Lessons in Sidewalk Chalk

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For my Father For teaching

me how to fill in the spaces.

Contents

Pactolus

Adam reached down to pull off a shoot coming out of the bottom of the stalk and for the moment his face was covered in the shade of the broad tobacco leaves. Sweat came down from his temple in a straight line to his eye. He stood up and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, wincing at the streak of dirt he knew he'd just left there. He could feel it baking into his skin. It was still early and by the time the sun went down and Adam got to wash up it would already be stuck there. It was changing his skin color like Pa who looked like he'd been rolling around in the dirt for days.

But Adam picked; he picked off the pink almost blossoms and the extra fans of leaves and tried to resist the urge to drag his feet. But even so the dirt fluttered up from under his boots and he got a breath full when he went under for a shoot. He stood up, coughing into his fist and trying not to spill his sack.

From a few rows down Grady whistled at Adam and pointed up at the sun. That meant time for lunch. Adam nodded and caught his breath. He spat the dirt out of his mouth and dropped his burlap sack where he stood to mark his place. Then he walked towards the barn where the boys ate their lunch.

The leaves brushed both sides of his waist as he went. He held up his hands letting them smack against his palms. He used to beg Pa to take him out here; used to kick his bare feet on the kitchen floor until the backs of his heels were bruised. Grady

would always relent, always say yes, put him on the front of his horse and let him come to work with the rest of the boys.

"Now don't go down any further than that row right there and if I call you, you better be quick with an answer," Grady would say shaking a finger but smiling and finish off by ruffling the dusty colored hair on Adam's head.

There was nothing like being three feet tall and only being able to see over the tops of the plants on tip toes. He would run as fast as he could with his hands out slapping the leaves until he got to the place Pa said he couldn't go and he'd turn right around again.

Adam reached the end of the row at the same time as Pa got to the end of his.

"How are you doing there, boy," He said coming over to walk alongside Adam.

"All right. Kind of hungry," Adam answered eyeing the tree where the rest of the boys had already settled down in the shade.

Grady laughed though followed his line of sight. "You'll get used to it. It's a hard time of the season but you'll never have a better night's sleep."

There other men who worked for Pa were sitting around the base of the tree with lunch pails at their feet and napkins spread on their laps. As they came up a tall man about six feet high with skin the color of dried clay held Grady up his pail. Grady's voice which, just the moment before could have patted Adam on the back got harder and said, "Where are we at on the other side, Dagan?" They began talking in rows and feet. Adam caught Dagan's son Palmer's eye who did not respond to Adam's roll in kind. Palmer pushed his eyebrows together as if to say, *What?*.

Savannah pawed the ground at the hitching post and tossed her head. Adam sidestepped Sam and Nathan who were sitting in front of her. Savannah was a Thoroughbred that stood sixteen hands high and was just a shade darker than the soil after it was turned; a twelfth birthday present from Grady. Adam was as tall as her chin now. Every day, twice a day, Adam would take her riding out beyond their property. Most of the time they rode along the railroad tracks. Savannah got spooked by trains but Adam knew the schedule well enough to avoid them.

"Sit down and eat your lunch, boy or you'll fall right over in the fields," Grady called to Adam.

"Yeah, Adam, a good strong wind will already cut you down. You don't need to be giving it any help," Baxter said. Landis, his father, punched him in the arm but laughed along with the rest of the boys.

"Well if ya'll are just having play time you can go right back to work. Go on," Grady said looking every single man in the eye.

Adam sat down next to his father and opened his lunch pail. The boys were quiet for a moment, the kind of quiet where everyone tries to act like nothing happened. After a minute Dagan said something to Grady again about the work and what they had to do the next day and it was safe for everyone to speak again.

Adam watched Palmer eating. His arm muscles were showing even when he wasn't working and Palmer was the smallest one there, besides Adam. Lifting his sandwich to his mouth, Adam tried to flex his muscles without Grady noticing. A slight crease formed on the inside of his arm. He sat there for the rest of the meal, curling the

sandwich until it was gone. Nobody said anything but Adam caught Dagan rubbing a smile away with the back of his fist when he caught his eye.

That night Adam came in from riding Savannah as the sun was starting to fall behind the trees. Grady was sitting on the steps of the porch tamping down his pipe. He slapped his hand down on the step beside him and Adam sat down. Grady struck a match and Adam smelled sulphur before the tobacco.

"Was everything in the barn tied down and closed up?" Grady asked.

"Yes, I checked," Adam answered.

"Good," Grady said, "You'll do good." A mosquito crossed in front of his face and he covered it with a drag from his pipe. When the smoke cleared the mosquito was gone.

Adam woke in the semi-darkness the air thick with the smell of the wood furnace and curing tobacco. He could just make out the shapes of the yellowing plants hanging above his head. He reached over the side of his make-shift cot and groped for his clothes and dressed as much as he could without sitting up. When his overalls were up to his thighs he sighed and swung himself off the bed.

This would be his seventh harvest once it was done curing, his seventh season. It was hard to tell in the dark but Adam had grown into his father's replica. His hair had darkened from dry sand to wet, his eyes had deepened to navy and he was already almost six feet tall.

The coals had faded to a dusty red during the night and the temperature had dropped. He stoked the fire until it glowed hot on his face, throwing his features so his

eyebrows and chin stuck out farther from his face. When it was as hot as he wanted it he shut the furnace door and checked the ground for any fallen embers.

Savannah was waiting for him in the stables. It was only September but the mornings were already cold enough for her breath to steam in his face as he brought her out. At this point in the season he could make it out before his father did, have time to ride with Savannah and still get back to help with the rest of the morning chores.

When Savannah was brushed and saddled Adam mounted and took the reins in his hand. He leaned down over her spine and said in her ear, "Come on girl, let's get out of here" and nudged her side with his heel.

She left the barn in an easy gallop, moving faster and faster the further away they got. Adam was bent over her back and fit into her streamline. His wrists barely twitched to direct her because she knew where they were going.

A few miles down the main road runs into the railroad tracks. Savannah turned right at the tracks so she didn't have to cross over. Adam slowed her to a walk and then a stop at an Oak tree that stood by itself.

He dismounted and let the reins drop. Adam paced around the tree keeping one hand on the trunk as he walked.

He looked back in the direction of the farm, "You can't even see it from here. It's all just trees, no tobacco, no cotton even." He stopped walking to put his hand on Savannah's neck, "We're going to Greenville today, Pa and me. Did I tell you? Only for a few hours though." Adam shook his head and continued his pace around the tree. "It doesn't matter anyway. He'd never let me stay. I've got this to work with, right?" he

waved his arm indicating the land around them, "This could keep me pretty much all right for the rest of my life." But not happy, he thought, though he didn't say it out loud.

He sighed, moving around the tree to mount Savannah. He gripped the reins tight in his hands and turned his head towards the tracks, then the trees, then the fields, the endless fields that hadn't even been planted yet. "So much space and I just feel stuck."

He nudged his heel into Savannah's side and they rode back to the farm.

When they got back, Grady was packing the saddlebags on his horse, Sterling.

"Good, you're back," he said, when he saw Adam approaching, "We've got to get going if we want to get everything done today."

"What is that we have to do again?"

"Get ready for auction next month. We've got to go pay some visits to our regular buyers so they can see how we're doing. You see, son, a business relationship is all about how you can talk. You can grow a good plant year after year, but if you can't sit down and smoke a pipe with the man who buys it then he won't remember your face." Grady finished his speech that Adam had heard so many times before and went back into the house to grab his wallet.

They had a truck but Grady only used it when he had something to haul that the horses couldn't carry. That day they were the only things to carry. So they rode.

The closer they got to town, the smoother the roads got and the more cars there were. Adam tipped his hat down so no one would recognize him even though, he thought, not that many people knew who he was anyway.

The road from Pactolus eventually turned into Fifth street. Since the college had been built there a few years before, everything had sprung up on that stretch. The first

year it had been there, Grady and Adam had walked the horses real slow down in front of it staring up at all the white buildings.

"There ain't no reason for anyone to know about Greenville except for that," Grady said, pointing to the closest one. "And there ain't no way that would be here if it weren't for this." He patted his breast pocket where his tobacco pouch was. "That's something you can be proud of."

East Carolina University had doubled in size since then. Adam wanted to stop but Grady kept on moving. They went to the same places they always did. Grady went to the feed store and talked to Jack, the owner about what the gossip was from Winston. Jack let them hitch the horses out back where his house was so they could walk around on the street easier. They went to the market and just happened (as Grady planned it) to run into a distributor for Marlboro who lived across the street.

Towards the end of the day, though, when they only had a few hours left of sunlight to get home and finish the chores on, Grady said to Adam, "I've got to go take care of a few small things real quick. Why don't you just meet me back out in front of Jack's in an hour?"

"Sure," Adam said. He got a coke from the machine at the gas station and wandered in the direction of the university.

In front of the dormitory Adam saw a group of boys throwing a football. They couldn't have been much older than he was. There were three of them, all wearing Levi's and short sleeve shirts. He got closer until he was just on the edge of their game, leaning against a tree watching them throw the ball back and forth.

The boy closest to him ran backwards and dove for a long shot. He hit the ground at the same time he caught the ball and clutched it to his chest. He caught sight of Adam, leaning against the trunk of the magnolia as he stood up.

"Hey kid," he said, "You want to play?"

"Me?" Adam asked. He had never thrown a football before.

"Yeah, you," the boy said, "You see any other kids around?"

Adam shook his head. He wanted to point out to the boy that he wasn't a kid either. He followed the boy away from the tree and stood in the circle with him and his friends. The boy tossed it to his friend who jumped for it and reversed it back to the third boy. The next thing Adam knew, the ball was turning around itself and coming towards him. He ran backwards with his arms stretched over his head reaching for the ball. It went straight through his hands and hit him square in the face.

He didn't wait for the boy's laughter to fade. He picked himself up off the ground and took off down the street. When he got back to Jack's he circled around back to where the horses were.

Grady was already there, smoking a pipe with Jack.

"Adam, you're bleeding," he said, standing up. "What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing," Adam said, "I just fell." But as soon as they said goodbye to Jack and were on their way out of town, he told him what really happened. When he got to the moment of impact, Grady laughed just like the boys had.

"It's not funny," Adam said, "I don't even know how to play catch."

"When do you ever need to know that for?"

"I needed to know then," Adam answered. "I don't like getting made fun of."

Grady waved his hand like he was batting at a fly. "Don't let them bother you. I bet you none of them would even know what to do with a seed besides look at it. Be happy you can make things grow. It's useful and does good for everyone."

Adam did not respond but thought to himself how he'd rather let the seeds grow by themselves. They got back to the house just in time to get all their chores done before the sun went down. Then Grady went back to the house and Adam went to tend to the stove in the curing barn. He stayed up that night poking at the coals just catching himself before they got too hot and slamming the door shut. All night he did that until he couldn't hold his head up anymore.

Two months later the auction had come and gone and, like always, they had made out all right. It was Adam's eighteenth birthday and also the first day of the planting season. He rolled over in his bed and smelled bacon. That night he had dreamed he had suitcases and he was setting them down next to a bed that didn't have sheets yet.

Grady was in the kitchen, sitting at the wooden table smoking his pipe when Adam came in still wearing his long Johns.

"Happy Birthday, boy," Grady said, "How does it feel to be legal?"

Adam looked at the table and the untouched plates in front of Grady. Not only was there bacon, but toast, potatoes, and eggs too. "Wow Pa, is this all for me?"

"Of course. Today you're a man and so you should eat like one." Adam said "thanks" again and smiled though he showed no teeth. He swallowed hard though he had not taken a bite. When he filled his plate his stomach turned though it was

not from hunger. He looked at his father and bit the inside of his lip. *It's too early in the day to tell him. The sun isn 't even over the tops of the trees yet.*

The sound of boots on the porch broke the silence and Dagan walked in. He patted Adam on the back, "Well look at you old man. You about ready to take over then? Give your pa a break?" He laughed and slapped Adam on the back again.

The rest of the men showed up and they went to work, like the day before, the year before, like always. They spent the whole day, half of them tending to the seedlings, the other half turning the field, inch by inch. Adam volunteered for the field. They said, no, it was his birthday but Adam insisted. He wanted to break a sweat he said.

And he did. He and Savannah were worn out and shaking by midday but they'd gotten half a day's work done already with more than half a day left to go.

And at the end, as he and Grady headed in to eat dinner, the crew slapped him on the back again, just like Dagan, teasing him about taking the farm away from his father.

When they had all gone Grady said to Adam, "Come here, boy, I've got something to show you." He went into his bedroom and came out with a brown box the size of an eyeglass case. "Sit down," he said and pointed a chair at the kitchen table.

He passed the box to Adam who took it with a shaking hand. Adam opened the lid and pulled out a pipe, hand-carved out of cherry with a black plastic tip. It was brand new.

"It's about time I taught you how to pack a pipe," he said. He reached into his breast pocket and took out a pouch of that year's harvest.

"Pa, you didn't have to do this," Adam said, meaning it because in a moment he knew Grady would regret it.

"Of course I did. You think I'm going to let you go past eighteen not knowing how to enjoy what you work for?"

"That's not what I meant." Adam was holding the pipe in both hands, turning it and inspecting it all over.

"Hush boy and just let me teach you this one thing." He set the tobacco pouch on the table and took a pinch between his thumb and his first finger. "The trick is to pack it in layers so you keep the air going. Just like you and me, without air a pipe can't breathe. So you put your first layer in and pack it down with your little finger just hard enough to feel the pull when you suck in, but not so tight that you have to pull hard. Now do the same with every pinch, making sure you still have the same pressure from the first layer to the last."

Adam followed his every move, his clumsy fingers moving slowly trying to make it look familiar.

"Now since this tobacco is still pretty wet you don't need to pack it but two thirds of the way up. But no matter how dry it is, never fill it all the way to the top." He reached into his pocket again and pulled out a book of matches. "Here," he said, and lit one, offering it to Adam.

Adam leaned forward and cupped his hand around the little flame. He had taken puffs off his father's pipe before but never really tasted it like that. It had always been charred then and in no way prepared him for how much it tasted like pine spice and the barn.

Grady lit his own pipe and leaned back in his chair. "So now you know," he said. Adam watched him and he watched his own hands move. He counted the crows feet

around Grady's eyes and mouth and checked how many shades darker his cheeks were. It was like watching a mirror that told the future, a mirror he could not move away from.

Adam set his pipe down on the table, still smoking and said, "Pa, I have to tell you something."

Grady snuffed his own pipe out with his calloused thumb and set it down beside Adam's. They were identical except for the smoke still coming out of Adam's and the teeth marks over the mouthpiece of Grady's.

"Go ahead, then."

Adam pulled a letter out of his pocket. "I've been accepted to college," he said and passed across the table. Grady took it in his hands and examined the seal on the front.

"Congratulations," he said, "you must be proud of yourself." His voice was laying flat in the air and it took him a long time to get the words out. "I am," he said, and thought, at least he wasn't yelling.

Grady pulled the letter out of the envelope. "And money too," he said, reading it, "how nice for you."

"It's just a loan. I'll have to pay it back once I leave school."

"And how do you plan to pay me back?"

"But I won't be taking any of your money. They're giving me enough for everything until I get a job."

"Will they give you enough to hire me another hand to replace you?" When Adam didn't respond right away Grady continued. "You forget that you already have a

job, a responsibility that you were born with, a gift you were given. You should be grateful that you will never have to look for a way to live."

"What if I want to look? This is a good opportunity and I can't pass it up"

"Everything is an opportunity if you take it right." Grady still wasn't yelling but to Adam, it felt like it. The whole situation was going worse than he'd imagined.

"How did this happen anyway? I didn't even know you applied to college."

"That's because I didn't want you to get angry before anything was official."

"And its official now, is it?"

"I haven't sent them my formal acceptance, but as far as I'm concerned, yes, it's official."

"What about Savannah? You just going to leave her here?" Grady knew he had thrown in the big bait, knew that would stop him in his tracks.

There was a moment when the only movement was from their chests heaving as though they had run from the train. "I'll come back for her."

Grady laughed; he laughed without smiling but he grinned through his teeth and said, "I bought her for you to keep here. I bought her and she's mine. She's not going anywhere. You aren't either unless you're walking."

"Fine, then I'll walk." He gave his father a hard stare and got out of his chair. When he walked out the door he didn't take anything with him but a lantern off the porch. Grady ran to the door and shouted at his back, "You'll be back before you make it a mile. You'll damn well learn to appreciate this farm or it'll be the death of you." Adam didn't walk towards town. He blew out the lantern and circled around the back of

the house to the barn. He opened the door to Savannah's stable. She started whining at the sight of him, his clenched muscles.

He hushed her, "Quiet, girl, we've got to go quick so he can't take you," she stopped whining but was still restless. "You hear me," he said, "He'll take you away from me forever if he hears you." She stopped. Without disturbing the crickets or the darkness he saddled and mounted her. They walked until they were where Grady couldn't hear them from the house. And then they ran hard east, towards town.

Adam didn't know where they were running to. School didn't start for another month and besides he couldn't keep Savannah there. He was in exile between two different kinds of paradises and two different kinds of hell. In front of him he could learn to do anything he wanted but he had no idea what he was capable of. And there he would lose everything he had ever known.

Behind him, his father was probably still sitting at the kitchen table, huffing on his pipe and waiting to hear footsteps. The house would still be sitting exactly as it always had: upright and steady, all the posts in the right places. It would be the same as it had always been. In his mind he moved forward and he watched the image shrivel, his father's dark skin wrinkle and flatten and the wood in the frame of the house rot.

Adam was riding hard but barely holding on to the reins and not paying attention to where they were. When they got to the train tracks Savannah was stopped dead and Adam fell off the saddle. Adam stood up and brushed the dirt off his back. He reached up for Savannah's reins but she wouldn't let him mount and she wouldn't let him walk her over the tracks. No matter how hard he tried, Adam couldn't get her to move any way but backwards.

"Fine," he said ten minutes later, still panting, "We won't go that way. But there's got to be some way."

He thought about it while they were walking back. The road ran alongside the fields and even though he couldn't see them he knew they were there, how long they were, where to look to find the spot where he first saw a snake or where he ate his first tobacco worm when he was little.

As he walked back up to the house he saw Grady's shadow move into the doorway. The light was behind him but he knew he would be smiling by the way his feet were spread apart. It would be a smile that said, "I told you so."

But Adam wouldn't let it go that way.

"I have a deal to make with you," Adam said, standing on the bottom step of the porch. "I'm going to school and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"So what's the deal then? That doesn't sound like much of anything in my favor."

"The deal is that I'll come back three days a week, when I don't have class. That's the best I can do so that both of us won't suffer so hard. You've been managing this place for years and I know you can do it just as good with the other boys. This isn't me, Pa. Not right now, anyway."

"I'm old, Adam, I can't do this for that much longer and I need your help. This is what you were meant to do," he said. "I know you're smart and I know it's what you deserve but I wish you would realize how good this will be to you later."

"I do, Pa. But I will better later. I know that I don't know everything about this place but I know a lot and I don't know much about anything else. And I've got to, Pa. I've got to or I won't ever be happy." Adam said.

"Well I don't like it so much as I could but it'll do for now. You just better make sure you keep your promise or else I'm sure you can count on one of the other boys for saying something about picking up your workload."

"I will keep my promise, though they'll probably say something anyway."

Grady laughed and said, "I'm sure they will," and moved out of the doorway. "You come inside, now."

Adam followed Grady in, picked his pipe up off the table and looked down into it. The top was still brown. "You got a light?" he asked.

"Sure thing," Grady said and picked the matchbook up off of the table.

Adam inhaled deep and coughed so hard he had lean over to catch himself from falling.

"Boy you got a lot to learn," Grady laughed.

The Width of a Dime

The white space filled the hallway between my bed and the nurses' station as I watched them, straining to hear over the buzzing in my ears. The way my father had his arms crossed, the way the doctor was nodding, it didn't feel like silence between us. My bed was leaned up at just the right angle to watch them. The monitors beeped in different tones and the florescent lights stuttered overhead.

I felt like I had been sitting in that position for days but really it had been just less than one. Mostly I just stared at the ceiling, trying to count the misshapen dots on the tiles. I kept losing track of which one I'd started from.

"You're lucky," Dr. Malone had said after I woke up from the drugs they gave me. "There's no indication that you've inflicted any permanent damage on yourself."

"So I can go home?" I had asked.

"Not yet," he said. "Anytime a patient is admitted for self-harm they are required to stay and undergo a psychological examination before they can be released. You can leave when we feel you're not a danger to yourself."

"I felt sick and threw up. How is that dangerous?"

"You already show signs of tissue damage in your esophagus which means that you've probably been doing this for a long time. As I said before, that's not permanent.

Heart failure, kidney failure, stomach rupture," he counted them off on his fingers, "All of them are permanent consequences of Bulimia and all of them could kill you."

My father had shown up at the door of my room in the hospital a half an hour ago, alone. He came in and said, "I'm taking you home as soon as I talk to the Doctor."

"I thought they couldn't release me yet."

"Your mother and I have made other arrangements." He said, and walked to the nurse's station where Dr. Malone was waiting.

My father always found a way to be the exception to the rules. As head of accounting for Friendly's Inc, he was in control of the salaries of a third of the town. That's not to say he was a tyrant, but he definitely had a lot of pull.

I watched Dr. Malone nod again, write and sign something on his clipboard and put it into my father's hand. I pretended like I hadn't been watching when my father walked back through my doorway.

"They said it will take about twenty minutes to get you ready to leave. I'll wait for you in the hallway."

"Okay," I said, unnerved at how fast it all happened. The nurse pulled out all my plugs, patched up the spot where my IV had been with a cotton ball and a clear band-aid and put my jeans and sweater in a neat pile at the end of my bed. I slipped my gown off over my head.

I moved slowly, my fingers shaking as I buttoned my jeans.

When I came back out in the hallway my father was reading, or pretending to read, a poster on the wall about hospital procedures. Since I had gotten there all I had

wanted to do was leave but as I looked at my father's back I thought of the way he said, "arrangements" and wanted to hide my head back under those white bed sheets.

"Dad," I said to get his attention, still only just past the doorway. My clothes felt like they had shrunk somehow since I'd last worn them. I tugged at my sweater trying to stretch it out.

"You didn't have anything with you?" he asked.

I shook my head.

As we walked out, no one looked up or said anything. I thought nurses were supposed to smile at patients, but from the moment I got there everyone had looked at me like some little kid who had bitten the old man next door. I had heard them thinking as they checked all my monitors and tucked my sheets under, *Why would you do something like thatl* I wondered, as my father and I walked off the ward, if it wasn't just disgust but also fear of what he might do.

He escorted me out to the car the way a soldier would, not cold but professional. He shut the door hard behind me, got in on the driver's side and started the engine.

There had been no window in my room and even though it was late October I rolled the window all the way down. When I looked up, the sky wasn't just overcast, it was thick, the color of dryer lint and pewter. The air smelled like snow.

My father was never very talkative but this was not normal. This was a decisive silence, more of a presence than an absence. I remembered how hard my mother was crying the day before, how she wouldn't look at me and I wondered what had happened since then.

"You'll catch a cold," he said a block later, and rolled my window up.

I was suffocating and he was taking the long way home, stopping at yellow lights and taking left turns at 10 miles an hour. It was like he was stalling for time, holding off until something big was going to happen. I couldn't wait that long.

"What did you say to get them to release me?"

"We'll talk about it when we get home," he said.

"Can you please just tell me now? I don't think I can handle any surprises."

"Surprises? How do you think your mother and I felt?" He was glaring at me as much as he could while keeping his eyes on the road. We came to a stoplight a few seconds later and he twisted in his seat to face me.

"You don't have the luxury of requests right now. You have embarrassed me. You have embarrassed your mother. Your brother has had to deal with the other kids at school, your friends included, interrogating him about what happened. And of course Kylie just doesn't understand." The light turned green and accelerated through the intersection. "More importantly," he said, "you've embarrassed yourself."

He turned into our neighborhood and I counted the houses as they passed. They were moving too fast, the white ones blurring into the brick ones, blurring into the air between each. Spring St. was colorless other than the red bricks and vinyl siding. All the grass had already died. My father only slowed when the last brick house started fading into our yellow one. He pulled into our driveway and I didn't wait for him to turn the engine off to open my door.

I walked in and the house smelled like dinner. It was hot like the oven had been on all day. I headed straight for the stairs and started climbing but I'd only gotten to the fourth step when I heard the front door close behind me.

"I don't think so," my father said, "Go and sit at the dinner table."

I reversed, walked down the hallway and pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen.

Kylie was already sitting at the table, perched on her pillow so she could reach her plate. Rob and my mother were bringing the food out. They looked up at me and just as soon turned back to what they were doing. Except for Kylie. Kylie wouldn't stop staring.

"Hi," she said, softly, twirling her dark blonde hair with one hand.

"Hi," I said, and tried to smile but couldn't quite make my muscles work.

Everyone sat down, my mother and father on either side of me and Rob and Kylie across the table. We said grace and my father picked my plate up. He piled on two spoonfuls of peas, a whole chicken breast, mashed potatoes and a roll.

I picked up my fork and stabbed at my peas hard enough to scrape the plate. I watched their gritty insides spill out as I pierced them, smashed them up against each other and piled them on the prongs of my fork. I bit them off and chewed them one by one, letting my teeth scrape over the metal.

They were watching me, looking up only for a second between bites. When my mother asked Rob how school was he tried not to stare at me, glanced instead and said, "It was okay."

She was trying to dominate the conversation so no one had the chance to speak. But at the moment my mother took a bite and chewed, Kylie said, "Rina, why couldn't you come home last night?"

The reactions were tangible, written in bright colors on everyone's faces and thick under my fingers. Rob's eyes widened and he looked around the table like he was waiting for an explosion. My mother dropped her fork and my father set his down slowly, put his elbows on the table and clasped his hands together.

"Kylie," my mother spoke slowly but her voice was shrill. "I told you we weren't going to talk about this."

"But I want to know before she leaves."

Something was starting to dig holes in my stomach. The back of my throat curled and I moved my hand up to hold onto it. It was going to be too late, I knew it.

"What," I asked, trying not to choke, "are you talking about?"

"Kylie, don't answer that question," my mother said. "If you're finished, go do your homework."

"No, I want to know," she said.

"I want to know what she's talking about," I said, getting angry and starting to panic.

"Answer you sister." My father spoke like it should have been in slow motion, the all too dramatic thud of a bass drum lying underneath his throat. "And then your mother and I will have a talk with you."

I couldn't tell if I was on the verge of screaming or tears. "How does she know what's happening to me before I do?" I asked.

"She doesn't really. She was just here when we were making the arrangements," he said. The menacing look he was making belonged on someone else's face, not my

father who was supposed to smile when he looked at me. "Go ahead and tell your sister what you did. She has a right to hear it from you."

"Not until you tell me where you're taking me," I yelled, hoping to get him angry enough to yell it back at me.

When he answered he was yelling but not the words I wanted. "I've already told you: You don't have the right to demands right now," he said. "Now, tell your sister what you did."

I thought, for a moment, of refusing but then caught a glimpse of Kylie out of the corner of my eye. She was ignoring everyone else, her hands in her lap, waiting. I could only look at her forehead when I spoke. "I wasn't feeling well at school and I threw up in the bathroom." Drip, drip, dripping on the tile. I could hear it. "A lot. And my ear drums burst." The red streak on the white. "And—" I paused, thinking of what else to say. I couldn't explain to her how heavy I felt, my stomach empty and still heaving. I couldn't explain to her that the sound I heard when my ear drums burst was like a speaker blowing a mile away. Color made the only sound. The white tiles shifted and clicked and reflected the fog of sharp breaths as I lay on the floor next to the toilet. The red dripped and smeared and it wasn't until I saw the black shoes on the tile that I realized that someone was talking to me. There wasn't a detail I could tell her that would make sense.

"Kylie, do you know what Bulimia is?" My mother asked, cutting me off.

"I'm not bulimic," I said, not to her, but to Kylie.

My mother spoke louder, "Bulimia is a disease—"

"—and I'm not diseased."

"—when someone makes herself throw up so she can look skinnier."

"I'm not bulimic," I said. I imagined pulling her hair out.

The banter began to get faster. My mother yelled at me, "Yes, you are" and "Stop it, Rina." The louder we screamed the more audible our breaths came. I pulled out replies between panting of "No, I'm not" and "You stop it" in a volume to match my mother's. Over us, Rob started yelling, "Stop it. Mom, Rina, Stop it."

The noise was thick and the static in my ears started buzzing louder. I felt faint. I told myself I needed to sit down and then remembered that I already was.

"Enough," my father said. "This isn't helping anyone. Rob, Kylie, will you excuse us please. Your mother and I have to speak to Rina."

Rob took Kylie by the hand as she hopped off her pillow and followed her as she stomped up the stairs. My father and I stared each other down to the sound of their thumping. My mother looked at a knot in the wooden table, trying, I was sure, to unravel it.

"You have made a decision," he said when the sounds of two sets of feet walking upstairs faded, "to no longer have control over you life. You need help and your mother and I are going to see to it that you get better."

"I'm not sick," I said.

"Don't interrupt me while I'm speaking," he said. His teeth were clenched together so his canines stuck out from under his top lip on his more dramatic syllables. I had been angry before, but not like that, not so laced with fear. They say in the second before you die your past gets scrolled out in one long strip before you. Well, the same

happens when you know your life is about to change, except instead of your past, it's your future. I swallowed and tried to hold on to the angry look on my face.

"We can't give you the kind of help you need here. We're sending you to a place where they have highly trained experts to help you through this."

"What place?" I asked. Hell, I thought, or Purgatory at least.

"It's called Laurel Hill. It's a rehab center for young women with eating disorders."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Your bags are already packed. We're leaving first thing tomorrow morning."

"You don't have an option," he said. "We're not going to let you stay here and give Kylie, or anyone else the impression that this is acceptable behavior."

"So you're going to send me away and give her the impression that you want to get rid of me?"

"Don't think of this of leaving you," my mother said, putting her hand on my shoulder, "We have to do this. You'll thank us one day."

I shrugged her hand off my shoulder. "One day you'll realize you've made a big mistake. On that day, I'll thank you for your apology."

The shadows that passed across the windshield splintered where the sun came through the bare trees. A week ago, I thought, this could have been beautiful. The leaves would have still been red and even the sun would look warmer. But now the sunlight came white and broken through the elms and the leaves covered the dead grass, shriveled and wrinkled like old skin.

"We're not doing this to hurt you," my father said as we had turned onto the drive of Laurel Hill. "Your mother and I love you and we want you to be well."

I pictured my mother as she had walked back into the house that morning, trying not to turn around and watch us drive away. She had stayed home with Rob and Kylie.

"You don't know me," I said.

My father didn't yell, but talked at me like I couldn't hear. "You can take this how you want to but you're not leaving until you've gotten better."

"Until you get your money's worth, you mean."

"If I have to give ten years of my salary to this place, I will if you learn how to treat yourself better."

He meant it and I knew it but still I pressed my face against the cold glass of the window, blinking up at the sun as it passed through the elms. "In ten years you'll wish you had treated me better."

I didn't know whether he did not hear it or whether he ignored it because we'd gotten to the end of the drive and he didn't want to be seen yelling.

The drive ended with two white brick gate markers six feet tall. On the left one there was an iron plaque that read: "Laurel Hill. Est. 1966."

We pulled up into the drive and my father put the car in park. The house was in an old Victorian style. The paint was fresh but the gray-green shingles had faded and some of them were missing.

My father got out of the car at the same time as a middle-aged blonde woman was coming down the steps of the porch. As they were shaking hands, I reached over and hit the lock button for the doors. They must have heard it because my father looked over

like he wanted to scream at me and started walking towards the car. The woman put a hand on his elbow and said something to him.

Except for the ones that lined the drive, there weren't any trees around the house until you almost hit the horizon. Even if I did manage to get past this woman and my father, there was nowhere to hide. She was walking towards the car, a flat smile on her face. When she got close enough she tapped on the window with the knuckle of her index finger and said, "Hi, Rina. My name is Mary. Will you roll down the window?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not going to make you get out," she said, "I just want to talk to you."

"You mean, trick me. I'm not stupid."

"I know you're not stupid," she said. She was speaking in that breathy, high pitched therapist voice. "And I'm not trying to trick you. Laurel Hill is a safe space. We don't trick people here."

I rolled my eyes and turned my head in the other direction, measuring how long it would take me to reach the woods and wondering how fast she could run in high heels.

"Rina—"

"Stop using my name like you know me," I said. I glanced over at my father who was gritting his teeth and glaring back at me. I looked him right in the eye as I said to Mary, "You don't know me."

"But I want to know you."

I rolled my eyes again.

"Listen," she said, her voice losing some of its breathy quality, "Your father is going to make you come in forcibly if I can't convince you to in the next five minutes. I promise that it will be easier this way."

"There's nothing wrong with me," I said.

"Well if that's true then I'll make sure you get home tomorrow."

We looked each other dead in the eyes. Whether she was telling the truth or just a very good actress, I didn't know but, regardless, she was right. My father already had the car keys out in his hand and was ready to pull me out by my teeth.

I looked, one more time, at the open field, the sun illuminating every blade of grass and the absence of shadows. When I turned back around, Mary had taken a step back from the door so that, when I opened it, it would not hit her.

Mary set down my suitcases and knocked on the door marked 113. Someone from inside said, "Come in," and Mary turned the knob.

The room was a combination between a hotel room and a hospital ward. The floors were wooden and the white walls had a generic painting of the beach and an old red bicycle rusting on the sand dunes. The beds looked like hospital beds but set lower on the ground with puffy bedding. There was one window in between them.

The girl occupying the left one took the book down from in front of her face as we walked in.

"Rina, this is Lacey Morgan. Lacey, this is Rina Seifried, your new roommate. I'll let you two get acquainted while you unpack. Lacey, you'll show Rina down to lunch in an hour?"

"Sure thing," Lacey said and Mary closed the door behind her.

I dropped down on the empty bed, face first, hoping that I would dissolve into the mattress before anything else happened.

"Bad day?" Lacey asked, laughing just little enough not to be offensive.

When I looked up she had swung her legs off the side of the bed and was facing me. Her yellow hair hung down to her shoulders dry and crisp as if it had been ironed. Her blue eyes were the only thing large on her except her clothes.

I sat up, too tired to be angry anymore and answered her: "You could say that."

She leaned sideways on her pillow. "How'd you get here?"

"My parents made me come," I said.

"Of course they did. That's how everyone comes to places like this. I mean: What did you do?"

"Oh," I said, sighing because I realized that I would probably have to tell this story a lot in the next few days. "I threw up in the bathroom at school and my ear drums burst." For some reason when I said it to Lacey, it didn't feel like a bad thing "What about you?"I asked

"I'm Ana. When I got down to 92 pounds my boarding school called my parents and said that I was becoming a liability. So now I'm here." She said this all with a smile on her face, still leaning against her pillow, still looking like she couldn't have weighed more than 12 pounds.

"What's Ana?" I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew what she was going to say.

"Anorexia," she said, "and bulimia is Mia. Just don't let Mary or any of the counselors hear you call it that. They'll say you're trivializing your illness."

Her lack of caution, remorse, the familiarity, the smile on her face. I felt like I had just been welcomed into a sorority. I passed the rush, from the bathroom to the hospital. Now I had pledged and she was letting me in on all the rules.

"If you want to unpack, the dresser in front of your bed is empty" She must have sensed that I was confused because she lay back down on her bed and picked up her book again.

I opened up my suitcases and looked at what my parent's had packed for me: some of my dad's old t-shirts, pajamas, sweatpants and sweatshirts and a few pairs of old, baggy jeans.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said, pulling each item out and throwing it on the floor, sure that if I kept digging, I would find my real suitcase. "There's got to be some mistake."

"No mistake. That's what they tell the parents to pack. See?" she said, tugging at her t-shirt.

"Why?" This was becoming less of a bad joke and more of a nightmare. I could feel my face getting hot and I sat down on the floor among my scattered wardrobe.

"Because they don't want anyone to look at how fat you get while you're here."

Lacey's shirt was so big I couldn't even see where her body was inside of it. "How long have you been here," I asked.

The amused smile came off her face as she said, "A month."

After that we both kept quiet until lunch. She read her book and I watched the contents of my suitcase wrinkle on the floor.

As much as I didn't want to believe her, Lacey was right. After lunch, the rest of the girls had group therapy and arts and crafts before dinner. Instead of joining them, I went with Mary on a tour of Laurel Hill that ended in her office.

I sat in a chair on the other side of her desk clutching the feather charm on my necklace.

"Here at Laurel Hill we have a few specific methods to help our girls heal and accept themselves as whole, beautiful young women," she said to me in, I'm sure, exactly the same way she had said it to a hundred other girls.

"The first step towards recovery, as with any illness, is acceptance. The unique point of view that we take here is that acceptance must be, not only of the illness but of the whole self: body, mind and spirit. Then we can help each individual work on their own personal struggles, and teach them how to love themselves again."

I could feel her building up to it and wished that she would just skip the part where she fed me the brochure and get to the point.

"In order to start this process, we feel it is best for our girls to rid themselves of all attachments. That means all jewelry, all clothing one is used to wearing, and any other personal item brought from home. I assure you," she continued, "that you will get everything back."

"I thought you told me I could leave tomorrow."

"I told you I would let you leave tomorrow if I thought it would be in your best interest." Even her answers were rehearsed.

"It is in my best interest. I don't have an eating disorder, but if I stay here long enough, I'm sure I'll go crazy."

"Threats do not make convincing arguments, Rina," Mary said, "However, if I see this to be true, we'll make the appropriate arrangements. But for now, I'm afraid you're going to have to follow the same rules as everyone else."

Before bed they took my watch away. They took my rings, the silver feather necklace I got from my grandma's jewelry box, and even my belt.

"Why," I had asked again.

"Everyone has to start from scratch," they told me. "You will find yourself when you have nothing else to cling to."

I had expected them to lock us in.

"They don't need to," Lacey said. "There's nowhere to go."

And she was right. Out there, the only things that seemed close were the stars.

It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the light.

For some reason all I could think of was this game my father and I used to play when I was little. He would say something like, "Rina, if you had the world's biggest ant farm, you'd teach them tricks and start the world's smallest circus." And I would say, "Daddy, if you had a sailboat, you'd take me to get seashells from every beach in the world."

It was a stupid game I blamed on being six years old and naive.

Though, starting out the window of room 113 at Laurel Hill I thought, things hadn't gotten much better. It was all still a stupid 'if game, each of us taking turns

having the bigger hand. And until that afternoon, I still believed that my parents would do everything for me. Instead they gave me t-shirts from the Goodwill pile.

Daddy, if you had a sailboat, I thought, *you 'd smash it into the rocks, wouldn 't you? You 'd let it sink all the way so not even the mast stuck out.*

I turned over and pressed my face into my pillow. I dreamt that night about never forgiving them. I dreamt of coming home in the morning and saying, "I told you so." I dreamt of turning eighteen and leaving.

Group therapy took place in the common room on the third floor of the house. All fourteen of us girls plus Carol, the counselor, arranged ourselves in the ring of couches and armchairs.

My first session was after breakfast on the first full day. I sat down in between Lacey and a redheaded girl.

Carol opened the session by introducing me and said, "If you feel comfortable, why don't you share with us the reasons why you're here."

Comfortable? It was becoming routine to tell the story now. The image of the red streak on the white tile was fading every time I thought about it. And the buzzing in my ear wasn't quite so loud. When I got to the part where my ear drums burst, there were no gasps, just a few impressed winces. The girl across from me sucked in air through her teeth but more out of sympathy than shock. I got the feeling that nothing I could say had shock value anymore. I could feel them nodding me into a category.

"But it's not what it sounds like," I said. They were smiling at me like I was a familiar joke. "I'm not bulimic, I just felt sick."

Jen, the girl on the love seat next to Carol, asked me, "Was this the only time it ever happened?"

"Well, no. But that doesn't mean anything. Everyone gets sick. Everyone throws up."

"Everyday?"

"No, not everyday," I said but when I tried to remember the last day I hadn't felt sick, I was counting back weeks before I could find one.

"And you don't think that's a problem?"

"Sure it is. But there are worse things." I thought about not being able to breathe, about choking, swelling windpipes and small spaces.

"Like what?" Carol asked.

I looked around the room. The sun was shining through the windows that dominated the back wall. It made it so that everyone, in their baggy clothes, looked more like shadows than people.

"Like being here."

"Everyone just wants you to be healthy," she said.

"I'm not sick," I told her, though my stomach was trying to push my breakfast back up, "I just don't feel good."

I already couldn't stand Carol's face. It had a permanent sympathetic frown on it and her eyebrows moved too much. At that moment her watch beeped.

"We have to end here for lessons," she said. "But we can continue this tomorrow. Can everyone thank Rina for sharing?"

After a while I got used to it and it was better than school. I didn't ever have to go to class. I just met with a tutor for an hour every week day and she gave me the assignments my teachers sent. I did my homework whenever I wanted and I didn't have to talk to anyone. The only person I really talked to was Lacey. She was smart, not saturated by this self-pity that had taken over the other girls. And she knew how to survive at Laurel Hill.

The hardest part was meal time. The chef was supposed to be some well known big shot from Cape Cod who left his four star restaurant to do "charitable things." But no matter how good they said the food was, it still felt like led all the way down. I chewed each bite until it had turned to liquid: the meat, the potatoes, the broccoli, everything. It still slid down my throat heavy and weighted my stomach down so I felt like I couldn't move.

We had to finish at least three quarters of our plates. Because of that and because it took me so long to eat even one bite, for the first week I was always the last person left at the tables.

Then one night at dinner I was sitting next to Lacey, counting how many times I had chewed my lasagna when I saw her bat a piece off her plate backwards into the napkin on her lap. I watched her, still counting, expecting her to pick it up but minutes passed and I was onto the next bite when she did it again. I watched her drop morsels in the same rhythmic motion as she would pick them up over and over again.

I was on my 8th bite when she crumpled the napkin up in her lap and stuffed it in her pocket. She stood up and winked at me, "I'll see you in the room." I watched her walk away. There should have been a bulge coming out of her pocket, but her sweatshirt hung down to the middle of her thighs and covered it up.

A half an hour later I walked into our room and found her sitting on her bed reading.

"What was that?" I asked, not sure if I was angry or worried or curious. All I knew was that I had sat there trying to eat as fast as I could just to get back upstairs and ask her what the hell she was doing. But the fastest I could eat still took forever.

"What was what?" she asked, laughing, knowing exactly what I was talking about.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," I told her. "How long have you been doing that?"

"Hiding my food? Forever. It's a trick I learned from boarding school. Once I got down to 100 Ibs, they started watching me so I had to make them think I was eating somehow. It's easier here, though. They don't sit next to you."

I realized I was still standing at the doorway and sat down with a squeak on the bed. "But what do you do with it?"

"Flush it down the toilet. They'll hear you throwing up," she said pointedly at me, "But they won't think twice about hearing something drop in the water."

I searched for some kind of remorse on her face but it wasn't there. There was just a girl laughing at a trick she had played. "Don't you want to get better?" I asked.

"Better as in what?"

"As in not anorexic," I suggested.

"In my opinion anorexic is healthy. More people die from food than the lack of it." She ticked the ways off on her fingers, "Choking, allergic reactions, food poisoning, obesity. Obesity is ignored as America's biggest problem. I love myself too much to be among the ignorant." I could tell she had said this before and wondered why it hadn't worked since she still landed herself in here. She convinced me.

"I don't want to be obese, either," I said, "but I don't think I can do that. And I want them to think I'm healthy so they send me home."

"You can do anything you want to," she said. "And as long as you say the right things and keep on smiling, they'll send you home in a few months."

After that Lacey taught me how to hide my food back, how to fold up the napkin right so I didn't stain my pockets.

One day, after lunch Mary called me into her office.

"I'm concerned about you," she said, looking me in the eyes with the stare she gave that was supposed to mean she was very serious. "It's been a month and you haven't gained any weight. In fact you're eight pounds lighter according to your last check up. And Carol says you're still not responding to therapy."

"I'm trying," I lied. "I know I have a problem and I want to get better. It's just hard." I bit my lip and held my eyes open so they'd water.

Mary was trying to reach through my skin. "Be that as it may, the program does not seem to be benefiting your condition. I've called your parents. They're coming here

tomorrow for a meeting. I've discussed it with the rest of the staff already and at this point, we are leaning towards releasing you from the program."

They were the magic words I had been waiting for. It was everything I had wanted her to say. Up until that moment I thought all I was working towards was going home. But instead I felt my stomach drop and heard myself plea, the tears I had been trying to make fall from my eyes coming up in my throat. "Don't send me home yet. I know I can do it." I didn't want to sound so desperate but at that point I would have done anything not to be forced out.

"I'm sorry. We'll talk about this tomorrow morning when your parents arrive but I wanted to prepare you for the possibility that you may be leaving us shortly."

I left the office stunned and fell into bed with my mouth open when I got back to the room.

"What's wrong?" Lacey asked.

"I think they're sending me home," I answered, staring at the ceiling but not really seeing it.

"Oh," Lacey said, "Well that's what you wanted, right?" She asked me like it was a good thing but I could hear the hesitation in her voice too.

"They're not sending me home because I'm better. They're sending me home because I'm getting worse. When I get back I'll just be waiting for my parents to decide what to do with me." I pictured myself locked in my bedroom while my parents went over brochures in the kitchen. "Would you go home?" I asked her.

"Home?" she asked, "My parents sent me to boarding school when I was eight. I don't really have a home." She shrugged. "I just stay wherever I am until someone complains and I get moved again."

I stood up and walked towards our one window. The field was already black, and the sky was overcast. The blackness seemed to thin the further out it went, opening to a space wide enough to scream and not be heard.

"Would you move now?" I asked.

Lacey sat up straighter and turned her head up from her contemplative melancholy. "Move where?"

"I don't know. Just move. I can't stay here anymore and I'm not going back to where I was. That field looks pretty good to me right now and that's more than I've been able to say about anything since long before I got here." I turned back towards her, abandoning my reflection in the glass. "So when I leave here in an hour or two, are you coming with me?"

"But there's nothing there. We could be running through the middle of nowhere for days."

"Do you have someplace better to go?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"I didn't think so."

We left a few hours before dawn. Layered in all of our thickest sweat suits, we crept down the stairs to the front door. It should have been key locked but it wasn't. Probably because they knew there was nowhere to go once outside. Just a long dirt drive and a

field that hid nothing. And that's what we ran into. Even though she had shorter legs, Lacey ran faster. I could only just barely see the diluted moonlight reflect off her yellow hair.

After what seemed like days, the open air rushing past my ears became muffled by the sudden presence of trees and the ground under my feet softened from the weight of dead leaves. I stopped and heard Lacey in front of me do the same.

From somewhere a few trees up she called my name and said, "You there?"

"No." I answered and walked up beside her.

"Funny. I think we should walk from here. I can't see a damn thing in front of me."

We moved through the darkness with our hands out, reaching to feel for trunks not to run into. It was winter and there were no bugs out to still the quiet. Other than our breathing, which steadied after a few minutes, I could hear nothing.

The sky began to turn purple from the sun almost on the horizon when I finally asked, "How long do you think it will take for them to realize we're gone?"

Lacey looked back at me then up to the sky and said, "We probably have a few hours."

"Then let's sit down for a while. I'm exhausted."

Lacey didn't hesitate. She slid down to lean against the base of the closest tree and closed her eyes.

I sat down against the tree across from her and tried to do the same. But when I closed my eyes I saw, from far away, my parents pulling up the drive of Laurel Hill. Mary was waiting in her neat black pants suit, on the top step of the porch. I couldn't

hear what they were saying but a moment after Mary moved her lips my mother's knees buckled and she leaned into my father with her hands over her face. My father wrapped his arm around her to catch her but otherwise didn't move. He kept focused on Mary until my mother stood up straight again. Then he moved faster than I had ever seen him, running straight towards the woods. When I saw his eyes they were frantic but focused on exactly the spot where I was.

I woke to Lacey shaking me saying, "Shhh. Rina, you were just dreaming."

I looked around us, bracing myself to get up and run away but there was no one there. It was fully light out but I couldn't even see the house anymore.

"How long were we asleep?" I asked.

"I don't know but we should probably get going."

"Right," I said and jumped up, moving fast in a forward direction.

"Wait," Lacey said, "that's the way we were coming from."

I turned around in a circle. There was nothing around us but trees. "How can you tell?"

"I just can," she said, and started to run. Having no other choice, I followed her. In the daylight she looked less fluid, her frame shaking each time her foot hit the ground. We hadn't even moved a minute when she tripped over her own feet and fell. I kept running only until I was right beside her and I dropped to my knees. "Are you okay?" I asked, panting.

She groaned and rolled over onto her back. She lifted up her sweatshirt and we both looked down. A branch had jabbed into her stomach and made a scratch all the way

across. It was just a branch, just wood, and it wasn't sharp enough to pierce through skin but still my mouth fell open.

We had changed in the same room before but I never really looked at her uncovered. Now I could see all her ribs lined up perfectly, sticking out far enough to make shadows.

She saw me staring at her and pulled her sweatshirt down. "I'm fine," she said and sat up. "Let's go."

"Lacey," I said, still sitting on my knees, "how much did you weigh at your last weigh in?"

"That doesn't matter now. We have to go." She turned like she was about to run but when I made no sign of movement she stopped and looked back at me.

"How much?" I asked

She shrugged. "Eighty-six."

"We're going back."

"No way. They'll kill us if we go back now."

"A few more days without food and you'll die anyway." I was screaming at her, not caring about tact. "I'm not watching that happen." I grabbed her hand and tried to pull her towards me but she started running. I lunged for her and, being tall enough, was able to catch her legs and pull her to the ground. "You need help," I said.

Panting, she replied, "I'm not sick, I just don't feel good." My own words came back to me from the first day. I let her go and we both sat up. Lifting up my sweatshirt, I looked down at my own stomach. They weren't as defined but I could still see most of my ribs and my hip bones were jutting out.

"I don't feel good either," I said and let my shirt fall. The sun must have been fully raised by then because the bark on the birch trees was reflecting light from under the clouds. Still it was gray and not silver. "But we're not going to feel any better out here."

Lacey had tears in the circles under her eyes. "But there's nowhere to go," she said.

"Yes there is," I said, reaching my hand out to help her up, seeing the picture again in my mind of them waiting for us in the driveway, "home."

And they were waiting for us. We weren't even halfway across the field yet when my parents, followed closely by Mary, came running out the back door. The two of us stopped bracing ourselves for impact.

My father got to me first. He took one look at me and said, "You're grounded for the rest of your life," and pulled me into a hard enough hug to push my heels into the soggy morning lawn

We were ushered inside to Mary's office.

In Mary's office, Lacey and I sat squashed on one side of the desk. My parents were waiting outside.

"What you girls did was irresponsible and dangerous and it's a miracle that you've suffered no more than a few cuts and scrapes," she was saying

Neither of us spoke. It didn't matter anymore. On the way back we knew we were both about to leave and we walked slowly. It wouldn't be the last time we saw each other, but it would be a long time. I wondered if I would get sent away again and she just wondered where. I wouldn't say we were ready for this but we were at least prepared.

"I am sorry to say that I am going to have to release you from Laurel Hill. I cannot risk having you stay and continue to be a negative influence on the other girls. Rina, of course your parents are already here. Lacey, I have called yours and they will be here first thing tomorrow morning."

She stood up and walked around the desk to a file cabinet and opened the top drawer. She pulled out two clear plastic bags labeled with our names on it and handed them across to us. "As promised," she said.

An hour later I was saying goodbye to Lacey on the front porch.

"Are they angry?" she asked me, nodding at my parents who were waiting in the car. ("Five minutes," they had said.)

"Yeah, they're angry," I said, "but they'll get over it."

"Do you think they'll send you somewhere else?"

"No, I think they've come to the conclusion that this whole thing was a bad idea."

Lacey laughed, "Yeah, maybe."

The sun was all the way up now and there were clear patches in the sky. We both still had dirt on the rims of our faces from where we'd fallen over.

The car horn honked.

I yelled, "One second," over my shoulder and turned back to Lacey. "Listen," I said, "Promise me you'll get better so you can come and visit."

She nodded. "I promise."

I pulled the feather necklace off over my head. "Here," I said, "you can wear this now." I fastened it around her neck. "Did you ever play that game at sleepovers where you pretended to be 'light as a feather, stiff as a board'?"

She nodded.

"Well, this one's solid," I said. "And it will stay that way forever. You can feel light, right here," I pointed at her chest, "and stay on the ground."

"I can't take this," she said.

"You need it more than I do."

The car horn honked again. "I have to go. I think my parents miss me."

I hugged her and walked down the steps of the porch. As we drove away I watched her from the backseat until the drive curved and she was lost through the trees.

On the ride home they yelled some but by the end my father was saying he knew better all along.

"Some places just make you crazy," he said to my mother as we pulled into our driveway. "There just aren't the right people there to make you get better."

As I followed my father through the door the smell hit me, just like dinner, and I stopped in the foyer. I let it wash over me: home, the sound of the air conditioning running. I pulled my sweatshirt tighter around myself and walked through the swinging door to the kitchen.

My parents were sitting at the table. I felt heavy as I landed in a chair. I pictured Lacey, sitting in the dining room at Laurel Hill, probably counting her bites as she chewed, waiting for the morning. Light as a feather, stiff as a board, I repeated to myself.

"You're grounded," my father said.

"Yeah," I replied, "I know."

Lessons in Sidewalk Chalk

The day is Sunday and we are coming home from Hebrew school. It is late fall and my brother is picking apart fresh cotton in the back seat of our van and throwing the seeds on the floor. The field behind our synagogue is just starting to bloom.

I am thinking, which is not unusual, but I am thinking because of what our Hebrew school teacher says Nazi's think beautiful people look like. They call it Aryan, which means blonde hair and blue eyes. I look in the passenger side mirror at my sister. She is Aryan. I am not, nor is my brother. I watch her and count her features. She is sitting straight up, her frame like a healthy scarecrow, tall, straight and narrow.

I ask my mother, "Why is Miriam so tall?"

She is sitting close to the steering wheel so her feet reach the pedals but she shifts her hips closer anyway when I ask, and replies, "Well it's probably because of her father."

"But Daddy's not tall," I say. I am confused. There is no one else we call father and the man I know by that name is, at 50, only a few inches taller than Miriam is, at ten.

"No," my mother says. She is being gentle and patient. She says, "Her biological father."

I am too young to take biology but I know it is what Dad has his degree in. I know it has something to do with microscopes and diseases and I know that something is wrong in its combination with the word father.

"I don't understand." But in some sense I do. I know that there is something that I am almost getting; that I know has always settled underneath everything, and for some reason now, will not stay quiet.

"Stop being stupid," Miriam says.

My mother shushes her and explains it to me, for what she says is the second time, in what must be shorter terms. "Your father couldn't have children so we had to go to a sperm bank."

We are pulling into the driveway and I roll up the window. I ask short questions. I ask, "Why?"

She says, "We don't know. That's just the way God made it."

I ask, "When?"

She says, "We told you about three years ago; when you were five."

We get inside and my mother insists on showing me the papers. There are only two: the first filled by the man who owns the sperm, the second, a consent form from my mother. She consents that everything will be fine, that no one will look or say anything about him.

"Aren't you glad you're here?" she asks.

I walk up the stairs and do not answer. Where am I? I am nowhere. I am cut in half and halfway living. I have half siblings; none of us share the same pieces of paper.

Alan Schreier is a biophysicist with a Ph. D from MIT. He cannot sing, or play card games well. He reads mainstream science-fiction novels. Alan Schreier and I share nothing; no interests, no talents, no blood.

My father has no blood type. He has no age, no religion. He was never born and he will never die. He lives in small spaces, in between the lines on a photocopied page. He says: I am a Caucasian male. I have no history of heart disease, cancer, or diabetes. My name is blank.

My mother keeps him in our filing cabinet with my sister's father and my brother's father. I wonder if they have ever spoken.

My mother is married to a man who is a stranger to me. He sleeps in the guest room because he snores and she can't sleep at night. At 1 am, 2 am, 2:37 am and on, he walks down the hall past my bedroom on his way to the bathroom. At least five times a night I hear his square, calloused feet shuffle on the old blue carpet.

I can't sleep either.

But I dream the night after I know for sure why we don't see or seem the same. I dream that another man is in our house, in the upstairs hallway. He is wearing black and shadows and walks slowly past our doorways. I lie in bed and I can feel him moving through the other bedrooms, making my family members disappear. I dream I am sleeping when he walks in my room, straight to my bed and I notice he has a knife in his hand. He comes close enough to touch my face with it and I wake up, not sure how long I have been screaming.

This dream repeats for ten years. I move my furniture often but each times he finds where my bed is. I blame my disorganization, the clothes and books on my floor, as a defense mechanism, an obstacle he will trip over. I lock my door at night

Derivative: A measure of the rate of change. A line curves, slopes over time and space. The two variables, distance and time are held against each other, time divided by the distance traveled. Inevitably, one will be greater than the other, and hold more power over the function.

I wake the next morning with the feeling that my life is 10 years less. I am a negative number, in a space that is 5,000 miles from my bed. I have altitude sickness and have left myself.

My mother knocks on my door, rattles the handle and says, "Rachel, it's time to get up."

"Five more minutes," I say, wanting each minute to last forever

I sink into the pillows, my stomach lurching as if I am going over an endless hill.

When my mother comes the third time she threatens to unscrew the doorknob. I kick the covers off and throw one leg over the side of the bed, then the other, still pressing my face hard into my pillow. By the time I get both feet on the ground I don't have time to change. I put on my flip flops and go downstairs.

My father is sitting at the breakfast table, drinking Folgers and reading the newspaper. He looks up when I get to the bottom step, sets his paper down and clears the space off next to him.

"Sit down," he says.

I pick up my backpack from by the door, sling it over my shoulder and sit down on the edge of the chair. "What?" I ask, looking just above his eyes.

"Your mother told me what happened yesterday in the car."

"What's that?" I pick at the dirt under my fingernails.

"I want to talk to you about it," he says. "There are things you should understand."

For just a moment I look into his eyes. They are more brown than green. His nose is too flat. His earlobes are too short and his greasy hair is almost black. I am not even a reflection in his glasses.

I am eight and I do not like to understand the sad things; I still like to play pretend. "I'm going to miss the bus," I say and I walk out the door.

I pretend to forget about it, letting my mind shift on to the normal trials of a prepubescent girl, chubby, ratty hair, with no real sense of social constraint except that I know people sometimes look at me funny.

It is sometime around then that I learn about the concept of Black Sheep. Most of my friends were, and have always been, male and it is a daily lunch table occurrence for someone, Matt, or Jed, or Andrew to say to me, "God, Rachel, your sister is hot." They are doing it, half-joking to get a rise out of me, but they are serious.

What I have going for me is sarcasm and I say, "And I'm sure she thinks you are too." It has nothing to do with me. Miriam doesn't look anything like Mom which

means she looks nothing like me. I am the ugly, awkward child; a donation from some desperate fuck too ugly to get paid for sex so he jacks off in a cup instead.

To me the concept of family is a lie. Families are tied to each other by blood or by marriage; ties they resent and tug at, pulling their opposite ends by their teeth, their necks, to the floor. I have never been to a family reunion, but the ones I hear about and see on TV always have a fight scene. Someone always leaves early, finds out something they don't want to know, tries to pretend they like someone they have no interest in seeing, or gets so drunk they don't remember it until the pictures surface.

I am going through some boxes in my mother's closet, sometime in high school when I find a t-shirt from at least 10 years before. It is from when our parents take the three of us to a fair where I meet the Cookie Monster and Big Bird and they give me a blue t-shirt that says CELEBRATE in big white letters. It is sometime when I still only remember things in flashes; when I have to squint to look up at things I don't understand. There are balloons everywhere, tied to dunking booths and every child's wrist who is old enough not to try and put it in their mouth. And there are lots of children.

CELEBRATE, when I am five years old, means Big Bird and balloons and my brother not walking yet. This says: CELEBRATE in hard white letters across the chest and just underneath it, FAMILY, small and hiding. I flip it over and on the back, just between the shoulder blades it says, "Xytec." I ask my mother and she says it is the name of the bank where the three of us come from.

Continuous function - anything that goes in comes out again in a relative way. When one draws it out on paper, they will never have to lift their pencil. Everything in nature is continuous, the physicists say.
Discontinuous function - like a bank account, one variable shifts without the other moving. Think: withdrawals and deposits.

I am a withdrawal. I am not natural. And when I babysit, I will not watch Sesame Street.

Limit - a dotted line that one approaches while moving towards something infinite. Two curves come from opposite sides. One reaches the right coordinates first, crosses over and then makes a turn in the other direction. Perhaps he lingers for a moment on the opposite side.

We argue over small things at first. First I drop out of pre-calculus because I hate it and I am failing. Instead of paying attention, I write bad poetry in the margins of my notebook. He starts with, "But you love math," and he really thinks I do.

And I say, "It doesn't make sense to me." But this is the wrong thing to say. He tries to sit me down and teach me anyway. Somehow we start talking about dimensions. He says, "Did you know there's a fourth dimension?"

"No, Dad. I didn't know there was a fourth dimension." My father likes to talk in rhetorical questions.

"Well the first three that most people know about," (Most people?), "are X, Y, and Z; Length, width and depth. Can you guess what the fourth one is?"

"Do you really think I can?" When he talks to me like a four year old he should just tell me the answers and spare me the trouble.

"It's Time," he says and tries to draw the axis out on a piece of graph paper.

"You can't show that on paper," I say. "You can't show time moving on a flat surface."

"Oh yes you can," he is still speaking in his excited I'm-teaching-you-something-I-think-is-cool voice. "It's a demonstration. You just have to imagine it that way."

"Well I can't," I say. And I leave. I cannot think the way he does.

It is the night my mother is out of town at a conference that we both crash into the dotted line. I am in bed, reading, when my father comes in and says, "I have to show you how to do your taxes."

It is 10:30 and I have school tomorrow. "Now?" I ask.

"They're due soon and I'm not going to have much time this coming week."

"I don't want to learn. It's not my fault that you waited until last minute." I pick my book up and start reading again.

"Don't ignore me," he says, "I am your father and—"

"No, you're not." I interrupt his presumptions that he can tell me what to do. "You're not my father. You didn't give me life to start with and now all you do is take it away. I just want to be left alone. So why don't you go away and stop bothering me."

"I am your father," he says.

"Not to me, you're not. You haven't done anything for me except make me miserable."

He starts to get angry now. He says, "Well you're doing a pretty good job of making me unhappy, too."

"Good," I say.

It is interesting how few words it takes to make something happen.

He looks me straight in the eyes and since it is late, he is not wearing his glasses. His eyes are like small drills on mine. He says, "I can't wait for you to get out of this house." He is pointing towards the door when he says it, and he holds his finger there for a moment after he stops speaking. Then he walks out of the room.

I don't know how to pack my things, what to bring and what to leave behind, so I just get dressed and leave.

When on the street I realize I have nowhere to go. It is 11pm on a Tuesday and everyone I know is asleep at their families' homes. I call my sister in Chapel Hill where she is at school but she does not answer. I call my friend, Jen, who lives only a few miles away and her phone is off.

The only other safe number in my phone belongs to my Aunt who lives in Chicago. It is only ten o'clock there and she answers.

"Aunt Janet, my dad just kicked me out of the house and I don't know what to do. I have nowhere to go." She is his sister and so she should be able to do something. "Where's your mother?"

"In Texas at a conference and she's not picking up her cell phone," I say, sobbing.

"Okay," she says, "I'll see what I can do. Just go someplace safe and I'll call you in a minute."

There is nowhere safe so I keep walking. I walk until I hit the railroad tracks. Fuck it, I say, and turn down them. I am walking on the rails like a balance bean when my Mother calls.

"Where are you?" she asks.

"On the tracks, almost to 14th street."

"When you get there, stay there. Your father is coming to get you." I have never heard my mother so angry before and I am happy for a brief second because it is not directed at me.

I do what she says and wait for him because if I don't, I will be the bad guy. This is working out in my favor. I get to go home and I have an excuse to never speak to him again.

When he pulls up I get in the backseat of the car. He tries to apologize and I say, "Don't fucking talk to me ever again." He doesn't even yell at me for cursing so I keep going. I tell him that as soon as I get the chance I'll make his wish come true and disappear from his life.

"I'm sorry," he says and he means it. "Sometimes you just make me so angry."

"It doesn't matter what you say to me now," I tell him. "As far as I'm concerned you've put yourself in the hole forever."

We go to sleep that night and don't talk about it anymore. In fact we don't speak much at all for weeks. I have already been accepted to three colleges and, in less than a year, I can go as far away as Vermont if I choose.

So, eventually, we learn how to make small talk, and I count down the days.

The Schrodinger equation is a fortune teller. She tells us where a particle will exist in space in five minutes, five years, five million years. She maps out the path of something solid, something there, something tangible in at least the smallest of ways. She tells us to expect it and we go through the data, let the numbers fill in the blanks and yet we still don't believe the coordinates.

I move away from home three days after my eighteenth birthday. I am moving into the dorms at UNC Asheville. It's only five hours away, but it's a good school and it's far enough. I follow my parents in my Honda Accord, a pack of cigarettes hidden underneath my seat. In heavy traffic I fall behind to smoke.

The other parents are there too, helping their children carry up oversized duffels and boxes, saying goodbye. It is no different for us. My mother helps me set up my fishbowl and make my bed and I walk them down to their car. Before he gets in my father says, "Here, this is for you," and hands me a thick envelope with my name scripted on the front.

"Okay," I say. I want him to leave so I can smoke another cigarette.

"Read it," he says, "It's important." We hug each other from only one side and part. I turn away and don't watch them pull out of the parking lot.

Two nights later, among new friends and almost strangers, I pull the letter out of my desk drawer.

Laying on my top bunk, with four other people on the floor, not paying attention to me, I read all six pages. It happens, as it sometimes does, that I don't know I am crying until I can hear myself doing it.

Because, to me, it seems already like something hidden, I never think that there is anything left to keep secret.

My father never says it because I never ask and because I never listen. So he writes it now and he tells me he is sorry he is not my biological father. He tells me, though, that he is glad I got the genes I did and he gets to call me daughter.

The worst part is that he is not angry; that he doesn't hate me for the things I have said; that he understands.

He fills in the blank spaces. My name is Alan Schreier, he says, I know things, I wear glasses, I like star trek and numbers. This is how I think, he says, I think of slopes, functions, solutions; I think of how to be able to explain this.

I am three, again, and I remember it the way my mother tells it. I am holding a stick of chalk in my fist pressing hard on the sidewalk in front of our house. My father is watching me scribble in purple and white and he thinks of the most beautiful thing he knows: Calculus and Physics Equations.

In Greek, he tells me, this is how the world works. Fill in these blanks with your own numbers he says, and you will find the answer to the questions you are asking.

"What questions," I ask.

"Every question," he says. "For now, this is just sidewalk chalk. You don't have enough variables yet, but you will, and it will make sense then."

My father's letter is not a solution; it is a list of things to plug in to solve an equation I don't even know I am trying to solve. The question is not who, but what.

I find it, as everyone does, when they are not looking.