can meet them, get autographs or chat about music. We only live a few minutes away. Maybe we can jam after the show or the next day. Maybe we can all go get milkshakes. Maybe we can give them our album and ask them what they think and they will say, “‘The Fault!’ Man, that's a great song. Or ‘Progress!’ That one's great too!” And then there will be recordings—and sure we still need a singer, but they might know someone in their studio looking for a gig. Then there will be a new record. A tour. Our big break.

Andrew, Rudy, Bryan, and I drive to the fairgrounds the next day. It's kind of strange to do something with Bryan again. He's been spending more time at the gym, more time with Schmidty drinking, and he doesn't talk much on the way to the show about Rush or

Help Wanted or sing any songs in falsetto as Rudy, Andrew, and I do. He seems more isolated than usual. I wonder how Bryan feels about our band continuing without him. How it feels to have someone replace him at the drum kit. Does he want to play again? He acts like he doesn't, but how can he just give up? How can he just forget about all that time and energy we put into making our music?

This evening, it's bright and hot and the sun burns through the sky above the stage. Our seats are near the front, near an aisle, and we are the first people seated in the entire arena. I talk with Rudy and Andrew. We talk about how we worked on "Hold It In" at the first band practice of our new band. And what should we name the band? Something rough-sounding, but catchy. Rudy seems excited enough, and then we spot Dave opening the gate to the chain-link fence that leads backstage. He's dressed in a black t-shirt and black jeans. He jogs up the aisle from the stage toward us, smiling. He moves sideways through our aisle, past a couple searching for their seats, and I introduce him to Rudy as our band's lead guitarist, Bryan as our roommate, our old drummer, and Dave shakes my hand and asks us, "How do you feel? Are you happy?"

"Good," I say.

"We gotta be quick," he says, shaking Bryan's and Rudy's hands. Bryan smiles politely, nods, says, "nice to meet, sir."

We get up and follow Dave down the lane between the columns of chairs. He brings us through a chain-link gate into a fence-enclosed area where some trailers and SUVs are parked. There are two rows of picnic tables beneath a forty-foot party tent. There are grills steaming and the sweet smell of meat cooking. There are a few

people sitting at the tables, white plastic passes hanging around their necks, eating barbecue sandwiches off paper plates. One guy stands up when he sees us walk in.

“Excuse me. Do you have passes?” he asks, looking stern.

“No, I'm a stagehand. I work for Steve,” Dave says. “I set this up with him, and he talked to your boss about it. These are my friends. We're just going to take a look backstage and get out of your way.”

“I didn't clear any of this,” he says, standing still.

The four of us don't say anything.

“Steve works above you. He cleared it with your boss,” says Dave and he shows the guy his ID and the guy sits back down and Dave walks past him and we follow him. He tells us to stick close to him and to be quiet.

We step down a few concrete stairs and into a concrete tunnel which burrows below the stage like a baseball field dugout. There are several rooms on either side, rows of equipment in black leather cases lining both walls, the words, “Rush, stage left” written across them in white spray paint. An open door reveals a few guys huddled around a computer screen in a small, empty room. They greet Dave. They're also stagehands. One of the guys is his boss, Steve.

“You should have been here a few minutes ago,” Steve says. “Alex just walked by, strumming his guitar, walking toward the stage entrance,” he points down the hall. *Alex Lifeson is here*, I think. “He might still be there. Go check it out,” Steve says. I desperately want to sprint down the hall and up the stairs to the stage, but Dave tells us to follow him, slowly.

And we meander carefully through the hall of equipment. I get my notebook and pen ready. I pull the liner notes from their latest album from my shorts pocket. *This is it. We are going to meet Rush. We are going to meet Alex Lifeson. He's at the end of the hall tuning his guitar or practicing riffs. He's just standing there and he wants to talk to us.*

But we reach the stage and no one's there. My heart drops and my blood smacks against my veins and trips up. *Man, I think. I could have met my favorite guitar player, my biggest influence, my musical idol.* I'm sweating through my black tour t-shirt.

Some more people wearing black “Stage Crew” shirts adjust equipment on stage, and the five of us stand at the stairs and watch them. People are funneling into the arena and diverging through the aisles like blood pumped through capillaries. The stage is filled with black shapes—the backs of amplifiers and monitors—and racks of guitars and drums splaying in all directions.

“You want to see Neil Peart's drum kit?” Dave asks. I nod, hypnotized.

Dave walks us to the other side of the stage and hops up the concrete stairs. He stops us there.

“I didn't set it up, but some buddies of mine did,” Dave says.

Rudy yanks his camera from his pants pocket.

“Take it quick,” he says and looks around. Then he looks back towards the kit.

“I'm not sure how many pieces are there, but there are a lot. Look at those rows of cymbals.”

Rudy snaps another picture.

I remember how we all used to help Bryan set up his drum kit in his garage. How each practice, he'd bring the new addition that he'd purchased: a China cymbal, a cowbell. A splash cymbal. A double-bass pedal. Woodblocks in pastel colors. Like he was building something. Like we were all building something. Like he was trying to make this exact kit. Like we were trying to be this exact band. It was beautiful and ambitious and I'm sad it's over. I always thought that as long as I was in a band, I'd be in a band with Bryan.

“Alright, let's get you guys outta here,” says Dave.

He leads us toward another gate, and I hope that Geddy Lee will suddenly intercept us and offer us conversation and autographs or that Neil Peart will walk on stage to test his drums. Instead, we reach the gate and spill out, back into the crowd of ordinary fans, awaiting the first notes of “Limelight.”

And that's it. We miss them. Maybe if we stay after the show ends, I think, we can meet up with Dave again. We still might meet Rush.

Rush plays through some songs off their latest album between classic hits from their *Permanent Waves* album, “Spirit of Radio” and “Freewill.” Washing machines tumble laundry on stage and the big screen backdrop gives us an overhead shot of Geddy playing the keyboard solos to “Subdivisions.” The fireball sun has been swallowed by the earth and an inky mix of orange and violet flood the sky. Andrew and I turn to each other and sing the verses, the high-pitched harmonies of the chorus. These are the songs that made me really love music. These are the songs that helped me get through everything.

Rush's second set is their 1981 album *Moving Pictures* played in its entirety followed by a more recent release. Then *2112*. The booming drums, the thick guitar chords, the punchy bass lines, the otherworldly vocals: all the reasons I want to be in a band—all the reasons I want to write music so badly—compressed into a song. Is it because the songs mean more to me than the songs themselves? “Hemispheres” is the long drive down NJ 519, the leaves crisp and swirling, the corn, silver in the first frost of the fall; church at St. Patrick’s in Belvedere; the library where Mom and Mark would go to get their books on Saturdays and where I would rent CDs; Apgar’s farm, the taste of the apple cider in the breeze; Mom’s illness; me sitting at the edge of her bed and talking to her about school, about God. “Red Barchetta:” that tiny diner at the fork in the road where we got hotdogs and ice cream and the hot dogs were only a dollar and how Mark lost his job and I bought lunch those times. “Anthem:” the first trip Jaime and I took together. We went to Ocean City, Maryland and stayed at Castles in the Sand. We went mini-golfing and made Taco salad and played Scrabble in the refrigerator cold of the hotel room. It was high school and we were so in love, we didn’t know what to do with each other. The guitar solo in “The Trees:” that electricity Jaime and I feel whenever we see each other in high school, when she drops by and we kiss on the front porch, stretching each minute, until the minute just before Dad gets home. “Working Man:” sitting in the band room at our old apartment with Rudy and Andrew, writing a song late into the night, Bryan sitting on the dishwasher in the kitchen while we talked about how much we loved the music, while Rudy cooked noodles, while we wrote lyrics and all itched to get back to the garage and play.

Then an encore. My all-time favorite song: a nine and a half minute instrumental called “La Villa Strangiato.” A chaotic guitar riffing above a grooving drum beat, then a quick dismantling of notes, a quiet, temperamental beat with sullen snare hits accentuating a weepy guitar solo. And the solo slowly builds, the drums pull the guitar along, and I mouth the word of every guitar solo note until it's screeching, soaring. Then: jazzy drums beating chaotic rolls and bass fills, the song stumbling forward through different times and righting itself like a ship escaping a storm—Melissa’s cancer; Mom’s illness; Thanksgiving dinners with everyone together, somehow—riding back into the melodies of the song's beginning. I know every note. Every snare hit. Every bass lick. I know how Lifeson moves his foot on the volume pedal to make his guitar cry swelling, heavy tones. I can feel the changes erupt from the song. We hum the screeching notes of the guitar solo and laugh Rudy plays the wild drum part alternating hands, slapping an invisible hi-hat and ride. Then he follows the drum solo until the song crashes to an ending and the lights go off. There's a shrill, “Goodnight Allentown!” from Geddy Lee and that's it. It's suddenly black, the afterimages of flaming lights etched into our eyes, the songs reverberating through our bodies like memories. Then dull stadium lights come on and it's quiet except for the sleepy buzzing of the crowd.

People start flowing from the arena like water seeping from pin holes in a balloon. The perfect rows of chairs are disheveled. The ground littered with plastic cups and wrappers and bags. The smell of beer on wooden chairs hovers across the trampled lawn like a fog. The stadium lights glare across the field.

I tell everyone we should walk to the stage to see if we can meet with Dave again. We hang around the fence, the twenty-foot buffer between the crowd and the stage. We

stand in trash and watch guys in black shirts and black pants wrap rubber cables around their arms, yank duct tape from the floor. I hope that they will toss setlists into the air like candy and I will get one and somehow get it signed before we leave. I don't find any. I ask a few guys if they could give me anything—a pick, or a drumstick or anything really.

We look for Dave, but he doesn't slip through the backstage gate.

“Nope,” one guy says rolling a stack of amps to stage left. “Nothing left, guy,” He says.

Bryan wants to leave. Did I forget everyone else was here with me? Bryan leans toward the exit like he's got somewhere to be as the last waves of people crash into the fences. I walk up and down the first few aisles. Nothing. Only beer cups and muddy chairs and mud.

I sigh. Dave's nowhere to be found.

“Let go,” I say. And we go.

We jam again with Dave in the basement where we practiced before. Dave asks, “are you happy?” to each of us as we help him carry his drums downstairs. Rudy joins us this time and we run through some material that Rudy and I had been working on when Bryan quit the band. We record some jams with Rudy's computer and then sit around a table and listen closely to each one. Dave asks us about school, says he loves that fill that Andrew played. He drinks a mineral water and eats some hummus.

Dave asks us about our last band, what happened to Bryan. “He just kind of stopped playing with us,” we say. He asks us if we might know any singers, then suggests we all go to some shows and try to recruit someone. We search through internet posts and advertisements. We talk about a band name. “We need some more

equipment,” Dave says, and we go to the music store and buy Andrew a bass fuzz pedal, buy me a new distortion pedal and a used effects board. Rudy buys spray paint and makes a stencil that reads “Saucona Iron.” We spray paint the stencil onto our guitar cases, our amps, the black plastic shelves we bought to organize our mixer and power amp and the glossy white letters of our new band name shine across everything.

Rudy and I go to Lowes and buy some pieces of wood and build pedalboards in the basement. Dave buys us some new power strips and extension cords to keep all of our equipment from shorting.

We bring a keyboard to the next practice and Rudy runs it through a program on his computer and into the PA system. Andrew's amp is kind of small, so Dave buys an enormous bass amp stack and let's Andrew borrow and use it. After practices now, we lug our equipment home and stack it in the basement of our apartment building. In no time we are stitching some songs together with punchy bass riffs and synthesizer chords and guitar solos and drum fills. We name the songs after the bands that they sound like. Tool. Dream Theater. We've got a song that rolls like an engine in a five-four time signature then breaks down into a reggae beat. “We've got a big sound,” Dave says. “It's huge. The sound we've got is huge.”

* * *

At Potts, Jaime's makes me a hotdog. She pulls a bun from the stainless steel steamer and plops it on the pine counter in front of the grill. She eyes a good dog, rolls it over a few times to crisp the outside. The smoke from the grill swells into the hood above her and disperses throughout the room, thickening the air. Her freckles glow in the pale yellow

light behind the counter; below her slender eyebrows, her blue-green eyes follow the movement of her hands, dry and cracked from the cold of late autumn—winter pressing. She yanks the dog from the grill and drops it into the roll on the counter. Jaime sticks her tongue out at me from across the room. I smile. She gives me with the dog wrapped in wax paper decorated with a marker-drawn heart.

I grab a strawberry milk from the cooler near the door and head back to the counter where Jaime is now serving a customer. The tube lights circumscribing the windows radiate neon red like the ambient glare of a bar. The freezers hum, the air conditioner above the door sizzles, the register dings, the sliding doors of the coolers thump as they are closed, the paper bag crunches as Jaime rests it on the counter, the customers—two tall guys in blue and grey Moravian College Basketball shirts—say thank you and stroll out the door.

“How's work?” I ask and finish off my dog.

Jaime shrugs her shoulders and eyes the ceiling. She frowns. “Busy.”

Her forehead and cheeks are rosy.

I screw the cap onto my strawberry milk and set it back on the counter. Jaime grabs my shoulders and pulls me toward her.

“I just want to go home and be with you,” she says. She laughs and kisses me on the cheek. Another customer strolls in and she rolls her eyes. We both laugh.

John stands in the back with his foot on the low rung of a stool. He's playing some game on his phone where he has to land planes over and over again. SportsCenter chatters away on the T.V., sounding vaguely like a modem dial-up on an old computer, like the beginning of Rush's “The Camera Eye”—you know the part just before the first

synth chords, with the snare rolling in the background, slowly picking up intensity, right before Alex Lifeson brings the song to life with the deep, crunchy reverb of his Gibson. Jaime can sense that I'm humming a Rush song in my mind as I scratch my head and look back towards her. She rolls her eyes again.

There are faded pictures of Jeff Potts' and his family scattered about the walls. There's a dry-erase calendar with names scribbled on each date.

“You sell any hotdogs today?” I say and she laughs again.

“I can't wait to get outside,” Jaime says and tips her head back, eyeing the holes in the drop ceiling. She asks if I want another hotdog. I say yes, she brings it to me and we split it.

It's 6:30, almost quitting time.

John comes back to smoke a cigarette, still staring into the plasma screen of his phone. Jaime starts sweeping the front and asks if I want to do the dishes, then gives me a wink of approval.

While Jaime waits on another customer, Mom calls me.

“Honey, Melissa was in a car accident,” she says.

“Is she okay?” I ask.

“Yes, but I have bad news. Some tests revealed that she has cancer again.”

“She has cancer again?”

“Yes, honey. But, in a way, the car accident might be a blessing. Maybe they found the cancer early enough.”

“Yeah. Maybe it must have just come back. They probably caught it early enough.”

“If she beat it once, she can beat it again,” Mom says.

“When I called Melissa, after Mom told me, we both tried not to bring up cancer, but I could hear it in her voice. It was the first time I’d ever heard her sound defeated. She had it beat, and now it was back again.”

I call Melissa to see how she’s doing. I walk around Bethlehem. Down past the college football stadium, the tennis courts. The leaves on the trees lining the sidewalks are changing and falling. It’s cloudy. The wind is picking up. It’s getting colder.

Melissa wants to talk about how I’m doing in school. I’m going to be putting together an honors thesis. “Remember to take breaks to reward yourself. Sometimes you just need to reward yourself,” she says.

“How is Jaime doing?” she asks.

“She looking into going to grad school. For neuroscience. She’s been thinking about going into genetics.”

Melissa doesn’t want to bring up the cancer again. But after a while, she does. She sounds tired. Maybe defeated. She thought she was done with all this. She wants to move on.

“I was going to try to come up for Thanksgiving, until this happened,” she says. “You know, it’s just a little set-back. But, I’ll definitely be up for Christmas. You guys should try to come down here over the summer or for Spring Break. We could take you to the beaches again like we did last summer.”

“Yeah, that would be great,” I say. “We will definitely look into flights. Maybe we can all come down: me, Andrew, Jaime, Jessica?”

“The more, the better. You guys would have a great time. You can meet the new puppy. I haven’t decided on a name for her yet. I’m thinking Maya.”

“Maya sounds great.”

“Yeah,” there’s a sigh on the line and then some silence. “Well I’m going to go get some rest. I’ve just been so tired lately. And the pups have to go out anyway.”

“Okay, I’ll say a lot of prayers for you.”

“Thanks, Michael.”

“Where’d you go?” Jaime asks when I walk back into the hotdog shop. The last car in front of Potts’ skirts down Fairview towards Main Street, takes a right and zips toward center city. It’s dark out now. Windy. A storm is coming.

“Melissa has cancer again,” I tell her.

Jaime’s mopping now; John is wrapping up the ketchup, onions, mustard, and chili pans now. Jaime locks the door; John turns off the television, checks the grill again, turns off the lights, and we slip out the back door into the yard. John locks the back and we walk along the broken concrete path, studded with fresh spring weeds, toward the street. I check out the stars glimmering between the cross-hatches of branches in front of the shop, like I do when I visit Mom in New Jersey. Jaime and John say goodbye and we make a right, walk down Fairview toward Monocacy.

The air is cool, thin and weightless compared to inside the hotdog shop. The breeze brushes pebbles on the sidewalk, rustles the poplars on Monocacy, and gently brushes Jaime’s brunette hair. There are few streetlights, and Jaime’s face shines in the vague moonlight. She tries to trip me, tries to make me laugh, tries to cheer me up. She

trips herself on the fault between the sidewalk panels next to a lumpy sycamore. I catch her, and we laugh. We stumble home.

* * *

Dave asked us about hiring a manager, and the next practice he brought someone with him to listen to us play. He was tall, with big shoulders, wore a dress shirt with a sweater over top of it, and he greeted us with an intense handshake. He told us about all the ins he had—connections to record producers and big venues. He could get us on tour by the end of the year, get us a studio album recorded. He would set the whole thing up as soon as we found a singer to complete the band.

“I’ve heard a lot of great things about you guys. Dave had me listen to all your demos.” He looked to Dave and then back toward Andrew, Rudy, and me. “And he’s right. You guys have a big sound. And this is a good area to have that sound. We can get you on the prog rock festival bill by the summer. The biggest prog festival in the United States happens right here in Bethlehem, did you know that?”

The three of us smiled and nodded and Dave seemed pleased to have hired us a manager, even though we only had written a few songs together. I wanted to think of the beautiful possibility of playing a rock festival. I wanted to think about finally going on a real tour—not some half-assed trip around the Lehigh Valley. But the only thing I could think about then was that Melissa was in Tampa, Florida, with Mike, but otherwise alone, being treated—again—for stage four cancer, and I couldn’t get my delay effect pedal to sound just like it had last practice. I couldn’t get the right sound out of the keyboard effects on my computer. The left speaker of our PA system was out too, and no matter

how we arranged ourselves, the mics, and the speakers in the room, it just didn't sound like it did before. When Melissa didn't have cancer.

“Why don't you guys play a few songs for me. I'll just sit over here and listen,” said our new manager, rolling up his sleeves and pulling a chair from the corner of the room.

We picked up our instruments and started into “Elevator,” but Dave flew into the verse too hard and the fast riff on my guitar suddenly became too fast to play. Andrew, Rudy, and me all tried to speed up to match Dave's tempo, but we just couldn't get there. And we botched the ending too. None of us could remember if there was another verse before the outro and that transition into the outro—where we stretch the four-four notes of the chorus into the ten-eight time signature of the verse—just fell apart into a jumbled mess as we all ended the song at different times.

After the song, we tell our manager that we all want to practice more now. We haven't practiced in a week or two or maybe we were just nervous, and that was why the song didn't sound quite right. But with more practice—we are all ready to commit to three, even four times a week—we could sound as good as anyone.

“I like what I hear so far, but get yourselves a good singer. Someone who matches your abilities. Start going to shows around here and talk to the singers of those bands after the shows. Everyone is always looking for his next gig,” said our manager. “Well, Dave,” he shook Dave's hand and Dave said “it's been a pleasure,” and then Dave led him up the basement stairs and back to his car parked in the college parking lot.

“We need some place where we can leave our equipment set up,” Dave said when he came back, and the next day I was in the basement of my apartment practicing our songs to keep my mind off of what I should be thinking about and I got an idea.

I called Rudy and he came over. “We can turn this into a practice space,” I told him. There was a bunch of old rolled up carpets that the landlord had kept stacked in a pile in the corner of the basement. There were some twin mattresses down there too. Enough to cover the walls, to drape across the low ceiling and semi-soundproof this place. Rudy smiled and said, “let’s do it.”

The drop ceiling is low. The walls are wood-paneled. We find some rolled up carpets in a stack of junk hiding the basement entry and unroll them across the teal tile floor to absorb the sound. We hang them across the pipes and screw them into the walls. We buy some old mattresses at a yard sale and line them across the walls and shove pillows under the staircase and tack an old foam mat to the ceiling. It's dark and humid in the basement now. We call Dave and Andrew and tell them to come over, that we have a great idea. Dave shows up, but says he can't stay long.

“This is great. This is going to be awesome,” he says, but he wants to talk with us about something. “I think we need to all be on the same page,” he says. “We need to all make the same commitment if we are going to do this,” he says. What’s he talking about?

“When you are done college, Michael, are you going to keep with the band or are you going to graduate school?”—I think that's kind of a strange question: I've already told him that Jaime and I were planning on moving to Philadelphia—“Because we need to make this commitment if we are going to do this right. We have such a huge sound,

and I really think we've got something original working here. I've got connections too. We can be famous," he says.

On one hand, I'm excited that he's so enthusiastic about our new band, but on the other hand, I'm wondering where this all is coming from. We've only had a few practices. We haven't even had any shows yet. We don't even have a vocalist. We hardly have a place to practice.

"Now that depends on your definition of famous. We can be world-tour-famous or we can be travel-around-the-US-and-play-local-shows-famous. It really doesn't matter to me as long as we can make a living doing what we love. How famous do you want to be, Michael?" he asks me.

"I think I just want to play music for a living," I say. I'm not even sure I want to be famous. I don't think I've ever thought about fame that way. I just want to play.

After Dave leaves, we set up the drums and it doesn't sound too loud when Rudy smacks the cymbals and pounds the bass drum, and we both are starting to swell with joy for the possibilities. I go upstairs, then out into the street to see what it sounds like. But it's loud. Way too loud. The bass drum shakes the coffee table in front of the couches and rattles the windows on the first floor. The cymbals burst through the walls. Our roommates don't think it will be quiet enough to have practice there.

Rudy and I frustrated. We thought it could work out. We resolve to keep practicing in The Doghouse. We keep doing what we've been doing.

The only times I saw Bryan anymore were nights he and Fisher went drinking. When he'd come back glassy-eyed and wobbling and stumble up to his bedroom. It always seemed like Bryan was trying to get as drunk as he could without dying. One night, Jaime

and I were heading to bed when there was the whizzing sound of the screen door walloping the frame and then a thud against the front door. The porch light was still on, but even this neighborhood just outside the college seemed to be done stirring with drunken students. Mostly everyone had stumbled home and fallen asleep. Fisher had come home hours before, but Bryan was still out there somewhere. Who knows where he went when he and Bryan got that smashed.

But now, there was Bryan, too drunk to find the door knob, banging on the door, his head wobbling across his shoulders, his eyes glazed over. And now Jaime was opening the door and Bryan's clammy body was falling into our apartment and landing on the floor. And then there was Jaime and me hauling his drunk ass to the couch and laying him on his side and sticking a bucket under his face so his drunk ass could puke without even getting up.

He was taking this too far. In classic Bryan style, he was taking it too far. He was going to end up plastered and dead somewhere if he didn't slow the fuck down. And maybe Jaime smacked him in the face. And maybe I punched him in the face and yelled into the black hole that was Bryan then. Because I was pissed that Bryan had done this to himself. I was pissed that Bryan had changed. Bryan was gone. This wasn't the Bryan I knew. The Bryan who was my best friend growing up. This wasn't the Bryan who wrote those first songs with me years ago, who talked to me about his dreams of being a musician and the shit he had to deal with at home. The Bryan who didn't want to become his parents. But here he was, blackout drunk, no longer playing music. My sister was dying of cancer and Bryan was wasting all the life he had left.

Around Christmas time, Melissa was doing badly, the worst that she had been in a long time. Her face was swollen. Her body was weak and ached everywhere. She slept most of the day. But she wanted to visit everyone for the holidays.

So she and Mike drove up from Tampa and stayed at Mike's parents' house in Catasauqua. Melissa was too tired and sick to drive all over the place and see everyone she'd been missing, like she'd done every Christmas since she'd first moved to Florida and started college. If we wanted to see Melissa that Christmas, we'd have to visit her there, at Mike's parents' place. This is what Mike explained to Mom on the phone.

Melissa and Mike set up a day for everyone to visit. A few days before Christmas. It was cold and windy, and the wind whipped fine snow across the driveway and into the wide, hilly yard. The house was solitary, on the side of a steep hill that seemed to overlook the whole Lehigh Valley. It seemed so far away from everything. It was a dream world held up against the real one. The actual world was through those trees across the driveway, being compressed under that slanting, heavy grey sky. Neither place seemed welcoming, but when we opened the door, Mike's parents invited us in, made us coffee and asked to sit in their big, warm living room, beside the crackling fire.

Mike and Dad had been talking. That was the rumor that Mike's parents had heard. And what did Mike tell Dad if they had talked? That it might be Melissa's last Christmas? That Melissa wanted to see him? That Melissa forgave him. That she doesn't mind if he came or didn't: that burden was on him now? What could he have asked him? Do you want to see your daughter? Are you sorry? Did you know what you were doing?

There's a rumor that Dad is coming to see her. Dad hadn't seen Melissa in years. Eight years? Ten years? The argument was so old by then. So pointless. Someone forgot

to send someone a Hallmark card and then there was a fight and then there was just stubborn silence. Mike led us upstairs into another a guest living room to see her. As I walked into the room, she was there, wrapped in sweats that were hers, but now, seemed over-sized and baggy. She hunched as she moved things from chairs for people to sit and gave us hugs and tried to smile.

“How are you, Melissa,” I asked her. “I’m okay. I’m just so tired, you know? Everything just makes me so tired.”

Then she sat on the couch, her foot curled under her, and gave hugs to everyone else who walked up the stairs and funnelled into the room. People touched her face and tried to smile. Everyone was there: Mom, Mark, Andrew, Jessica, Bethany, some of Melissa and Mike’s friends who lived in the area. Everyone asked her how she was, and she said she was just tired. Always nauseous and tired.

“Would anyone like drink?” Mr. Bugbee called up the stairs and someone took an order down to him.

“Oh, and Mike,” he called up again. “Dave is here.”

Dave. My father. Dad. He had actually showed up.

“Dave,” he says. The sound of my father’s name rings like a word in another language. The sound of my father’s name is strange and distant.

Everyone gathers in the den, talks about anything—Christmas, traffic, weather—until Melissa wants to meet with Dad in private. Mike takes them to a separate room to talk. The rest of us—Mom, Mark, Bethany, Jessica, Andrew, me, Mike’s parents—we all sit there and wait.

What are they talking about? Does Dad ask for forgiveness or try to talk himself out of responsibility? Does he say he didn't know how much Melissa meant to him then? Does he say it was the way he was brought up? It was how Pop-pop raised him—no-nonsense? And what was nonsense? And how was he supposed to know Melissa would cancer? Maybe he just needed another year or two to settle his nerves and get his priorities straight? Was it all too late?

“She’s already made peace with everything,” Mike tells us while Dad and Melissa talk. “This is all up to Dave. She’s doing this for Dave.”

At Melissa's apartment, stacks of boxes surround the kitchen table. Bunches of marriage magazines. Unopened wedding gifts. Unopened Christmas gifts. There's the chocolate that Andrew and I got her on a stack of boxes in the corner. *I know*. A shitty present when everything tastes like nothing, and everything is drowned in medicine. Could she even eat any? What was I thinking, asking her husband if I could get her a bottle of wine? Of course not. Didn't I realize what was happening to her? Didn't I realize what medicines she was on? Did I even get her a wedding present?

I was sitting at Melissa's table. I was listening to “Remember”—the old version, Help Wanted's version—and I couldn't help but feel I'd missed something. When did we change it? The baseline? The breakdown? What made us shift the beats below those stalwart lyrics? *Forget about tomorrow. Just get through today*. I can't remember.

It's February now.

Forget how the enemies escaped. Bryan bounced across the drums in my

headphones, did rolls across the high hat, and I hadn't talked to him in weeks. The clouds were opening up. The room seemed to pull light magnetically through the balcony door.

I listened to the new version. With Dave on drums. It was different, but not necessarily better. How did that song become this one? I read Dave's email again. He quit the band. We hadn't practiced since Andrew and I left for Tampa the week before. "It's been fun," I said in my reply. But it was over.

I couldn't think about it anymore. I'd been saying prayers all day. Reading the Bible. Reading miraculous stories on the internet of people on the brink of death, recovering in an instant from terminal cancer. Terminal cancer. Even the words sound final, unmusical. My sister was dying of cancer. *Remember. Remember, you need to keep praying.*

And I try. It's exhausting.

It's exhausting to trace all the steps you skipped. To recall all the places where you wronged everyone. That's what bubbles through your mind, after all, when someone close to you is near death. Not just that person, either. Everyone. You want to apologize to your stepmother, for those times slamming doors and cursing her name; for moving out before high school ended. You want to apologize to your roommate—bandmate—for any time it seemed you were inconsiderate to him. You want to apologize to your old boss for quitting with no notice. And you send text messages to these people and they respond—a bit confused, a bit stunned—that you would even remember these minor disagreements and think that they had been holding them against you all this time. Another cookbook.

I should have gotten her another cookbook.

* * *

{; Watching Mike at your bedside, Melissa, with a big mug, pointing the bendy blue straw into your mouth. You're sitting on the bed, wrapped in a blanket. With your eyes closed, you mumble and hum and rock and laugh in a morphine dream. People—so many people: Mom, Mark, Jessica, Bethany, Andrew, Jimmy and Mark Jr., Nudge, Mike, Mike's parents, hospice workers, Mike's brother and sister-in-law and nephew, co-workers at the hospital, roommates from college, sorority sisters, maids and matrons of honor at your wedding, priests, friends from Tampa and Pennsylvania and California and everywhere—walk in and out of your room and sit in the chairs next to the bed and ask you how you're doing. They smile and talk with you, try to explain how your acts and words and presence in their lives has kept them going in some quietly momentous way. They speak with small words. Talk about immediate things. “I heard you went to the movies last week. What movie did you see?” All the while, your cells wage a civil war. Your liver, your breasts, your spine: battlefields. Your body: suicidal. But your body is not all that you are. You have a name. You are a song.

You smile and hum like a bird in Spring. And it is Spring after all, isn't it? Outside the air—the cloudless sky—is clean, like newly washed windows. Like the foggy start of a dream or the second where a song begins. There is a music channel playing on the television, some high number that no one ever reaches by accident.

“Remember,” you say to Andrew and I, “Remember when we went to the space center? And it was so hot?”

“Yes,” we say.

It was two summers ago, not long after you found out you had cancer for the first time. You beat that cancer. This is a new cancer.

“And we all got blue Slushies?”

“Yes,” we say.

“They were so good,” you say, bobbing your head.

And then the next minute: “I wish I could have a blue Slushy right now,” you smile and laugh with your eyes closed. You haven't had much to eat or drink today, and we all think this might be good for you. Mark and Mike discuss where one can be found (there's a Target downtown with a Slushy stand) and Andrew and Jimmy race down the stairs of the apartment building and take the car to go find one.

Sometimes, you open your eyes and the yellow where the whites should be startles me. Those are not your eyes, Melissa. Your face is puffy, rounded, far away. Mom sits on the couch, not wanting to talk to anyone anymore, weighed down by the way your song is unravelling instead of coming together.

The Slushy arrives and you sip it and laugh more.

There is a festival going on outside. The one you always went to in college: Gasparilla. A celebration of—well, what are we celebrating? There are college kids dressed in pirate costumes—black hats and eye patches, leather vests and tattered shirts, hand hooks and bead necklaces—drinking beer from warm cans, stumbling down the crowded streets toward Bayshore Drive. You tell us about it every year, and every year we say we will come down for the next one. You have Mike go to the closet and pull an egg box filled with rainbows of beads collected from Gasparillas passed. Electric purple

ones, neon green ones. Ones with little figures of pirates. Ones with tiny dangling beer glasses. Ones marked with skulls and crossbones. *Forget about tomorrow.*

You pull the necklaces in tangled jumbles from the box and spread them across your bed. Mike helps you unravel them and you hand them out to all of us, laughing, telling us your stories. We can make out some of your words, between mumbles. You open your eyes once in a while. You ask us to come close, to lean across your knees so you can drop the beads around our necks.

And then you lie down. Lie still for a long time.

Andrew and Jessica take a plane back to Allentown. They make one last trip into Melissa's room before they leave, wearing their backpacks of crumpled clothing and she smiles and hugs them. They talk to her for a minute. And then another. Hug her again. They know. They know that this is the last time they will see her.

I'm going to stay. I know that they both want to stay, but they don't want to wait to see what is going to happen. They know and it must reverberate through their bodies and press into their minds like a half ton weight.

"I don't know what I would do if I saw Melissa die," Andrew says when I say goodbye to him and hug him, before Nudge drives him to the airport. I want to hug him and tell him that everything will be okay. I want to tell him, "I'm your big brother: I'll be here for you no matter what."

This goodbye feels like a final goodbye too. What if I never see my brother again either? This feels like a slow but certain end to the world; Melissa, }

The next day the hospice workers appear at three. Then a priest with a Bible and a little black book leaking the scent of last rites. We are all still. He prays for us as we all sit around Melissa's bed. He reassures us of the meaning of it all. Psalm 23. *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death and quietly drink coffee in the kitchen, I will fear no evil.* I will sit down on her couch, wander out onto the balcony. *The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want* as I am battered by warm breezes and the freshness of spring sunshine. But I want Melissa to live.

Dad called me. Mike had been trying to convince him to visit Melissa. I imagined him calling Dad every hour saying, “This is your last chance”—because, of course, it was—until Dad finally bought a plane ticket.

“I’m getting on a plane now,” he says. “It was the earliest flight I could get,” he says and my heart drops like an anchor tossed off the side of a ship. Why the excuse? He had years to buy this plane ticket.

And Melissa is fading. Today, she's been sleeping in her bed, sinking deeper every minute. Her words are jumbled and roll into each other as if the letters of each word are stacked on top of one another and she tries to say a stack at a time. Does he want me to feel sorry for him? I don't want to feel sorry for him anymore. He's had his chances. Why does he feel it's necessary to redirect some pointless, stale blame? Why couldn't he just say “I'm sorry?” after all these years. Say sorry to all of us. But we have to forgive him.

I walk outside and sit on a curb at the edge of the parking lot outlining Melissa's apartment complex. It's February now. It's warm. The air is thin and smooth and slips over me like a silky bed sheet. The sky is a tranquil indigo, fading into a deeper purple

after sunset. Never before have I seen such a sonorous sky. The misty stars twinkle in slow rhythms, like the rhythm of the ocean tide. The moon rises over Melissa's apartment.

In front of me, a row of white garages leads down the street toward the entrance of the complex. Moonlight bounces off their rows of white siding and blurs the lines between things. The apartment buildings glow in their Eastery colors—pink, yellow, lime green. I'm shaded by palms crackling in the breeze. Their shadows bend away from the light of streetlights. They turn teal as the sky fades.

There are telephone wires that run above me and dip between the wooden poles along the roadway. The gentle hum of traffic rolls behind the garages. The whole world is like a nursery rhyme or a dream within a dream. My eyelids are heavy and everything is silent. I touch the dirt behind me with both hands and pull a twig from the ground and bend it until it breaks into smaller twigs. I feel it snap and shock my fingers. I feel the gritty earth under my fingertips, the flaky wood pieces in my palms. My sister is dying of cancer.

{, and it was late January in Pennsylvania, cold and bitter after a recent blizzard when Mike called me to come see you, Melissa. I was doing homework in the science building at school. Through the snow chalking the backdrop of the black night, there was a lone track of two-foot-deep footprints arcing across the snow-sodden world, violet in the moonlight.

Do you remember that poster Mom had on her wall? On the wall along the stairs? It was of a beach at sunrise with the poem “Footprints” printed in silky white letters:

My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

“I never wanted to have to say this, but you need to come down here right away,” Mike said. “She only has a couple of days left.”}

I snap more twigs expecting to come to a realization that this world is, in fact, reality, but now reality feels like a thing that was never actually defined.

I walk back to Melissa's apartment. She's breathing slowly, with long, cold spaces in between breaths, like time and space between distant stars. Mom tells Melissa not to be afraid. “If Jesus gives you his hand, Melissa, take it,” she tells Melissa with tears burning her swollen cheeks. “Take his hand,” Mom says.

The lights in the room are dim. The television snores in the distance. Ten or twelve of us sit in chairs around Melissa's bedside; Mike sits on the bed. We are all watching her breathe. In. And then a long pause. And out. And In.

I tell Mike that Dad is coming, but Mike knows already. He talked to him earlier. “Dave is coming,” he tells Melissa, holding her hand with all the life in him. “But he said it's okay if you go. It's okay Melissa,” he forces a smile. “He's on his way, but he said you don't have to wait for him. You can go home, Melissa.”

He is silent for a long while and then begins a prayer. We all close our eyes with “Our heavenly father.” I open my eyes and just look at Melissa. Her cheeks are sinking. Her eyelids look like they will crush her eyes. God, how could this happen? Is this really going to happen? God?

God?

I watch Melissa take a breath as Mike prays on.

And then she doesn't take another one.

There is an electricity that shoots through us and informs us that Melissa is gone, and everyone opens their eyes at seemingly the same moment. We all watch her and wait for another breath, but she has no more to give us. We all explode into tears and the room burns with a muggy, uncomfortable heat. We remind each other of times we spent with Melissa; assure ourselves of her goodness, of her life lived for a purpose. The tears sting in our eyes and the blood rockets through our veins and we slowly accept that we are still alive.

All of a sudden, I'm drained. My limbs are heavy; my head is too big for my neck. We say more prayers and then Mike calls someone and then we leave the room and let Mike say goodbye to Melissa. The body that is no longer Melissa's. The body that he once loved and kissed and held hands with and moved through this world with that is somehow—by some wretched mystery of life—no longer his wife and lover and friend. We all float around Melissa's apartment, without Melissa, like uninvited guests. Or like ghosts ourselves.

I have to take care of my little sisters and brother now. I am the oldest. I don't want to be the oldest, but I am the oldest.

Andrew is back at college now. I call Jaime and talk and cry and lean over the balcony onto the wrought iron railing and watch the blinking dots of airplanes drift soundlessly between the stars. I ask her to walk to Andrew's dorm and give him a hug. I call Andrew and we talk about the memories we have of Melissa. How we drove to

Florida a few years ago to visit her. How we played those songs at her wedding on guitar.

Mark sits in the living room with Mike. Mom goes to her room to be by herself. I go out to sit on the balcony.

I get another phone call from Dad. I stare at the phone before I answer it. The moonlight reflects off the windows of the apartments across the parking lot. What do I say?

“I’m at the airport in Tampa. I’ve been trying to get a rental car for a fucking hour and I finally just got one. I should be there in about forty-five minutes,” Dad says. I imagine him rushing through a busy airport, shoving his way through crowds of people in limbo between flights.

“Just tell her that I’ll be there soon,” he says.

“Dad,” I say, searching for the words, “You’re too late.”

There’s a long pause.

“Shit. Damn it. No. Fuck. No. Damn it.”

“Melissa passed away half an hour ago.”

“Shit. No.”

“Hospice is coming—”

“Just ask them to keep her there until I get there so I can say goodbye,” he says.

“Okay. I will ask Mike,” I say, though I would rather find a piece of ground to lie down on and sleep for a hundred years.

“Shit,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

Dad arrives. I meet him in the dark at the entrance of the gated apartment complex to let him in. He follows me.

He says hello to everyone as we enter and Mike shows him to the bedroom where Melissa's body lies in the darkness, below a cone of lamplight. Dad asks me to go in with him and so I sit next to him in a chair next to the bed as he lowers his head. I'm too tired to curse him for not being here.

I see a tear slide down his cheek and suddenly he turns to me.

“You should be happy that you were here until she died,” he says. “I was with your Aunt Debbie the day that she died of cancer. Your Uncle Billy had gone away for a while and it kills him that he wasn't there. Your brother is going to be eaten up by this and you need to tell him it's okay. You'll always be his big brother and you need to take care of him. You need to take care of your little sisters too. Just be happy that you were here until the end. She's in peace now.”

I don't understand what he's saying. The words are too fast and the darkness is blinding and my sister's body lies there, smothered in blankets, empty and cold.

“Tell your mother that you are going to stay with me at the motel. I got a room with two queen beds. We need to get you out of here for a while,” he says.

I'm too tired to argue, so I nod, and then get up and leave.

Mike sinks into the loveseat, holding his dog Joey and cries soundlessly into his beer. Mike's parents kneel next to him and rub his shoulders, hold his free hand. They whisper to him. Others stand around with their heads drooping like wilting roses, bobbing in and out of the realization that Melissa is gone.

I close the door and walk across the living room and Dad bursts out of Melissa's bedroom and stands at the front of the living room. He claps his hands together and smiles. Why does he smile?

“Very difficult,” he says, “She was such a difficult kid,” he says to Mike.

His parents turn to Dad, then back to Mike. Mike says nothing.

I feel so sorry for my father.

“I'll be over tomorrow morning,” he says finally, “to make omelets. Does everyone like omelets?” he asks, but no one answers.

And then he shuffles me out of the apartment, and it feels as though we are being chased through a bad dream as we make our way across the rippling parking lot to the car. Suddenly we are coasting beneath the balls of yellow streetlamp lights. And then we are in a parking lot of a motel off the highway at 1 am and the sky seems so dark, like the sun will never, ever rise again. The streetlights and liquor store neon signs whine and glow reluctantly like the only sad, dim lights that have ever been. Psalm 23 reverberates through my head like a lullaby and I want to be led beside still waters. I want to sleep for a thousand years.

I tell Dad that I want to take his airport rental car and drive eleven hundred miles home to Pennsylvania. I just want to be home. I want someone to tell me it's okay, even though it's not. I need Jaime. I need her to hold me.

In the motel, the rain pounds against the plastic window. The palms in the parking lot beat against the walls, the ceiling. My face is stuck to the wet, hard pillow. I don't want to get up. I blink and it's 7 am. I don't ever want to get up. I don't ever want to do anything ever again.

{: this day—the day after you died—is full of voids. Things feel new, only backwards, inverted: the negative of you—the afterimage of you burnt into our eyes. Like the static after a light is turned off. Emptinesses like the unfastened silence after a song ends. An empty bed. A new comforter pulled tight, across the tops of the pillows. Open windows, the sun erasing the dead room with a glare. A pot of yellow flowers on the countertop which look and feel and smell and seem as though they are not only not real, but non-existent altogether. There are pictures on the bookcase of someone who no longer is. There are books and chairs and sweatpants and throw pillows and coffee tables and television remotes and coffee mugs and stereo knobs and cereal bowls and balcony chairs and palm fronds and dog toys and rice boxes and computer desk drawers and Vera Bradley handbags and Holy Bibles and cabinet handles and cell phone chargers and candles and dollar bills and light switches and parted curtains and folded shirts which you have touched and moved. Your echo dissolves through the apartment. The dogs curl together on the couch and wait. They sleep, wade into a sea of dreamy timelessness, and}

Mike would spend the next few months at his parents' home. Everyone would fly north for the funeral, and she'd be buried where we grew up: in Whitehall, Pennsylvania. But Mike wanted to drive home. He wanted to bring his dogs, but his parents insisted that he couldn't drive alone. I said I would go with him. I hated flying anyway—the fear of giving up control more than the fear of heights or of falling—and we left in his car in the late afternoon the day after Melissa died.

The distant day gets closer through the car windows, the long shadows of cars passing us on the highway. The interstate feels infinite, yet full of motionlessness. until it's dark and raining as we cut through Gainesville. Mike makes calls to friends, tells them the terrible news—couldn't someone else send the message?—and then reminisces about the life they had together, the people they'd known, the places they made their own. Now half of him is missing for the rest of his life. He sobs and talks and wails and laughs into his cell phone.

I hold the wheel steady, keep my eyes fixed north on Interstate 95, which keeps straight and wide, carrying us like an endless river. *My sister is dead.*

First rest stop. Chubby palm trees. Bathroom break, Starbucks. Maps on the walls and *you are here* and all that. A sheet of lead clouds pressing against the hazy orbs haloing gas station lights. Mike will drive. He digs around in the trunk for something, then gets in on the driver's side. We bend around the on-ramp and fling onto the black highway.

Mike stuffs a pipe with weed and lights it.

“I can't believe she's fucking gone” he wails and pulls his body toward the steering wheel and slams it back into the seat. He opens the window to let the smoke seep out.

We are both quiet for a while.

“Now that she's gone,” he says looking out into the road, “is there anything you want to know about your sister?”

I try to think of something to say, but everything feels so long gone and unknowable. *Melissa is dead.* I can't believe that I'll never see her again. It's not logical. It's not real.

“Anything you wished you had asked her?” he asks. I remember when Melissa first got her driver's license and she drove Andrew and I to the mall. Or a few Christmases ago at Mom's place in New Jersey, when I hugged her goodbye in front of the driveway as she and Mike prepared for the long drive south to Tampa. And the way she said goodbye. And the way I noticed—maybe for the first time—that I was taller than her. When did I get taller than her? Why did I never notice before? I remember going to Wildwood one summer when Mom and Mark first got together and they rented a beach house surrounded by a garden of sandy pebbles, and all of their kids—my siblings—were there. Mom dropping off Melissa and her friend to shop in Stone Harbor. All of sharing breakfast in a baby blue restaurant with a rotunda of wooden beams crosshatching the ceiling, fans spinning, endlessly twirling the warm breeze, the smell of salt water through the air. What do I need to know?

“Don't you want to know how we met?” he asks. We don't look at each other.

“Yeah.”

“She was a lifeguard at the Catty Pool ten years ago”—*I remember now*—“and I lived in Catty, went to high school there, and I'd go to hang out at the pool during the summer. One day we talked.”

Then first dates.

I lean back in my seat and ebb and flow through wake and sleep, splash through an ocean of swirling dreams and nightmares.

Second rest stop. Around midnight. I think we've made it to Georgia. A warm wind slaps the car through the hazy darkness. Mike pulls out a binder of loose CDs and tells me to pick something and put it on. I think of the CDs Melissa used to burn me for

birthday presents: Radiohead, Pink Floyd, Stone Temple Pilots. I think of the bubbling Sharpie letters of her handwriting leaning into one another like friends at a party. There is it again, all across these. There are a few albums I know well. I pull *Tiny Music* from the case and push it into the player.

Mike puts the case under his seat and drifts out to the uncertain seas of his dreams.

Into another void.

The album plays through twice, restarts each time with “Press Play.”

How long have I been awake? Then *OK Computer* three, four times?

Interstate 95 is the same for a thousand miles: Mike asleep against the car door, trees down each side of the road swimming in the starless ocean of night. If it weren't for the cars or the painted lines, you'd think you weren't moving at all.

Mike drops me off. I tell him I love him. I wonder how many times I will see him in the future. He was always so good to Melissa, and I love him like a brother. But I guess now, things are changing.

Jaime is home. She gives me a long, tight hug. The sun shines through the curtains and Sherwood bounces around her cage. I cry for a long time there, sitting next to Jaime in the middle of the afternoon until we both fall asleep in bed with our clothes on and sleep through the afternoon. When we wake up, Fisher tells us that someone came asking for me. He left some stuff of his in our basement, he said. He came to pick it up. It was Dave. Dave coming to get the band equipment he'd been storing in our basement for band practice: the bass amp he bought for Andrew to use. It was Dave coming for his

stuff and leaving. It was the band ending. It was Melissa dying. It was Bryan changing. It was everything disintegrating around me.

{; at an hour before closing time the hill is less steep; the walk home is faster; the March wind is less noticeable as it brushes through your pant-legs, across your forehead. The spiny flower-barren bushes in front of Bethlehem Sporting Goods are more cozy and inviting when you fall into them, twice. The bottom of a hill doesn't feel like the bottom of a hill, it feels like the first step home: the first step towards more alcohol.

The clouds are a neon white and ghostly, glowing against an obsidian sky.

Vicky spins off the parked, burgundy Chevy truck at the bottom of the hill—her latest boyfriends'— and falls into the street. I help her up and watch the stars stir through the leafless limbs of trees in a clockwise motion.

Jaime lights a cigarette as she wobbles into a mailbox. I can't quite remember what my legs feel like.

At the bar, we played beer pong and Vicky set the plastic ball on fire while trying to light a cigarette. A white powder burst out of the ball and into a fleeting flame, like a magic trick, and Vicky dropped her beer on her shoe. That's what drinking is, after all: an allusion, a miracle, a magic trick. Works every time.

The fresh smell of cold spring rain hangs thick in the air, interrupted by wafts of the cigarette smoke smell emanating from our sweatshirts as we resume the walk home. Vicky stands up from the snow-dusted curb and places one foot in front of the next, carefully, as if walking a tightrope home.

The streetlight above us flickers and hums. We are all practically running now, power-walking up the steep incline without much feeling in our toes. I decide to sprint

through an empty intersection, two blocks north towards Moravian College's campus. I stop in front of our porch and stand and wait for the steps to stop moving, but they don't, so I hold on to the railing and wait for everyone else. They are there almost instantly. My phone says it's two o'clock. I can't remember what time comes after two o'clock.

I smoke a cigarette on the porch overlooking the sidewalk as everyone heads inside. I don't normally smoke. I watch the few new leaves tumble inaudibly from the oaks to the gutter in the breeze. *How fast can I make the world spin?* The cigarette butts on the sidewalk are practically levitating now, the trees are leaning to the right, the college down the street sinking into the ground until I adjust my eyesight dead ahead and *Presto!*—everything returns to an even keel, then starts rolling away again.

I know its a bad idea, but I've lost the capacity to care at this point and Jaime wants to do a round of shots.. She mixes the cranberry juice, Jaeger, and Peach Schnapps in the tin mixer and she carefully splits the portion into four glasses. I spill my chaser across the floor. It's water. At least it wasn't beer again. Or maybe it was. *Abacadabra!*—they taste the same now! It's a miracle! I've turned beer into water!

There are empty pizza boxes piled on the counter. The greasy stench of cardboard lingers; the soggy-rag smell of wet dishes emanates from an overfilled sink.

I try to focus on cleaning the beer off the floor. I squat down with a wet paper towel and hold onto the table. The spot beneath the chairs drifts toward the refrigerator. My hand wipes the floor and it seems clean, but the linoleum still looks moist. I reason that it's just always looked like that, shoot the paper towel across the

room towards our lidless garbage can, miss by a foot, and go to fill up my cup with tap water.

The lights are dim in our kitchen. One is busted and none of us care to replace it. It's been dead for three months now.

We hear Bryan shove his bed across his room and open his door just so he can slam it shut. Nothing out of the ordinary. He used to drink with us all the time. He used to drink way too much. Jaime sits on the couch and turns on the television. Vicky bounces a basketball off the ceiling and writes a bunch of messages in green highlighter on sticky notes and pastes them all across Bryan's cabinet next to the fridge. We know that tomorrow we'll find some nasty letter—written in chicken scratch—on the table about “respect, blah, blah, blah consideration, blah, blah, blah.” I will see Bryan the second he is walking out the front door. He will have already mixed his protein shakes, taken his creatine, his 21-pill pre-workout supplement. His heavy black bag will be supported by his bulky shoulders as he strides out the front and slams the wooden door behind him. I used to lift and run with him too. Just the sight of his face will piss me off.

Fuck that shit. There are more important things to think about, more important things to do. Like finding something to eat. Vicky has ten miniature *Mama Celeste* pizzas she bought from the supermarket for a dollar each. We pull some out of the freezer, peel them from their delicate plastic sheaths and throw them into the microwave, one by one, patented foil-heating-pad and all.

The microwave dings. Vicky sprints to the bathroom. I open the microwave. The cheese is melted and steaming as it cross-hatches the tomato sauce ocean above the crust of the pizzas. The edges hiss in a joyous exhalation, rejoicing like

they anticipate us eating them. The bottoms are crispy—even flaky—and, in splotches, a triumphant burnt sienna. Mama Celeste would be proud. Her chefs have so beautifully prepared for us this delicacy to reheat and enjoy—in all its greasy-late-night-snack wonder. It's like they were made for our drunken consumption.

Later, when Vicky and I discuss the existence of God, I will remind her of the miracle of Mama Celeste pizza. The facts that her brother went to war in Iraq and you died of cancer at twenty-seven will be temporarily put into perspective. The whole universe seems to make sense then for one second, for one delicate bite into that steaming microwavable pizza.

Bryan slams his door again, but we're only whispering. We share a laugh and Vicky goes to smoke a cigarette on the porch after grabbing her sweatshirt off the couch. I'm reminded of a bumper sticker that says, "Alcohol: one more reason to believe that God exists and wants to make us happy." I tell Vicky as she walks back inside through the dark of the living room into the buzzing pool-hall glow of the kitchen light. We laugh again. It's settled. God exists. Alcohol is good. Vicky reminds me that I should have started drinking earlier.

Jaime's passed out on the couch now. My stomach gurgles to the top of my throat. Vicky tells me to eat some crackers. I do that and drink water before heading to bed, hobbling up the stairs. I find that my cheeks are wet with tears. I drag Jaime with me. The house is cool now. I can feel it in my exposed toes, the backs of my legs. I was warm before, but now I'm cold—}

When I wake up, I'm sitting on the floor, resting my head against the slick wet porcelain of the toilet. It's dark out. The light above the shower is still on in the corner of the

bathroom, dim like a street light in fog. I vaguely remember falling into things last night. My body aches from sitting so awkwardly—legs stretched away from the toilet and sink, one beneath the other in the cramped space between the half-wall dividing the room into a toilet area and a shower. My torso is twisted towards the window. The damp tile is cold beneath me, and I'm shivering. Above the sink, I see the reflection of the baby blue wall in the mirror, the slim sliding window. A rusty vent near the door exhales warm, moist air and faintly rustles the window curtain across the room like a palm tree whistling humbly in a midnight breeze.

I close my eyes again, and I'm on an island in the keys. I'm laying in a hammock slung between two palms. The clouds trace lines across the sky beneath the moon, but everything smells like piss. I'm covered in berries and they smell like piss. The sand is glowing like plastic and the scene is heavenly, but it smells like piss. I wake again. My nose is stuffy; my head is congested and heavy.

The wet dog smell of the toilet water makes me puke. I bounce to my knees and cough the vomit out of my nose. I smell piss and pizza sauce. My nostrils and esophagus are flaming, and just before they burn up, I'm puking again, head convulsing, arms stiff, hands clutching the rim of the bowl. My biceps hurt from clamping the bowl so hard. One more time. There you go. Get it all out. Fuck, this hurts. My abdomen convulses, then settles, aching now. My face is warm, and suddenly, I'm soaked in sweat. It's the first time I've ever been drunk.

Sweat drops drip from my long, wavy hair into the muddy water. My jeans are soaked. My shirt is soaked. My hands are clammy and cramping and tired. My wrists hurt from being bent. It's dark out. I can barely see myself beneath the barroom aura of

the dying lightbulb above the shower. I feel empty. And hungry. I must be done with this.

I remember doing shots for Melissa. Can you do shots for someone? Does that even make sense? What's the point? Getting drunk for someone who has died. You've gone to a better place, and no one cares that I get drunk because I miss you.

Andrew and I did a bunch of shots in a row. I kept going. Before Andrew left, I was stumbling around, talking about as straight as I walked. The last thing I remember was doing a shot for you.

I get up and wash my face in the sink. Cold water first, then warm, then cold again. My face has no color: it's white as paper. My stubbly beard is getting longer now, wild and unruly; I don't care enough to trim it. Red patches slump beneath my tired eyes. My eyes are white. I remember Melissa's eyes, when she opened them once in a while. While we stayed at her apartment in Florida. The week before she died. Her eyes were tired too. And yellow. Bright yellow.

I brush my teeth three times and I watch the yellow on my teeth. I dry myself with a towel. I open the doily white curtain of the bathroom window, slide the glass pane to the left, and let in some cold air. The magic of alcohol is gone. It was a sick trick. The early morning air is thick like jello, strained through the screen of the bathroom window. It's cold and smacks my face like a bucket of ice water. I can't get yellow out of my mind.

I walk out to the back door and stand in the yard. It's about 6:30. I'm certain I'm in my backyard, but I feel I'm on a boat, drifting soundlessly through the intermittent waves of the tumultuous ocean, only hours before dawn. Things shift skyward. It's

breezy, and the clouds are moving steadily now, keeping a good pace as they slide. They glide across the sky to the west, glowing a shiny silver color around their edges, just beneath the radiant light of the moon. The contrast is incredible. My backyard, a patch of overgrown grass folded over and dying on itself, outlined by a planked-wood fence, blurs to a silhouette against the coal-black sky, slighted by the moonlight. I hold on to the doorframe for balance. *Am I going somewhere?* I wonder to myself. No cloud stops to give me an answer. The patio is cracked and I kick some dirt across it. The bitter gusts bump into me like rogue waves, rocking me in and out of clarity.

There's some reviving potion in the air with the smells of muddy, dead grass, the pine fence, the crisp salad wind before dawn. The moon emits a glossy luminescence, making the night seem like a just-printed picture.

This is what limbo is like: the future is far beyond the blur of horizon, the present is the cold wind biting at your face. All the while, the past tugs at you like an undertow as you stand knee-deep in an ocean of memory. Where do you go? You don't *go* anywhere. You wait.

I think of *Rush's* "Earthshine:" Peart's tribal rhythms; Lifeson's guitar rolling, ebbing and flowing through verses and choruses; Lee's unearthly vocals, harmonized and soaring above the instruments like a group of wandering spirits. I listened to this song over and over again when Melissa passed away. It's ghostly resonance sticks in my mind. I have homework due Monday and it makes me sick to my stomach. How can I keep going?

What happened to all the music? What happened to the band? What happened to our family, the harmonies between us all that sustained us, kept us ringing? The chord is broken now.

How do I keep ringing?

I remember a family reunion on my Mom's side some years ago. Andrew and I played outside behind the concrete building, ignoring all those aunts and uncles and cousins and nephews and nieces who hadn't seen each other in twenty years. We played cards with other kids while they danced polka and drank Yuengling and celebrated the Powanda name—my mother's maiden name—in a wood-paneled fire hall in central Pennsylvania. I sniff the swell of burning firewood, drifting through the neighborhood this morning and it reminds me of campfires with Dad, the sizzle of the radiators in Mom's old house—it was long before they divorced; was it even before Mom got sick?—and I miss them and I miss you and everyone and I just want this to be over so I can go to sleep—}

7. “Jams”

After Jaime and I moved to Philadelphia, there was no more band. Andrew moved to Philadelphia after he graduated and Rudy moved back to his parents’ place outside of New York. But when it was just Jaime and I working and going to grad school, I got a job as a cook in a restaurant in Old City and as I’d sweep the floors and finish the last of the dishes, I’d switch the radio to the 90s rock station. Stone Temple Pilots would come on. Then Nirvana and Candlebox and Alice in Chains. “Shimmer” and “Heaven Let Your Light Shine Down” and “Cherub Rock,” the Smashing Pumpkins song we used to cover. I’d text Rudy, “hey man, I really think we should start a band again.” I had a couple drinks in me by then. The other cooks and I would share a six pack or two, and by the time it was time to go home I’d barely be able to ride my bike.

I’d text Rudy again, “hey man, let’s do this. Don’t you want to start a band again?” Rudy had told me he’d been playing drums in his free time. “Let’s do this: you on drums, Andrew on bass, and me on guitar. Or Andrew on bass, me on drums (I can learn), and you on guitar, since you’re better at lead anyway. Andrew and I can take a train to New York every weekend and maybe a day during the week and we can practice at your place. And other days you can come down here and we can just write stuff acoustically.”

No answer. Rudy was working fifty or sixty-hour weeks as a train mechanic now. He had a new girlfriend too. And it was getting late, then, almost eleven.

“Come on man,” I texted him. “If you could, wouldn’t you go back and play with Help Wanted again?”

Finally, my phone buzzed.

“Dude, you need to stop it. You’re really stressing me out.”

I stared at the phone for a long time, and David turned off the lights, the television humming in the corner, and I couldn’t believe it. Everyone was gone. The family that I had was broken. The band—that family that helped me deal with my family falling apart: they were gone too.

Jaime and I went to the bar, an old Irish Pub in Center City, and I told her how much I missed everyone, and she said, “at least we are together.” And that was true. But a few drinks later, at home, when Jaime fell asleep on the couch watching a show about people hunting for spirits, I muted the television and put my headphones on, listened to those old songs we wrote. And then I watched Nirvana music videos, thinking, “that could have been us; we could have been big; we could have made it,” until I fell asleep on the couch too.

What I meant when I said, “we could have made it,” was that I missed that time before it all fell apart. I missed that time before Melissa died and my family unraveled when there was still hope to pull my family into a time of healing and happiness and togetherness. I wanted my music to pull us all together. I wanted it to have that power.

Mom had too much stuff. Christmas’s had been hard the past few years, and it was getting close to Christmas again, Christmas 2013, and Mom’s stuff kept getting in the way. Mark wanted to move it back into the basement, but Mom tried so hard to go through it all—those plastic tubs filled with papers and bills and magazines, Longaberger baskets half-filled with pencils and pictures. Little stuff. It was going to take time, but we could get it all sorted out.

Mom had always been trying to sort this stuff out. Through being diagnosed with a neurological disease that burns up her limbs day after day. Through divorcing Dad and moving out of Whitehall to the Central Pennsylvania. Through marrying Mark and moving to suburban New Jersey. Through Melissa dying, through Mark's mom dying, through Gram passing away, through her brother—my Uncle John's—suicide, through Mark's father kicking them out of the house they rented from him, and returning to Whitehall. We always seemed to end up where we started in this family. We loved each other and tried to move forward through everything, but we ended up getting swallowed by all the stuff swarming the living rooms of our lives.

Mom had too much stuff, and Mark told her. Mark's heart was bad now, and he couldn't spend so much energy moving all this stuff around—the boxes of thrift store books, the framed pictures of all her children as children, Melissa at Disneyworld—to get to that fucking Christmas tree. Andrew and I told her time and time again to get ride of her stuff, but why? Mom knew she had to. Mom knew all that stuff got in the way, but that wasn't what bothered her. What bothered her was that feeling that she couldn't do anything about it. That feeling that she was doomed to let it all swallow her.

She was sick with pain coursing through her, throbbing in her veins and stabbing through her body and constricting and choking her. And that was only her body. She could hardly stand up, sometimes. Sometimes, she felt well, but sometimes she could hardly stand up. Her doctor wouldn't prescribe the medicine she wanted. She wanted her old medicine. The stuff that knocked her out for days, kept her in a dreamworld, kept her wrapped in a warm narcotic blanket. And who could blame her?

But Bethany wanted to decorate the house for Christmas. Bethany wanted them to decorate the house, wanted a tree to be put up and decorated in lights. Bethany wanted to celebrate something. Family. She wanted this family to keep going. Sometimes I felt like everything was crashing and burning and then Bethany wanted to put up a Christmas tree. Decorate it in lights. Celebrate what we have left. And there's a lot to celebrate if we just pause to remember it all. All of us are left and we are still a family.

Mom had too much stuff and Mom knew it and Mark told her and Bethany wanted to put up a Christmas tree and this is what was happening when I visited that Saturday in December with Jaime and Andrew. Mom was lying on the couch. She was crying. Apologizing for not being able to do more. For not being able to do the simplest things like clean a room and put up a Christmas tree.

A few weeks ago Mom bought a new couch. The springs of the old one were busted, and your ass sunk down until it hit the wood frame. Mom wanted to do something for her family. Andrew and Mark and I waited and waited for Mom to come home. She held up the line in the thriftstore, was with Jessica when Jessica's first real boyfriend dumped her (via text message, and then in subsequent hours undumped and redumped her) and Mom paid a few guys to haul the couch to her house a few blocks from the thriftstore in their beat-up truck. And after we all sat down on the new couch and thought about it for a minute, we realized that Mom was doing something great for us in the small way that she could. Though we didn't understand and asked her again and again why she spent the hundred dollars when she didn't really have the money and asked again and again why Jessica was crying and asked her if she really needed a new couch? Didn't Mom already have enough thriftstore recliners and chairs to seat us all? They were piled

up in the basement, spread out across the wide living room. We all sat down on the new thriftstore couch and it was so comfortable and Mom was crying and we were all embarrassed.

Mom was embarrassed when we came to visit her and she was lying on the couch recliner and in so much pain and Mark and Bethany were frustrated, talking to each other about how they wished they could do something to help. I was living in Philadelphia, what was I going to do. This is what I was going to do, Mom.

I drove up the next day. It was supposed to snow, but not too much. Mom sat on the couch and told me what I could do. We decorated the house together. We talked.

Mom: tell me how you want me to string the lights across the front porch, Mom, how you want me to wrap the railings in garland. How you want me to hang those angel lights across the door, where you want me to put that fiber optic tree. Show me how to make your Sloppy Joes, Mom, how to bake your Poppyseed cake. Tell me that story of my birth again, Mom, so I remember how I got here. How the doctor gave you a pill while you cried. Told you what you might have to do. How I should have never been. How you prayed for three days and hemorrhaged until we both nearly didn't make it. How the doctor swore I'd be dead before I was even born. How you kept me alive, Mom. How you kept us all alive. How you held us all together somehow and showed us how to navigate this nearly unnavigable life.

We are going to sort all this out, Mom. All this stuff? This is easy. This is the easiest thing we've ever done together. All the ornaments. All the old lights with busted bulbs. All the wreaths. All the stuff that isn't for Christmas. I'm going to get each box, hold up every single thing in it. Where does this go? Do you need this? You can sit there.

Rip up those bills from five years ago, throw them out. Rip up those old magazines. Toss the broken stuff in the broken containers away. Clear things out. Get all this stuff out of the way. Get back to the present moment.

We went all day like that: both of us tackling this mountain of stuff one step at a time. Mom went through a few rounds of medications. Needed to just sit and breathe a few times. She told me I could go whenever I needed to. “You’ve done so much already. Go home and relax. Be with your wife. She probably misses you,” she said. It was close to seven in the evening. Snow was starting to build up. It was December and dark.

“One more box,” I said, sitting on the floor in a big space that we’d spent the day clearing and you could see the carpet where the Christmas tree would go.

“Last box,” I said, and Mom pulled the papers out.

Mom pulled out a folder of Melissa’s awards from middle school, high school: Perfect Attendance Award, Honor Roll, High Honor Roll. A big stack of them just sitting in a box covered in everything else.

Mom looked at each one carefully, letting all those strands of memory link them together again. Mom and her daughter. Her first child. Mom looked at them, smiled, frowned, handed them down to me sitting on the floor.

I felt like I needed to say something: “We have to keep going, Mom. We have to help each other keep going. We are all doing the best we can. We have to take care of each other and keep living our lives.”

To decorate the porch, to make space for a Christmas tree. One little victory. And then another will come. Mark put up the tree.

Mark's heart was doing badly. He got winded from standing up. From walking to and from the car. He had a heart attack. He needed to get a pacemaker put in. He couldn't work anymore. He didn't have health insurance. Was it all those years in the chemical plant? Did getting laid off save his life? It could've been worse. Mom and Mark struggled to get by.

A night in January 2014, the day of Mark's heart surgery I had a dream. Mark came home with something for me. It was a guitar. A limited edition Gibson SG. The thing was crimson and shining and beautiful. He wanted to get me a present for some reason. He wanted me to take it. I knew they had no money—hardly enough to buy themselves groceries—but Mark wanted me to take it. Mark had no money. He and Mom were both disabled, living on social security, but Mark bought me a guitar, in this dream, and smiling a wide smile, handed it to me.

The guitar's price tag said \$3999. He spent four thousand dollars on a guitar for me in this dream. I wanted to tell him he needed to take it back. He needed to take it back. He needed the money, even in this dream. They needed the money for food. Even in this dream, they couldn't escape the fact that they needed the money for food. They needed the money for Mom's medicine. They needed the money for Mark's heart surgery, for Mark's heart medication. Mark wouldn't buy the potassium pills to save money. I didn't need a \$4000 guitar. I hadn't been in a band for years. I barely play anymore, I told him. But he wanted me to keep it. He was so happy that he could get it for me. He was so happy to do something little for me, like buy me something. He smiled and talked fast, like he'd always done. He smiled and handed me the guitar like he had been saving up for this for years, like he'd been thinking about this for years. Like he'd

been dreaming a dream like this for every person in his family for years, and all I could think about was how I wanted to take the guitar back and give him the money.

I woke up and lay in bed for a long time. It was hard to get up.

It was always hard to get up. It was always hard to do anything anymore. You can work extra hours to buy groceries for your family. You can wish with all your heart that you could do something for your family. All these people around you that live and work hard and suffer together and still love.

But all you can really do is love them in the end.

But maybe that's just enough.

The next weekend it was warmer. The snow was melting around Mom's glider in their small, square backyard. This was her sanctuary, where she went to sit and read and smoke cigarettes and think about how to move forward. Mark sat inside on the couch, listened to music through his puffy black headphones, and Mom sat outside under the cloudy sky. I sat next to her. She said Mark was doing okay. He was getting better. She felt good then, too. Some days she could hardly stand up, but other days, she felt good. She felt good today. She'd been feeling really, truly happy lately, putting things into perspective, getting stuff clean, taking care of the house. She felt useful, taking care of Mark, like those days twenty years ago, before she got sick, when she used to work as a nurse. She spent all day praying for everyone and that had given her strength.

I only had time to visit every few weeks, then, and I was grateful she was doing well that weekend. I didn't want to think about the next weekend when she would be down and out again. When Mark would lie in bed the whole day too, gasping for breath. This weekend, she felt good. She looked like she was doing better, too, I tell her, her

blond hair shining. She way she talked, the way she moved her arms, bounced her shoulders, it was like was dancing, beaming with joy in the simplest things. She was alive and it was sunny and warm.

Andrew, Jessica, Bethany, Mom, and I went to Perkins like we used to when we were kids and Mom would take us to see the people dressed in cartoon costumes on Tuesday nights. We laughed. We were loud, but there was no one around, and this is who we were anyway. We talked about Melissa. About Gram. About Uncle John. About the good times we had when our family was full. We laughed about everything we could laugh about and even the things we couldn't laugh about.

The food came out and on Mom's pumpkin pancakes, right next to the puddle of whipped butter, clear and shining, was a single staple. Mom was laughing about something else when the waiter dropped the plate in front of her and she pointed it out and kept on laughing and we all kept laughing.

The manager came over. A staple?

"We don't even have staples or staplers back there," said the manager.

He gives us twenty-five percent off our check.

Mom laughed and laughed.

"How about you throw in a free pie, too?"

And the manager wasn't laughing and Mom got a free pie.

"Every day," Mom told us like she's told me so many times before, "We need to find it in ourselves to thank Mother God and Father God and Jesus Christ for every little blessing in our lives."

We are each other's biggest blessing.

Jaime and I got married on the beach. Billy Joel's just the way you are, our first dance as a married couple. And then "Fool in the Rain" swirling through the palms with the night, with those loose strands of her sparkling hair reminding of those times we listened to Led Zeppelin and drove to the movie theater in Allentown, ate pizza on the sunny hill, those days we learned that just knowing each other's names could drive us forward into the unknowns and possibilities of our lives. That C Major scale. The notes stepping gracefully upward, with just the right time and space in between. Like "Soul to Squeeze," like "Piano Man," all the melodies that we fell in love to. The scent of ocean engulfed us like a warm blanket. Jaime's words, "I love you," salty in my mouth.

At the dive bar in Philly, a bearded guy slapped out Neil Young songs on an acoustic. "Sugar Mountain." "Old Man." We used to cover "Rockin in the Free World," with Andrew slapping at the E octave on bass, Rudy thrashing a solo over the lean chords, the three of us harmonizing the vocals. I was a few beers in. I was a lot of beers in. This guy had a harmonica strapped to his face and the sounds he made were sad, fleeting, disappearing into the summer heat funneling into the open face of the bar.

When we got home, Jaime fell asleep. I watched those Nirvana music videos for hours. Kurt Cobain in black and white, wearing a white dress, lip-syncing the words to "In Bloom." I could have been like that. I could've been there, on stage, doing the only thing I was ever really good at. Even I wasn't that good at it. I I watched those interviews, that concert footage until I was swollen with that pain in my stomach again.

The pain that tells me I've missed something. That we had something and now it's lost.
"Sadder still to watch it die, than never to have known it."

I'm trying to end this book, but something is missing. Is it the happy conclusion? Where I say, "I'm better now"? Where I say everything that has happened has made me a better person. Where I say I'm ready to move on now. Where I say music of my past has been quieted, but that's okay, at least I can write about it. Writing about it makes me feel better. But all that's bullshit. Everything keeps me emotionally trapped in the past.

I dig up Actinoid's CD. The lyrics—I don't remember writing most of the them—seem to be talking right to me, calling me out. From *Forlorn*—wasn't this the first song Bryan ever wrote (I can remember him showing it to me)? "And the world keeps on spinning like a beautiful blue and brown ball. And you try to understand what is happening, but you just can't make sense of it all." The solos in the song are actually decent. The singing is terrible, but the music is alright.

I want to play them again, but they're dead.

And anyway I can't just drop everything like a want to. Look at everything I have now. A wife. Some sort of career. Some sort of stability. But I feel so unstable without the music. And not just any music. All that music that I made with those people that I love, for the people that I love. Even if I could play all those songs again—for all the people I'm missing—it wouldn't bring them back. If I could only write something new. If I could only write something new that would hide all those songs in the past. Or give them new meaning. I keep trying. And trying, but the old songs rise up in my mind and like waves wash it all over me again. I'm drowning in all those old songs. I'm drowning.

I wish I could write something new. Something new. I want to write something new. I'll keep trying. Maybe one day I will.

Sitting in a coffee shop, working on my memoir, I listened to "Circles," a song that eventually became Help Wanted's "In the Park." It's just me, playing one acoustic guitar, but it sounds like there are so many guitars behind me. The way the chords are arpeggiated. The way the clean notes ricochet through the empty space between chords. Maybe it's the static. The echo. But maybe it's not.

The verses are dark, but the chorus has wide open chords, hopeful harmonic notes in octaves. The acoustic is twangy and bright like how I remember those days writing songs. I remember working on the song, sitting in the band room by myself and perfecting each note, each transition, each pause and riff until I was ready to bring it to everyone else. Eventually I took the idea to Andrew and Rudy and they played around it, made it better. We took the song to Bryan who added drums and made it even better. It was a part of all of us before any of us even knew what it would become. Even when I was writing the first chords by myself. Even when I was writing that song, I wasn't alone. I could feel that there was more to it to be discovered. That somehow all the people around me could help unlock the secrets of those melodies. That somehow everyone around me was the secret to those melodies. Jaime. Andrew. Rudy. Bryan. Mom. Mark. Dad. Jessica. Bethany. Melissa. Grammy. Gram. Nana. Uncle John.

Even now, looking back on me sitting by myself in the band room that summer—the summer sun shining off the posters of bands we'd listened to and dreamed of—recording the skeleton of that song, I can feel that I wasn't alone. I never was alone. They were part of me before I ever knew it. I pulled those songs out of me before, and I can

write them into life again. I'm closing my laptop now. I'm going to walk home. It's springtime and bright and sunny. I'm going to pull that guitar out from behind my dresser, write part of something new.

[clicks tape]