

***broken images:  
experiments in fragmented narration***

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Margaret Dimoplon", with a horizontal line underneath the name.

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*"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images. . ."*

from *The Waste Land*  
T. S. Eliot

## *introduction*

When I took a fiction writing course early in my undergraduate career, I learned many things about the way I write and the way I think. I was frustrated by not being able to say exactly what I wanted to say in my short stories. I found the traditional short story form limiting and restrictive. After giving the matter some thought I realized what was causing the difficulties in my writing.

My thoughts are not organized in the way a short story usually is. I do not think in a strict chronological order. Rarely do I entertain only one aspect of a situation. Most often, I try to see people, places and things from all possible perspectives.

Then I discovered the works of two authors who broke the traditional structures of narrative forms and by doing so seemed to come closer to matching my thought patterns than most writers: William Faulkner and Pamela Zoline. Upon reading Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, I was impressed by his use of multiple narrators to explore the many facets of a seemingly simple plot. Zoline's short story *The Heat Death of the Universe* had a profound impact upon my writing. It was my experience with this story that led to my discovering the term "fragmented narration" which, as I have come to understand it, describes stories that break from the constraints of chronology and the traditional points of view.

I have applied these techniques to my own writing and, as a result, have been better able to tell the stories I want to tell. As I continue to grow as a writer, I will undoubtedly continue to experiment with new forms. I hope the results continue to be as personally rewarding as the stories I present here.

# ***the top ten reasons why i should kill myself***

## **10. School**

I graduate from high school in May. So far, I have applied to six colleges and universities in the tri-state area. To date, zero acceptances.

## **9. Beth**

She's my best friend. She knows more about me than anyone else. She knows everything except what happened with Chad last Monday night. I hate her. Her life catastrophes always coincide with and eclipse my own: I'm rejected by six schools and she's rejected by ten; I get a 'D' on Mrs. Murphy's algebra final and she gets an 'F'; my cat dies and her mother dies; I dent Dad's fender in the parking lot at the mall and she totals her father's car while driving drunk and ends up in the hospital for two weeks. Sometimes I think she plans it that way so she'll get all my attention and not be obligated to work up any sympathy for me. I hate her. Still, she is my best friend and she was almost my first lover our sophomore year but I couldn't get it up and I started crying and poured my heart out. She's been cool about everything. I think it takes a lot of pressure off her knowing that I don't want to fuck her. But she is so needy and I can't handle her problems and mine anymore and I know she isn't going to go away so I'll have to. Knowing her, if I do kill myself, she'll run through the halls of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Memorial High School with an automatic weapon, gunning down everyone in her path and then take her own life after being cornered by a S.W.A.T. team. She'll be the topic of a very special edition of "Geraldo" and no one will remember my death.

## 8. Money

I think I have too much of it. That makes me feel guilty. Especially when I see the Thompson Brothers, Earl and LeRoy, dressed in clothes that really are old and not just made to look that way and sitting alone together at that table in the back of the cafeteria that is smaller than all the other tables with no food in front of them.

## 7. That kid in the McDonald's

Speaking of lunch, my sixth grade class once took a field trip to the state capital and we stopped at a McDonald's along the highway for lunch. There was this blind kid in there with a really messed up face, like he had something drastically wrong with him. We were running around and making a lot of noise and the kid must have gotten scared because he started screaming and clutching his father's arm. His dad got a really pissed-off look on his face, grabbed the kid up and hurried out the door. The kid didn't get to finish his Happy Meal or take the McDonaldLand play figurine of Mayor McCheese with him. I've always felt bad about that. I couldn't tell how old the kid was and, on the bus on the way home, it scared me when I realized he might have been my age.

## 6. Kids in general

What if Beth's kid comes out looking like that one I saw in the McDonald's?

## 5. Old people

I don't like old people. I don't want to become an old person. Every few months, the whole family packs up and goes half-way across the state to see my Mom's mom who has been in a nursing home since I was little. Nobody talks about these trips. Mom says we are going and the next weekend we go. The nursing home smells like piss and death. Grandma can't carry on a conversation anymore. She spends the visit staring blankly at us with that I'm-not-sure-who-you-are-but-you-seem-to-know-me smile on her wrinkled old face. After a few hours, Mom starts to cry and we drive home in silence and the trip is not mentioned again until a few months later when Mom announces it's

time to go again. During one of our visits a few years ago, we were wheeling Grandma around the halls and we saw this young woman who was helping an old man around on a walker. As soon as they passed us, the old man started having a fit. He fell down, convulsing and spitting up greenish-brown slobber. The woman started bawling and screaming and the nurses came running. Mom saw it all and she started crying also. We had only been there a few minutes but she had to leave. Old people make my mother cry. I don't want to make anyone cry. That's why, if I kill myself, I'll go a secluded place out in the woods where no one will ever find me. Mom won't believe I'm dead until she sees my body. That's just the kind of person she is. She'll always think that I'm alive out there somewhere and she won't cry as long as she thinks I'm alive.

#### **4. Chad**

God, I hate to even think about it! What a glorious introduction to the world of sex. A lot of awkward groping, kissing, and sucking. I gagged during, threw up after and I still have the taste in my mouth. Why couldn't I have held out for someone like Robert? I'll bet Robert's cock would slide down my throat with no problem at all and his cum probably tastes like honey. I'd even let him take me up the ass. There's no way I would ever let Chad in down there. I don't even like Chad. But I was desperate. I really had to find out what it's like.

#### **3. Robert**

I have worshipped him from afar since the eighth grade when his locker was next to mine. During every break between classes I'd get to smell that cologne he doused himself in and watch him fix his hair in his locker mirror. And, when we had freshman P.E. together, I'd get to see him wiggle his beautiful ass into his tight, white gym shorts. And when he sat next to me in Mrs. Pauling's English class, I'd let him copy my homework and cheat off my tests just so he'd look at me and smile that gorgeous smile and say in that luscious baritone, "Thanks, dude." That has been the extent of our relationship, however. He's straight as an arrow and he got Jenny Parker pregnant last year. At least that was the rumor. We never saw a kid so I guess she got over it

somehow. I hope Beth gets over it. She always said Robert was too much of a jock for her. But she wasn't thinking that way at Carol Riffin's eighteenth birthday party when she let him fuck her. She just disappeared for about twenty minutes then she took me outside and told me all about it. Cruel bitch. She knows I've loved him for years. It made me sick, literally. I had had a little too much to drink and it all came up there on Carol's porch. Beth said if she hadn't been drunk it never would have happened. Now she's pregnant and she just knows Robert, and not any of the guys she's fucked since, is the sperm donor.

## 2. My family

A mother who thinks Beth and I are a couple, a sister from whom all I could ever learn is how to apply make-up, a brother who thinks dead baby jokes are the pinnacle of modern humor, a dog that has too many fleas to be let into the house anymore, a father who looks out of the corner of his eye at the son he knows is a fag.

## 1. John Fitzgerald Kennedy

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the thirty-fifth President of the United States of America who died a death as glamorous and dramatic as Beth will after I commit suicide, and who, as a result, was immortalized by having a mid-sized high school in the Midwest named after him. At the school which bears his name, John Fitzgerald Kennedy's death occurs annually on the TV screen in Mr. Richfield's American history class. Mr. Richfield idolizes John Fitzgerald Kennedy and every school year concludes in 1963 with the assassination. Thanks to Mr. Abraham Zapruder, every succeeding generation of American school children has the privilege of witnessing that historic moment in time when John Fitzgerald Kennedy's head was blown apart. Ever since I saw that film in Mr. Richfield's class, I have wondered what it felt like for John Fitzgerald Kennedy when his head burst, releasing all the stress of his life, the PT boat incident, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and splattering it all over Jackie, Governor Connally and the pavement of downtown Dallas, Texas. And, when I put a gun to the right side of my head and explode my skull the way John Fitzgerald Kennedy's was exploded, all the

stress of my life will likewise be released; my frustrated sexuality, Beth, Chad's sad messages on the answering machine, that kid at the McDonald's, the Thompson Brothers, the look on Dr. Richfield's face as he watches John Fitzgerald Kennedy die.



I.

Tina rolled out of Brad's embrace and looked at the alarm clock on his bedside table. The red digital numbers cast an eerie red glow on the table top. Her picture, in a tiny frame, took on a somewhat frightening look in the dim redness. It was 11:21 p.m.

She started to get out of bed but Brad, half-asleep, muttered something and replaced his arm around her. He nuzzled his face against her cheek, stubble scratching her. He let out a deep breath and the smell of alcohol filled her nostrils. Tina's stomach tightened and she clenched her eyes shut.

II.

Tina clenched her shut eyes and pretended that she did not hear her father open the door to her room. Her stomach tightened and she clutched her stuffed rabbit, its plush fur pressing against her cheek. She tried very hard to stop shivering but could not.

There was a heaviness on the bed beside her. It was always the same: the brush of his hand all around her face, the gentle removal of the rabbit from her hands, his mouth over hers, stubble scratching her face and the smell of alcohol filling her nostrils.

III.

She gently moved Brad's arm and got out of bed.

"Where are you going?" Brad mumbled.

"I have to get home. I have an early class tomorrow."

"Spend the night here."

"Brad, I can't," she said, somewhat impatiently. Brad had always been demanding of her time but it seemed as if the longer the relationship went on, the worse he got. She hunted for her panties on the dark floor.

"Come on. It's getting late. Just stay here tonight." He was sitting up now.

"I have no clothes here. All my books are at my place. I need to go home." She looked over at him and could just distinguish his handsome features. From the time they had met, Tina had been aware of Brad's remarkable resemblance to her father as she remembered him: dark eyes, a long nose over full lips, all framed by a perfectly square jaw. His black hair, closely cropped, signaled another similarity: her father had been in the Army, and Brad was an active member of the campus' ROTC.

Sometimes, early in the morning or late at night, when she was tired and her mind was not sharp, or when Brad showed up unexpectedly, giving her no time to prepare, she would still, at first glance, think she saw her father lying next to her or walking toward her. It often made her jump, prompting Brad to ask why she was so nervous. One morning she had even screamed when she woke to see Brad in bed next to her. Brad, insensitive to her moods, had laughed off the incident.

"Jesus, Tina. It's just one night."

"No, it's not. It's almost every night." She hated her tone but couldn't seem to change it.

If she hadn't been feeling so agitated, she would never have been able to protest. Brad usually got his way.

"Come on, Tina." It was more a demand than a request. "What's it going to hurt?"

#### IV.

"Come on, Tina! Come say, 'Hi,' to your daddy's friends."

"No. Please!" She begged, pushing her bedroom door shut.

But he pushed it open. "Come on!" he laughed. In the room beyond she could hear his friends, all from his Army days, all drunk, laughing and yelling for her to come out. When she had been younger, she hadn't minded sitting with them for a while, being passed from lap to lap, listening to stories she didn't understand, full of swear words. But now that she had started maturing, it made her uncomfortable to be paraded in front of the group of men reeking of cigar smoke and alcohol, laughing and cheering at her, telling her how beautiful she was.

"No, daddy. It's too late. I have to go to school tomorrow." She tried to reason with him but he was beyond that.

"Come on, Tina!" He pushed the door the open further, reached in and pulled her into the other room.

She stood there, in her pink nightgown, nervously shifting from foot to foot as her father's friend's cheered and hollered.

"Damn! She's really growin' up!"

"I've known her since she was this high!"

"Lookin' as fine as her mother did!"

Above the din, Tina heard the reference to her mother. She had died when Tina was very young and Tina had few memories of her. Her father would never talk about her, leaving Tina to guess and wonder. Tina had never even seen a picture of her mother.

As soon as she could, Tina slipped back into her room. She stared into her mirror, wondering if she really did look like her mother. More, she wondered what kind of person her mother had been. Tina had been to her friend's homes, seen women who could refuse their husband's requests and she wondered if that was the kind of woman her mother had been. Or had she been like Tina, unable to refuse her father anything?

V.

"So, are you, like, saying we spend too much time together?" Brad asked.

"All I'm saying is that I can't spend every night over here. I have other things I have to do." Reason had never worked with her father but it sometimes worked with Brad, especially if she could convince him that he would benefit in the long run if he would let her have her way. "I have to study tonight, but I can stay here tomorrow night, after my test. And then it'll be the weekend." She abandoned the search for her underwear and grabbed up her jeans, which were lying near her feet. Quickly, she slid into them and groped for her sweater.

"I don't know why you just don't move in here like I offered. It make things a lot easier and cheaper for us both."

"I told you. I can't break my lease." Tina lied. She lived in a house where the rooms were rented on a monthly basis. But she knew Brad could never figure that out so it was safe for her to lie about it.

## VI.

"I told you, Dad. Their car broke down. Misty's parents can't bring me home." Misty sat on her bed, giggling, as Tina clutched the phone. To Misty, it was a joke, a ploy to get Tina to spend the night at her house. But to Tina, it was an escape, serious and dangerous. Even though her father had never even spanked her, she feared his reaction should he ever catch her in a lie. "No, Dad. It's really OK. They can take me to school. I can wear something of Misty's."

Misty covered her mouth, trying not to laugh.

"Her parents said it was OK with them. It's too late. I can't explain how to get here from our house."

Misty rolled around on the bed, highly entertained by Tina's phone call.

"Yeah. OK. I'll be home tomorrow after school. Good night."

Tina hung up the phone. Misty laughed as loudly as she could. "God, Tina! You are so good at that!"

Misty's mother stepped into the room. "What did your father say, dear?"

"He said it was OK with him if it was OK with you," Tina said, straight-faced.

Misty's mother looked at her daughter, stifling her laughter, and back to Tina, serious and grave. "Well," she said slowly. "All right then. I'll go get you a blanket and a pillow."

As soon as she was out of the room, Misty burst out laughing again.

Tina tried very hard to stop shivering.

## VII.

"Please, Tina." Even when he begged, Brad sounded like he was giving an order.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and started putting on her shoes. "I'm sorry. I can't. I really need to study. I'll stay tomorrow night. And through the weekend. Please, Brad. OK?"

He sighed. "All right." Brad moved across the bed, put his arms around her and kissed her on the back of the neck. "It's just that I'm so into you. I want to be with you all the time." He kissed her again, running his fingers through her short, auburn hair.

Tina had succeeded in defusing the situation.

"Let me get dressed and I'll drive you home," Brad said.

"No," she said, standing. "Don't bother. I can walk. It's just a few blocks."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I need some fresh air anyway." Tina knew that she would win this one easily: Brad had offered to take her home and would have done so had she accepted, but she knew he would rather stay comfortable in bed. This way, they both got what they wanted.

"OK. I understand."

"Thanks."

"I love you, Tina."

She flinched. "I love you, too." She hated it when he said that. He had said it first and much too soon, only a month into their relationship. She wasn't sure that she did love him but how else could she respond without starting an argument?

## VIII.

"I love you, Tina," her father whispered, just as he always did.

She still pretended to be asleep even though she was crying. He placed another kiss on her forehead, stubble scratching her.

Tina wondered what the word, "love," actually meant. For a while, she had thought it to be synonymous with the word, "fuck," based on the context in which it was most often said to her and what she had learned from the evenings with her father's Army friends. But she had also heard it on TV and in her friend's homes and it seemed to have a variety of meanings, none of which she fully grasped.

IX.

She put on her sweater which she found by the door. "Good night."

"Night, love. I'll call you in a few to make sure you got home all right."

"OK. Give me about ten minutes."

"Speak to you soon."

She opened his bedroom door, silently made her way past Brad's roommate, asleep on the couch, and went out the front door.

The sidewalk was old and jagged, cracked from the roots of the trees in the yards along the street. It was a fairly quiet night. On weekends, this neighborhood, populated mainly by college students, was busy all night. There was no one out tonight, however. Most of the houses were dark. She wrapped her arms around herself and walked quickly. It was early autumn and it had been very warm during the afternoon but had gotten very cool after the sun had gone down. She wished she had worn a jacket. Or that she had taken one of Brad's. Deep inside herself, she felt a small shiver. She walked faster, hoping to be home before her teeth started to chatter. She walked under the light of a street lamp and rounded the corner.

She was shivering quite badly by the time she reached the point where the street intersected with the alley. The cold was the only thing on her mind as she walked hunched over. Had she been more alert, perhaps she would have heard the footsteps in the gravel coming at her from the alley.

Suddenly, there was a tightness around her chest and something sharp in her side. In surprise, she gulped some of the cool night air and made an odd, hiccup of a noise. The tightness around her chest moved up around her neck. The sharpness left her side and a hand clasped over her mouth. She saw the light from the street lamp behind her glint off the blade of a knife that was being held in the hand over her mouth. The handle of the knife pressed against her lips. She let out a soft whimper. At once, she realized that she was being dragged into the alley. She struggled but whomever was dragging her tightened the arm around her neck, making it impossible for her to breathe.

X.

She found it impossible to breath. She could not inhale, could not exhale, could make no noise at all. She seemed to recall a time when he father did not do this. Was that when her mother was still alive? Questions filled her mind. Why was he doing this? Was this what he had done to her mother?

XI.

Tina was pushed into a small shed that faced the alley. She woke falling face down and hit the cold cement slab floor. The smell of dust swirled up around her. Tiny pieces of gravel embedded themselves in her right cheek and the palms of her hands. She heard the door bang shut. The noise startled her.

She tried to get up but was pushed back down. Her abductor sat straddled over her back. The knife fell to the floor beside her face. Her hands, outstretched above her head, were free. The impulse to reach out for the weapon raced through her mind but, before she could act, her captor snatched it up. She felt the edge of the blade against the back of her neck.

"Don't. . . don't fight this."

Her heart raced even more at the sound of the words. Her attacker's voice was quiet, almost inaudible. He stammered slightly. She thought he sounded nervous.

The knife was suddenly no longer against the back of her neck. Then it was. Then gone.

"Ow," he grunted.

The knife was again at the back of her neck.

"Turn over!" he squawked.

She half turned, was half pulled, over onto her back. He remained straddled atop her.

The knife was in his left hand. He held it weakly against her throat. With his right hand, he fumbled with the zipper on his pants. After several seconds, he groaned in frustration. He put the knife between his teeth and held it there while he unfastened and pulled down her jeans and opened his zipper.

Tina tried to push him aside. Teeth clenched on the knife, he bent over her and held her wrists down. Her legs between his, she was completely pinned. "Don't scream," he said through his teeth and it sounded more like a desperate plea than a command.

In this position, with his face only inches from hers, Tina finally got to see the face of her attacker.

She realized that he could not have been more than fifteen years old. He was tall and lanky, thin but strong. His dark hair hung to his shoulders. He had a pale complexion and big, watery eyes.

"OK. Now," he muttered.

She felt his limp penis fall against her belly. He wiggled around and tried again to penetrate, burrowing into her pubic hair.

Something wet fell on her face. She made a tiny scream which startled him. Then she realized that he was crying. His tears fell on her face and mixed with her own. He screamed loudly and shook his head. The knife flew across the room and hit the wall. He collapsed on top of her, sobbing hysterically. "Oh, God. Oh, God. I didn't want to do this. I'm so sorry." Tina lay still, paralyzed with fear and confusion. His smooth cheek rubbed against hers and his cool, clean breath filled her nostrils. "They made me. Said I couldn't. They're right. I'm some sort of fucking faggot or something. I can't even get it up. Oh, God. I'm so sorry. What am I gonna do? They're gonna know I couldn't do it. I'm such a waste. "

## XII.

"Oh, Tina, I am so sorry," her father cried, tears streaming down his face. Her lawyer had kept her from having to testify in front of him but she wanted to be there as the judge handed down the sentence. What Tina noticed was how little difference there was in his courtroom appearance from the last time she had seen him. His words did not move her at all. In fact, she felt numb. "I love you, Tina," he called over his shoulder as he was led away. She still did not understand that word. But she had come to know that what he had been doing to her was wrong. She was fifteen now and could bear the burden of his actions no longer.



A few months earlier, she had been sleeping over at Misty's house. They had been lying in the dark in Misty's bed, laughing and talking. Misty had begun talking about kissing her boyfriend when Tina had suddenly started crying. She told everything to Misty who ran and got her mother.

### XIII.

"Tina?" Brad was screaming in the distance.

"Brad!" Tina bellowed as loudly as she could. The boy jumped up in terror. He caught his pants before they fell to the floor.

"Tina?" Brad's voice was louder now.

"Brad!" she cried again.

The boy looked nervously around, unsure of what to do. Tina looked up at him. He was as frightened as she was. Brad wouldn't wait for the police. The boy didn't have a chance against Brad's anger.

"Tina?" Brad was getting closer.

"Oh God," the boy choked. He paced in fast little circles.

"Tina?" It was Brad's roommate's voice now. With both of them yelling for Tina, it sounded as if they were coming from all directions.

The boy ran to the door. "Oh, God! They're gonna find me. Oh, God!"

"Brad!" Her throat was raw from screaming.

The boy stood in front of the door and cried.

Several images rushed through Tina's mind: What Brad would do to the boy once he found them; what would happen once the police arrived, how the story would be in the papers the next day; how they would have to go to court. And before her stood a pathetic boy in a fit of panic.

### XIV.

She and Misty were sitting in the bedroom they now shared every night. They had their schoolbooks open but were not really studying. Instead, they were giggling and chatting of boys and teachers and events in their lives. Tina was happy. She felt

as if she finally knew what a normal life was like and, although she still had nightmares, she savored her new life and craved more.

Then Misty's mother stepped into the room and asked Misty to leave. The tone of her voice made Tina's stomach tense.

She sat down next to Tina and spoke softly. "Dear, there's something I have to tell you. It's about your father. He. . . . Well, he's dead."

In the following days she heard from Misty's parents, from the newspapers and TV, and mostly from her classmates, how her father had hanged himself in his prison cell. It seemed as if every one in her small town knew what had happened. Strangers looked knowingly at her no matter where she went.

The guilt and shame welled up in her, flooding out all goodness and happiness. Within a week she had stopped speaking at all. She withdrew further and further until Misty's parents were no longer able to care for her. Ultimately, she was admitted to a hospital where she stayed until the doctors felt she could function normally again.

## XV.

"Go," Tina said quietly.

He looked down at her.

"Run."

He hesitated for a moment then pulled the door open. As soon as he took off into the night she screamed, "Brad! Help me!"

A figure soon appeared in the open door. Tina screamed and desperately tried to cover herself.

"Brad! She's in here!" Brad's roommate stood in the door, staring at Tina, unsure what to do. She heard Brad running toward the shed. He pushed his way past his roommate and kneeled down by her.

"Call the cops!" Brad ordered.

Brad's roommate ran off toward the house.

Brad put his arms around Tina, sobbing hysterically, and held her.

# **losing place**

*Jay*

The town looks pretty much the same as it did the last time I was home. The same mayor's name is still on the welcome sign at the city limits. The same factory is still pouring black smoke into the sky. My old high school still stands, empty and eerie, as it does every summer.

But as I approached my neighborhood, things didn't seem quite right. I drove through the park, expecting to see it full of kids on summer vacation. But it was deserted save for one elderly couple sitting on a bench. Tim and I, when we were little, spent every day of the summer in the park. It was always full of kids.

As I got closer to home, there were no kids on bikes or playing ball in the street. I didn't recognize anyone. A lot of new families have moved into the neighborhood, but it seems as if they are all older couples with no kids. There was a new family living across the street and, most surprising, there's even someone in Timothy's house next door.

Tim's parents moved away not too long after he was killed and the house stood vacant for quite some time. It was odd seeing the lawn looking taken care of and a fresh coat of paint on the hose after so many years. I wonder what the inside looks like now.

The last time I was inside the house was the night after Dad's funeral. I climbed out my window and went over to Timothy's house, just like I used to do when I was little. I really didn't stop to think about what I was doing; I just did it. I was able to get the back door open and I went inside to what used to be Timothy's room. It was dark, of course. By that time the house had been empty for over a year. It was just big and black and empty and the smallest noises echoed for a long time. And it didn't smell like Timmy's house anymore. It just smelled musty.

Standing in the middle of Timothy's room, I started crying. I cried more than I had cried at Dad's funeral. I think it was because I missed Timmy so much. I really needed his friendship that night.

**Andy**

He has a cool car. I saw him pull up this morning and start carrying stuff into the house across the street. Mom said it must be Mrs. Perry's son home for the summer. He's the youngest person next to me in this neighborhood. I thought it would be cool to go over and talk to him, see what kind of stuff he's moving in, talk to him about college, but Dad called and I had to talk to him.

He wants to come get me for the weekend. I had stuff lined up to do already but it's been a while since I saw him so I figure I better go. Besides, I'd like to get some extra money what with summer coming up and everything. I thought about getting a summer job but Mom told me not to be stupid, that's what child support is for. And I'm not going to have too many summers in life where I can get away with not working. Or too many years of child support left, either. I guess she was right.

Still, I'd like to get a car next year. Mom said Dad would probably take care of that but I know better than to count on him for everything. And I'd like to pick my own car. A cool car like that guy across the street has.

**Jay**

I don't know if he's interested in me or my car. I've smiled and waved at him a few times when I've seen him. I think he must be the only person under twenty in the neighborhood now. He mostly stays across the street. I've only seen him leave a few times, always with the same group of three or four teenagers. It doesn't seem like he has many friends. He does seem somewhat the typical nerd with his glasses and lanky body. I tried to ask Mom about him without appearing to be a pedophile but she didn't have much to say.

In fact, she's been distant all week. Maybe she's just having to adjust to not being alone in the house anymore. She's had it to herself since Dad died. She always told me the door would be open if I ever needed to come back home. But now I wonder if she meant it or if she just said it out of some feeling of parental obligation.

I understand, however, that it's probably the circumstances surrounding all this that's upsetting her. I wish she would at least try to understand. Perhaps she doesn't realize just how badly I needed to come back here and solve this problem.

**Andy**

He might drive a cool car but he is not cool.

He's supposed to be a college guy but he's living over there with his mother and every day I see him coming and going in that stupid Taco Bell uniform.

What a joke!

That car is wasted on him.

**Jay**

He's been sitting over on his sidewalk for an hour watching me wash and wax the car and trying to act like he's not peeking over here. "It's a '68 Mustang," I tell him. Now, I suppose, I'll find out if it's me or the car he's been gawking at for the past few weeks.

"Yeah, I know what it is," he replies, walking across the street. He doesn't have the arrogant tone I find it typical among young guys, like the guys I went to high school with. I never had that arrogance either. I was never too confident. That didn't happen until I went away to college.

"Where'd you get it?" he asks, examining the horse on the front of the car.

"My Dad got it brand new when he was a senior in high school. He won it off a radio contest. He saved it for me."

He looks kind of surprised for some reason.

"Wow. That's really cool. What's your Dad drive now?"

"His last car was a hearse." A dark sense of humor and a sarcastic streak was something I had always possessed. They, like other facets of my personality, never really emerged until I went away to college. It had to do with that severe lack of confidence I had. Dad probably thought once he gave me this car on my sixteenth birthday it would help my self-esteem problem. It didn't. Dad tried a lot of different things to help me. Finally, I think he realized what I always needed was to be on my own and have to rely on myself. He said words to that effect when the time came for me to move to college.

When he came to pick me up for Thanksgiving, I think he saw changes in me already. In the end, I believe he was pleased with me. I will always wonder, though,

what he would have thought had he known the whole story. But I never got the chance to tell him. It was during that long ride home for Thanksgiving that he told me he was sick. Each time I saw him after that never seemed appropriate.

My young friend from across the street hasn't said a word since I made that crack about the hearse. He's studying the car intently, though. Maybe he didn't understand what I said. Maybe he's not as brainy as he looks.

"This is a great car. I wish I had something like it," he says at last.

"Do you drive yet?"

"I can drive. I know how. But I don't turn sixteen till January."

"I see."

"So, uh, what college do you go to?"

"It's a small school in Ohio called Spring Hill. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. It's not very large."

"You like it there?"

"It's great. I like it a lot. I usually stay there year-round but I decided to come home this summer. I miss it already."

"How long have you been going there?"

"Three years. I'll graduate next year."

"What's your major?"

"English."

"Oh." He resumes his inspection of the car. "Well, I better go," he says after a few minutes.

"I'll be seeing you."

"Yeah." He starts walking back across the street. He stops and says, "I'm sorry about your Dad. Sounds like he was a really cool guy."

"Thank you. He was."

As I watch him walk away, I get the feeling I'm missing something obvious. Slowly, it occurs to me: How did he know I was home from college?

**Andy**

He's kind of interesting but he seems really weird and hard to talk to. I wonder if he's always been like that or if it is because he's been in college. Talking to him is kind of like talking to a teacher.

**Jay**

Mom works second shift at the nursing home now. She said they changed her schedule after someone quit. When I get home from Taco Bell, she's already left for work. When she gets home, I'm usually in bed. The only time I get to see her is a few hours in the morning. She talks mostly about work. I know Dad's death left her in a financial bind, but she won't admit that. She helps me pay for school but since I've been working for Professor Hall, I can cover most of that cost myself. I don't like taking her money. I'm sure she has other uses for it.

Still, we have not had a real talk since I got home. In fact, we have not really talked since the end of my freshman year when she came to help me move into my first off-campus apartment. I decided to tell her everything even though I knew she had a lot to cope with because of Dad's cancer. My first year of college had been incredibly eventful and I wanted to share everything with her. I had always enjoyed sharing things with her. Up until that day, she had always listened eagerly when I told her about what I was learning, the new people I was meeting, and the things I was doing outside of class. But telling her that her only child is gay was something she did not want to hear.

Her reaction was coldness and silence. It was so unlike her. I tried to talk to her about it several times after that but it never helped. After she reacted so badly, I decided to wait until things with Dad were . . . resolved before mentioning it again.

Somehow, two years have slipped by and in that time we've done nothing but grow apart. I'm sure she doesn't like to face this issue but now she has to since I am home again and I am a constant reminder.

And I think she lied. I think she asked to work second shift.

So here I sit, in this smelly Taco Bell uniform, waiting for her to get home. I dare not take a shower for fear that she will sneak into bed before I get the chance to talk with her.

And then I hear her car and see the headlights through the window.

"Jay," she says, coming in the front door and obviously surprised to see me.

"Why aren't you in bed? You do work tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yeah. But I thought that maybe we could talk."

"OK," she says casually. She kicks her work shoes into the corner by the door.

"Are you running short on money this week? I can give you a few dollars."

"No. Nothing like that."

She crosses her thin arms and looks at me impatiently. "Well, then what do you need?"

Her tone is making me feel like an intruder. "Just to talk," I say quietly. "We haven't talked in a long time. I thought we could catch up on what's been going on around here while I was away."

She makes a fake laughing noise. "It's a really quiet neighborhood anymore. Not much of the old gang around." She keeps looking at the clock on the wall above the sofa where I am sitting. "Not much to say about that. I'd love to hear about what you've been doing at college, dear, but I'm terribly tired. Maybe one day soon if we both have some time off we can talk or whatever then. All right?" She starts walking toward her bedroom before I can answer.

### **Andy**

He sits home by himself every night after he gets home from Taco Bell. I see him out on the porch, sitting under the light, reading till way past dark. All his friends must be back in college.

He looks up from his book as I go up the walk. "Hello. What can I do for you this evening?" he asks.

What a weird question. "Well, nothing, I guess. I just thought I'd come over, you know. I was just sitting at the house by myself and I saw you over here."

He closes the book and points to the other lawn chair on the porch. "Have a seat. Would you like something to drink? We have some Pepsi in the house."

"No, thanks." I sit down and just sort of . . . sit. I don't really have anything else to say. I'm starting to feel kind of stupid for coming over.



"I never caught your name," he says.

"Oh. I'm Andy. You're Jay, right?"

He looks kind of confused or something. "Yes. How did you know my name? You seem to know quite a lot about me."

"Oh. My mom and your mom are pretty good friends."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They don't go places much anymore since your mom's work schedule changed but they talk on the phone a lot."

"I didn't know. Mom hasn't mentioned it."

"Yeah. Your mom's pretty cool. She helped us move in and everything."

"She did?"

I don't know what the deal is with this guy but every thing I say seems to surprise him. Doesn't he ever talk to his mom? "Uh-huh. She introduced Mom to all the neighbors. And Frank." I point to the house next to his. "She had me and Mom and Frank over to dinner one of the first nights we were here. Frank had just moved in, too."

"Frank?"

"Yeah. He's. . . haven't you met him?" I'm not sure how much I should say. Am I telling him something he's not supposed to know? But there's no secret about Frank. Everyone knows about him.

"No, I haven't met him. Why?"

He's just sort of staring at Frank's house now. "Frank has AIDS."

"What?"

He said that really loud and he looks really mad. Is he going to freak out on me or something? "Uh, yeah. It's no big deal. He's kind of an activist, I guess. He's in the paper sometimes. He goes to city council meetings and stuff."

"And he's a friend of my mother's?" His voice is a lot calmer now but it scares me more than when he yelled.

"Yeah. Real good friends from what I know."

"How much do you know about Frank? How did he contract the disease?"

"I don't know. I don't talk to him that much. He's a nice guy, I guess. But it still kind of scares me, you know?"

"Is he gay?"

I feel like I did that time I was trying to sneak out of school with Pete and Mr. Tyler caught us and asked us what we were doing. I'm not sure how to answer but I know whatever I say will either be really good or really bad. "I'm not sure. I think he is. He works at the theatre downtown. He's kind of queer acting, I suppose. And I see some queer-looking guys over there sometimes."

He doesn't say anything, just stares at Frank's house.

He stands up so quick that it scares me. "Andy, I've enjoyed our conversation and I hope that we can speak again some time. But I think it would be best if you went home now."

"OK." I want to get off this porch as quick as I can. "See ya around," I say as friendly as I can.

I'm just to my house when he goes tearing down the street in his Mustang.

### **Jay**

We have passed the last few weeks in silence. Mother keeps her schedule and I keep mine. I avoid her since it is obvious that's what she wants. A few times, I've overheard her on the phone, talking and giggling and I know it's Frank on the other end. Other times, when she claims to have been "just outside for a little while," I know she has been next door visiting him.

And I have finally seen Frank. He's a tall, gaunt man with thin black hair and sunken, dark eyes. He looks ill. Most of the day he spends in his back yard caring for his immaculate garden. Our eyes met once, when I was carrying the garbage out. He looked as if he was going to speak but said nothing. That incident made me wonder what Mom has told him about me, what she has said to him when she talks to him about the things that she can't talk to me about.

I'll admit it: I am jealous of him. And I am angry with her for being able to talk to him when she won't even make an effort to do so with me.

So I resign myself to this situation for the rest of the summer and console myself with the fact that in August I'll go back to school. I'll just have to write this summer off as a loss. I could have made more money working for Professor Hall. I could have had

more fun spending the summer with my friends. But I thought it was more important to get back on good terms and work through all this stupidity. It's obvious I am wasting my time.

**Andy**

He's sitting over there on the porch again, trying to read as the sun goes down, swatting mosquitoes every now and then. What the hell? The worst he can do is tell me to go home. He doesn't wave when he sees me anymore and he always looks like he's pissed off or something. I didn't mean to make him mad. I don't even know what I said.

"Hello," he says when he sees me coming up the walk. "Have a seat." He doesn't seem mad now, just sort of quiet and sad.

"What's up?"

"Not a lot. Just reading."

"How's work?"

He kind of laughs. "It's Taco Bell. Draw your own conclusions. About all I'm getting from the experience is money and not much of that."

"Oh. Is your school expensive?"

"Somewhat. It's usually not much of a problem."

He says stuff in weird ways and it's kind of hard to understand him sometimes. "Is that why you came back for the summer? To earn some money? Did you have gambling debts or something?" I say it as a joke. He seems to have a weird sense of humor and I'm not sure if he'll laugh.

"Nothing that exciting, no."

"So. Why did you move home?"

"My mother reacted badly when I told her I was gay and I moved home to try to repair our relationship."

He said it so casually that I'm not sure I heard him right. It's kind of a shock. I mean, I never would have figured him to be queer. When I think of queers, I think of people like Frank and his friends.

"Are you all right?"

"Huh?"

"You had an odd expression for a second."

"Oh. No. I'm OK." I don't know what to say, though.

"The way you talked about Frank, I thought you understood."

"Oh. It's not like I'm a good friend of his or anything. I guess you just don't seem the type."

"Whatever. It's neither here nor there."

What the hell does he mean by that? "Yeah," I agree, just to play it cool.

He doesn't respond. I think he's waiting for me to say something, trying to guess my reaction. Pete's dad does the same thing sometimes. He'll say something really weird and then try to make me feel uncomfortable or get me to react a certain way. Pete's mom always tells him to quit playing head games with people. I'm not sure what that means, but I think Jay is doing it now. He's not mean with it like Pete's dad, though. I think Jay really does care what I think.

"So, if you're gay why did you get so pissed off when I told you about Frank?"

I don't think he expected that. "It's a long story," he answers slowly. "The gist of it is that my mother hasn't been able to hold a conversation with me since I told her I'm gay but she has no problem with having a gay friend like Frank."

He's right. It is a long story. That doesn't keep him from going into all the details, though. He seems like he needs to talk about it so I listen.

### **Jay**

I have the day off today but my body won't let me sleep late. So I lie here in bed in this hot room with my windows open and my electric fan running. I don't feel like moving.

I hear a lawnmower.

Peeking through my window blind I see Frank mowing his lawn.

Summers, when I was little, Tim and I would always wait to mow our yards on the same day. We would race to see who could get done the quicker. Afterward, we would take our allowance money and ride our bikes to the shopping center. There used to be a drug store there that had an old-fashioned soda fountain. I'd always get a magazine or

cheap paperback with the money I had left. I could tell Tim got bored waiting for me to make up my mind. He never complained, though.

Once, when we were twelve, I was able to talk an older boy into buying a copy of *Playboy* for us. That was the one purchase that interested Tim. We hurried back to Tim's house, barricaded his bedroom door and eagerly started flipping through the glossy pages.

Tim was thrilled with what he saw. I feigned delight but actually could not determine what was so great about naked women. However, I was very intrigued by Tim's reaction, not to mention the little bulge in his shorts. I let him keep the magazine.

As he got older, Tim grew from a cute little boy with golden hair to a very handsome young man. He had the prettiest green eyes I have ever seen. And he became quite a good athlete. I was attracted to him but even after I realized I was gay, I never seriously thought of him in a sexual way. In the first place, I knew Tim was not gay. I was privy to his tales of sexual conquest, from his first kiss at thirteen to his loss of virginity at sixteen. But more important, he was too much like a brother to me.

I told Tim I was gay the only time he ever came to visit me at school. It was a weekend during the fall semester of my sophomore year. I took him around to a few parties and he seemed to like that aspect of college. Tim had decided to wait before starting college himself. He had told his father that he wanted to take the time to decide on a career. But I don't think he ever planned to go to college. School was never his favorite thing.

That Sunday afternoon, before he left for home, I told him I was gay. He said it made a lot of sense and it explained some things about me that he had always wondered about. Ultimately, he said it would not affect our friendship. I was glad I told him. We promised to talk more about it later.

It was exactly eight days after that when Dad called me and told me that Tim had been killed in a car accident.

I've been able to cope with the loss. But now, seeing his house every day brings back so much and I keep thinking that things would somehow be better if he were here.

**Andy**

God, I love the summer. I glad that I did like Mom said and didn't get a job. Sleeping till noon, doing whatever I want, whenever I want. Like the night Pete and I walked to the park with Denise and Debbie. Damn, that was a great night. Maybe I should ask Debbie to come over some time while Mom is at work. Man, that'd be great. Me and Debbie here in the house alone. I don't know if Debbie would. Pete says he knows a lot of guys that have screwed Debbie. She seems to go for the jocks and I am no jock. She's really beautiful but I had a hard time talking to her that night. I was kind of nervous and she's just not that smart. She seems like. . .what's that?

Sirens.

There's an ambulance across the street. Nobody's home at Jay's house.

Yeah, it's Frank. They're going into his house.

**Jay**

She won't talk about it. She still pretends there's nothing wrong, as if she barely knew Frank, as if his death didn't tear her apart.

This is one of the few meals we've shared all summer. There won't be many more. Next week I move back to school. Nearly three months have passed without a meaningful conversation between us. Even though she is sitting across the table from me, I miss my mother. Rather, the mother I used to have. It's time to do what I came here to do.

"Mom. About Frank. . ."

She looks up quickly. I can't finish my sentence.

"Frank? What about him?"

Voice high-pitched, she is going to deny anything I say. She used to use that voice with Dad when they would argue and she knew she was wrong but didn't want to admit it. "I know you and he were friends. It must have been hard on you when he died."

"No. I barely knew him."

"Mom. I know you were close."

She snorts in frustration and rolls her eyes. "I hardly knew him. I only went to the funeral because I didn't think many people would show up. And he used to give me flowers out of his garden. So I sent flowers, you know, in return."

Her eyes are watering and her voice is softening. Grabbing for her napkin, she knocks her spoon off the table and it hits the floor with a loud clatter. She holds the napkin over her face. "Flowers," she whispers.

I was expecting a fight. She would get defensive, I'd launch some accusations and we'd end up yelling. That situation, I was fully prepared for. I didn't expect this. "Mom. I'm sorry. I lost Tim. I know how it feels to lose a friend. And Dad. We both lost him."

There is no response. She simply dries her eyes, gets up from the table and starts clearing the dishes.

"Mom, I know you are upset. Please talk to me."

"I'm fine." Her voice is shrill again.

"Damn it!" I stand to confront her. She looks shocked at my sudden jump from the chair. It falls backward and hits the dining room wall. "Why do you have to treat me like this? Why do you act like I'm a stranger?"

Her eyes narrow. I've never seen such anger in her face. Her expression disarms me. "You are! I don't know you anymore!" "Why?" I beg. "You could accept Frank. I'm your son, for God's sake!"

She nods her head quickly, as if she agrees with me. "You're right. Frank was not my son. You are."

### **Andy**

I talked to Jay's mom a little bit the other day. Me and Mom saw her at the funeral. She didn't have much to say. I knew Jay wouldn't be there but I haven't seen him at all until just now, across the street putting stuff into his car.

"Hi, Jay," I say, approaching him from behind. "I thought you weren't leaving until next week?"

"I had a change in plans. I'm going back today." He seems pissed-off. Sweat is running off him and he's breathing hard, like he's been packing in a hurry.

"Oh. You got much left to pack? I can help."

"No. This is it."

"Well, hey. It's been nice knowing you. Maybe we can, you know, get together when you come back."

He shakes his head and wipes the sweat off his forehead. "That would be nice but I'm not coming back."

I smile. "I'll be here for a while. I still have a few more years till I graduate. You'll be back to visit before then."

"I am not coming back," he says again.

"Oh. Well, then, good-bye, I guess."

He looks around, to his house, to Frank's, to mine and then back to me. "There's something you have to know. This is not a good place, Andy, this neighborhood. I never put it all together until last night. Once I stopped to think about, though, it all made sense. I don't know why it's this way but this place takes things from you. If you stay here too long, it'll take everything from you. My dad, it drained the life out of him. And my friend, Tim, who used to live in Frank's house, he didn't get out in time and it killed him, too. And now. . . ." He stops talking and rubs his eyes. "I've lost a lot to this place, Andy. I'm not going to let it take anymore."

He sounds like he really means what he says. But it's not making much sense to me.

Jay offers his hand and I shake it.

He gets into his cool car and drives off down the road.



## ***kate's feast***

*There was a plate on the table.*

The carry-in dinners at Aunt Jackie's house were always informal. That was one of the reasons Kate enjoyed them. When other people were around, Betty, her mother, felt less compelled to correct her table manners and lecture her about nutrition. Still, Betty always managed to sit straight across from Kate and, should Kate make a faux pas or attempt to eat something inappropriate, Betty was ready with a correcting glare. The expression on her face could get so stern that it would make Kate's stomach hurt. Then again, Kate always was a nervous child.

*There was a plate on the table. It was sitting directly between Kate and Betty.*

"Why can't I stay with Miss Beck, Mommy? I like her." Kate had overheard words like "mildly retarded" and "special education" but big words confused her. She had no concept of what they meant, only a feeling of dread related to them.

Betty squatted in front of Kate and started to button the top button on Kate's frilly, white blouse. "Because you're a nervous girl and regular classes upset you." Kate's stomach hurt and she was finding it hard to breathe. She squirmed, not wanting her top button fastened. "Hold still!" Betty commanded. "Don't you want to look pretty?"

Betty was wearing the perfume that came from the large bottle sitting on her dressing table. The smell of it hurt Kate's nose. That was the reason why she had picked out a small bottle of a different perfume as a gift for Betty when Aunt Jackie had taken her shopping for Christmas. But Betty never wore the perfume Kate had bought for her. The smell of Betty's perfume and the hair spray holding Betty's tight curls in place had gotten into Kate's eyes and they were watering. "Don't cry!" Betty yelled. "You'll only make it worse if you cry. You have to go to a different class and that's all there is to it!"

It was then that Kate began to cry.

*There was a plate on the table. It was sitting directly between Kate and Betty. On the plate were some cupcakes which Aunt Jackie had baked.*

When Kate was ready for the seventh grade she went to a new school. It was an old building and her classroom was in the basement. She was always afraid of the pipes and wires on the ceiling, criss-crossing like a huge spider web ready to fall down and trap her. One day, they really did look like they were going to collapse on her. She bolted from her desk, ran out of the building and stopped in the parking lot where stood, shivering in terror. The school nurse helped her back into the building, promising all the way that the ceiling was not going to fall. Kate saw all the faces in the windows staring at her as she slowly trudged back into the building.

Betty was furious when she arrived to pick up Kate and take her home for the rest of the day. Only Kate, however, knew how angry Betty was. Betty spoke pleasantly and concernedly to the nurse but Kate saw that Betty's lips were drawn back and thinned out, the way they always looked when she was angry. Kate began to cry.

She resisted all efforts to calm her down. The nurse finally, in frustration, suggested that Betty go ahead and take her home. Kate was led through the halls, out the door and to the car, crying all along.

She lay in the back seat as her mother drove home. Kate sometimes got car sick and the combination of the day's stress and the rolling of the car made her dizzy and nauseous. She closed her eyes and was very still, acting as if she were asleep.

"Embarrassment," Betty uttered just loudly enough for Kate to hear.

Later that evening, at the dinner table, Kate sheepishly asked Betty why she couldn't be moved to another classroom since she didn't like the one she was in.

"Because you're a nervous girl and regular classes upset you," Betty answered.

*There was a plate on the table. It was sitting directly between Kate and Betty. On the plate were some cupcakes which Aunt Jackie had baked. "Help yourself, Kate," Jackie had said, smiling, when she put the plate on the table.*

Kate was now taking classes at the same high school Betty and Jackie had attended. Betty often talked with Jackie about the fun and good times they had had in that school. Kate wondered if it was really the same school because she always had a miserable time there. Her classes were held in three rooms in the back of the building near the swimming pool. The smell of chlorine made her stomach ache and her nose hurt and the splashing and yelling of the people in the pool frightened her. Through the walls, it sounded like screaming.

Kate wanted to have fun at school like Betty and Jackie said they had had and she wanted to be away from the smell and the noise. The other students in her classes terrified her and none were her friend. There was boy who once hit the teacher. Another girl once urinated on herself at her desk. The next day, Kate was relieved that the smell of chlorine had returned. Still, she asked Betty why she could not go to different classes. "Because you're a nervous girl and regular classes upset you."

*There was a plate on the table. It was sitting directly between Kate and Betty. On the plate were some cupcakes which Aunt Jackie had baked. "Help yourself, Kate," Jackie had said, smiling, when she put the plate on the table. The cupcakes were chocolate with white icing and colored sprinkles on top.*

Today had been a good one for Kate. It was Sunday and she had not had to go to school. And the dinner at Aunt Jackie's house meant that there would be a few hours during which she would not have to be alone with Betty. It was always so quiet in their house with just the two of them. The noise and people at school frightened Kate. But the noise and the people at Aunt Jackie's house were pleasant and fun. Warm and happy laughter, just like the families on television had, and lots of people to talk to.

Kate liked talking to Aunt Jackie and her cousins. With so many people around, she often was able to talk for several minutes before Betty interrupted her or corrected her. They would talk to Kate differently than Betty or her teachers talked to her. She could take her time, find her words and let them come slowly. Betty and her teachers demanded that Kate talk fast and the words would get tangled up and sound weird when they finally left her mouth.

Still, Betty was always there. Even when Kate was talking to Jackie alone, she still felt as if Betty were looking over her shoulder, saying, "Don't slouch. Say it right. Talk plain. Smile more. Look nice. You're wrinkling your clothes."

Betty was the one who woke her up in the morning. Kate would sleepily stagger into the kitchen where breakfast, servings precisely measured on the kitchen scale, would be waiting for her. One piece of toast, no butter, bran cereal with skim milk and perhaps a piece of fruit. No waffles, sloppy with butter and syrup, nor sweet cereal in brightly-colored boxes like Aunt Jackie served on the rare occasion when Kate was lucky enough to spend the night at her house. "I hate sending you there," Betty said once. "God knows what she feeds you. You'll turn out fat and ugly like her if you eat like that."

Betty was the one who put her to bed at night. Kate was afraid of the dark but Betty had taken her night light away when she was twelve. All the stuffed animals she clutched at night when she was frightened were gone the next year. Most nights, Kate held her pillow tightly around her chest and slept lightly. Nightmares were common. "You'll grow out of this soon, I hope," Betty would say, sitting on Kate's bed after being awakened by her daughter's screaming. "You are too damned old for this. God, we're going to look like hell in the morning if you don't let us get some sleep."

Only Betty was always there.

Kate vaguely remembered someone big and warm who would sit on her bed and hum till she fell asleep. She asked Betty about it once. "I never did that. No one ever did that. You were dreaming."

Kate thought it may have been her father. She sometimes wondered where her father was but was always too afraid to ask.

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Aunt Jackie sat down next to Kate. "How is school going, hon?"

Kate had told Aunt Jackie before that she did not like school. Aunt Jackie really cared and listened. "Well. . .," Kate began slowly.

"She's doing terribly," Betty spoke up. "Her last evaluation was terrible. I don't know what the hell I'm going to do about her."

Kate's own words evaporated. Her mouth, open to speak, filled with air. She closed her mouth and chewed the air.

"I swear to God," Betty continued. "I do everything I can for her. But her pretty clothes, feed her right, get her medicine for her zits, take her to have her hair done. And look at her." Betty flung her hand in Kate's direction.

"She looks fine," Jackie said happily.

Kate had spent almost a half an hour that morning fixing her hair just right in the mirror. She knew it wasn't perfect but Betty demanded they leave for Aunt Jackie's house at exactly eleven-thirty.

Kate crossed her arms over her chest. She liked the red top she was wearing and it went well with the jeans she was wearing. Betty, seeing her in it had said, "My God. Well, we don't have time for you to change." The jeans, though, felt too tight, especially now that her stomach was knotted and her breath was short. She had told Betty they were too tight when Betty bought them for her. "You just need to lose some weight," Betty answered.

Kate was still grinding her jaws, chewing the air.

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"Her teachers say the same thing," Betty was continuing. "She won't let them help her."

"Well, she's getting to be woman," Jackie said. "Kate, you'd like to do things your own way, wouldn't you?"

Aunt Jackie's words surprised Kate. She had always felt that way but she was not good enough with words to form the thought and really understand it. Aunt Jackie had done that for her and suddenly Kate understood it very well. She opened her mouth, ready to agree, to say, "Yes! That is what I want. I want to do things my own way!"

But Betty interrupted before Kate's words came out. "Do things her own way? Ha! That's a joke. I still have to buy her clothes, lay them out for her, decide what she's going to eat. This kid can't make a decision to save her life."

Aunt Jackie put her hand on Kate's shoulder. Kate was chewing on more aborted words. Her mouth, empty, demanded to be filled with words. But she had no words. Words belonged to Betty.

Everything belonged to Betty. Kate had nothing.

*There was a plate on the table. It was sitting directly between Kate and Betty. On the plate were some cupcakes which Aunt Jackie had baked. "Help yourself, Kate," Jackie had said, smiling, when she put the plate on the table. The cupcakes were chocolate with white icing and colored sprinkles on top. Kate, who liked the things Aunt Jackie made, wanted a cupcake very badly. Betty, lips drawn and thin, looked across the table at Kate and shook her head. Kate reached across the table, took a cupcake from the plate, ripped the paper off and shoved the whole thing in her mouth.*