

Definitions
by Jenna Nissan

My mom says that having a baby is like the earth giving birth to the moon. Brandon, my brother, says this doesn't make any sense because the earth isn't the moon's mother, and even if it was, the sizes don't match up to a mom and her baby. He says that when a human has a baby, it's more like an orange coming through a straw: pulpy and painful and full of juice. I believe him because he is seventeen and knows about these things.

Besides, all that talk about the earth and the moon is just another example of how moms are *sentimental*. Sentimental was Monday's Buzz Word of the Day for English class, which means you have to look it up in the dictionary and use it in a sentence.

I wrote, *My mom is feeling sentimental because Dad died.*

Usually, Mrs. Schneider hands back my paper full of little red check marks and circles. She doesn't use X's, even if you get it wrong, because English is first period, and I think she understands how it can feel to start your day with big red X's across your page. A circle is kinder than an X.

But today, instead of my homework, Mrs. Schneider handed me a sealed white envelope and flicked her long, bony finger at me so I would lean in close.

"Jamie, sweetie," she said. She spoke in one of those adult whispers where the voice is just airy without actually being any quieter. "I arranged for you to go to the guidance office today during class." She tapped her red nail against the envelope. It was addressed to *Mrs. Randone* in swirly script.

"Did I fail my homework?" I asked.

Mrs. Schneider flinched a little because I didn't pretend to whisper. "No, no, no," she said, and laughed, nervous. It's weird how people laugh at things that aren't funny and cry when they're happy and don't cry when they're sad. It's like all the emotional tubes get tangled in a Boy Scout knot and nothing comes out right. Maybe we girls have ours more tangled than boys, and that's why moms are so sentimental.

"I just thought—." She stopped and whispered for real now. "I just thought maybe you'd want to discuss what you wrote with Mrs. Randone. Even if you don't think you want to. Sometimes we can't say the really hard things, so we write them down."

She placed the envelope in my open hand and lightly touched my shoulder. I kept my eyes on the envelope as I slung my backpack over my shoulder and pushed in my chair and walked out the door. I didn't want to see the eyes of the kids in my class. I knew what they were thinking: *Jamie Neil is sentimental*.

When I reached the guidance office, the old lady with white curls sitting at the front desk told me Mrs. Randone would just be five minutes. I knew the routine. I took a seat in the waiting room.

There is never anything to do in a waiting room, which I suppose is sort of the point, even though the people who make them always try to distract you with magazines and little posters on the wall. I'd read the one above my head a hundred times: *The Self-Esteem Bubble*. At the top, there was a drawing of a little man smiling in the way only cartoons can. He was surrounded by a giant bubble, which was being pumped full of air by compliments, like "creative," "intelligent," "out of this world." He looked so inflated I thought he might float away. Below that drawing, the same bubble-man was frowning,

and his bubble was being attacked. Stupid. Ugly. Worthless. The words made little pops. Some were shaped like needles. The caption read: *Don't be a deflator*. I wished for the thousandth time that I was still in kindergarten and not sixth grade, so that at least I wouldn't know how to read posters like these.

I decided to watch the old lady at the desk instead because I figured she'd at least be more interesting than a corny poster. I wondered what she would do all day if there was no Mrs. Randone and no one who wanted to come see her. It's a weird job to have, really. Guardian of the waiting room. Waiting to make other people wait. She was staring at her computer screen, and I wondered if whatever was there was really so important or if she was just concentrating really hard on not looking at the posters.

Besides, it seems to me that all rooms are waiting rooms. In the classroom, I wait for the bell to ring. On the bus, I wait to go home. In my kitchen, I wait for dinner to be served. People are always waiting for something. Waiting to wait for something else.

Mrs. Randone came in just then, all smiles and poofy brown hair. "Come in, Jamie," she said, swinging her office door wide as if I was a guest she was welcoming to her home.

I handed her the white envelope that said *Mrs. Randone* in swirly script and sat down in the big leather chair next to her desk. Mrs. Randone asked me how I was and said something about the weather and going to the beach with her son. I knew she was trying to make me feel comfortable. She put on tiny brown-rimmed glasses, tore open the envelope, and read the paper carefully and quietly. I sank into the chair and imagined it was swallowing me whole.

When she had finished, she removed her glasses and put them back in their case and then folded her hands on the desk. Just then, I was waiting for this to be over.

“How are you today, Jamie?” she asked.

It was the same question she had asked me before, but I knew this time it was different, that she expected a real answer. “I’m okay,” I said. It was true.

“So I guess Mrs. Schneider must have told you we’re here to talk about your homework?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, “about the buzz word of the day.”

“It’s not really about the homework, you know. It’s because what you wrote is saying something about how you’re feeling. And that’s what I’d like to talk about, if you feel up to it.” She leaned back in her chair as if she was waiting to listen.

“Well, I think it’s a stupid assignment,” I said.

“Why’s that?”

“Because,” I said. “You don’t actually learn anything about a word by looking it up in the dictionary. All a dictionary does is tell you another word for the word, and usually most people don’t understand that word either. It’s like, if I was trying to explain a word to someone, I’d give an example or tell a story. Dictionaries don’t tell you anything.”

“And what would you say for sentimental?”

“I’d say what I wrote,” I said. “I think someone could understand that.”

“And what if I didn’t?” Mrs. Randone asked. “How would you explain it to me?”

I looked down and fiddled with the string on my sweatshirt hood. “I’d say that since Dad died, Mom has been taking out old photo albums. That I saw her once in his closet, trying on his shirts. That she cries a lot.”

I didn’t want to look at Mrs. Randone, but I knew right then that she would be nodding and listening as if this was a normal thing to say, as if she wasn’t feeling really sorry for me, even though she was.

“I spoke to your mom on the phone this morning,” she said. “Just to get a little background before our meeting. She told me you were supposed to have a little sister too, last month, but there was a complication with the pregnancy.” She placed her hands on her desk and leaned forward in her chair. “That’s a lot of things, I think, to feel sentimental about.”

I felt my cheeks get hot when she mentioned my sister. I folded my arms tightly across my chest and gripped the sleeves of my sweatshirt. My sister was supposed to be a secret.

“Do you ever feel like doing things your mom does?” she asked. “Looking at old photos or other things to remember your dad?”

“No,” I said. “And I don’t like thinking about my sister, either, if you’re going to ask.”

“If you had to give a word to describe how *you’re* feeling, what do you think it would be?”

I thought long and hard about this, not because I cared about giving Mrs. Randone an answer, but because it was something I had thought long and hard about for a long time. “I don’t know,” I said, finally. “I don’t know if there’s a word for it.”

Mrs. Randone leaned back in her chair and bit the end of her pen. “Tell you what,” she said. “What if we make a little arrangement. I’ll talk to Mrs. Schneider and see that you don’t have to define buzz words for the next few weeks, at least.”

I liked Mrs. Randone a little better then.

“But instead,” she said, “I want you to write your own dictionary, the way you would describe words, any word you want.”

This sounded suspicious. Writing a dictionary was a big task, and I was no Merriam Webster. “Like for homework?” I asked.

“Nobody would have to read it but you,” she said. “I would give you an assignment sheet. And at the end of each week your mom would just have to check that you’d been writing, just describing a few words a week, and she’d sign off on it. You could drop it off in my office and to Mrs. Schneider. Case closed.” She smiled like we were in on a sneaky plan.

I thought it over. It sounded like an okay idea. I did hate buzz words, after all. I told Mrs. Randone it would be fine, and she started writing a letter and told me to come in and talk to her anytime I wanted, and then she sent me back to first period, this time with a white envelope that said *Mrs. Schneider* in red, swirly script.

When I got home from school, Mom was in the garden, and Brandon was at work, probably taking pizza orders or cleaning crusty cheese off tables. I didn’t feel like going to the garden, because Mom always asks me to help her, and then there are worms, and I hate worms. It’s a funny thing about gardens. Even the prettiest things always have something awful underneath.

I sat on the couch and waited for Mom. She came inside wearing a tank top and loose yellow shorts and handed me a single red tulip. “Here, pretty girl,” she said and kissed me on the forehead.

I flinched at her touch, but I took the tulip anyway. I guess she could tell I wasn’t in the happiest of moods because she sat down across from me and placed her hands on my knees. Her thin, delicate fingers were smudged with soil.

“You feeling okay, Jamiebee?” she asked. She brushed the damp wisps of hair off her forehead and studied me with her wide brown eyes.

“You should ask Mrs. Randone,” I said.

Mom frowned. “I’m sorry,” she said. “She called me this morning. Your English teacher was worried about you. I thought it might be easier for me to explain than for you to, that’s all.”

“Did she tell you about the dictionary?”

“Yes,” she said. She wiped the sweat from the freckled bridge of her nose. “She called me after you met to tell me how it went. How do you feel about it?”

I didn’t answer. I wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

“Did you tell Jillian?” she asked.

I shook my head. Jillian was my best friend, but lately I hadn’t been telling her much of anything. Not because she was different or because I was trying to hide things from her, just because lately I hadn’t felt like telling anyone much of anything.

“We’re all here for you to talk to, Jamie,” Mom said. “I hope you know that.”

She waited a long time for me to answer, but I couldn’t find the words just then. Mom placed her palm against my cheek and rubbed her thumb slowly over my chin.

Finally, she released a low, shallow breath and let her hand fall from my face. She turned away from me and went back to the garden. I went to my room and wondered when Brandon would be home, and when dinner would be ready, and if Jillian was going to stop telling me all her secrets because I'd stopped telling her mine. I was waiting for answers I didn't have. I brought the tulip to my face and let the little yellow sprouts inside tickle my nose. The scent made me think of Mom. She always smelled of her garden.

Through the window, I could see her struggling with weeds. There was an old tin bucket next to her full of leafy scraps. She was wearing her yellow rubber gloves and her big-brimmed hat to block out the sun. She pulled a handful of weeds up from the soil and tossed them in the bucket with a quick flick of her wrist. Then she tugged at another handful a little more forcefully, and then another, and another, until she was ripping the roots from the soil and throwing them down beside her, until she was tearing at anything in her reach, and a red tulip came up in her fist and fell across her knees. She stopped, her chest heaving, and raised the tulip to her eyes. It fell from her fingers, and she covered her face with her hands and rocked back and forth over her knees. A loose strand of hair clung to her cheek.

I took out an old red notebook from the bottom of a drawer and called it my dictionary. *Garden*, I wrote. *Where my mother goes to cry*. Then, remembering that words can have more than one meaning, I added: *The way she smells in springtime*.

Brother.

I want to write about my brother because he has taught me something important for my dictionary: sometimes, things have to be a little bit messy. I know dictionaries are supposed to be alphabetical, but sometimes, things just don't happen in the right order, like the time I had a spelling test the day after my birthday and had to sit at my kitchen table memorizing letters after cake. Life is like that sometimes. I want to write a real-life dictionary.

But like I was saying about Brandon, he's the biggest mess I know. He leaves his old boxer shorts all over the floor so that when you walk in his room, you might even think they are his carpet. When he reads a book or watches a movie or listens to a CD, he just tosses it on the floor, like it belongs there. Mom says boys are just like that, but Dad was always very neat and wore a tie and cleaned the dishes, so I think this is something special about Brandon.

But it wouldn't be enough just to define my brother as a slob. There are so many other things to know about him. There are the things that everyone knows, like that he drives a black truck and plays on the Varsity basketball team. And his friends know that he has a new girlfriend every few months and that if they visit him at Jimmy's Pizza when he's working, he'll give them a free slice.

There are other things to know about him, though, that most people would never guess. Like, when I was little, he used to read me stories and make up different voices for all the characters, like he was performing a play. And he sings Elvis songs in the shower but makes me promise not to tell. And he keeps a box of Snickers bars under his bed that he sometimes shares with me, and he cried when our dog Midnight died two years ago.

Plus he wears Baxter Hair Gel for Men, even though he doesn't have much hair at all, and I wouldn't even think of calling him a man.

When Brandon got home from work tonight, he came into my room without knocking, which gets me really mad sometimes. But tonight, I was happy to see him.

"Hey, squirt," he said. He picked up my gray teddy bear and started tossing him around in the air. He was still wearing his bright red Jimmy's Pizza T-shirt, and he smelled faintly of pepperoni.

"Hey, ugly," I said. We are allowed to say these things to each other because somehow, if you're saying it your brother, it doesn't mean quite the same thing.

He smiled and tossed the teddy bear at me, then ran his hand over the bristles of his short blonde hair. "Working hard?"

I closed my dictionary and put it away in a drawer, because I didn't want him to know what I had written about Mom.

"Whoa," he said, grinning that grin he grins whenever he's up to no good. "Something private?" He tugged at the loose collar of his T-shirt, which was slipping over his shoulder. All of his shirts are oversized.

"It's extra credit," I said.

"Well, okay," he said. He swung his legs up onto my bed and folded in his knees so that his feet wouldn't dangle over the edge. He lay looking at the ceiling, and after a minute, he wasn't smiling anymore. Lately, since Dad died, Brandon comes into my room sometimes and lies on my bed without saying a word. I sit at my desk and read, and the two of us just sit together, in our own kind of quiet.

Brandon got up after a little bit and went next door to his room. A minute later, my door opened, and he tossed a Snickers bar on my desk.

“For your extra credit,” he said. He closed the door. “Goodnight, squirt,” he said, from the other side.

“Goodnight, Brandon,” I said.

I took a bite of my Snickers and started wondering how Brandon would define *sister* if he had to. If he would write, “She sits at night and writes in a red notebook for extra credit. She still sleeps with a gray teddy bear. She loves omelettes with ham and onion, especially the way Dad used to make them, with just the right amount of cheese. She used to catch caterpillars and name them.”

So I wrote, *Brother. The person you share secrets with without speaking.*

Dog.

Here’s another secret: Brandon cried when Midnight died two years ago, but I didn’t. It started with a big lump near the bottom of his paw, like he had swallowed a tennis ball and somehow gotten it stuck in one of his veins. Before we knew it was sickness, Brandon used to grab hold of it and tell me Midnight was growing a baby on his ankle. “How’s little George today?” he’d ask. “How’s Sally?”

“Midnight is a boy,” I’d say. “He can’t have babies.”

“Still.”

Then the tennis ball started to bleed. I came home from school one day, and Mom noticed little spots of blood on the carpet. Midnight was sitting in the corner, licking his paw. Where there used to be black fur, the insides of the tennis ball were coming through,

except they were mushy and white and veiny, not like a tennis ball at all. I was little then, but I thought for a minute maybe Midnight really was growing a baby, and something had gone very wrong.

“Jamie,” Mom said, “why don’t you go to your room and play? I think Midnight isn’t feeling very well, and he needs me right now.”

I wanted to be with him, to scratch his favorite spot at the bottom of his ears, or kiss the tip of his nose, the way Dad did when I got sick. “He needs me too,” I said.

Midnight tried to stand then, but he let out a little whimper and fell down, landing against the wood paneling with a loud thump. Mom let out a small cry that sounded a lot like Midnight’s and then covered her mouth with her hand, as if to stop the sound from getting out.

“Jamie,” she said.

She didn’t have to ask me this time because I was scared, too scared of my toes touching Midnight’s blood on the carpet and too scared of finding out what dogs look like when they cry. I ran upstairs to my room and sat on the edge of my bed and waited for it all to be over and for Midnight to come running up the stairs, no baby, no tennis ball, just Midnight, wagging his tail.

I don’t know why, but I started thinking about the time earlier that year when Dad was driving me to a dentist appointment, and we hit a raccoon with the car. I had been feeling a little bit scared, I guess, like I usually do when I have to go to the dentist, so Dad was making up a story about little lobsters that live in my mouth and pinch dentists’ fingers before they can touch my teeth in a hurtful way.

“Then why haven’t I seen them?” I asked.

“Because you have a good dentist!” he insisted. “Really, when I was little, I had a dentist so bad he used to hop around the room with little lobsters clinging to his fingernails. He was never able to hurt me, but he never helped me either, because the lobsters were always getting him first.”

Just then, there was a loud thump from under us, and the car rocked back and forth a little like it was struggling over an ant hill. Dad’s face went as white as a ghost, and he slammed on the brakes, as if he could still stop whatever had already happened. The car went still, and we sat there alone on the quiet road, just me, Dad, and whatever was beneath us.

“Daddy?” I asked. “Daddy, what happened?” I had been scared about the dentist before, but just then I couldn’t keep my hands from shaking.

Dad didn’t answer for what felt like hours. Then he placed his hand over mine and said, “Stay in the car, sweetie. I’m going to take a look.”

I didn’t want him to leave me, but something about the look on his face made me more afraid of seeing what had happened than of being alone in the car. Dad took a deep breath and opened the door and placed each foot carefully on the pavement. I knew then that he was preparing himself for something awful. When he closed the door, I couldn’t stop my hands from shaking again, because his hands were gone.

He came around to my side of the car and dropped down below the window. I could just see the back of his head, his neat, short brown hair and the collar of his shirt. He groaned and mumbled something I couldn’t hear. I heard his hand smack the pavement. It was another minute before his face was at the window, pale like a ghost’s again. His brow was creased and damp with sweat.

He opened my door just enough to stick his head in. I noticed he had missed a small patch of hair on his clean-shaven chin. “How are you, sweetie?” he asked.

“Okay,” I said. I tucked my hands under my legs. “What... what is it?”

“We’re going to play a kind of game, okay?”

“A game?” I asked.

“Well, not a game, really. But a trick.”

“Like a magic trick?”

“Yeah, kind of like a magic trick.”

“How does it work?”

“I want you to close your eyes and count to ten five times, and when you’re done, this will all be over.”

“That’s not really a trick,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “But I need you to close your eyes.”

“You could have just asked,” I said.

“Okay. Can you close your eyes and count to ten five times?”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“What is it?”

He placed his fingers over my eyelids. “Close them,” he said.

So I did.

One, two. The door closed, and I heard Dad’s footsteps on the pavement. Three, four. The trunk opened. Five, six, seven, eight. Dad’s hands were knocking around in the trunk. Ten. The trunk closed with a loud click. One. Footsteps on the pavement again. I

thought I could even hear Dad's breath near my window. Five. I heard sounds like something dragged across sandpaper. Something heavy. Something that made Dad groan. Something alive, I thought, or something that used to be alive.

Nine. I opened my eyes. I looked out the window, and a dead raccoon was staring back at me, only I knew it wasn't seeing me the way I was seeing it. Its eyes looked like round, glass marbles. Its tongue and some part of its insides were hanging out of its mouth. Dad was holding it in his arms the way you would hold a baby. He had wrapped it in a towel, only the towel was stained red and purple, like even its bruises were leaking out. He turned to carry it away, but I saw at the other end that its feet were crushed like pancakes and a pile of red insides hung in a giant wet knot.

I covered my eyes with my hands and started counting to ten again, fast. I was thinking about how Mom and Dad had always told me that dying was just like falling asleep and dreaming forever, but the raccoon's eyes weren't even closed, and if he was dreaming, it must have been nightmares. I was thinking how my feet had been right over him when he died, and maybe his soul had drifted up into my body. I kept seeing how all his insides were on the outside and how his tongue was probably tasting his insides, and what did they taste like, and could he taste anymore, anyway. I was thinking there was nothing between us but glass.

The car door opened and Dad got inside before I had finished counting, but I kept counting anyway. After I had stopped, I still didn't want to take my hands away from eyes. I felt Dad's hand on my knee.

"Jamie," he said, "it's okay, you can open your eyes now. It's all over."

My hands were still shaking, but I kept them pressed tight against my eyelids. I tried to rub out all the pictures in my brain. Dad took each of my hands in his and pulled them gently away from my face. When I opened my eyes, I was staring into his. The thin creases in the corners of his eyes were drawn tight, and I could feel his warm breath on my face.

“Are you crying?” he asked.

I wasn’t, but I didn’t want to answer, because if you’re not crying, it means that everything’s okay, and everything wasn’t okay.

Dad stared into my eyes for a long time, and I didn’t blink, so that his eyes smeared into round, blue balls and his face became like a painting. I let my eyes blur until I was staring into nothing. He must have seen the raccoon in my eyes. They gave me away. He kissed me on the forehead and squeezed my hands tighter. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Should we give him a funeral?” I asked.

Dad closed his eyes. “How about we give him one here in the car?”

“Okay,” I said. I glanced down. “How does a funeral go?”

“I’ll do the funeral part,” Dad said. “You can just listen.”

He took both of my hands inside of his like he was hiding them inside a cave. “I want to say—” He took a deep breath. “I want to say I’m sorry. I took a life. I don’t know what kind of life he had, but we’re sorry he lost it. I hope he rests peacefully.” Dad was quiet for a long time. Then he looked at me. “Is there anything you want to say?”

I thought for a minute. “I’m sorry for his mom,” I said. “And his whole family. And for his kids, if he had any kids. I hope they’re okay.”

That was my first funeral. We never made it to the dentist.

What I didn't know then, sitting on the bed while Midnight bled downstairs, was that another funeral was right around the corner. It didn't happen right away. Mom took Midnight to the vet, and we found out that what Brandon called his baby was actually called cancer. We found out there was nothing we could do. The vet wrapped Midnight's paw in a soft bandage, like the one Kelly Frank got on her arm after falling off the monkey bars that she made everyone sign during recess. The vet said to give Midnight some time until his paw hurt too much to keep going, and then we should put Midnight to sleep.

Afterwards, Mom and Dad told me that sometimes dying really could be like falling asleep, and that it didn't always happen the way it did with the raccoon. They said what happened to the raccoon was just a horrible accident. But still, over the next few weeks, whenever Midnight's blood would soak through the white bandage and Mom would have to change it, I thought of the raccoon's insides. I thought of its marble eyes that couldn't have been dreaming because they were so still.

During those weeks, Brandon stopped making jokes about Midnight's baby, and Dad gave Midnight extra treats, and Mom always went into her bedroom after she changed Midnight's bandages and then didn't come out for a long time. Then one night, just before we went to sleep, Mom called me and Brandon into her room. We sat down at the end of the bed, on the pillowy comforter that looked like a garden.

"I have something difficult to tell you," Mom said.

Brandon looked down and started pulling at the hairs on his arm, like he always does when he's nervous.

“Tomorrow when you’re both at school, I’m going to take Midnight to the vet to put him to sleep,” Mom said. She spoke slowly and carefully like she had practiced saying the words many times. “It’s hard for him to walk now, and I think he’s in a lot of pain. I don’t think it’s fair to keep him with us anymore.” She looked down and pressed her fingers into the comforter. “He’s part of the family, and I hope you both know it’s okay to be really sad about losing him. I thought you might want to say goodbye tonight before you went to bed.”

I didn’t know what to say, and Brandon didn’t answer either. It was so quiet in the room that I could hear Midnight’s nails scrape against the wood floor outside the door.

Mom stood up and took both of us in her arms and kissed us both on the head. My cheek pressed into her thin shoulder bone as she drew me towards her. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I love you.”

She walked into her bathroom and closed the door, and me and Brandon stayed sitting on the bed. “Do you want to go first?” he asked.

I didn’t answer. I was thinking about the raccoon and how I hadn’t known him, but he must have had a favorite treat just like Midnight loved rawhide bones, and he must have had a favorite sleeping spot like Midnight liked the green couch in the living room, and he must have had a cute face like Midnight’s before it was flattened by our tires. It didn’t seem fair, somehow, that I would always remember Midnight more just because I had known him.

Brandon took my hand. “Come on,” he said. “We’ll say goodbye together.”

He led me out into the hallway, and Midnight was there, looking up at us with his round, dark eyes and wagging his black tail. He didn't know we were going to make him die tomorrow, and he still loved us, and that didn't seem fair either.

Brandon dropped down to the floor and took Midnight's head in his hands and rocked it back and forth and buried his nose in Midnight's fur. He kept his face there for a long time. When Brandon looked up, I saw that Midnight's fur was wet with his tears. He hid his face from me and walked into his room and closed the door.

I knelt down beside Midnight and swallowed the ball in my throat and let my hand rest against the softest part of his ear because it was the last time I would ever feel it. I told him I loved him in my brain because I couldn't say the words out loud. Then I closed my eyes and went into my room and shut the door and counted to ten five times fast. I waited for my tears to come, because I knew Midnight and that meant I should be able to cry for him, but every time I thought of him I thought of knotted insides and glass eyes, and I felt sick inside my stomach instead of sad inside my heart.

The door opened, and Brandon came inside. His eyes looked all red and swollen. "You okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

He looked down at his feet. "Well," he said. "I'll see you in the morning." He turned to leave, but then stopped. "Hey, Jamie?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"Don't tell anyone... you know, that I cried."

"I won't," I said.

He closed the door and went back to his room, and this time the whole house was silent. I stayed awake thinking about how Brandon had said “don’t tell,” and how Mom had gone inside the bathroom, and how Dad was in the living room with the TV on, and how Midnight was somewhere alone in the house on his last night alive. I strained my ears against the quiet, but no sound ever came. Here’s what I know now: *The dog is the family member you’re not supposed to cry for.*

Bus driver.

When I got on the bus this morning, Jillian was waiting in our usual spot. We’ve been sitting in the middle row since the first grade because it’s close enough to the back to listen in on the popular kids, but close enough to the front to have some peace and quiet if we want it. Today, I was in the mood for some peace and quiet.

I slid in next to Jillian and said, “Hi.”

She was hugging her backpack to her chest and resting her chin on it like it was a giant pillow. She yawned. “Morning,” she said.

We didn’t say anything else for a long time, and I watched the houses pass through the window. My neighborhood reminds me of the canned goods aisle at the supermarket. All the houses are the same shape, but different colors. Sometimes I play a game with myself where I try to find the house on each block that breaks the pattern. There is always at least one that doesn’t fit. Sometimes it’s a small detail, like maybe it has a fence where the other ones don’t, or a front porch, or a longer driveway. But sometimes it’s something more obvious, like the yellow house on my street that’s only

one story instead of two and has a statue of an elephant in the front yard. My house fits in perfectly, but I've always wondered what it would be like to live somewhere else.

"Anything good from the back of the bus this morning?" I asked Jillian. The silence had gone on a long time, and I wanted to be the one asking the questions.

She shrugged. "The usual. Kenny and Andrew were plotting how to steal something from Grace's backpack when she gets on. I guess they figure she'll throw a fit." She played with the frayed end of her braid and tugged the rubberband off. I watched her undo the ropes of yellow hair and weave them idly back together. I put my hand in my pocket and slid the front of my cell phone up, then down, up, then down.

Jillian turned her face toward me and scrunched her eyes a little, the way she always does when she's thinking over something carefully. The brown freckles across her nose folded into the creases of her eyes. "I heard you got called into guidance last week," she said.

I glanced down. "Who said?"

"I don't know," she said. "I heard it around."

I swallowed, hard. I hated the thought of people talking about me. "Well," I said, "you must have heard it from *someone*. I mean, someone had to have said it for you to hear it."

Jillian rested her cheek against the blue canvas of her backpack but continued to look me in the face. She's always looking at you when you're talking, like it helps her make sense of every word you say. Lately, this makes me nervous. "Greg Klein, in gym class," she said. "But actually, I was wondering why you didn't tell me."

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. It wasn’t a big deal. I just made a mistake on my homework.”

“But it’s not Mrs. Randone’s job to correct homework,” Jillian said.

“I know. But you know how they are about me lately. Everything’s a big deal, even if it’s not.” I unzipped my sweatshirt, then zipped it back up. “And this wasn’t,” I added.

“Okay,” Jillian said. The look she got on her face was the same look Dad used to get when he couldn’t finish the crossword in the morning paper. It’s the same look Mom gets whenever she talks to me these days.

“They’re making me write a dictionary,” I blurted out.

Jillian lifted her head from her backpack. The look on her face vanished like smoke, and she looked like Jillian again. “A dictionary? Why?”

I shrugged. “I told Mrs. Randone I thought the Buzz Word of the Day was stupid. So she said I could write my own dictionary instead.”

Jillian scrunched up her eyes again. “That sounds like a lot of work,” she said.

“Not really. I can pick any word I want. It doesn’t have to be hard words.”

She pointed to her foot. “So you could pick *shoe*?” Then to her face. “Or *nose*?”

“I could,” I said, “but those are kind of boring.”

“I guess you’re right.” Jillian looked all around like she was considering all the words there were to pick from. “How about bus driver?”

“What about it?”

“What would you say, for that word?”

I looked down the skinny aisle to the front of the bus. I had never really stopped to think about our bus driver. From behind, I couldn't even exactly picture what his face looked like, even though I saw him every morning and every afternoon. I felt sort of sorry about this, so I took the time to look at him really closely. He had brown, spiky hair like a porcupine that stood just above the top of the seat, and he was wearing a plain, gray T-shirt. I felt like he probably usually wore plain-colors. He was shaped like a soccer ball, but that much I knew from memory.

"I think he probably still lives with his mom," I said.

Jillian giggled a little. "Why?"

"Because he doesn't really look grown up, even though he is. He doesn't wear a suit to work like most dads. He dresses more like Brandon."

"You don't have to wear a suit to be grown up," Jillian said. "What about a gym teacher? Or a policeman? They don't wear suits."

"Yeah, I guess," I said. "But they have uniforms. I mean a gym teacher wears shorts and T-shirts because he has to play sports, so it's kind of like his uniform."

"But *my* Dad wears—" Jillian stopped and looked down. She fiddled with the strap on her backpack. "Well anyway, that's it? You'd say the bus driver is the guy who still lives with his mom?"

"I don't know," I said. "That's probably just where I'd start thinking."

She ran her finger along the edge of the window. "Well, I think you could be wrong," she said. "The bus driver could have his own kids, and a wife that loves him, and a big house with a pool where he has barbeques in the summer. He could be really good

at something. In fact, he could be a millionaire who just drives a bus to keep himself busy.”

This all seemed really unlikely to me, but I knew Jillian was just thinking out loud, and I felt too tired to argue. “He could be,” I said.

“Anyway,” she said, “my point is that you don’t know. He could be anything during the day when we don’t see him. I think the busdriver is kind of a mystery.” The bus pulled in front of the school, and Jillian stood up. “That’s what I’d say, anyway.”

As we walked off, I paused to look at my bus driver. He had small, spiky hairs on his chin that looked more like they were there by accident than because he wanted them to be. His nose was small and round, and he had a large, brown birthmark under his right eye. I felt like I was looking at a face I had never seen before.

When I got to my locker, I took out my dictionary and wrote on a new page, *Bus driver. The familiar face I never notice.* But after I wrote the line, I felt just as lonely as the words looked, sitting alone on the white, empty page. I dragged my pen through the words and wrote instead, *Bus driver. The man I hope is secretly a millionaire.*

Lullaby.

Today, Mom made gnocchi for dinner. She usually only makes this on special occasions, like when Grandma retired from her job at the steakhouse or when Dad’s business partners used to come over for dinner. When I got home from school, she was taking the dough out of the oven, and the whole kitchen smelled like a baked potato. Mom was humming a song to herself, and I wondered if the special occasion today was that she was happy.

“Want to help?” she asked, moving the baking sheet so that the dough wiggled.

I sat down at the kitchen table and dipped my hands into the tub of flour. I rubbed my palms together and watched the puffs of powder make small, white dots on the brown wood. It was like watching snow fall.

Mom sat down next to me and took a large fistful of dough in her hands. I stuck my hand in too and watched as the small holes I made closed around my fingers and swallowed them whole. The dough felt warm around my skin. I tore a piece out of its center and practiced making long snakes on the table top. When I finished, Mom cut the snakes up into little cylinders, still humming to herself.

I didn’t realize until just then how quiet the house had been since Dad died. She hadn’t sung a note. I missed her voice. It was small and sweet sounding, the way you might imagine a hummingbird would sound if a hummingbird sung songs. When I was little, Mom used to sing me lullabies while Dad played the guitar. Sometimes, they borrowed other people’s songs, and sometimes, they wrote their own music.

Mom carried the dumplings to the stove, and we dropped them one by one into a pot of boiling water. Each one made a small splash. “Careful,” Mom said, covering my hands with a towel. We waited for the pieces to rise to the surface.

By the time Brandon got home from Jimmy’s Pizza, everything was ready. When he saw what we had made, he asked, “What’s the occasion?”

Mom kissed him on the cheek. “No occasion,” she said. “I just felt like it.”

We sat down at our new kitchen table. We used to have a square one with four chairs, but a few weeks after Dad died, Mom bought a new round one. At first, she just

took a chair away, but that just made everything off balance. You can't have a square without four. It's easier this way to pretend there's not someone missing.

While we ate, we talked about Brandon's last basketball game and the other team's dirty plays and the shots Brandon made and the shots he didn't. I tried really hard to pay attention and make Brandon feel I understood, because Dad always knew more about basketball than Mom or I did. I think Brandon misses talking about basketball.

After he had eaten three platefuls of gnocchi, Brandon pushed back from the table and said he was going to go start his homework. He washed his hands and was almost at the doorway, but Mom was just sitting there, pushing the dumplings to one side of her plate with her fork.

"Brandon," she said softly, "the dishes." And just like that, she was crying again.

Clearing the table and washing the dishes used to be one of Dad's chores. It was one of a lot of chores Mom had asked Brandon to start doing, like take the garbage out and mow the lawn and pick up milk on the way home from work. He was always forgetting to do something.

Brandon came back into the kitchen and picked up his plate. He stood there a moment, looking down at his red potato mush while Mom sat with her face in her hands, taking slow, shaky breaths.

"Mom," Brandon said, "I'm sorry." He put his plate down on the counter. "I'm trying."

"It's not you," Mom said.

I stood from the table and carried my plate and cup to the counter.

"Jamie," Brandon said in a voice that didn't really sound like his, "I can do that."

“I want to help,” I said. I picked up Mom’s plate too.

“Jamie, I said I would do it,” Brandon snapped.

I turned the faucet on, hard, and walked out of the kitchen. Even at the top of the stairs, I could still hear the water pounding the bottom of the sink. There was silence everywhere else.

A few minutes later, Brandon’s door closed shut, and loud music shook the wall between our rooms. I covered my ears and tried instead to hear one of Mom and Dad’s lullabies, and when I couldn’t remember how they sounded I tried to make up a definition, but I couldn’t find anything to compare their songs to. I waited for hours, but Mom never asked Brandon to turn down the music, so I pretended it was a lullaby and let the vibrations rock me to sleep.

Sister.

I was sitting in first period English, listening to kids present their final book reports. It wasn’t much to listen to because I had read most of the books already, and mine wasn’t due for another week, so there was nothing to be nervous about yet. Madeline Addington gave a summary of *Harriet the Spy* that to me said she hadn’t read past the tenth chapter, and John Birbaum’s poster on *Summer of the Monkeys* got a few laughs because he had found pictures of chimps doing karate. But then, Gabrielle Linsky gave hers on *Little House on the Prairie*, and in true Gabrielle Linsky style she made handouts outlining each character’s development throughout the book. She was rambling about Pa Engells’ bravery and Laura’s thoughtfulness when Mrs. Schneider interrupted her to ask about baby Carrie.

“Oh,” Gabrielle said, waving her hand like she could wave away baby Carrie. “Well, I didn’t include her. She doesn’t really change, because, you know, she’s just a baby.”

And just like that, I was thinking about Anna.

In my daydream, I am teaching my sister to boogie board. I am a teenager, just old enough for Anna to be old enough to boogie board. I am never quite sure how old I am in these daydreams. All I know is that I am old enough to know things, like what the difference is between a parkway and a highway, or how to say words in French, or how to get on an airplane all by myself. Sometimes, I teach Anna to iceskate. Sometimes, I take her to the mall. Sometimes, I make her omelettes. But today, I am teaching her to boogie board.

In my daydream, it is one of those days where the sun seems to be coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once. The sun could be shining from inside the golden sand, or from underneath the still surface of the ocean, or from the sunglasses of the lifeguard. Light glints everywhere. Anna is carrying a seashell in one hand and dragging the blue Styrofoam boogie board in the other. The boogie board skips across the surface of the sand, following her like a pet.

When we reach the water, I tell Anna to pick up her boogie board and hold it in both hands against her belly. She picks it up and wiggles her hips, giggling. “I’m boogying like a *boogie* board,” she says. We have the same sense of humor.

A wave rushes up the beach and washes over our feet. Anna crinkles up her tiny toes against the cold. She is wearing a purple bathing suit with sea turtles on it. It’s the

same bathing suit I wore the day Dad taught me to boogie board. In real life, I gave this bathing suit away at a yard sale. But in my daydream, it belongs to Anna.

I take her arm and lead her into the water. “Don’t be scared,” I tell her. I was scared when I learned to boogie board, but Anna is braver than I am, and Anna is a fast learner. “Don’t be scared,” I tell myself, because the water is up to my waist now, and Dad is not in this daydream.

“You have to wait for the wave to come,” I tell Anna. “Then, you push off, hold on, and ride it to shore.”

“But how will I know?” she asks.

I want to tell her how you wait for the belly of the wave, not the tip-top where you can see the white foam, but there is no time to answer because a wave is rolling toward us like a mountain on wheels.

“When it’s time,” I say, “you’ll know.”

I can feel the wave lifting my feet off the sand, so I push off and yell to Anna “*Now!*” Then we are both lifted to the sky, and I can taste salt and wind and water before the wave sends us scraping against the sand.

We are both laughing, and there is sand in our hair and sand on our knees and sand grinding between our teeth, so we pull ourselves from the water and tilt our faces towards the sun. When we are tired from laughing, we close our eyes.

“Anna,” I say, after a long time. “How’s Dad?”

She turns her face toward me. Today, she has Dad’s blue eyes, and Mom’s auburn hair, and a smile that is no one’s except her own. “He misses you,” she says.

I want to ask her what he spends his days doing now, and how slowly time passes for him, and if he hears my thoughts when I think of him, and if he is happy, but even in my daydream, there are no answers to these questions.

“How’s Mom?” Anna asks.

“She wishes she could have known you,” I say. And then, Anna has Mom’s brown eyes and Dad’s light brown hair, and then she has Mom’s freckles and Brandon’s wide smile, and then, slowly, she has no features at all as she fades into the haze floating over the sand. Finally, she is gone.

In real life, I took my pen and pressed it into my palm until it stung.

Before Anna’s birthday became the same day she died, I had kept a list of things to remember to tell her about Dad. The memories used to come to me in daydreams in the middle of class just like the ones I have about Anna now. Maybe Mrs. Schneider would be discussing the difference between fantasy and reality, and it would make me think of Disney World and our vacation there and how Dad made me and Brandon wait on line to go on Splash Mountain with him over and over again. And I would write in the corner of my notebook, so I wouldn’t forget, *Dad was still a kid on the inside*.

And this would make me think of how excited Dad used to get about Rocky Road ice cream, or how he talked about the calendar in terms of sports seasons and not weather seasons, or how he always wore two different colored socks when he had a big business meeting because he thought it was good luck. And I would write all of these things down in the corners of my notes until there were no more corners, and then I would fill the margins, and then the back of the page. *Dad used to give me the Comics page and*

Brandon the Sports page so we could all read a piece of the newspaper together. Dad liked to read mystery books. Dad liked finding constellations with the telescope.

Once, I made a list of all the arts and crafts we had made together. *Safety-pin bracelets. Easter bunny candles. Sand-art. Model train. Pipe-cleaner dolls. Origami cranes. Paint by number. Unicorn music box. Big bird head bands. Charm bracelets. Clay bugs.*

One time, I accidentally handed in my Science homework with a note in the corner that said *Dad used to organize silly family competitions at every holiday. Last year, my toy horse won the Family Derby.* The next day, Mrs. Chiarelli handed my homework back with my first pass to guidance.

When I started getting worried that I was running out of my own memories, I would ask Mom and Grandma to tell me stories, and I would practice remembering them in the middle of class. *Mom and Dad met at a common friend's swing dance competition. Dad was afraid of the Abominable Snowman when he was little. Mom and Dad were married on the beach. They wrote their own wedding music. Dad's favorite food that Grandma made was macaroni and cheese.*

And then, after nine months of waiting, there was no Anna. There was no one to tell Dad's stories to.

After Anna was never born, I started thinking of all the things about Dad that I would never have been able to explain to her, like the way he smelled, or exactly how his laugh sounded. I could tell her how Dad had snored so loud that I could hear him from all the way down the hall, but I could never quite explain how I used to feel safe when I

heard him sleeping in the house, and how now, the quiet sometimes keeps me awake at night.

And after Anna was never born, there was no way to remember her at all, so I started making up my own memories. *My sister is an astronaut, a dance instructor, a puppeteer. My sister is a ghost. Today she is thirty years old and tomorrow she will be five. My sister is my best friend. My sister never knew me. My sister is real, and she is imaginary. My sister was born. My sister is a gravestone.*

Friend.

This Saturday, Mom and I went over to Jillian's house together. We do this about once a week so I can hang out with Jillian and she can spend time with Jillian's mom, Nancy. Mom and Nancy grew up three houses away from each other in a town about a half hour from here. They like to say they are each other's kitchen timers: once one of them does something, the other knows it's time to catch up. Nancy had her first kiss two weeks before Mom, Mom got her wisdom teeth out one month before Nancy, and they got pregnant with me and Jillian just two months apart. The bonus for me is Jillian and I get to brag about how we've been best friends since even before we were born.

On the car ride over, Mom put all the windows down. The leaves rustled each other like they were sharing secrets, and even though we were driving slowly through the neighborhood, I could feel the wind like a hand against my cheek.

"Are you ready for our double play date?" Mom asked. That's what's she's called our afternoons with Jillian and Nancy since I was little.

“I guess,” I said, “but you know, it’s not really a play date anymore. I mean, me and Jillian are too old for that.”

“Nonsense,” Mom said, “you’re never too old for play dates.”

“*You* are,” I said. “You and Nancy don’t play or anything. You talk.”

“We laugh,” she said. “We have fun together. Adults have different kinds of play dates than kids.” She brought the car to a stop in Jillian’s driveway. “Plus,” she said, reaching out to touch my cheek with her thumb, “if you don’t find talking fun yet, you’re definitely still young enough for play dates.”

We walked up the long, brick walkway, and Mom stopped to smell some purple flowers in front of the house. “I’ll have to ask Nancy where she got those,” she said. We let ourselves in through their blue front door.

“Girls?” Nancy called, from the kitchen. “Is that you?”

“No,” Mom said, “it’s the sex offender from next door.”

Nancy’s laughter floated toward us from the other room. Her laugh hits all kinds of different pitches, like a one-woman Christmas carol, or a doorbell. Mom is always making jokes I don’t understand when she is with Nancy, who was coming around the corner with her curls bouncing and her arms open. She pulled me in for a hug and kissed Mom on the cheek. “Jilly’s outside on the swings, Jamie,” she said.

I went out through the screen door and joined Jillian on the swingset.

“Hey, Jilly,” I said, “what’s a sex offender?”

Jillian squinted her eyes against the sun. “It’s someone who offends the sexes, you know, like male and female.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, I think I heard that before.” I sat down on the swing next to her, and we both rocked slowly forwards and back.

Jillian pointed to the other end of the yard, where her little brother was playing near the shed. “I have to keep an eye on Derek ‘til my dad gets home,” she said.

“Well, that limits the list to outside,” I said. Whenever Jillian and I get together, we start by making a list of all our options. Then we pick the top three things by process of elimination. The list was a lot longer when we were little because there were so many make-believe games to choose from. *The horse game. The game with the magic clogs. The game where we each have seven jobs. Enchanted Forest. Ninjas. Muscle men. Picnic.* Each game had its own characters and stories.

There are things on the list that still haven’t changed, of course, like walking to the Corner Deli for sandwiches, riding bikes, making up words to the Spanish channel, and prank calling people in the phone book. Still, sometimes lately the list feels a little short.

“We could get some cards from inside and play Slaps,” I said.

“Nah,” Jillian said. “It always gets messy in the grass.”

“Maybe when your dad gets home we could walk to the Corner Deli for lunch,” I said.

“I think my mom’s making lunch.” Jillian grabbed the chain of her swing. “We could make up an obstacle course.”

“But then Derek would want to try,” I pointed out.

Jillian dragged her toe through the dirt below the swing and started tracing letters, but I couldn’t make out what she was writing.

The screen door swung open, and Jillian's dad walked out wearing a sweaty green T-shirt and holding a white plate in each hand. Drops of sweat slid the side of his brow and settled in his beard. I knew he had just come from a pick-up football game, because he and my dad used to play some Saturdays. "Hi, girls," he said. "Need me to take this little guy off your hands?"

Derek looked up at the sound of his dad's voice and went running toward him, latching onto his leg since his dad's hands weren't free.

"Hi, buddy," Jillian's dad said.

"Hi, Daddy," Derek said. I wished I could steal the words from his mouth and make them mine.

Jillian's dad walked toward us with the plates in his hands and Derek attached to his leg. "I bring you turkey sandwiches on white," he told us, winking. "Compliments of Chef de Mom." Then he hoisted Derek on his broad shoulders and carried him inside.

I took a bite of my plain turkey sandwich and rolled the bread into a little ball in the corner of my mouth. Jillian picked at her brown crust. Through the screen door, I heard a faint sound I recognized as Mom crying. Jillian and I both lifted our heads. I could see Mom and Nancy sitting over two cups of steaming tea through the large kitchen window. Mom was covering her face with her hands. I took another bite of my sandwich and tried to chew loud enough to block out the sound. Jillian didn't take her eyes off the window.

"Want to go for that walk anyway when we're done eating?" I scuffed the bottom of my sneaker against the grass. "I know we've already had lunch. Maybe we can pick up a candy bar or something."

“Sure,” Jillian said, “whatever you want.”

“Did you finish your book report?” I asked.

“Almost,” she said. “You?”

“Yeah, but I heard Mrs. Schneider’s assignment is easier than Mr. Madeira’s.”

“Probably because he’s about a hundred years old,” Jillian said.

We laughed a little. Mom’s crying drifted through the screen door. It was as quiet as the creaking of the chains on the swing set and the buzzing of the insects, but it sounded so much louder. It felt like it filled the whole yard. Jillian was still looking through the kitchen window. Nancy was standing next to Mom now, and she had her arms wrapped around her. She spoke into Mom’s ear.

“Hey, Jamie?” Jillian said without taking her eyes off the window.

“Yeah?”

“Am I a bad friend?”

“What?”

She looked down, dragging her toe through the dirt again. “Well, am I?”

“No,” I said.

“But,” she said, turning to look me in the face, “you don’t talk to me.”

“I talk to you,” I said.

“No, you don’t,” she said. “I mean, not the way our moms talk.”

I pushed off the ground so that I swung a little faster.

“I’m sorry,” Jilly said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” We were both quiet then. “Do you ever cry like your mom does?”
Jillian asked.

“Not really,” I said.

“How come?”

“I just don’t,” I said, a little louder than I meant to. Jillian flinched and looked down at her feet. “It’s not like I haven’t cried at all,” I added.

“I didn’t mean that,” she whispered.

“You don’t know what it’s like,” I said. “You have a dad. And a little brother. You have everything.”

“It’s not everything.”

I pushed off the swing and stormed to the corner of the yard and sat down facing the wooden fence. Gripping a handful of grass in each of my fists, I pulled until I tore all the pieces from the ground. It sounded like ripped jeans. I took two more fistfuls and tore again, and again, staring hard at the blank, wooden fence in front of me.

I hadn’t even heard Jillian’s footsteps when I turned to find her sitting down beside me. She was sitting very still, and her lips were drawn in a thin line like she was holding in her breath. “Maybe you want to go home,” she said.

“No.” I wrapped my finger around a single blade of grass and pulled it out of the ground.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said. She opened her palms and spread her hands wide, as if answers might fall from the sky.

“I’m just confused, Jilly,” I said. “I’m too confused to cry, or talk, or anything.”

Jillian slung her arm around my shoulder and rested her head against mine. I tightened my grip on the handful of grass and sucked in my breath and kept my eyelids firmly closed. And then it was all too much to hold tight, so I unclenched my fists and let out all my breath.

“Maybe some time I’ll feel different,” I said. “And then I’ll call you. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

That night, when I got home, I started thinking about the Halloween when Jillian and I dressed up as bride and groom and said “I do,” which meant forever, and did that mean that when I was a grown-up she would have me over every Saturday and make me tea? And I thought about the day we found the door to her attic, and we crawled in and hid and imagined what the world would be like if no one found us and we were gone, until we heard her mom screaming our names in a voice we’d never heard before, and her dad too, and then we didn’t want to imagine anymore. So would Jillian call out for me if I was gone? And would I call out for her? And I thought about all the girls at school who each wear half a necklace that says *best* or *friend*, or the ones who post notes on each other’s lockers for everyone else to see, or who use secret words to speak in code. Me and Jillian don’t do any of those things, and we’re too old for play dates and too young to talk, so what do we do?

Once we built a leprechaun ladder out of clovers and waited under the kitchen table with a flashlight. After a long time, Jilly turned the flashlight off. “If he can see us, he might stay hidden,” she said. I told her I wanted to see him. I wanted to know he was there. “You just have to listen. He’ll come,” she said. I got tired of waiting and fell asleep with my head under the kitchen chair. Jillian stayed awake, listening. She shook me

awake when she finally heard a noise. It was so dark it seemed like my eyes were still closed, but I heard quiet footsteps, like toes sinking into sand. We were both holding our breath. When there was silence again, we turned on the flashlight. There was gold dust on the ladder. Jilly's always been better at believing than I have.

I told Jilly, "Maybe some time I'll feel different. And then I'll call you." I didn't know if I ever really would.

So I wrote, *A friend is someone who waits, even when there might be nothing to wait for.*

Memory.

I am five and looking down a long, white aisle from between Mom's legs. All I see are strange faces. They are turned towards me, their eyes searching the folds and layers of Mom's lavender dress. They whisper and wait.

"Tell them to close their eyes," I say, pressing my face into Mom's thigh.

"This is a moment your uncle and his guests want to remember, sweetie," she says. "I can't ask them to do that."

I tug at the bottom of Mom's dress so that it reaches to the floor and I am enclosed in a lavender cave. I press my hands against the weak, silk walls and imagine I am safe.

Light floods the cave like a pool of water, and Dad peeks in from under the hem of the dress. The lace drapes over his shoulder, and in his tuxedo and bow tie, he looks like a magician. He grins. “Boo,” he says.

I don’t know why, but this makes me even more frightened. Mom shifts her feet, and it feels like the walls are collapsing around me. I grab at her legs.

“Okay, sweetie,” Dad says, not smiling anymore. He places his hand on my white-sandaled foot. Before I know what’s happening, I’m enclosed in his arms and back in the light. Dad holds me to his chest and strokes the back of my head. After a moment, he places me on the floor in front of him, holding my shoulders between his hands.

“You’re more than a flower girl,” he says. “You’re a whole garden. You’re a field of wild flowers.” He laughs and kisses me on the forehead.

I am five years old, and I don’t care about being beautiful, but somehow, this makes me feel better anyway.

Dad points to the very end of the long aisle in front of me. “I’ll be waiting right there for you,” he says. And then he walks away, until I can’t see his face anymore.

Mom crouches in front of me and straightens my dress. Her auburn hair is tied up with small white daisies, and little curls bounce around her cheeks like inchworms. She is holding a small basket of rose petals, and her eyelids glitter with fairy dust.

“Just listen to my voice,” she says. “I’ll be singing to you the whole time.”

Brandon pops up from behind her and throws his arms around her shoulders. She squeals in a voice as little as mine and laughs with her whole body. Brandon always knows how to make her laugh. In his tuxedo and bowtie, he looks like a miniature Dad.

His hair is combed stiff and shiny with gel, and he carries a cushion with two gold rings on his palm like a butler. He looks like he's playing dress-up.

“Cheer up, squirt,” he says. “I've gotta do it too, you know.”

I look back down the long aisle lined with strangers. I feel my hands start to tremble again.

“Jamie,” Mom says, turning my face towards hers, “would you feel better if you walked with your brother?”

I nod because I don't feel sure enough to speak. Mom takes my hand and slides the basket of rose petals into my palm, closing my fingers around the handle. She takes my other hand and places it in Brandon's, then turns us both to face the aisle.

“Be brave,” she says, then whispers to me, “don't forget to toss the flowers.”

“But how do we know when it's time?” Brandon asks.

“When I start to sing,” she says, “you follow.”

I watch as she moves quickly past us, her long lavender gown dancing down the aisle until she takes her place at the microphone. She closes her eyes and looks like she's dreaming as her soft, sweet voice fills the room.

Brandon takes a deep, shaky breath and shifts his weight anxiously from foot to foot. “Okay, Jame,” he says, squeezing my hand a little tighter, “just you and me now.”

He takes a step forward, and I feel myself pulled along, closing my eyes tight so I don't have to see any of the eyes looking at me. But then I hear Mom's voice singing high, high enough that the whispers and the faces fade like ghosts, and I'm only listening to her music. “Don't forget the flowers,” Mom had said, so I reach my hand into the basket of rose petals and let them fall through my fingers to the floor.

I open my eyes and realize I am half way there. Brandon is at my side, leading me. Dad waits at the end of the aisle. I can almost see his face. And all the while, Mom's voice plays like a music box, guiding us forward, as I leave flower petals behind our feet.

Today.

When the bus dropped me off this afternoon, I was surprised to find Brandon already at home. He usually never comes home until dinner time because he is always working or at basketball practice or with whatever girlfriend he has that month. At first, I was excited to see him, because I thought maybe he could take me for a drive or play cards with me. I would do anything to make the time pass quickly until bedtime. As soon as I took a second look, though, I could tell it wasn't a good surprise. Brandon was sitting on the couch with his arms folded, and Mom was sitting on the sofa chair staring at him hard, only he wasn't looking back at her at all. Neither of them said hello to me or even seemed to notice I had walked in.

"What's Brandon doing home?" I asked. I would have asked Brandon himself, but he didn't look like he was going to be answering anybody's questions just then.

Mom turned towards me slowly as if it took a lot of effort to stop staring at Brandon. "Hi, Jamie," she said, which seemed like hard work, too.

"Well?" I asked. I hate it when Mom ignores my questions.

"Brandon got in some trouble at school today," she said. "But it's something I want to talk to Brandon—"

"What kind of trouble?"

Mom looked down and took a deep breath. “This is really a conversation I need to have with—”

“I got caught smoking pot,” Brandon said. Mom spun towards him and made her face into a warning, like a yellow stoplight. “At school,” he added.

Mom put her hand over her forehead like it hurt to hear the words again. “Jamie, listen—”

“For God’s sake, Mom, she knows what pot is,” Brandon said. “She might as well know what a terrible brother she has, too.”

“Will you go to jail?” I asked.

Brandon laughed. Mom covered her face with both hands.

“Well in my DARE class they said if you say yes to pot, you go to jail, and you lose all your friends, and you can’t remember anything, and you—”

“Your brother shouldn’t be laughing,” Mom said. “If he was just a few months older he *would* have gone to jail. Lucky for him, he’s still a minor.”

“What’s a minor?”

“It means he’s just a kid,” Mom said.

Brandon looked up. “Just a kid? So let me get this straight—I’m just a kid, but I’m also supposed to be the dad around here?”

“What?”

“No, no, I’m just supposed to go to work, wash the dishes, take out the trash, pick up the milk, take Jamie to her appointments, keep you from having breakdowns—”

“Enough,” Mom said, loudly. She looked down at her lap. Brandon re-crossed his arms. The room got so quiet I wanted to scream.

“I just don’t understand,” Mom said at last, raising her face to look at him.

“Why?”

Brandon spread his hands wide. “Why what? Why I smoke a little pot, like any other kid my age? Like you probably did too when you were in high school?”

“Not in front of your sister.”

“Jamie,” Brandon said, turning to look at me. “Lots of kids smoke pot. Epiphany. Hallelujah.”

“God damnit, Brandon,” Mom said.

“Whatever, Mom,” he said. “She’s smarter than you think. This isn’t a Santa Claus moment.”

Mom slammed her fists into the sofa arms. “How dare you presume to know what this is for her, when you can’t even keep track of yourself!” She was yelling now. I covered my ears.

“I know better than you do! We’re both *kids*, remember? And you have no idea what it’s like to be a kid, living in this house with you.”

“And you have no idea what it’s like to be the mother of a kid that screws up like this,” Mom said.

Brandon looked down at his hands.

“Suspended for a week, kicked off the basketball team, no chance at a basketball scholarship, and Lord knows your grades aren’t getting you into college.” Mom narrowed her eyes. “Honestly, what would your father say if he were here?”

Brandon was quiet for a minute. Then he stood up. “I think he’d say ‘fuck you.’” Then he turned his back and walked right past me out the door.

I didn't take my hands away from my ears until the door had slammed and Brandon had started his car, and I could no longer hear him driving away from the house. Mom was still looking straight ahead at where he had been sitting, as if she didn't realize he wasn't there anymore. She was sitting very still, with both hands resting evenly on her knees.

I took my hands away from my ears. The silence was so loud it hurt. "Brandon's gone," I said.

"I know," Mom said.

I didn't know what to say then. I wanted to scream or fall to the floor or pound my fists on the wall because Dad was gone and Anna was gone and now Brandon was gone too, but the only change in the house was the silence. There should have been sirens. The sky should have fallen down.

"But," I said, my voice shaking, "aren't you going to do something?"

"There's nothing I can do," she said. She sounded as calm as if she had just stepped on an ant.

"Yes there is!" I said, except it came out loud, in a voice I didn't even realize was mine. "Brandon is gone! You have to do something!"

Mom dragged her hand down her face, smearing her mascara beneath her eyes. Then she raised her arm and pointed at the stairs. "Jamie, go to your room!"

"No!" I shrieked.

Mom stood up. She pointed again at the stairs, hard, and yelled even louder, "I said, go to your room!"

"No!"

Mom took two steps forward. Her face and her hands and her legs all seemed to be shaking at once. Then she looked up at the ceiling, put her hands over her ears, and screamed at the top of her lungs. For a moment, I couldn't look away from the dark mascara lines running down her red cheeks, from the auburn curls that fell limp and clung to her damp, sticky skin, from the thin, cracked lips that used to sing wedding songs and lullabies and perfect harmonies.

When I got to the top of the stairs and slammed my bedroom door, she finally stopped screaming.

Anger.

Reasons why I'm angry with Mom: 1. She always buys me pink T-shirts, even though she knows I hate pink. 2. She wouldn't let me go ice skating with Jilly at the pond in County Park because she said it was too dangerous, because the ice was too thin, even though it wasn't, and ice skating is beautiful. 3. She tells Grandma all my secrets, like my grades and my nightmares and even the one time I had a crush on Jake Fleming from Social Studies. I am shy around everyone who knows my secrets, and now Mom gets mad at me for being shy around Grandma, because it is impolite. 4. Mom is always late, and I am always the last kid to be picked up from anywhere. 5. Since Dad died, Mom stopped making my lunches, so I have to wait on the cafeteria line and eat beefaroni for lunch, and everyone knows that when I had a Dad I had nice turkey sandwiches on white, and everyone feels bad for me. 6. She gets mad when I eat dessert after eight o'clock, even though she makes me eat beefaroni for lunch every day. 7. I don't think I will ever

be as beautiful as Mom, even though people say I look just like her. 8. I asked her for a training bra, and she said I wasn't ready. 9. Whenever she calls me, she sounds surprised to hear my voice, or relieved, like she didn't know for sure I would answer, like I might have vanished into thin air, like I might have died or never been born. 10. When Dad died, she was getting a haircut, and I was home alone, and she didn't answer her phone, not even when I called six times, not even when I screamed as loud as I could through the phone line and hoped that she could hear me.

Anger is when you take everything horrible, put it on the tip of an arrow, and point the arrow at someone else.

Guilt.

But sometimes I think, what if I could have screamed louder, what if I had stopped screaming soon enough to dial 911 first, what if I had dialed faster, would Dad still be alive, and would I have a little sister, and a brother that didn't run away, and a mom that wasn't downstairs screaming? Would I still have bagged lunches and the Comics page to read every morning and arts and crafts and family games on holidays? Would Mom and Dad still be making music? Would Brandon still be on the basketball team?

But then, what if Mom had answered her phone? What if her haircut had been on a different day? What if she hadn't been late getting to her haircut, like she always is, would she have finished on time? Would she have known what to do? Would she have *done* something?

Guilt is when you take the anger at the tip of the arrow and point it at yourself, and then out again because it hurts too much, and then in because you deserve it, and then out because you don't, until the arrow spins around pointing everywhere and at everyone, and anger explodes like fireworks.

Morning.

I woke up lying on top of the covers in all of yesterday's clothes. When I first opened my eyes, it was hard to remember what really happened, if I had really stayed awake until after midnight waiting for Brandon's car to pull up in the driveway, if I had really stopped talking to Mom and not seen her since coming home from school, if I had really not eaten since yesterday's lunch, if Brandon was really gone. It was the same feeling I had the morning after Dad died, the feeling that the home I was waking up to was not the same one I woke up to yesterday.

I tried again. I shut my eyes tight and rubbed them hard. I told myself maybe Brandon came back after I fell asleep, maybe Mom and him made up, maybe the high school and the basketball team forgave him, maybe Mom had breakfast on the table, maybe everything would go back to normal. But when I opened my eyes again, the clock read 7:15, which meant the bus was coming in fifteen minutes, which meant Mom had never woken me up, which meant everything was still wrong.

I pushed myself off the bed and walked into the hallway. Brandon's door was wide open, but he wasn't in his room. His blue and green plaid covers were crumpled and pushed back to the middle of the bed, untouched since yesterday morning, and his room was littered with clothes: a red T-shirt under the window, black basketball shorts in the

corner, a blue sweatshirt hanging off the back of his desk chair, a pair of jeans under the bed, striped socks scattered everywhere. Three empty plastic CD cases balanced on the corner of his desk. His stereo sat on top of the bookcase, flashing green, surrounded by plastic trophies. Three Snickers wrappers lay crumpled on the floor. A Pearl Jam poster was peeling off the slanted wall over his bed. A Nets jersey was tacked to the opposite wall, number 34. I don't know what I was looking for, if I expected to find him there among the dirty socks and candy wrappers and trophies, if I thought he might just be lying under one of the T-shirts on the floor. I wondered what he would do without his Sports Illustrated magazines, or his lucky blue and black sneakers, which he had left behind. I wondered what sort of home he could make somewhere else.

I walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. Mom was sitting at the table alone in a cotton nightgown. A cup of tea sat in front of her, and the steam curled in front of her face. Her eyes were pinched red at the corners, and her lips were drawn in a thin line.

“Hi,” she said.

I didn't answer.

“Jamie, why don't you sit down?”

I didn't move.

“Okay,” she said, “I understand.” She stirred the spoon in her tea, then stopped and looked up at me again. “I don't think you should go to school today, sweetie.

Brandon—” She choked on his name. “Brandon never came home.”

“Where is he?”

She looked down. "I don't know." She pressed the bottoms of her palms into her eyes. "I've been calling him all night. He won't answer. I called his friends. I had Nancy drive around and search. I called the police. Nobody can find him."

I swallowed hard. "He's never coming back."

"That's not true," Mom said. "He'll come back. We'll find him." She smoothed her hair with a shaking hand. "He's just upset."

"He's never coming back," I said, again, "and it's all your fault."

"That's not true," she whispered.

"You should have gone after him! You shouldn't have let him leave!" And then I thought, why didn't *I* stop him? Why didn't I run after his car with my arms waving? Why didn't I ask him to take me with him?

"I was upset, too," Mom said.

"I don't care! You're not supposed to let this happen!"

"Jamie," Mom said, "sometimes things happen, and there's nothing anyone can do to stop them."

"You can always do something," I said. "You can always try."

"I'm trying," Mom said. "Every day."

"Not hard enough," I said.

"As hard as I can."

I folded my arms. The clock read 7:27. "I have to go to school," I said.

Mom reached out her hand as if she could touch me from across the room. "Stay home with me," she said. "Please."

"I have to go to school," I repeated.

“You don’t. You have my permission.”

“I have a book report today.”

“Your teacher will understand.”

“No,” I said. “She won’t.”

“We’ll look for him together,” she said. “We’ll fix this.”

I could hear the bus croaking slowly up the road. “I’m going,” I said. “Try and stop me.”

But she didn’t. I turned around, slipped on my shoes, picked up my backpack from where I dropped it yesterday at the door, and walked out. I trotted down the stone walkway with my heart pounding and my head racing, until I found myself at the top of the bus stairs facing the long aisle of noisy, laughing kids. I froze. I wondered if everyone would notice I was wearing the same clothes as yesterday, that I hadn’t fixed my hair or brushed my teeth, that my shoes were untied, that something else horrible had happened to me. I ducked my head and slid into the first empty seat I saw.

“Jamie!” said Jillian from a few rows back, in our usual spot.

I folded my arms over my chest and didn’t answer.

“Jamie,” she said again, “hello, I’m right here. Did you not see me?”

I sunk lower into my seat and closed my eyes.

“I know you can hear me,” Jillian hissed. She waited. “Fine.” I heard her fall heavily back into her seat.

The emergency room doctor emerged from the wide swinging doors in his long white coat. “Brandon and Jamie Neil?” he asked. Brandon shot up out of his chair.

“That’s us,” he said. I rested my head against the cold, glass window of the bus. Dad

stood at the bottom of the ladder. He smiled at me through the screen door before placing his foot on the bottom rung. Stop, I said, to myself and to him. Don't. I placed my forehead against the sticky green vinyl seat in front of me. Mom was in the kitchen, with her back towards me, chopping carrots. I was working on cross multiplication. 34 times 56 equals? Mom gasped and the knife clattered against the counter. A small drop of water ran down her ankle and stained the rim of her sock. She spun to face me and a smile spread across her face. "Your sister's here," she said. I dialed the ambulance again.

We pulled into the parking lot, and I ran off the bus. I disappeared into the crowd of kids pushing through the front doors and flooding the halls. I landed at my locker. I had nothing to put in it, but I opened it anyway. I stuck my head inside and pretended to search through the papers stacked at the bottom. I tried to push away all the pictures forming in my brain and focused on the blank steel wall of the locker. I wanted to crawl inside.

I felt a sharp tap on my shoulder. I looked up to find Maya Kozlowski chomping on bright pink gum. "Bell's about to ring," she said. She blew a bubble and watched it pop.

I followed her blindly to the classroom and put my head down on the desk. Juliana Steinway and Amy Platt were gossiping about Kelly Graber's birthday party. Was it all girls or boys too? Kevin DeGiacomo and Steven Burns shot paper balls into the waste basket. They argued over how many points a shot from ten feet counted for. Maria Daniels and Haley Frasier made plans to go to the mall over the weekend. The bell pierced like a foghorn through the chatter. I heard sirens. I saw the lights flashing red,

blue, and white through my living room window. I lifted my head off the desk. Mrs. Schneider stood at the front of the room with a clipboard in her hand.

“Settle down, everyone,” she said. “We’re starting with presentations again today. Take your seats.”

I looked down at my backpack and realized for the first time the book report I had insisted I had to come to school for, the one I completed weeks ago and practiced reciting in my room countless times, was still sitting neatly tucked away in a folder on my desk. I felt dizzy.

Mrs. Schneider dragged the back of her pen down the list. “Let’s see,” she said, and then looked directly at me. She smiled and placed the clipboard down on her desk. “Jamie Neil, you’re up,” she said.

I felt all the faces in the room turn toward me. I imagined them surveying my messy hair, the striped red and blue T-shirt I had on since yesterday, the light blue shorts. I couldn’t imagine giving the presentation even if I had brought the report with me. I sank down in my seat and stared at my hands.

“Jamie?” Mrs. Schneider asked.

“Yes?” I said, without looking up.

“Are you ready?”

“No,” I said.

Mrs. Schneider hesitated. “Would you rather go at the end of the class?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I would rather not go at all.”

A faint murmur of giggles spread through the room.

“Jamie,” Mrs. Schneider said, “today was your assigned date. You know you lose full credit if your report is late.”

“I don’t care,” I said, looking her in the eye. I could have explained that I had finished the report weeks ago, that I knew everything there was to know about *Twenty-One Balloons*, that I even knew everything there was to know about the real island of Krakatoa, but the truth was I just didn’t care.

Mrs. Schneider looked at me carefully. “I think you do,” she said.

“I don’t,” I said. “And I don’t care about any of your other stupid assignments.”

“Okay, Jamie,” Mrs. Schneider said sharply, “that’s enough.” She snatched a blank piece of paper from the corner of her desk and scribbled something on it. Then she walked over and thrust it in front of my face. “You can spend the class in Mrs. Randone’s office. Understood?”

I grabbed it from her hand and pushed my chair in hard against the table. The legs screeched against the floor. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and walked swiftly to the door. The room broke out in whispers as I left.

I charged through the deserted hallway. When I reached the Guidance Office, I threw open the door and walked right over to the old lady sitting at the front desk without waiting to be called. She looked at me like I had broken in. I thrust the piece of paper in front of her face. She took it from my hand and read it quickly. “Okay, dear,” she said. “Wait right here.”

She hurried past me to Mrs. Randone’s office and knocked lightly on the door, leaning her ear close to listen. “Kathleen?” she called. The door opened just a little, but I

couldn't see inside. "Jamie Neil is here to see you," the old lady said and then mouthed in her practiced adult whisper, "urgent."

Mrs. Randone's office door swung wide open, and she emerged with a small smile, which disappeared as soon as she saw me. I must have looked as mean as I was feeling. "Okay, Jamie," she said, taking the paper from the old lady. "Come right in."

I walked into her office without looking at her and flopped down in her big leather chair before she could ask me to sit down. I didn't want to be told by anyone to do anything, to take a seat, to give my report, to go to my room, to calm down. Mrs. Randone closed the door behind her and sat down at her desk while reading the note. I hadn't even bothered to read what it said. She put the piece of paper down on her desk, adjusted her brown-rimmed glasses, and studied me carefully.

"What's going on with you today, Jamie?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"It doesn't look like nothing."

"I don't think nothing looks like anything."

"Exactly," Mrs. Randone said. "That's why it looks like something." She waited for me to answer, but I didn't. "Do you want to take a few minutes just to sit?" she asked.

"We don't have to talk just yet."

"We don't have to talk at all," I pointed out.

"Unfortunately, we do," she said. "Not about everything, if you don't want. But I understand you caused some trouble in Mrs. Schneider's class, and I do have to ask you to explain yourself."

"I didn't cause any trouble," I said. "I just didn't have my book report."

“That’s not like you, as far as I understand,” she said. “You’ve always been a very good student. I know first hand because you’ve been turning in your signed dictionary assignment sheet every week. Is there a reason you didn’t have your report?”

“Nope,” I said.

She folded her hands on her desk. “And there’s no reason you snapped at Mrs. Schneider?”

“That’s right,” I said.

She leaned back in her chair. “If there’s no reason, then you don’t belong in my office. Kids who don’t do their homework and snap at teachers for no reason end up in Principal Turner’s office.”

“So send me to the principal,” I said.

“You’ve never been one of those kids,” she said. “That’s why I think there must be a reason.”

“Call my mom if you want the reason,” I said.

“I might have to,” she said, “but I’d rather hear it from you.”

I folded my arms across my chest and looked down. We sat in silence for at least a minute.

“Have you been enjoying your dictionary assignment?” Mrs. Schneider asked at last.

“I don’t think any kid ever *enjoys* an assignment,” I said.

“I hope that’s not true,” she said with a smile. “But do you think you’re writing a better dictionary than the ones you had to use for school? Better than even Merriam Webster?”

“Who knows,” I said. “No one’s had to look anything up in it yet.”

“Okay,” she said, “then let’s try a definition now. If you had to give a word for how you’re feeling right now, or for how you were feeling when you snapped at Mrs. Schneider, what would it be?”

It was the same question she had asked me weeks ago. I still didn’t have an answer. “I don’t know,” I said.

“Any word,” she said.

“I don’t want to think about it.”

“Angry, maybe? Overwhelmed? Confused? Frustrated?”

“I said I don’t know!” I yelled. “I don’t want to define it! I don’t want to define or explain anything to anyone! Sometimes, you just can’t!” And before I could stop myself, I stood up, took my dictionary from my backpack, and threw it on her desk. It wobbled like a frisbee and knocked her blue plastic paperweight and stapler to the floor. A few pens rolled over the edge of the desk and scattered across the tile, clacking like fingernails on glass.

Mrs. Randone stood and gripped the edge of her desk. “I’m going to have to ask you to take a seat in the waiting room,” she said. “You’re not in any frame of mind to be in school today. I’m going to call your mom and ask her to come immediately.” She opened her office door and lifted her chin in the direction of the hallway to indicate that I should leave.

So I left. I walked out of her office, past the old lady at the front desk, through the door to the Guidance Office, down the hallway, and right out the front door of the school. Then, without knowing where I was going, I ran.

Stillborn.

Mom is in the kitchen, with her back towards me, chopping carrots. I am working on cross multiplication. 34 times 56 equals? The carrots snap. Mom gasps, and the knife clatters against the counter. A small drop of water runs down her ankle and stains the rim of her sock. She spins to face me and a smile spreads across her face. “Your sister’s here,” she says. She grabs her belly and holds it in her arms. This time, I jump out of my seat and dial the ambulance right away. Then I hand the phone to Mom.

I stand with my back pressed up against the kitchen wall and watch as another drop of water slides down Mom’s thigh. She spreads her feet wide on the kitchen floor. Another drop falls and splashes on the tile. It forms a puddle the size of a pebble and shines like a fish. Even though I know this is amniotic fluid, which is what keeps the baby safe until she’s ready to be born, even though I know the baby is going to make her way down the birth canal, and Mom will be in a lot of pain, because she told me many times so I wouldn’t be scared, I suddenly feel I can hardly breathe.

Mom places the phone down on the receiver.

“Mom?” I ask. “Is she okay?”

Mom places her hand gently on my shoulder. “Yes, sweetie, this is what’s supposed to happen. Remember?”

“But she’s losing her amniotic fluid, and that keeps her safe, and we’re not at the hospital, and— ”

Mom picks up the phone and hands it to me. “Breathe. Call your brother and tell him to come home right away. He’ll drive you both to the hospital.”

I dial and Brandon answers, “Jimmy’s Pizza.”

“Anna’s being born,” I say. “You have to come home!”

Mom stands with her hand against the wall, taking deep breaths, focusing on my face.

“Shit!” says Brandon. “I mean—sorry. Is Mom okay? Is she in pain?”

Mom must have heard him through the receiver because she says loudly, so he can hear, “I’m fine.”

“Tell her to lay down,” Brandon says. “Jamie, take her to the couch, okay? I’m coming.”

“I will,” I say. “Hurry.”

Brandon hesitates. “Tell Mom I love her. I’ll be there soon.” The line goes dead.

I don’t know if Mom heard him, but she grabs suddenly at her stomach.

“Lay down!” I gasp. “Does it hurt? Brandon said lay down!”

“No,” Mom says. “I just wish—” She covers her mouth to stop the words.

I take her hand and lead her to the couch. She swings her feet up and rests her head on my lap. I stroke her hair. I stare out the large living room window at the quiet street and wait to hear the sirens. She’s safe, I remind myself. Amniotic fluid breaks. The baby travels down the birth canal. It hurts. But when it’s over, it’s beautiful.

But then I hear the sirens wailing from a distance and getting louder and louder as they come closer and closer, until they’re too loud, until my eardrums throb, and then the lights flash red and blue through the living room window, and I can’t look away, and my eyes burn, and the men in white cotton suits jump from the ambulance and come running

up the walkway with a stretcher. My heart pounds so hard that it aches, so hard I have to grab at my chest with my hands, and I think, this must be what a heart attack feels like.

The edges of the room start to blur, and I am breathing so hard I can't hear anything clearly, though I am vaguely aware of the men rushing into my living room, of their voices, of their hands under Mom's back and legs as they lift her like a dead body, of one of their faces in front of mine. I try to whisper, "I don't want to die," but I can't speak.

"Jamie!" The room stills and comes back into focus, and I turn to see Brandon standing in the doorway. He walks toward me swiftly and scoops me up in his arms. "You're okay," he whispers. "Close your eyes. Don't think. Don't remember anything."

I know he is carrying me to the car because I gasp in the fresh air like I've never breathed before. He lifts me and places me on the sticky leather seat. I feel the seatbelt close around my chest. He clicks it into place. The door slams shut. The sirens sound, and we're moving. My chest throbs. Brandon turns up the stereo as loud as it goes. He sings Elvis at the top of his lungs all the way to the hospital. I know he is trying to drown out the sirens, but they are too loud. They blend with the background music.

I am lurched forward as Brandon slams on the brakes and turns off the engine. His door opens and shuts and then he is at my side, unbuckling my seatbelt. He places his hands firmly on my shoulders. "Open your eyes now," he says. I open them and find myself staring into his wide, blue eyes. Lines of sweat mark the sides of his face. "I know how hard it's going to be to go inside there," he says, nodding at the stark white hospital building behind him, "but Mom will want to see your face before she goes. She'll want to know you're okay. Can you run in with me?"

I take a deep breath, and I erase all the pictures in my brain. “Yes,” I say.

Brandon takes my hand, and we run—through the parking lot, through the sliding glass doors, through the bustle and beeping of the hospital, beside Mom’s stretcher, waving at her like she’s off to see the world. We slow to a stop, our chests heaving, and watch as she disappears behind the wide, swinging doors. I remember Dad’s face when I saw it here for the last time, his eyes closed, his face a deep cranberry red and covered in beads of sweat. The doors swing shut, and Mom is swallowed into the world behind them.

We turn back and face the waiting room. In the corner, the TV mumbles about a hurricane in Florida. A man in a gray suit feeds quarters to the snack machine. Magazines and newspapers and empty coffee cups litter the tables. I remember it all too much, even the dull, stale smell.

Brandon places his hand on my shoulder. “Let’s wait outside,” he says.

We walk back through the sliding glass doors, and the sun creeps like a warm blanket over my face. The fresh air tingles like mint leaves. I take deep breaths and let it fill my lungs. I imagine my chest is a balloon or a bubble of gum, and I fill it with air until it bursts.

Brandon and I don’t try to speak. I focus on the little things, on the sound of a pebble scraping against the pavement as I move it under the sole of my shoe, on the sigh of tires rolling in the parking lot, on the shadows moving across the walkway, on the shifting shapes of the clouds. After a while, Brandon says, “We should go back inside. Just in case.” So I close my ears to the sounds of the hospital and follow him in.

Seven more times we go in and out the sliding glass doors. Each time, I follow the minute hand of the clock until it passes two numbers. Then we are allowed to leave again. On the eighth time, the minute hand is halfway between the nine and the ten when an emergency room doctor emerges from the wide swinging doors in his long white coat. “Brandon and Jamie Neil?” he asks.

Brandon shoots up out of his chair. “That’s us,” he says. Brandon extends his hand to the doctor, palm turned to the side, just the way Dad used to.

The doctor wraps his hand around Brandon’s and then extends his hand to me. I stand up and shake it. It is my first handshake with a stranger. “I’m Dr. Friedman. Nice to meet you both,” he says and then motions back at the chairs. “Please, sit down.”

“Is everything okay?” Brandon asks. “Is Mom okay?”

“Your mom is doing fine,” the doctor says. “She’s resting now.” He motions at the chairs, insisting. I sit back down, but Brandon doesn’t.

“It’s over then? She’s delivered? Can we see her?” he asks.

“Brandon,” says Dr. Friedman, “please sit.”

As he drops into his seat, Brandon’s face seems to fall with his body.

“Your mom asked me to talk to you because she’s not feeling up to it right now. I’m so sorry to have to tell you this, but there’s been a complication with the pregnancy,” Dr. Friedman says.

Brandon shakes his head. “I don’t understand.”

“During labor we detected that the baby had lost its heartbeat,” Dr. Friedman says. “She delivered a stillborn.”

Brandon covers his face with his hands. “This can’t be happening,” he mumbles.

“Your mom is doing okay,” Dr. Friedman says. “She’s upset, but she’s doing just fine physically.”

“The baby,” I ask, my voice shaking, “she had a heart attack?”

“No,” the doctor says. “Not quite. Her heart just stopped beating. Complications like this can happen during labor. I wish these things didn’t happen, but they do. Usually, if something’s gone wrong, we’re able to detect a problem during pregnancy, but sometimes, as in your mom’s case, not until labor. There are a number of causes, but many times, the cause is unknown. Sometimes, there’s no explanation.”

Brandon removes his hands from his face and stares blankly at the wall in front of him.

Dr. Friedman glances down at his clipboard. “Your mom has given us permission to run some tests. We’re going to examine the placenta and the umbilical cord and test for multiple infections. I hope it can give us some insight.”

Brandon swallows hard. “But my mom’s okay?”

“She’s recovering. She’s still in some pain. We’re giving her some medication. She’s in a lot of emotional distress. It’s hard, you can imagine, to go ahead and suffer through the labor when you find out the baby has lost its heartbeat.” He looks down and frowns. “I’m so sorry for your loss. She wants to see you, when you feel ready.”

Brandon stands up immediately, and I understand there is no time to feel ready, you can never feel ready for something like this. We follow Dr. Friedman through the swinging doors, we enter the hallway where Dad’s heart beat too fast, and then the room where Anna’s heart stopped. Mom is pale yellow. Crumpled white sheets stick to her damp skin. A steel pan sits at her feet, and water from a bag drips into her veins through a

thin, plastic tube. Brandon pushes the hair off her face. I hear Dr. Friedman's words again, how he talked of a heartbeat as something that could be lost, as if it could fall into your veins and be swept away with your blood, as if it was a sock that didn't come out with the laundry, or a pen that fell behind the desk. Already I have lost two heartbeats, and still, I don't understand. Where did they go? How can I find them?

Escape.

I didn't stop running until my lungs felt like cracked paper. I had sprinted through the parking lot, down three blocks, around a corner, and down two more before I stopped, my chest heaving, bent over my knees. I sat down heavily on the pavement. My head felt like a fishtank, heavy with water and swimming. I looked up and down the street and wondered if the old lady had figured out yet I wasn't supposed to leave, if Mrs. Randone had come out of her office to find me gone, if Mom was on her way, if they would all be coming after me, searching. I needed to get out. I grabbed at my pocket, took out my phone, and dialed Brandon.

It rang three times before he picked up. "Jamie?"

I felt all the air escape from my lungs as soon as I heard his voice. "Brandon," I said.

There was silence on the other end. "Hi, squirt," he said softly.

"Are—" I dug my nails into my palm. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," he said.

I couldn't think of anything else to ask, and that meant the conversation was over, but my hands started to shake at the thought of hanging up and not having him there at

the other end of the line. And then suddenly I was crying, crying so hard I could barely breathe, and I wanted to save all my tears in a jar so I could prove to everyone that I really had been sad, I had been sad all along. “Please don’t leave,” I said. “Please don’t disappear.”

“Jamie—”

“Take me with you,” I sobbed.

“Where are you?” he asked. “Are you at school?”

“No.”

“Are you with Mom?”

“I’m all alone.”

“Where? Where did you go?”

“I left,” I said. “I left school.”

“Look up, Jame,” he said. “Try and figure out where you are. There must be a street sign. Are you far from school?”

I drew in a long, deep breath and tried to focus. “Pearl Street,” I said. “It’s just a few blocks.”

“Don’t move,” Brandon said. “I’m coming. I’ll be right there.”

I closed my phone and put my face in my hands and counted each second. I was at three hundred forty seven when I heard the loud hum of Brandon’s truck as it turned around the corner. I opened my eyes and rose unsteadily to my feet. Brandon pulled to the curb and came to a slow stop. I opened the door and stepped in. Brandon’s eyes were drawn and tired, and the collar of his blue basketball jersey was slipping off his thin shoulder. It was the same jersey he was wearing yesterday, even though he wasn’t on the

basketball team anymore. He held his mouth slightly open as if he was afraid to speak. I pulled my knees up to my chest in the passenger seat. Then Brandon turned the key, and the truck went still.

“I was never leaving for good,” he said.

“Oh,” I said.

“I wouldn’t just leave you.” He looked me in the eye. “Or Mom. Don’t you know that?”

“I guess,” I said.

“You should know that.” He sighed. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“So what happened?” he asked.

“I forgot my book report,” I said. “And then I got mad.”

He let out a single laugh. “All fear Jamie,” he said. “Wanna fill me in on the rest?”

“Not right now,” I said. I tugged at my shoe lace. “Where did you go?”

“Nowhere. I just drove around. Eventually, I parked on a random street and went to sleep. Somewhere no one would look for me.” He tugged at his ear lobe. “I just needed to get out,” he said and turned to study me carefully. “Does Mom know you skipped out on school?”

“Maybe by now,” I said. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen her since I got on the bus this morning.”

Brandon glanced at his hands. “Was she mad?”

“Just sad. Worried. She was up all night.”

He cracked his knuckles and stretched his fingers against the rim of the dashboard. After a minute he said, “Hey, listen, all that stuff I said yesterday, about smoking pot—you shouldn’t pay attention to that.”

“But you do smoke pot,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “but I don’t want you to. I mean, just because I do something stupid, you shouldn’t do it too.”

I hesitated. “I wouldn’t.”

“Good,” he said. He laced his fingers through the steering wheel and looked down the long, shady road in front of us. The leaves stirred as a breeze passed. A single one broke off the limb and danced through the air like a ballerina. “Do you ever wonder,” he said, looking straight ahead, “what Anna would have looked like?”

I glanced at my hands. “All the time.”

He looked down and nodded. “Me too.” He ran his thumb down the side of his jeans. “Any ideas?”

“Sometimes—” I stopped and took a deep breath because I had never said these things outloud before. “Sometimes, I like to think she would have looked like me.”

“Dad would have liked that,” Brandon said.

I bit my bottom lip and glanced at my hands.

“Do you think—” He ran his hand along the back of his neck. “Do you think he would be disappointed in me?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said.

He put the tip of his thumb to his teeth. “I’m not so sure,” he said. He shifted his weight in the seat and looked back down the road, tapping his two fingers nervously on

the steering wheel. “Sometimes I have this idea—I know it’s crazy—but sometimes I have this idea. I wanted to be more than a brother to her, you know, with Dad gone. I figured I was the closest thing to a dad she’d ever have. I was making this list—like I said, crazy—but I was making this list of things Dad used to do with me when I was little that I still remember, things that were really important to me, and I thought I’d do them for her, when I could. He would have wanted her to have that. But then—” He shook his head and spread his hands wide. “Then she was gone. And I thought how could that happen, you know, how could this possibly happen to us? And they never did find a reason. ‘Sometimes there’s no explanation.’ But there is. I don’t mean to say she died because of—I just mean—I could never have filled his shoes.”

I didn’t know what to say. Brandon hung his head, and his shoulders folded downward, and his arms lay limp at his sides. Everything about him looked so heavy. “You would have been great,” I said. I wanted to remind him of all the things he did for me, even when Dad was around, that were so much like the things Dad did. I wanted to tell him how much I loved the different voices he gave the characters in the stories he used to read me at bedtime and how I always won at tic tac toe because he taught me all the traps and how I could dribble a basketball better than any other girl in gym class and how I never felt as tall as when he lifted me up onto his shoulders and carried me around the house. But it was all too much to say outloud, so instead I said, “Really. She would have been lucky.”

He pressed both hands to his face and sat hunched over his knees. I could see his fingers trailing over his forehead, rubbing deep circles into his skin. Finally, his hands

dropped from his face and he looked up at me. “There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you,” he said. “But you don’t have to answer, if you don’t want to.”

“What is it?”

“It’s just—I’ve always wondered what happened that day with Dad. Of course I know what happened to his heart. But I wasn’t there. You’re the only one who was with him. I guess I just wondered—I don’t know why, but I want to know. I wish I could have been there with him, at the end.” He swallowed hard. “He was already gone when I got to the hospital.”

At first I couldn’t speak. I opened and closed my mouth, but no sound came out. After a moment, I said, “I’ll tell you what I can.” Then I closed my eyes.

Heart Attack.

I am sitting at the kitchen table eating my after school snack. Just a small one today—rice cakes—because later we are going out to dinner. Dad is sitting across from me, reading over some papers for work. He is chewing on the rubber eraser of his pencil. It is Thursday, his shortest work day, which means we always do something special after school, sometimes just me and him, sometimes the whole family. Today it is dinner at Mom’s favorite restaurant. We have to spoil her rotten, Dad says, in the last months of pregnancy.

He throws the pencil down suddenly and stands up from the table. He paces to the large glass doors and stands looking into the backyard, his hands on his hips.

“Everything okay, Dad?” I ask.

He turns back towards me and forces a small smile. “Yeah,” he says, running his hand across his forehead, “sorry, sweetie. Just work stuff.”

Dad doesn’t like to talk about business at home, so I don’t ask anything else. He walks back to the table and gathers up his papers, organizing them into a heavy stack before stuffing them into his briefcase. He runs his hand across his forehead again and takes a deep breath, turning to the side. He catches my eyes on him and forces another smile.

“Have a lot of homework tonight?” he asks.

“Nope,” I say. “Mom told me about the restaurant tonight, so I got all my homework done yesterday.”

“We should do something then,” he says quickly. “Before dinner. I feel like getting out of the house. What do you think?”

“Sure,” I say.

“How about the park? It’s finally starting to warm up. We could bring the frisbee or the soccer ball.”

“Frisbee,” I say. “The ground’s still too mushy.”

He smiles. “Deal.” He’s already reaching for his coat, and then he stops and snaps his fingers. “I forgot. Let me just do this one quick thing I promised your mom I’d take care of, and then we’ll get going.” He disappears through the side door to the garage and comes out into the backyard carrying a tall wooden ladder. He places it on the stoop against the house and raises his eyes to the roof.

I open the door and call out to him, “What’s that for?”

“Just have to clear out the gutters,” he says. “I’ll just be a second.”

I close the door and sit back down at the table, watching him through the large glass doors. He places his foot on the bottom rung and climbs slowly up the ladder. I take another bite of my rice cake and watch until he has climbed out of sight and I can only see up to his knees, his feet resting on a rung a few from the top. I chew my rice cake idly and remember a math problem from class that afternoon about trading pennies and start working out the answer in my brain, which makes me think of Rachel Brown’s coin collection and how all the coins inside the plastic have never been touched, and how maybe I should start a coin collection, or some kind of collection at least, maybe a different collection because I want to be original, and then through the window, I see Dad falling.

He writhes in the air as he plummets to the ground, his one foot latched on the middle rung and his hand reaching for the ladder as it falls backward with his weight. His body arches, and for a moment he looks like a trapeze artist completing a backflip. But then he falls heavy as a stone, landing with a crack against the cement stoop. The ladder thuds against his chest a second later, lacing his legs in a trap.

I am on my feet, screaming. I break through the doors and fall to my knees at his side, waiting for him to sit up and laugh at his own clumsiness, waiting for him to tell me everything’s okay, waiting for him to say anything at all, but he doesn’t. His head tilts back, his mouth falls open, he gasps for air and grabs at his chest. He attempts to lift his left arm and screams.

I ask him to speak, to tell me what’s wrong, to tell me what to do, I say “Dad,” over and over. His jaw looks like it is tied tight with wires. It trembles and stays locked

open, slanted unnaturally to the side. He grabs at his chest. Drops of sweat escape from his forehead and fall into his eyes. He grabs at his chest. He draws in short, shallow breaths. He gasps, “My heart.”

I dial Mom, six times, no answer, while Dad writhes on the cement. On the sixth time I bring my mouth to the receiver and scream “help!” at the top of my lungs. It is only then that I remember 911. By the time I have choked out our address and gasped “his heart,” by the time I have dropped the phone and rushed back outside, Dad lies still. I fall to my knees beside him and tear at my eyes and place my hands over my ears, trying to erase the image of his face still and damp as baked clay, trying to silence the sound of his screams, trying to create darkness so I can be a ghost and go with him.

Return.

After I finished, Brandon didn’t speak for a long time. Then he reached up and placed his hand over mine. “Let’s go home,” he said.

When we walked in, Mom was pacing in the doorway of the kitchen, biting her thumbnail, the phone pressed against her ear. She turned at the sound of the door, and everything on her face softened when she saw us. Her mouth fell open and she drew in a quick breath and placed the phone gently down on the receiver without looking away from us. All her motions were slow and shaky. She stood still across the room, her eyes fixed on us. Brandon and I placed our bags on the floor and remained in the doorway. Mom chewed her nail. I looked to the floor.

And then in one moment Mom had covered the distance of the room, wrapped her arms around us, and pulled us tight to her chest. I felt the warmth of Brandon's arm pressed against mine. I could hear Mom's heartbeat, steady and strong, but I held myself stiff as a tree trunk against her embrace, I drew my fingers into fists, and I closed my eyes so that the room vanished. And then I am outside again, kneeling on the cement stoop, with my head against Dad's chest. I am searching for the sound of his heartbeat. When I can hear nothing except the buzzing of insects and a squirrel rustling the leaves, I tear at my eyes and place my hands over my ears, trying to erase the image of his face still and damp as baked clay, trying to silence the memory of his screams, trying to create darkness so I can be a ghost and go with him. But instead of what comes next, instead of the long wait for the wailing sirens, instead of the shaky ride in the cold cage of the ambulance, instead of the white stretcher that carried Dad away forever through the swinging doors and the waiting for the relief that never came, I hear Dad's voice.

"We're going to play a kind of game, okay?" He lifts my head off his chest and holds it in both hands.

"A game?" I ask.

"Well, not a game, really. But a trick."

"Like a magic trick?"

"Yeah, kind of like a magic trick."

"How does it work?"

"I want you to open your eyes and count to ten five times, and when you're done, this will all be over."

"That's not really a trick," I say.

“I know,” he says. “But I need you to open your eyes.”

“You could have just asked,” I say.

“Okay. Can you open your eyes and count to ten five times?”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“What will I see?”

He places his fingers over my eyelids. “Open them,” he says.

So I do.