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The three stories in this manuscript “Creepy,” “Elegantly,” and “Bad Romance” interrogate the complexities, joys, and struggles of female friendship. In “Creepy,” the first person narrator, Annie, develops a friendship with her neighbor, Ms. Jacobs, while she cleans out Ms. Jacobs’s cat’s litter box during Ms. Jacobs’ pregnancy. The story tracks Annie’s relationship to her sexuality and her relationship to her mother. “Elegantly” follows Julia’s desire to adopt a Chinese daughter, and “Bad Romance” is a sister story, following Melanie’s relationship to Annesley, her younger sister who finds fame on Youtube.

CREEPY AND OTHER STORIES

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CREEPY .....	1
ELEGANTLY .....	25
BAD ROMANCE .....	47

## CREEPY

Everything with Ms. Jacobs happened back when I thought of myself as creepy. In September of ninth grade, my mother handed me a note from Ms. Jacobs, and she stood close to me, watching me read. She twitched with jittery excitement. Ms. Jacobs asked if I'd help clean out her cat's litter box, because she could no longer do it herself. She didn't use the word "pregnant" specifically, but my mother had heard about it through someone in her book club who worked in the same building as Ms. Jacobs who'd overheard the people in Ms. Jacobs lab discussing how it would affect their projects, and so she must have figured we knew. That was like Ms. Jacobs: never apologizing for anything or taking the time to explain herself. I jumped back and forth on each foot, like how I waited at a stoplight during a run.

"How long will I have to do it for?"

"Annie," my mother said. "I think you can figure that one out."

"So you have read it?"

My mother frowned, fishing in her purse for her phone.

"You'll make good money."

"I'll think about it."

I had to be careful not to act too interested. I pulled my tennis shoes off and walked upstairs. Once, a girl at school told me I had intense eyes. I was watching her sit down across from me, and her hands, the precision with which she placed her binder on

her desk, and her chin, which made a delicate droop towards her neck, and then her shoulders, which tensed up along with her neck when she saw me watching her. She began to laugh, the uncomfortable kind, and she stopped talking to me in the halls. My mother was probably already on her phone, texting someone about Ms. Jacobs or searching her contacts for the right person to call. She used gossip to reel people in. I peeled off my sweaty socks and threw them on the floor right outside my bedroom and went into my brother's bathroom. He'd left for college the year before, and so there was no one to know about my obsession, and so it became larger in my head.

Ms. Jacobs wasn't there. She usually wasn't, but I'd spent hours watching her backyard anyway. If I squeezed into the space between the toilet and the wall, I could see into her living room window. You left the living room and walked outside to a boring cement patio, which you walked down a few steps to get to the small, rectangular yard. Once, a family of cardinals pecked at the yellow grass. Over the winter, during our one snow, there appeared a snowman with a scarf around his neck and no face. Last month, I caught her sitting outside on the wooden bench with a younger blonde woman. I watched them talk. Ms. Jacobs took her shoes off, and her friend sat on the ground with her back against Ms. Jacobs' knees, and she absently scraped at the cement with a twig. They drank beers. I took a picture, deleted it, and then took another one. The nauseating shame of what I was doing roiled inside me like heartburn. I allowed myself to feel it. There were men that watched me sometimes, my Dad's friends usually, and when I walked into the room, a few of them started at my chest, then moved in a quick motion

down to my shoes, and then they swept their eyes back up me, slowly, until they found my face.

We shared a double driveway with Ms. Jacobs, and sometimes our cars would be parked so close together that, to exit the car, I'd have to crawl out of the driver's seat. When Ms. Jacobs and my mother talked, I'd lean against the car or pretend to fiddle around with something in my backpack. Ms. Jacobs might be carrying groceries in from the store. She'd be wearing a gray or black suit, tall high heels. She wore her hair down in a frizzy, curly mess. It was unruly like mine, but I always kept mine up. Ms. Jacobs ran a biology lab at the National Institute of Health, and my mother said she was high up on the totem pole. White powdered doughnuts, Poptarts, giant cartons of Goldfish squeezed out of the green recyclable bags she used. Ms. Jacobs was overweight, not like us. She responded to my mother with a concentrated distance I wished I could emulate. She said, yes, yes to a woman who did it all and made everyone else's business her own, and she kept walking. She asked quick questions, like how my brother was doing in college or how my dad's restaurant was going, and she took the first few words out of my mother's mouth as sufficient enough answer, and she moved towards her door, which was painted red. A huge iron lion held the circular doorknocker in its mouth like a chew toy or a bit.

On the way to the gym, my mother pressed me again.

“Did you decide to do it?”

“Not yet.”

That summer, my mother and I had started going to the Curves for Women. Mom wanted to lose ten pounds, and she said my motivation could inspire her. It was also something she could brag to people about: look how close we are. At first, I just went as cross-training for cross country, but I’d found that being at the gym— adding more and more weights to the machines, watching the women next to me on the treadmill and upping my speed, pumping myself towards a hazy happiness full with endorphins— bought me the most prolonged distance from my head.

I saw my mother walk up to Mrs. Livingstone, the mom of a guy in my grade. When she got closer, Mrs. Livingstone stepped backwards, almost tripped on one of the fitness balls behind her, gave my mother a quick, pursed-lips smile and walked off.

By then, I’d discovered that my mother was not the kind of woman other women loved. She grew up rich and in Atlanta, and we lived in the suburbs and were just normal, and I thought that might explain how the mothers of my classmates turned away from her at the first chance they got, before the conversation even started, repulsed by a less than subtle snobbery. But, there was something loud and annoying about her, too. She talked too much. She grated on you, gossiped with an almost manic diligence, like she was waiting for just the right moment to pounce. In eighth grade, when I waved her pillbox of Lexipro self-righteously in front of her face, she begged me not to tell anyone. I didn’t have anyone to tell, but, still, I fantasized about my mother without it. Maybe, she’d let other people’s opinions affect her a little more, and she’d be better.



Yet, my mother was the sweat and bones behind every parent-teacher night, PTA auction, lecture series at the church, Wednesday night supper, church volunteer trip, and middle school soup kitchen visit, and she held several secretarial positions for various organizations around our area, and so, if people wanted to criticize her, they did so only in subtle ways and behind closed doors, and to me, they spoke of her enthusiastically, and they said what an incredible person she was. The women spoke of her, yet they did not talk to her. They stood together in clumps, the way the cool girls in my grade hung out in Mr. Koch's office, and they avoided her until they needed a favor, and then they asked her for her help, probably feeling good about themselves for including her.

"I'm going to do it," I said leaving the gym.

My mother didn't put a shirt over her sports bra even when we went outside. Her nipples were hard. Her face was a bright, splotchy red. I saw her check out her new body in the car's reflection.

"Good, Annie. You'll be a real help. Can you imagine what it would be like to be in her circumstances?"

"I'm not going to fucking spy, mom."

"Annie!"

"I'm just saying that so you know."

I could be direct with my mother and not with anyone else. At school, I was reserved, not exactly a loner, but not cemented in a group of friends either. I felt like I was doing my mother a favor, telling her directly what other women only said behind her back.

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The teakettle was screeching.

“I have chamomile, ginger, and a nice green,” Ms. Jacobs said.

When I paused, she said, “or, do you want more of a fruity one?”

She began to rummage in her pantry, and soon, she held up a box of apple cinnamon.

“I knew I had this somewhere. I also have hot chocolate.”

Hot chocolate would have been lame. She handed me the apple cinnamon. I tried to wrap my hands around the whole mug, but I burned myself, and so I took the handle. We walked to the couch. She put a plate of three Oreos on the coffee table in front of us. I sloshed some tea on the floor when I sat down.

“Is this the weirdest request you’ve ever gotten?”

Ms. Jacobs asked the question like it was an order, like there was only one acceptable answer—something cute or witty that said ‘yes of course it was.’

“No,” I said. I looked around. I’d been in the inside of her house when I was a kid—a Christmas party here or there—but her house was different than I’d thought it would be. The room was clean and non-cluttered. The color scheme was plain—browns and whites with a few dark green and blue accents—but the décor was modern, so unlike my mother’s classic traditionalism next door. The couch was “S” shaped and curled around nearly the whole room. The two coffee tables were unevenly placed and low to the ground. On one wall hung three massive black and white photographs—a white

woman in an Indian sari, a group of people, probably a family, on a bright white beach, and a close up of an enormous elephant, the wrinkles of his trunk at the foreground.

The cat rubbed up against my leg. She was all gray except for a white patch of fur, like a mustache, around her mouth. I had recently started shaving, and I liked to rub my hands along my new legs, to feel their smooth and womanly variety.

“What’s her name again?” I said, kneeling next to the cat

“Bobbie.”

“Now I remember.”

“So, the baby’s due in early April. I’ll just need you until then. I really appreciate it. I’d completely forgotten about the whole pregnant women, litter-box thing, until one of my friends reminded me.”

Ms. Jacobs showed me the litter box, which was in a closet in the living room, and she showed me how to scoop the poop into plastic bags and the green trashcan outside where I could throw the bags afterwards. She gave me a key to her house, and she told me she’d pay me on Sundays and that she’d leave the envelope on the counter if she wasn’t there, and that of course, I should do this on my own time, so I should just come in whenever. I thanked her, lifting up the trash can lid and throwing the shit inside on my way out.

For the first couple of weeks, I went over there right when I got back from cross-country and before she got home from work, so I could explore her house. I wanted to

figure out how she got pregnant. I was tentative about it at first, assuming at any minute she'd walk in and know what I was doing. On the fifth day, I got up the courage to go into her bedroom. Her mattress was on the floor, pressed up against a corner, and she had huge, brightly colored pillows pushed against both walls. The bedspread, sheets and a fuzzy white blanket made a lumpy mess at the end of the bed. A sheer, light yellow curtain with small silver diamonds hung from a hook on the ceiling above where she slept. I stood in the doorway. The curtain shimmered with dull afternoon light. I went to stand under it. I stared up. I remembered being inside the parachute during P.E. when I was five or six, before I popped out of the hole in the middle and waved my hands excitedly. I stayed still, swooped up by an intense and marvelous aloneness. On the outside, my classmates sat heavy on the edges, and soon, one of them batted at the parachute, sending gigantic ripples across it, screamed at me to hurry up already.

I stopped looking around Ms. Jacobs' house for a week, but eventually, I started up again. When mother asked me what it was like over there, I usually said, "normal," and once, I snapped: "honestly, she's the least interesting person ever. It's creepy you like her so much." My mother looked at me funny and turned back to her baking.

At night, I created stories. Imagining Ms. Jacobs getting inside of her bed, feeling her growing stomach, snuggling up on the floor, I decided Ms. Jacobs was pregnant because she'd been raped. The wooden four-poster bed she recently rid herself of because pain is often palpably remembered, and Ms. Jacobs had been leaving the mall when two black men held a gun up to her head and got into the car with her, made her drive them to her house, and there, they raped her on her wooden bed, one after the other,

stole a few pieces of her jewelry and then left. Because Ms. Jacobs was such a strong person, she'd decided to make something beautiful out of something ugly. One day, when her child would ask about her father, Ms. Jacobs would figure out a way to spin the story, focus on the deep sadness in her father's beautiful, brown eyes.

Once, I opened a journal that was on the floor by her bed. I slammed it shut, yet I'd unmistakably seen the name "Jake," and for a while, he became an ex-boyfriend she'd run into at a high school reunion. She'd been drunk, and although rarely horny, there must have been something in the punch that night, and they'd had sex in his car, and now, she was trying her hardest to keep the news from him, because he was married, and plus, he told her to her face she'd gotten fat. Afterwards, Ms. Jacobs cried in the bathtub, but drying herself clean, she'd moved on, until of course, a month later, when she truly realized what the night had meant.

There was my favorite fantasy, one I only tried on late at night, right before I'd drift into sleep, at one of those holy points during the day when vulnerability and honesty can talk, even if you'd rather them not, even though you'd rather they would. The conclusions I'd come to would be nearly lost by the morning, meaning that I was safe, therefore, to engross and enchant myself with visions of a secret life I both feared and hoped Ms. Jacobs had. I trailed into thoughts about cross country and running behind Jessica, the way her shorts sort of caught and rode up between her legs until she realized and pulled them down. Ms. Jacobs— maybe she was what I only sometimes knew. I savored hazy, pleasurable visions about the blonde woman she'd been with that day. I

saw her reach over and extend gathered fingers into a wider circle around Ms. Jacob's knee. The surprise of it rippled over my body, spreading.

About two months into the job, I was in the shower when I realized I'd missed the interval of time when Ms. Jacobs was working. It was almost six. I threw on some sweatpants and twisted my hair up into a towel turban and ran out the door.

I could smell Ms. Jacobs' cooking from the hallway.

"Who's that?"

I walked into the kitchen. Ms. Jacobs held a knife in her hands, not erect exactly, but maybe like she'd spontaneously grabbed it. She put it down.

"I was late today."

"You're all good," she said, taking a deep breath in. She was chopping vegetables. "I just thought you were someone else. Nice hair-do."

I pulled the towel off, and my wet hair dripped down my back. Her stomach was growing larger, and it looked ugly to me, swelling out under a shirt so tight that the cotton was stretched out, and little slivers of her skin were visible underneath. She looked tired. I put the wet towel on her coffee table, then on the floor next to it, and walked towards the litter box and knelt down.

"I'll be out of your way in just a second."

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" Ms. Jacobs was standing over me, licking the sauce off a wooden spoon.

“I made spaghetti. I made way too much of it.”

“My mom’s already made dinner.”

“You could go ask her.”

I wasn’t the person you thought of when you wanted someone next to you at dinnertime. I came back half an hour later with a plate of three homemade brownies my mother redistributed from a tray of brownies she’d already made for some fundraiser. My hair was brushed and dry. I’d changed my shirt.

“Your mother does it all, doesn’t she?” Ms. Jacobs said, unpeeling the tin foil and taking a look at the brownies, grabbing a pinch of one and popping it into her mouth.

“You have no idea,” I said, rolling my eyes, and we laughed.

We sat on the couch next to each other like old friends. The spaghetti sauce was spicy, and I had to take huge gulps of water between bites, but Ms. Jacobs didn’t seem to notice. She put her feet on the coffee table, and I sat cross-legged with the bowl between my legs. I felt strangely comfortable there in her house, next to her, eating her food. There was no one in the world that knew what I was doing, and no one in the world to care. Somehow, at school, I’d begun to feel like the stalker character in a movie. I stole looks at your ass when you walked away from me. I hid behind the menu at the diner, took steady peeks at the table across the way where the hot girls sat—talking to each other, eating hash browns, flipping at their hair. I wore a twisted grin on my face. You told your friends I made you feel weird, or you didn’t admit it.

Bobbie sat across from us and watched us eat.

“Does he always do that?”

Ms. Jacobs laughed. “That’s the thing I love about Bobbie,” she said. “He wants to be involved.”

“Have you thought about names for your baby?”

“I have a few, but I’m not telling.”

“If it’s a girl, it could be Bobbie Junior.”

“If it’s a boy too.”

We laughed. I sunk further into the couch. Ms. Jacobs stretched out, pressing her back against the sofa, pointing her toes.

“Where did you grow up?”

“Boston.”

“Does your family still live there?”

“My dad and his wife.”

“Will they come for the birth?”

“They’ll come afterwards. Dad’s not really the person you want holding your hand.”

“You don’t want anyone in there with you?”

“My friend from work. Lynda.”

I felt the blood in my face. I saw Ms. Jacobs’ hands, pressed hard against Lynda’s boobs, and together, they rushed the covers away with their feet. Together, their bodies made soft gorgeous curves, like the hand on the breast in a painting. When I looked up, Ms. Jacobs was staring, twirling her fork through her pasta. My eyes began to sting. I put my bowl on the coffee table.



“She and her husband have three kids. She knows what childbirth feels like.”

“That will be good,” I said, softly.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes.”

We ate in silence.

And yet, silence suited us. The longer we sat, my creepy awkwardness became a symptom of a blurry, confused past, not a characteristic of my present, here. Lynda disappeared. Ms. Jacobs had forgotten about her too.

“What’s your favorite subject?” She eventually asked me.

“French.”

“Hmm. Is it because of the teacher or do you just like languages?”

I paused to consider her question.

“I guess you’re right that it’s probably the teacher.”

“It’s amazing how much teachers can make or break the experience. It seems like they shouldn’t have all that power, but I think they do. My favorite was Ms. Davis. Seventh grade algebra. She was so excitable, with this strange little laugh and all these jokes to herself. I learned so much.”

I nodded. I wanted to hear more, and so I asked. What was your school like? What was your family like? What were your friends like? What do you mean by that?

Ms. Jacobs was generous with me. She talked about growing up in freezing Boston, about her annoying sister-in-law who was always sending her Christian chain-emails, about how she’d rescued Bobbie from the side of the road after getting a flat tire, about her mom’s death when she was twenty-seven. At the funeral, everyone kept asking

Ms. Jacobs if she had a boyfriend, and finally, just to shut them up, one of her work friends agreed to act as a stand-in. Ms. Jacobs laughed vigorously at that memory, and I made it into something else.

At the end of dinner, she invited me back the next week, and then, the week after that too. I was doing something right. When Ms. Jacobs asked about me, I flipped the answer, so I could ask something about her, anything, and I began to fill in the details of her life little by little, and she became more full, like school notebooks that spilled over papers during the semester, like my muscles. We started our own version of Wednesday Night Supper, and it was exciting to revise a church tradition and to make it our own. When I wrote my English papers on her couch, I finished in half the time. We watched boring science documentaries together, sorted through her junk mail and had contests for the weirdest coupon, made milkshakes with her fancy blender.

I began to see Ms. Jacobs for all the things my mother wasn't. Before latching on, my mother's words evaporated in mid-air in front of me. I began to treat her like my father or my brother, with a sort of 'yes, yes, I hear you because I have to' attitude, not any sort of real hearing, just hearing based on how it pertained to me, like where my laundry was in the cycle or what time we were leaving for school. My mothers' questions about Ms. Jacobs' repulsed me, especially since my fantasies about her pregnancy had all but ended. She was a person now, a friend, but I respected the tenuous nature of our friendship, knew some questions were off limits, was too nervous to ask others. Mainly, they didn't matter anymore.

I think it was the way Ms. Jacobs talked to me that surprised me the most. Like I was just one of her friends, and we could consider life together. Ms. Jacobs let me be nostalgic for the moments in my life that were happening to me right then, and there was something in that permission that made me feel safe, like there was an impermanence to my life as it was now, like there was a hope in its future.

In February, my mother and I were in the parking lot leaving the gym. It was dusk. Past the trees at the edge of the lot, the sun was setting, coloring the sky a soft orange in the space between the trees and the dark gray of night that pressed down above it. It was not brilliant. I wore a sweatshirt and ear muffs. My mother swung her keys back and forth in her hands, and they made an obnoxious clicking noise. When the clicking noise began to irritate me, when I could hear nothing apart from it, I looked over at my mother so that she would see me and stop.

When she didn't notice, I slowed down. Finally, she turned around. I knew what that girl at school meant when she said I had intense eyes. My mother stepped backwards, startled. My eyes tattletaled, exposing to my mother the dark anger I'd so fiercely forced into hiding. She stared at the ground to get away from me. She still clicked the keys, and the sound synched with my grating anger. I held my gaze. When she looked up, it seemed she'd regained something, strength maybe, and she stepped closer. Our eyes connected, like she was meeting my match. She squeezed the keychain tightly. The clicking stopped.

On the ride home, one of her fingernails broke off. She gave out a muted gasp of pain. The nail fell on her lap, and she unrolled the window and threw it outside, the cold air rushing through the drying sweat on my scalp.

I over-heard my mother on the phone. It's just weird, she was saying. It's just weird that a woman of her age wants to spend that much time with my daughter.

The next day, she stood in the doorframe, blocking me. I picked at the chipping white paint by the strike plate.

"Stop," she said. I freed a large piece and threw it on the ground.

"Stop," she said, batting at my hand.

"Stop," I said.

"Why don't you change the litter while she's at work?"

"I just forgot."

"You never do anymore."

"What's it to you?"

"You know that women can change their own litter if they buy a mask."

There was something calculated in her voice, like she'd been sitting on this information and waiting for the right time to punch me with it.

"You're the one that wanted me to help her out."

"Guard your heart," my mother said. She arched her back to take up more space in the doorframe, as if to say I couldn't leave. She popped her pelvis out towards me and

tightened her jaw muscles, which prompted a severity of face I hadn't seen, made her look almost like a man. Am I allowed to say there was something sexual I saw in her that day? Mother animals freak when someone threatens their offspring.

“What in the world does that mean?” I said.

“Just be careful,” she said.

I pushed her hand away and stormed out of the house.

“Hey,” I said to Ms. Jacobs, out of breath.

Ms. Jacobs was stirring a huge pot of soup.

“Hello,” she said. When she looked up, I wondered if she'd been crying.

“Are you making that for Wednesday night supper?” I said, trying to sound casual about it.

“I can't do tomorrow.” Ms. Jacobs said. “Would the next one work?”

“Yes,” I said. I bent down to collect the litter, feeling my hot face.

I think Ms. Jacobs could tell I was about to cry, and she walked me to the door.

“I'm sorry I've been aloof Annie,” she said. “I'm super distracted right now.”

“I'm here if you ever want to talk,” I said, pathetically.

The next Wednesday, I knocked on the door, but no one came. I checked my phone. I was a few minutes early. Maybe, she was at the grocery store. I sat on the left side of her stoop, out of my mother's vision, and I waited. After about ten minutes, I knocked again. When no one answered, I decided to use my key and wait inside.

A brown skinned man was in her living room, walking towards the couch, holding a bag of popcorn.

“Who are you?” he said.

He was not fat, but he was pudgy, especially around his face. The room smelled like the chemical butter of popcorn, which he ate straight from the bag. He was not much taller than I was, probably around 5’6 or 5’7, and he had a giant light-colored birthmark on his neck that crept up onto his cheekbone and the left side of his face. He wore a navy blue sweatshirt that said *Calvin Klein* in white block letters across the chest and wrinkled khaki pants and faded dark brown loafers.

“Who are you?” I said. Feigning control, I stepped closer, feeling in my sweatshirt for my cell phone.

“I’m just waiting for Jennifer to get home,” he said, holding the popcorn out to me as if he already knew I’d take it. “We’re old friends.”

“No thanks,” I said. “I’m supposed to be coming over for dinner.”

“What is she making?” He stepped closer.

Up close, he wore a warm twinkle in his eyes, like he knew I’d cave and eventually answer whatever it was he asked. Even with little worldly experience with men, I intuited that this charm had gotten him places with women like me, women who might look past his height and chubbiness and allow themselves to notice, mainly, his handsome face, women who weren’t used to being looked at in this way, women who weren’t used to being specifically craved. Perhaps, this was what I had needed all this

time: not those dark fantasies at night, just a man who'd look at my face like it meant something.

I did not answer the question.

“How do you know Ms. Jacobs anyway?” I said.

“So formal.” He was flirting with me. I could have reached out my hand to touch his face.

“How do you know Jennifer?”

“That's so much better.”

“How do you know her?”

“We go way back.”

“You've already said that.”

Then, it clicked. I was surprised I hadn't known all along. What else was a man doing in her kitchen eating her popcorn like he owned the place? I began to feel woozy, irrational. Ms. Jacobs hadn't actually been sharing herself with me at all. I hadn't been in on it. What were his plans? I knelt down by the litter and began to scoop at it, spilling some of it on the mat, lazily brushing it behind the litter box with my sweatshirt sleeve. I paused, stopped scooping. Did she know? Had she invited him? Had he climbed in from the back window? I saw the blonde woman flick an ant off Ms. Jacobs knee. Ms. Jacobs brushed the woman's hair behind her face.

The plastic bag made a crinkling noise when I added the shit to it. I heard him talking above me. “Why are you doing that?” He was repeating. “You should really tell me who you are.” He was using that righteous, pleading voice I recognized from men that

didn't understand why you weren't giving them what they wanted. My brother used it on my mother when she made stir-fries. Once, he threw one in the trashcan right in front of her.

I needed her. I needed my mother. I allowed myself to feel it, and the nauseating shame roiled inside of me like heartburn. The man stepped away from me when I stood up, but not before the side of my body brushed against his arm. I walked quickly, pausing for a moment to nod at the elephant photograph on the wall, finally seeing it for how ugly it was.

She was sitting at our kitchen table writing nametags. I paused to watch the meticulous way she wrote, how she imagined the spacing of the word before she put the pen to the page. My mother was simple, spending so much time on the things that didn't matter to please the people that judged her.

"Mom," I said. "There's someone that's broken into Ms. Jacobs house."

Right away, she stood up, and she was already past me and out the door before I could catch her up. "Did you see him?" She threw the question behind her.

"Yes." I said. "Wait."

"Did he try to hurt you?"

My mother was already opening the door to Ms. Jacobs house, like she was already prepared for whatever might happen. I watched the back of her legs, which were smaller than I'd remembered, and I realized she'd been picking at her food, taking the smallest bites.



The man was sitting on the couch, his propped legs next to the empty bag of popcorn on the coffee table.

My mother pushed an open palm behind her, telling me to stay back.

“Who are you?” she said.

The man stood up and held his hands out in front of him in melodramatic self-defense. “Slow down lady, slow down,” he said. “I’m a friend.”

Don’t speak to her like that, I thought. Don’t call her lady. I moved forwards a step to form a line with her.

“You don’t look like it,” my mother said.

“And what the hell does that mean?” He said.

“You haven’t explained yourself.”

“Your little girl never gave me the chance.”

“Well, now’s your chance.”

“I’ve been to a few conferences over the years with Jennifer. I wanted to surprise her.”

“Well, how did you get in?” I said.

The man looked relieved when the door opened. Ms. Jacobs was suddenly in the room. We turned around to face her. She looked first at me and then at my mother and then at the man. My mother grabbed my hand, creating a barrier between Ms. Jacobs and the stranger. We waited for her to speak.

“Akshay?” She said, like she wasn’t sure she was seeing him. She slid her hand down her stomach.

I let go of my mom's hand and stepped back, so I could see both of them at once.

His face had gone pale. He moved the zipper on his sweatshirt up and down in a frantic motion. She took her ponytail out, was fixing a new one. He didn't look directly at her stomach, but at her face. She stared down at the top of her stomach, which was so big it could hold a plate. He zipped the zipper all the way up to his chin and then yanked it down. A finger was in the way. Ms. Jacobs was watching him intently. He held up a bloody finger to her, as if in gentle offering. "Here," Ms. Jacobs said softly. "Let me help you." He walked towards her, staring at her eyes, as if we were not a barrier, as if he didn't see us at all.

When I heard "don't touch her," I came back into the room. My mother's voice was the strong, commanding one I knew, the brave and terrifying one that demanded I guard my heart at all costs. She was taller than he was. She flexed her body, swiftly rotating so that she stood in his way. She was statue still, looking him straight in the eyes. Whatever softness I might have previously seen in the man's face was gone. He stood taller too, and he stared aggressively down at her, like he might disappear her with a simple flick of his wrist.

Yet, she kept her stare. All those women that have shunned her, I thought, staring into her face, watching her eyes, unwavering. Perhaps, the real beauty of my mother was that she never noticed what other people saw, not their judgments of her, not their judgments of me, not the tenderness between Ms. Jacobs and this man, nothing but what she believed was in front of her.

Ms. Jacobs softly nudged my mother's shoulder.

“Please back off, Dorothy,” she said.

“I’ve got this Jennifer,” my mother said, not turning to face Ms. Jacobs but pushing Ms. Jacobs away with her hand. She got even more in his face. They were so close they could have been kissing.

In a flash, I saw him bring his hand level with his face and wind it up behind his head. Right before he slapped her, I came in from the side and shoved him down. When he fell and banged his head against the coffee table, Ms. Jacobs rushed towards him. He sat up, looking confused. The cat rubbed against my leg. My mother stared at me. Ms. Jacobs touched his head. “Get the hell out of my house,” she began to scream. “Both of you.”

There was no flinch in my mother’s eyes.

“Do not scream like that in my daughter’s presence,” she said, coolly, turning to face Ms. Jacobs. “I will not have it.”

“I feel bloody sorry for her,” Ms. Jacobs said, a bit softer now. “Having a meddlesome freak for a mother.”

To this day, I’m still not sure why the energy in the room suddenly landed on me. Perhaps, there was something soft or strong or cutting in my voice, or maybe it was the surprise of what I said, the way it didn’t fit within the chaos of the room. Even the man watched me, holding his head. No one spoke after I said it, and my mother and I left Ms. Jacobs blowing on the man’s forehead, and we nearly tiptoed out of her house.

“I’m sorry.”

It pricked at all of them, shut us up. I'm sorry for pushing you down, but she was just a young, ugly thing trying to protect her mother. I'm sorry for pushing him down, but you were just jealous of him. I'm the only friend you've ever had. I'm sorry you heard her say that about you, that you're a freak and a bad mother. What you don't understand, honey, is that I'm used to it. You'll learn to be too.

## ELEGANTLY

Julia knew who the child was immediately. She felt a ringing in her ears from the abrupt discovery of it. She reached out, without noticing she did so, and she placed her fingers on the computer screen, and she touched the child's black hair. The ringing in her ears had grown louder now, and she turned away from the screen in a frank and stunned disbelief. She remembered the way she felt when she held her son Andy for the first time, as if the whole scene had been so delicately and so perfectly set-up by the Lord himself. His decided effort shone through and within the objects in the room, through her new baby's skin, through the white hospital bed, which, in this new light, appeared almost metallic, as her baby's eyes had too... The ringing in her ears, no, but that was the lawnmower at the Henderson's, where a man, seated in a plastic orange seat, made lines back and forth across the grass. The sun reflected off the seat, and what was a blunt orange appeared almost neon, more vibrant, which was how Julia felt too.

The child in the photo looked around seven. The text said she was eight, and she did not stare directly at the camera, but rather, away from it, as if she were not considering the device at all. Julia's friend Caroline had forwarded her the email. It was an adoption website, older girls in China that needed homes. She clicked on the picture and zoomed in closer. The child had a flat button nose, and her eyes looked half-shut, thin like they are haven't seen the sun in a really long time and don't know what to do with themselves

straight lines, and her legs—she had club feet, the email said; she was born that way, and she'd stay that way, too, without surgery—sprawled out in front of her, looked normal at the leg and then, excruciatingly unnatural when, at the feet, they faced inwards at a ninety degree angle from the thigh.

Her feet were at the foreground of the shot, made up nearly half of the picture, which seemed to be the photographer's intention. Yes, to the outside, her feet would be the most relevant thing about her, like Downs syndrome or albinism, a soldier at the airport, visuals you can't separate from the person underneath. Whenever Julia saw a soldier, she instinctively looked away, not knowing what to do with the powerful experiences they'd had they could lord over her, not knowing how to thank them, her eyes watered over.

Frances was calling for the third time. Seeing her name, Julia was jolted out of her head, and she came back into the space of her home. She looked down at her phone, silenced it, and then, out the window at the Henderson's lawn again. "So many illegals working there," her husband Greg would complain, "It's like I'm back in Mexico." Greg would stare blankly at the Henderson's house, as if remembering a better, more perfect time. In college, he studied abroad in Mexico, leaving Julia on campus to invite her non-threatening (according to Greg) male friends to sorority functions. Her phone was still vibrating. Normally, Frances would just walk over, so the phone calls probably meant something. Grief glues people down, and Frances was likely stuck to the couch. Julia picked up her phone to answer, but then decided against it. She needed to think about her own life right now. She'd call Frances back later.

Now, she thought of running her hands, the backs of her palms across this child's feet, of giving them attention and kisses all over, of telling the child over and over again that her feet were beautiful despite the rest of the world's nasty opinion. This child was going to be their daughter. Her hair was in a buzz cut, short and black and uneven on her head. It did not suit her. Julia had never worn short hair in her life. Had her daughter cried when some orphanage lady did this to her, or had she relaxed into the soft "ahh" of the human touch on her scalp? The generosity of a hand on the head; the quiet hum of the shaver in her ear.

Julia zoomed out to see the picture in full. What was the wallpaper? Baby ducks? Crayons? The paper was faded, and so were her daughter's clothes. Oranges more like yellows, blacks like soft grays. Julia rubbed her hands against her khaki pants, pulled her shirt down over her stomach. She would have to really think this through. She'd get to the bank, call the agency. She'd get a room ready. Andy's room would work better than the guest room. Oh, yellow would be so perfect, and she was sure Andy wouldn't mind. Andy hadn't stepped foot in that room for years.

Julia believed that her husband would see this as she did. He would have to. This was their answer to the Lord's question in heaven one day: what have you done with your lives? Greg would be next to her in that shining place, or somewhere close, and they would feel humbly certain that they'd done enough. Eternity would be sweet. The Henderson's story... it was ripe and recent in their memories. Frances's only son had either jumped or fallen off of a balcony while drunk. He'd had a drinking problem for years, but the Henderson's hadn't taken control, or they hadn't known what to do, or

how, and here they were. So quickly, and your life was in ruins, glued to couches. Julia was moved and terrified by the uncertainty of it.

Julia and Greg believed fervently in doing good and publicly. This was not something Julia remembered about herself anymore. In college and for years, Julia and Greg were the couple everyone loved to love. Greg used to sing and play guitar in the worship band, and when he prayed into the microphone before the speaker came on, his sincere yearning for God moved Julia to tears. After they got engaged, her girlfriends would open their eyes during the prayer, and they would watch her cry.

Her daughter's name was Li Na. It said so under the picture. She'd be in college before either of them turned sixty. They could afford it. Julia copied the picture into a document and pressed print. She watched her daughter appear in front of her in slow inky sections. The picture looked worse like this, less clear. She should have printed it smaller. Julia got up from the desk holding the picture. She needed to change her pants. She'd gotten Li Na's inky feet all everywhere.

Frances was calling again.

“Hi honey,” Julia said. “Are you O.K?”

“Can you come over?”

Frances was good at asking for what she wanted. She was originally from Connecticut, and she'd moved into the massive house next door a few years ago, and Julia had been terrified of her until she knew her and realized that Frances was actually



someone she liked to have around. She craved her, like wine. Frances was bold, and she expected so much from Julia so immediately, wearing this loud voice Julia thought had to be put-on or self-created or what was the difference?, and she talked about sex often like anyone her age actually thought about sex that much, wanted to pour that third glass of wine into Julia's glass... They'd become best friends. They spent hours on her porch, and they texted and drank and cooked, sharing the littlest details of their lives with each other, like what they'd eaten for snack, how the work-out was, how to spice it up in the bedroom. Six months ago, when Frances's son died, Julia realized at the funeral that she was Frances's main person, a fact which both pleased her and shocked her, and she stood next to Frances while she and her husband received people, told others Frances was too tired to talk right now, was the liaison when people wanted to bring flowers or casseroles by, told them Frances didn't like mushrooms if they asked.

The man was standing next to his lawnmower, and he waved at Julia. Julia let herself in through the front door. Frances was in the sunroom at the back of the house, sinking into the couch. Julia lifted Frances's legs up, so she could sit down, and then placed them, gently, across her lap. Frances stared straight ahead. Julia began to stroke at her knee, making little circles around it with her fingers. She took Li Na's picture out of her pocket, and she handed it to Frances.

“What is this?”

“I want to adopt her. Her name is Li Na.”

“Oh no,” Frances said. “We don’t need both of us off the deep-end. God forbid. The Universe just couldn’t handle it.” Instead of God, Frances talked about the Universe, like there were limitations to how much you could impose on it, like it might pop.

“God is speaking to me,” Julia said. “You know when you just *know*.”

“No, I don’t,” Frances said.

“One of those really bad days?” Julia asked.

“One of those ones when I’m obsessing over his last ten seconds.”

“Oh goodness,” she said. Julia could not look up at her friend, at that shaded-over emptiness in her eyes, the budding distance between them she’d see there. Imagining the seconds before death. The whole charade seemed unproductive to her, destructive. What could you find there besides vague shapes you’d concretize and figure out how to hate?

“Yes, I know.” Frances paused and looked off again.

“She’s beautiful by the way,” Frances said, gesturing at the picture. “So, does Greg know about this intricate plan yet?”

There was a tone of mocking in Frances’s voice. Julia wished she couldn’t hear it, but it was there. When Julia talked about God, Frances responded with the same distant amusement, like when a little girl—naïve, beautiful— says something adorably false about babies or sex. You repeat it to your friends. Perhaps, it had been insensitive of Julia to talk about the good in her life, in her future, while Frances was having such a horrific day, but Julia was just trying to get her mind off things. Wasn’t that what friends were for?

Julia put the picture back in her pocket.

“Not yet,” she said quickly.

She looked down at the picture. This was her daughter. She had to be.

“But I will,” she said. She forced her voice strong. She kissed Frances on the forehead. “I have to go,” she said, and she walked outside.

It had begun to happen less and less over the course of her life, but there were flashes here and there when Julia swooned, remembering another girl she didn't recognize anymore walk into the college classroom entirely alone, scan the room, choose the seat on the second row close to the professor but not teachers' pet, feel the rush at the professor's eyes on her should it linger... She wished her professor's eyes would stay on her, that she could carry the professor's gaze outside with her like a spotlight, that people would see her lit up and that they would know something about her that they could share with her, and then she would know it too. Outside, the landscaper was sitting on the lawnmower, eating a sandwich. This time, Julia waved at him, but he didn't see her. Professor Carson, Julia's favorite professor in college, reminded her of Frances, and both of them reminded her of the woman Julia wasn't, strong with her words or sure. Both of them made Julia feel the same way: like they had and would always have something she wouldn't. Julia hadn't known how to respond to either of them. It was the knowledge of these unattainable attributes that made Julia feel helpless. It was what she tried to swallow. She turned to look back at the Hendersons' before she walked into her door. The man got up off the lawnmower, was shaking the crumbs off him. The sight made Julia sick.

She went into the kitchen to prepare a marinade for the salmon and to arrange the refrigerator for Li Na's picture. She wanted Greg to come across the picture on his own. Maybe, he'd even imagine it was his idea to adopt her in the first place.

In a large plastic bag, Julia mixed brown sugar, soy sauce, teriyaki. When the crunchiness of the sugar disappeared, she massaged the salmon, all slippery, inside the bag and laid it flat on the refrigerator shelf. She shut the door of the fridge and stepped back to determine the right spot for the picture. When Greg came in from work, he'd head straight for his filtered water. The picture should be somewhere visible, perhaps a few inches from the handle. When he looked Li Na in the eyes, would he know? After they'd dated for a little while, Greg told Julia he'd known he'd marry her from the first moment he laid eyes on her at a Christian meet-and-greet. Repeating it to her friends, they had swooned while Julia's eyes shined, but she kept to herself how weird this comment made her feel. How could Greg have known something like that?

She placed Li Na's picture next to a wedding shot of Greg, Julia, Andy, and Leanne, Andy's wife. Stepping backwards, Julia felt weirdly powerful as if she were about to invent a world not yet aligned—was this how God felt all those years ago, making night and day, deciding how they should blur?

She left the kitchen. She jumped when she heard the front door open, and she grabbed the *People* she'd been reading and flipped it open to a page. Some famous teenager turned adult, turned anorexic and off the deep end again. Julia sometimes wondered what off-the-deep-end would look like on her, like if Andy died or Greg.

“Hey honey,” Greg said. He gave her a kiss on the cheek. “How's your day?”

“Good,” Julia said. “Just fine.”

“I just saw John Henderson,” he said. “It’s been six months now. Can you believe it?”

“I know,” Julia said.

She watched her husband walk away from her into the kitchen. She couldn’t think about Frances now. Greg looked good for almost fifty, even his backside. Julia thought she looked much older than he did, and she wondered sometimes if he thought the same thing. Even though his face was beginning to wrinkle, his wrinkles were steady, sat almost regal on his face, and his hair was still that dark and unchanged brown. He’d developed a slight beer gut, but still, he walked with an almost lazy confidence, like the world was his but also not something to get worked up about either. This had been a shift from his youth to middle age, and Julia, for the most part, had enjoyed it. He’d become easier to be around, more low-key, not as in-your-face about what he believed in. She imagined more women would be attracted to him now, not just the ones that weren’t threatened or annoyed by a certain over-bearing quality he had. Had he seen his daughter yet? Was he staring at her, catching his eye on the page at a certain slant of light?

Julia heard him open the refrigerator door and then close it shut.

“What is this?” Greg said. He was in the living room with the picture, which was slightly ripped at the top. He must have tugged thoughtlessly at the tape. Julia felt a rise of anger well up of inside of her. Calm, she told herself. Calm.

“I want us to adopt her, honey,” Julia said. “Her name is Li Na.” Julia wished for herself a more powerful voice. Their trip to France last year, the twenty-something

stewardess yelled at the drunk, hulking businessman who'd tried to put his iPad in the overhead bin during takeoff, as if the man meant nothing at all. It had been titillating, terrifying. How close she got to his face. How much authority she'd given herself.

"That's nice," Greg said, throwing Li Na onto the coffee table in front of him and sitting down in his favorite armchair.

"How much?" he asked her, his feet up on the table, and he took a long sip of water.

Julia raced up into a standing position, grabbed her daughter's picture, which she crumpled even more inside her hand, gave Greg a look she'd never known of herself before and was quite shocked by— did she look as angry as she felt?— and she half tripped, half-ran into their bedroom, grabbed her brown suitcase—the one they used for short domestic trips—and began to unzip it. She flung it open.

"What are you doing?" Greg asked, calmly at first, getting up slowly and following her into their bedroom, squeezing his hands against the hard wood of his desk chair.

When Julia said nothing, just began calmly pulling clothes out of her drawers and her closet, not paying attention to the specific outfits, but rather, simply, the process of packing itself, Greg's voice began to reach louder and louder, until it arrived at a volume Julia hadn't heard of him before, except for occasionally during football games, five or six beers in. But even that was rare, a figment of their past together, their twenties, the

wives in the kitchen laughing over dishes, laughing over their men who were having a little too much fun.

“What are you doing?” he began to scream at her, and he grabbed her shoulders. He started to shake her, which was another thing he’d never done. Twenty-plus years of marriage, and you have never hit me, Julia thought, almost absently, as if she were watching the scene play out on a television screen, and he squeezed her.

It was apparent to Julia that Julia was different now, but this was all she knew. She continued into a silence that seemed suddenly to come naturally. In a passing thought, Julia wondered why she hadn’t utilized this all along? His fingernails were still blunt yet nearly satisfying through her shirt and into the sides of her arms. There was something even sexy in him here, the Greg in front of her, and she had a thought—which left her before she kept it—of him throwing her down on the bed. He would enter her, and he would hold her there.

“Answer me,” he said.

Still, she said nothing, yet she looked him straight into his eyes. He removed his hands then, stepped back, took a different approach.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Please explain what just happened.” His voice was softer now. He seemed scared now, like he might jump from the fright of her.

Still, she said nothing. She threw together a toiletries bag in the bathroom, while her husband called to her from their bedroom, asking if they should take a trip together, asking what he’d done, changing his tone again, and she heard him say, “honey, you’re being absolutely ridiculous,” as if she were his mother who worried too much.

Julia turned on her electric toothbrush to check for its battery, and she jumped backwards, almost dropping the thing, but caught it, still vibrating, and she squeezed it hard in her hand to turn it off. She and Greg shared a charger. She'd leave it. Julia reached the bathroom door and then went back. She yanked the charger so hard out of the plug that one of the tongs bent all the way over.

On her drive, she called Frances.

"Did you tell him?" Frances asked.

Conversation with Frances always picked up right where it had ended, where it had last been meaningful. Her best friend didn't dwell around in small talk, because small talk was below her.

"Yes," Julia said. She paused.

"Are you going somewhere Julia?"

"How did you know?"

Frances never answered questions like that.

"Where are you going?," she asked.

"I'm just driving," Julia said.

"I looked up her name. It means elegance."

"Elegance." Julia liked that word. She hadn't thought to look up Li Na's name. It was nice that Frances had.

"It's pretty," Frances said.



“I’ll call you tomorrow. I just need time to think.”

“What?” Frances said. “You’re already getting off the phone? I don’t even know what’s going on.”

“I’ll tell you soon,” Julia said. She liked the firmness in her voice. Maybe, she could use it on anyone, press people down. She hung up her phone, and turned it off.

I’m sorry again honey, Greg texted Julia the next day. Greg was probably on his lunch break, eating some sandwich, sitting in the sun on some bench. How much, how much. Julia reached for her phone from the bathtub without drying her hands, and she watched the water from her fingers seep through her case and appear on the screen at the top left corner. How much to fix water damage? How much.

Her phone vibrated again.

I don’t understand why you’re being so unforgiving. Of course, I didn’t think you actually wanted to adopt her.

The water bubble spread thin and stopped moving.

Julesy... we used to have some African child on our fridge every year. Andy loved doing that when he was little. Writing letters back and forth and all that, sending Christmas presents.

Greg changed his approach: It was an honest mistake. You’re being unfair.

I know you’re in Auburn, he said. I checked the credit card statement. What the hell do you have to do there?

You hate driving at night.

And a full two hours?

I love you. Please respond.

Julia switched her phone off and got out of the bathtub. The towels weren't as plush to the touch as they'd looked when she'd gotten there last night, and she wrapped one around her head and dropped the other on the floor. Because Julia had forgotten to put the bath mat down, she nearly slipped, but she caught herself, her hands steady on each side of the doorframe, and she steadied her feet, walked towards the closet. She had checked for the robe last night.

"The good ones have robes," Greg had told her on their wedding night.

She slipped the bathrobe off its hanger. She loved the satisfying dive the robe made for the floor, the robe being too heavy for the hanger, too plush, too ready for the body. Julia wrapped the robe tightly around herself, fit her arms into its sleeves, tied the belt into a tight knot around her waist. She shuddered from the stark, rich pleasure of it, the way it made a deliberate and thorough soak of the water on her skin, the way it embraced her all over.

Julia pulled up the email from the adoption agency on her phone. She needed to call them today. She needed to get this whole thing started while she still had the momentum.

She walked downstairs. The hotel lobby was empty. Julia hadn't been in Auburn since Andy graduated. An old woman at the front desk, probably around her age, said "Good morning" all sweet to her, and the women looked at each other's mouths and then

smiled. A sliver of light down the woman's face looked like a thick strand of dyed blonde hair against the woman's gray.

She opened the door to step outside. The Alabama air was that thick hot that finds its home on the surface area of the skin and pools itself inside the knees and elbows. Julia turned left. She passed Sconzos, one of the oldest cafés still around. She and Greg used to spend hours there, splitting the pumpkin chocolate-chip bread, having long swirling conversations about everything they loved. Julia would go over them in her head while she fell asleep at night. When he was in Mexico, she wrote him letters at Sconzos, trying to force away the pinned-down and irrevocable distance she felt from him, wishing she could tell him that sometime, late at night, it scared her that she felt OK without him, nearly happy. In her letters, she said, I miss you, life is boring without you, I hope you're living it up.

Julia walked past the place where he proposed. The circular brick inlay had been replaced by white stone. She walked towards the history building, which had been rebuilt from a generic brick into a structure much more modern and expensive: huge glass windows, a domed ceiling, a smart, white brick. A group of girls walked past Julia wearing athletic shorts and white t-shirts, carrying their books in massive brown purses. When Greg proposed, Julia put a permanent stop to engaging in thoughts about the semester before. In October, outside of her apartment, she'd allowed Tim, one of the guys Greg had deemed "definitely gay," to stick his tongue down her throat. She never told Greg he'd been wrong. Kissing him, she'd wondered if he wished she were a man, and she became temporarily aggressive, jabbing her pelvis into his crotch, and they pulled

each other down to the sidewalk. The sparky, abrupt eroticism and the thoughtlessness of the moment was what terrified her most. She became a vision of someone else. A few minutes later, she stood back up and shakily walked off, feeling guilty about cheating, knowing she'd never try cheating again.

Julia wondered if Professor Carson was still around. She looked her up on her phone. There was Carson's picture and her office number and her email. Seeing her picture, right in front of her again, Julia marveled that she hadn't once looked to find her on Facebook. All this time. She stood still, looking at her phone. She zoomed in closer still, so that she could see a close-up of her face, and then she zoomed in closer still, so she could see only the color of her skin on her cheek, that light brown, and a blemish like an acne scar or maybe a mole.

Junior year, she'd made a list in her journal with her friend Lexie about why Professor Carson was the best ever. She'd already been in two classes with Carson, but her third was more specialized and discussion based, and it was during that class that she'd really fallen in love. Julia stopped at that thought. Fallen in love? It was nothing. It was the way she used to talk about Andy in elementary school, when he came home raving about Ms. Smith, his first grade teacher, how his little face lit up when he talked about her.

Why Carson is the best:

- wears flowy, out-of-style skirts with flowy, out-of-style shirts and rocks it
- claps her hands out of passion and has bulgy eyes

- history = relevant!
- not afraid to talk about God (Julia added that one)
- everyone in class just stares at her
- knows my name/ believes in us
- her hair is short and she's not a lesbian
- feminism (Lexie added that one.)

“How do you know she's not a lesbian?” Lexie asked.

“She mentioned a boyfriend once.”

“That doesn't mean she's not a lesbian.”

“I guess not,” Julia said, but she took note of the harshness in Lexie's voice, and she told one of her sorority sisters afterwards that her friend Lexie from class— “remember the commuter? The one that also loves Carson? Kind of awkward?”— was probably a lesbian, and her sorority sister seemed interested, and she nodded her head fervently and then added, “That's sad.” Julia thought it was sad too.

She and Lexie had gotten joy out of calling Carson by her last name. There had been something satisfyingly fitting, nearly masculine, like Carson was a football player she knew on a first-name basis: Carson was hilarious in class today; Carson said this weird thing about memory; Carson called someone out today.

Carson's office was on the third floor. Julia didn't know what she'd say. She walked up the stairs with the other students. On the third floor, she asked the secretary where Carson's office was. The secretary pointed to her left without looking up. Julia walked towards her office, stopping when she saw “Joy Carson” on the tag in the

doorway. Her door was open, but Julia stood to the side where Carson wouldn't see her. There was another student inside, and Julia could see the young girls' legs, and she could hear they were talking about a paper. Carson was talking in that strong but low lull Julia thought she remembered. It had been like Carson knew for certain what she was saying, and so she didn't need to speak it so loudly. Her soft confidence, her elegant words. She was doubly powerful. People heard her in a room.

The girl walked outside of Carson's office. She gave Julia a smile. It was Julia's turn with the professor. She walked up to the door, gave it a slight knock.

Carson looked old. She was different. Her hair was still short, but it didn't stand out so much on an older woman.

"Hello," Carson said, looking up. "What can I do for you?"

"Professor Carson," Julia said, her voice shaking. "I used to be one of your students. A long time ago. I was just visiting the area. I'm Julia Grayson."

"Oh yes," Carson said, standing up. "Julia. Well, look at that. It's lovely to see you." Before Julia knew it, she was hugging Carson. It was unexpected—Julia had been on her way to sit down—but Carson, moving to where Julia was, was hugging her, and Julia was hugging her back. She felt herself start to cry.

Julia sat down on the wooden chair across from Carson's desk and wiped her eyes quickly.

"How have you been? What have you been up to? Lord, it was so long ago when I taught you."

"My son graduated from here a few years ago."

“Wow. I’m getting so old.” Carson laughed.

“How is your life?” Julia said.

What a weird question to ask her. Julia felt out of place, stupid. She could feel Li Na’s picture in her pocket, like it reminded her of her new self. Maybe, Carson could explain to her what Julia had just experienced. How much, how much. Maybe, the Lord led her here for guidance. Maybe, this was all part of His plan. She could leave renewed.

“My life...” Carson said. “Where to begin?”

Carson smiled at Julia, while Julia waited for more, and smiled back.

The women smiled at each other.

When it became apparent to Julia that the pause was all Carson was going to give to her, that her question had been rhetorical, Julia felt a sharp stinging in her chest area. She wondered what she’d expected from this woman—that they’d be friends? That she’d open up to her? Give her something of her adult life that Julia could use in her own? Carson was still smiling at her, waiting, watching. It was like she’d immediately thrown Julia’s question out, like Julia was irrelevant.

“My best friend just lost her son.”

“Oh,” Carson said. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

Julia felt tears begin to form. She let them roll down her face.

“He was drunk at a party, fell off a balcony. My son said he was the kind of person you’d expect to fall off a balcony. How can you *expect* someone to fall off a balcony? I wanted to tell my son he was the kind of person you could *expect* to say something insensitive like that, but I didn’t.” Julia was gone now, as she’d been when she

left her house, as she'd worked her whole life to never be. Her words ran together without the pauses to space them.

Carson watched Julia while she cried.

After a few minutes, she looked at the clock.

"I have to go, Julia. I have to teach in four minutes."

"Oh my god," Julia said. "I'm so embarrassed."

"I'm sorry I can't stay," Carson said. "I'll be praying for your friend. You can stay in here as long as you need."

Carson did not look Julia in the eyes, just quickly swiped her briefcase, pulled her shirt down over her skirt. Julia heard her shut the door softly, as if she tiptoed out of the room of a sleeping child. She felt a disgusting and unnamable shame. She let herself feel it. She deserved it, this.

She stood up and walked to the other side of Carson's desk. There was a picture of Carson with another woman in a wooden frame. They were on the beach, their arms wrapped tightly around each other's necks. The sky was the same dark gray as the ocean. The other woman was smiling. Carson was taller than the other woman. She had a sort of serene and playful look on her face, like she didn't care that someone was taking her picture, or like she wanted that person to see her this way, breezy and free.

Julia would not normally dream of rummaging around in someone else's things. The consequences would be too embarrassing. She unhooked the back of the frame. She pulled Li Na out of her pocket, and she folded her so that she'd fit, and she crammed her picture behind the one of Carson and her friend. She'd print a new one when she got



home. For a moment, Julia felt that she was simply doing this out of a sort of imaginative and artistic curiosity, like scrapbooking, organizing moments together. She placed the frame back on the desk.

It was more than that, but she would not dwell inside her darker, more dangerous thoughts for long. She never did. Julia wanted Carson startled, freaked. What would it be like to randomly come across this picture, an anonymous and disabled Chinese girl, behind this other picture, inside a frame you'd had in the same place for years? It was payback, the only kind Julia was capable of, for this woman who ignored her.

Outside the history building and upon abrupt realization, Julia snaps. She's back, her designated place. It is like shedding—never has there been a feeling so joyful—the chunky hanger, the heavy bathrobe, the thick, weighted plop onto the floor. No time, now, to think of what is lost; how light Julia feels, how ready to float.

Her son has called, and she has answered the phone. The thick heat of the outside has just hit her. It comforts her after the air conditioning in Carson's office. She never belonged in there, she thinks, and she hears her son say it. We're having a baby! Her son says. Her son doesn't even know she's in Auburn. Her husband has never called him. Her husband had not been planning on taking this seriously at all. Her son probably thinks she's at home or at the grocery store, or just piddling around on the computer, comforting Ms. Henderson, thinking about dinner. We're sorry we didn't wait to tell you in person, he says. We're just so excited. Julia starts to cry.

One day, she and Leanne and her two-year-old grandson sit outside by the pool, and Julia will look out past the deep end, at the garden which she's been putting a lot of energy into lately, past Frances's lawn. She hasn't been able to be there for Frances in the way she used to. Something has happened between them. Murky territory. Julia has apologized over and over again even though she hasn't known exactly what for. She has delivered her surprise dinners and brought her wine, but something keeps telling Julia, over and over again, that she will never be able to be what Frances wants, and Julia resents the anger in Frances's voice, the subtle tint of condescension, and so she's reached out less and less. Eventually, Julia will decide that Frances hates her because of what Julia has that Frances does not. Greg is the one who suggests this, and Julia will let herself believe in a childless woman who cannot be happy for her best friend with a grandchild, who will never move past her own grief and into a place of Christian empathy. Julia reaches out for her grandchild who is walking too closely to the pool. She catches onto his bathing suit, but he slips away from her, and then she grabs him by his feet and pulls him close to her, and she kisses the side of his mouth. That poor Asian girl I was meant to love, she will swallow back in a choke, and she will never wonder on her again.

## BAD ROMANCE

Melanie took naps on their screened-in porch when she got stressed. She needed to finish her summer reading, but the migration patterns of birds were so uninteresting, but her teacher might give a test, but her toes were curled up between the cushion and the wicker couch and so comfortable, but she should really sit up because she was setting herself up for failure by lying down. Aileen was calling. Melanie had gotten her first smart phone for her fifteenth birthday a few days ago, and it was vibrating on her stomach, underneath the book she put down without realizing, about to give into the nap. After four rings, she picked up. She slid the answer key over with her finger, a gesture that still gave her a distinct pleasure. There was something adult about it, like she'd finally made it in the world.

Aileen was laughing hysterically. Melanie was too tired for this. She sat up, rubbed her eyes. Sweat had pooled under the creases of her stomach. She made a quick swipe of it with her hand and rubbed it on her pants.

“What?” Melanie said.

“Have you seen them?”

“Seen what?”

“Your sister’s videos.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just go upstairs,” Aileen said. “Type in ‘Yoyolover5445 dances to Nobody’s Perfect.’ Trust me.”

Melanie stood up and walked into the kitchen. Her grandmother was standing by the stove, and when she turned around to face Melanie, about to say something (Nema was always about to say something; it was like her mouth was always open, mid-speak), Melanie turned around and walked up the stairs to her room, grabbed onto the rail. Walking up the stairs, she woke up, realizing she’d probably known about the videos all along. Her mind was sleepy like that, always taking a while to catch up. But her sister had been spending all those hours in her room this summer, the irritating pop music blasting, the same songs over and over again. An angled chair against her door served as a makeshift lock. Melanie would barge in sometimes, push the chair down, feeling it was all in her right as makeshift mother, and Chelsea would be in there, always dancing. Their mother passed from an aneurysm when Melanie was ten, and Chelsea was six. Melanie would think to ask if Chelsea had done her summer reading, would tell her dinner was ready, would imagine herself to be the mother her grandmother wasn’t quite able to be. She was always failing.

“Let’s watch it at the same time,” Aileen was saying to Melanie. “Start it now. 1, 2, 3.”

This synchronicity was something she and Aileen had perfected. They sat on the phone and watched a TV show or a YouTube video at the same time, listened to a song, laughed aloud at similar parts, commented on how cute the actor was. Lately, Aileen had been boring Melanie. By now, it felt like they should have moved on from needing to

watch everything together. Why couldn't she do things on her own? Melanie missed the cue. The music started on Aileen's end first.

There her sister was. Dancing. Hannah Montana, who'd been popular years ago. On screen, Chelsea looked the same but also different, like the generic version of a brand name. It was weird. Chelsea had shoved her bed farther against the wall to clear a space, and she was standing by the light switch and flipping it on and off to the beat, her lips tightly pursed together. Her shorts were too small. After the intro, she left the light switch on, and she dramatically walked towards the camera, like a cat-walk but not sexy, like how a kid thinks she knows what she's supposed to be imitating, but she doesn't. Chelsea pranced up to the camera. You could see just her hip for a split second and then just a close-up of the floral print on her purple shirt. She tilted the webcam down towards her feet and then stepped back into the routine.

Aileen said, "I love this part," right before Chelsea dramatically "patched up a hole" with her hands, like the lyrics said, until she "overflowed." At "overflow," Chelsea jumped up into the air, did a sort of twisty jumping jack movement, and she landed on her feet, right on cue with the music. She stood for a beat with her hands outstretched. Only her fingers waved spiritedly, like a cheerleader, a near perfect look of seriousness on her face. Melanie laughed out loud. Chelsea was already on her next move, the grapevine.

There were already over 1000 views. In many ways, that made sense to Melanie. She had a chaotic energy about her that was clearly compelling. Sweat dripped down the side of Chelsea's face.

“I know, right?” Aileen said when the video finished. “Your sister is hilarious. And, she’s already got so many views.”

“Oh God,” Melanie said. “What if my Dad finds out?”

“He won’t. How would he?”

“Call you later.”

Melanie hung up the phone.

She clicked on one of the other videos, turned off the volume, and watched her sister dance. She felt a haziness come over her, like the grainy black and white movies Nema made them watch sometimes. Melanie knew that in another life, from another person, she might have called the video awesome or hilarious, but how could she? Her sister was fat, and her sister was public. Melanie had been keeping track of Chelsea’s body her whole life, as her grandmother had watched Melanie’s, noticing aloud little changes or silently commenting on flabby thighs or jelly arms with a specific sweep of her eyes. This was how the women in her family related to each other, how they showed the younger ones they cared. For Chelsea’s sake, Melanie proclaimed loudly when she was full, narrated her decision to throw the rest of the potato chips away rather than eat them all. She made a big deal about fruit. She would never admit she hated the crinkling sound the Lean Cuisine wrapper made when her grandmother slid a knife through it before plopping the plastic dish in the microwave. Chelsea called Lean Cuisines food for the pigs, and she made oinking noises, swirling the mac and cheese around in the plastic tray. If her father was visiting, he took Chelsea out for secret ice cream cones Melanie pretended she didn’t notice. Judging from old pictures, Melanie’s mother had been fat

when she was little, probably around Chelsea's weight, but Melanie remembered someone tiny. At the Mexican restaurant for her ninth birthday, there fell onto the table little tortilla chip crumbs because of the meticulous way her mother nibbled.

Melanie wasn't going to be an idiot. Chelsea's fat was what made this funny. She slammed her laptop shut. She would have to make sure her father never saw them. He would flip. Melanie had known he was high at the father-daughter dance in eighth grade, but still she reveled in the way he twirled her, as if she were the most beautiful girl in his world, and he dipped her, and, for a moment, he held her horizontal on his thigh. She thought he might kiss her, like you'd see in a movie. Then, her father's face shadowed, and he lifted her back up, quickly, and they stopped dancing. Had she pursed her lips wrong? Maybe she'd been too heavy on his knee. Her father left her. Chelsea was tagging along because Nema needed a break, and Melanie watched them dance a fast song together, having a blast, doing the sprinkler and the shopping cart and the fishing pole and the fish. During the summer before high school, Melanie got down to 120, but over the year, it'd been slowly making its way back, and she was at 135 again. She was tired. Melanie laid her head down on her pillow, kicked off her flip-flops, and went to sleep.

My friend from camp Joseph was the one who suggested I post the vids. I sent them to him over Dropbox. He has a blog where he talks about his life and stuff, and I think it's hilarious, and he told me how easy it is to make your own YouTube channel,

which I already knew about because I'm not an idiot. Joseph makes up all these weird stories about one of his friends (Jack Jackerson), and he pretends to pass out because he's so overwhelmed by how many people are obsessed with his blog. I laugh the hardest at that part. He has 200 views. Probably 40 of them are from me.

Last week, I put them all up at once. Well, I only have three really good ones, and so I put all of those up on Tuesday. Over the summer I'm bored. Nema had me taking swimming lessons, but those are over now. My other friend Jackie says I should post the link on my Facebook wall for more views, but I don't want to do that yet. Nothing really happened for a few days. A few people saw them, and I got one comment, which said "you are fat," and I deleted it, but then I started getting more views, and I got my first positive comment, "you are hilarious," and that made me happy. I responded back and said, "thanks" with a smiley face, and now I subscribe to her channel, which is mainly those videos with the song lyrics so you can sing along.

"Disurbia" is my favorite, and it's my favorite song too. I love Rihanna, even though some people hate her because of Chris Brown, but that seems unfair. Her voice is dark and beautiful. I made a lot of the hand motions match the words of the song. Like when Rihanna says, "it's a thief in the night to come and grab you," I wave my hands in front of my really serious looking face, like I'm trying to find you so I can come attack you or rape you before you wake up and see me. Before it gets too serious, I come out of that and shimmy towards the camera, because it makes sense with the way the music goes. At another part, Rihanna sings, "Disconnecting on calls. The phone don't even ring," and I use the old home phone Melanie and I used to play secretary with, and I keep



answering the phone but then looking really confused because it isn't ever actually ringing, and finally, I throw the phone to the side. It's pretty funny.

My body knows what to do when music is playing, but it works better when I'm alone. The seventh grade one will be this fall, but the sixth grade dance was last spring, and no one asked me to dance. Jackie got asked three times, but she had to pee, so she didn't have to dance with this boy Frank. Katy Perry was playing when Frank asked her, and when Jackie walked away, I sort of rolled my body in front of Frank to make him laugh, but he looked mad and walked off, and that was really all the dancing I did that night. When someone else is there, my body gets more quiet, even though it feels loud inside of me.

Yesterday, I reached 1,000 views on "Disturbia," and I posted a thank-you to all my fans. "Nobody's Perfect" and "Firework" are a little bit farther behind, but maybe, they'll catch up when people start hearing about me. There have been a few other really mean comments. I've stopped deleting them. Instead, I just ask why they have to be so mean and stuff, tell them I feel sorry for them, because I do. Daddy told me that mean people are just mean because someone was mean to them in their childhood, and they never learned how to be nice.

I push play. It's "Bad Romance," by Lady Gaga. I used to hate her because she was too weird and her nose is so long and all her songs are about sex, but I like her now. I press record on my webcam. Before I know it, I am out of my seat, going free. My body does everything for me, without me asking for it. I turn the music up louder, and I just go. Rah, rah, rah, rah, rah. I shimmy, jump, roll my body, do kicks and let my butt

shake, and I wave my hands. Once I've recorded myself dancing to the same song like ten or twelve times, I watch them all over again to find the best moves to use, and then I plan the final one. It's a lot of work, but it's fun. In first, second and third grade, I was the most popular girl in the grade because I always came up with the most creative and fun games, and they always carried into the next recess.

For the first day of school, Melanie came downstairs wearing a loose sequined top and blue jeans. She paused by the hall mirror to flatten her stomach with her hand. It flopped right back.

Chelsea was already at the table, shoveling cereal into her mouth. Melanie sat down next to her.

"Slow down," Nema said to Chelsea and then she turned her back.

"I saw them," Melanie whispered.

Chelsea kept eating. Milk dribbled down her chin. Melanie dabbed at it with her napkin.

"Stop," Chelsea said, swatting her away. "Do you like them?"

"You'll have to take them down before Dad sees."

"Why?" Chelsea said. "I'm just having fun. Tons of my friends have YouTube channels too."

"Dad won't like them."

"Do you like them?"

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You like them,” Chelsea said. “Lots of people do, and Dad won’t know.”

“I’m telling you,” Melanie said. “He will.”

Melanie saw the conversation as a sort of warning. She wasn’t going to tell her father, but she was going to get on Chelsea’s computer and delete the videos when she got home. She’d spent all night trying to come up with alternatives. The most appealing one was to close her eyes to it, play dumb. But, she’d gotten a few Facebook messages last night, one from this artsy senior girl she barely knew, asking her if she’d seen her sister’s videos. Views were increasing. From the time she went to bed to the time she woke up, “Nobody’s Perfect” had almost 1,000 more views and lots more comments. Melanie scrolled through them until she saw one that made her head go all hazy and helped her decide definitively what she would have to do: As a father, I am disgusted. What kind of fucked up parents let their kids do this shit? Underneath, someone had responded with a “LOL”.

Aileen was sitting with someone Melanie didn’t know at lunch.

“Meet Brandee,” Aileen said. “She’s new. I met her in homeroom.”

Brandee had headphones in. She was watching something on her phone and laughing. Melanie had noticed Brandee in the hallway earlier, and she’d overheard these guys in English talking about her too. She was short, stick skinny and sort of mousy looking, had dark dyed black hair, and bright make-up that looked caked onto her face,

like it would probably take a deep scrub to get rid of the sparkly purple eye shadow, the shiny bronzer.

“I showed her,” Aileen said.

“You’ve seriously got to stop,” Melanie said. “I’m taking them off this afternoon.”

“What?” Aileen said. “You can’t do that.”

Brandee pulled her headphones off.

“That was the best thing ever. I want your sister to be my friend. Hold on a second. Gonna text the link to my dad. He’s going to love it.”

“She’s taking them off,” Aileen said to Brandee, looking serious.

“What?” Brandee said. “No you aren’t. They’re too good.”

Melanie didn’t like the way this new girl was talking to her, or the way Aileen was looking at Brandee adoringly, or the way the cafeteria—the plastic orange chairs, the slippery floors, the bulletins on the walls— suddenly felt like it was squeezing in on her. When she looked down at the sandwich in her hand, she could not imagine putting it in her mouth.

“They are too good,” Aileen repeated after Brandee. “Plus, don’t worry. You look nothing like her.”

“Whatever,” Melanie said.

“Her dad’s a make-up artist,” Aileen said. “Isn’t that cool?”

“Once, he did make-up for Reese Witherspoon,” Brandee said. “Now, he works at Bloomingdales in Bobbi Brown.”

“So your dad’s gay?” Melanie knew it wasn’t the right thing to say.

“Mel, you can’t ask shit like that!”

“It’s fine,” Brandee said. “So what if he is?”

“Well, is he?” Aileen asked.

Brandee rolled her eyes. “It’s called a continuum,” she said. “Haven’t you heard of it?”

Brandee’s phone was buzzing.

“Oh my god,” she said. “My dad thinks your sister is amazing. You’ll totally have to bring her to his counter sometime.”

Melanie looked down at Brandee’s text message conversation with her Dad. *This is the little sister of one of my new best friends.* Everything happened around and to Melanie without anyone asking her what she thought. It was the same in eighth grade when her father asked her if she wanted to move into Nema’s house, because he only asked after he kept saying, the house is bigger and the school is better and Nema cooks so well and it’s good to have a woman around, and I’ll only be half an hour away. Like Melanie had any choice. Plus, she’d known what had prompted the move. A few days before that, she had been looking online to figure out how to put a tampon in. She kept pushing and pushing and it never felt like it was going in, it kept hitting something, and she kept putting the rejected ones in the toilet, but then it didn’t flush. The plunger was upstairs, and she knew her father would see her and ask what she was doing. She tried fishing them out with her fingers, and that worked for a few of them, but some of them were stuck and the toilet was getting closer and closer to overflowing every time she

flushed. There wasn't a trashcan, and so she wrapped them up in toilet paper and put them by the toilet.

"I've just got to fix the toilet," she said to him, holding the plunger.

"No," her father said, rushing to get to the bathroom first and grabbing the plunger from her. He was possessive over household chores. "I'll do it."

When she got to the bathroom behind him, he was staring down at the mess she'd made. She saw him realize what it was. She tried to slide in next to him, so she could hide the ones she'd wrapped in toilet paper, which were dripping excess water on the linoleum, but at the same time, he was reaching out for a hug from her, something Melanie wasn't expecting, and he wrapped his arm and the plunger around her, and the plunger touched her arm.

"It's O.K.," her father said. "I'll deal with it."

"No," Melanie said. She wanted to shove him away from her, to yell at him, and to hurt him.

"Yes," her father said. "I will."

He pushed her, telling her she should go. When she left the bathroom, she saw that she'd dripped blood on the floor. When she came back later, it were gone, and she imagined her father's disgusted and serious face while he cleaned her up.

When she opened Chelsea's laptop, there was a note for her on the keyboard that said, Leave me alone!!

Melanie tried to log into YouTube, but of course Chelsea had logged out. She tried a few passwords, but nothing. The webcam wasn't there either, and she opened Chelsea's desk to look for it. Inside, she found another note. Chelsea drew a winking rabbit. I hid my camera too, the rabbit said.

Brandee joined them at lunch every day. Melanie found herself trying to attract Aileen's attention where it used to just come. Aileen was always looking at Brandee, and whenever Brandee paid attention to Melanie, it was only because she wanted to ask about her sister. "I just want to meet her!" Brandee would say. "Dad and I watched the videos last night again! How 'bout when she gets a book out and pretends to read it when the lyrics say 'I lived and I learned it'?" Brandee and Aileen would howl out in laughter, as if trying to get attention from the people around them. A few weeks into school and people were talking about Chelsea a lot. Chelsea posted one of the videos on her wall, and it had over 300 likes already, and Melanie saw that she kept getting more and more Facebook friends, people her age Melanie had never even spoken to.

Yesterday, a fat girl, a senior Melanie thought was named Sarah, stopped her in the grocery store: "But seriously, your sister made me feel better about my body. If she can flaunt it, then why can't I?" Melanie was standing by the grapes, holding a bag of purple ones she'd chosen. Sarah did a pose— one hand triangulated at the head, another on her hip— and she blew Melanie a kiss. "See?" she said. "Your sister's an inspiration." A stoner sophomore with flippy hair Melanie had always thought was cute

stopped her in front of the bathroom: “Dude, your sister is rad.” He didn’t look Melanie in the eyes, just flipped his hair close to her face. Melanie’s eyelids fluttered. He walked away.

“What time are you coming over tomorrow?” Melanie said to Aileen. “It’s our annual back-to-school sleepover,” she said to Brandee.

“I know,” Brandee said cheerfully. “I’m coming too.”

“I’m not sure we have enough beds.”

“Don’t worry,” Aileen said. “I already called your grandmother to ask.”

“We can go to the mall with Chelsea and visit my dad,” Brandee said.

“Yeah,” Aileen said. “We’ve got it all figured out.”

Mel’s new friend Brandee looks sorta scary, but she wasn’t that bad. She took us to her Dad’s make-up counter. I could tell Melanie was annoyed I was there, and she wasn’t laughing at any of my jokes, even with her friends around, but Brandee and Aileen were doing enough laughing, so I didn’t really care. I think Melanie was mad they were laughing, because she just sort of stared straight in front of her and forgot to hold the door open when we went in the mall.

“Thanks a lot, witchy, I said instead of “sissy,” and Aileen and Brandee just died. Melanie turned around and looked at me like she could kill me. It seemed like she was trying to tell me something, just between us, and I felt bad for a second. But then, Aileen and Brandee were trying so hard to get me to say something funny, like they kept pointing at things and asking me what I felt about them—the cookie store logo, the



janitor's mop, the lady in the Victoria's secret— and so eventually, I gave in and kept being random. Melanie walked behind us.

Brandee's dad, Steve, was obsessed with me. He was wearing these high heeled shoes and his voice was very high, and he kept saying how adorable I was, and he patted my face. He had me sit up on one of those high chairs, and he gave me a make-over for free. When he was half way through my eyes, he told me to open them so that he could look into them. His eyes were dark green. Melanie was in the bathroom at that point, and she had been for a while, and Brandee and Aileen were off looking at other make-up, and Steve said, what color are your eyes? and I said, can't you see them? They're right in front of you. When Steve laughed, he threw his head back all the way like my Dad does when he laughs at my jokes.

Steve touched the bottom of my chin and asked me to lift my face towards his a little bit. Look me in the eyes, he said, and so I did. He said, don't stop making your art, no matter what anyone says. You inspire people, he said. People like me who are scared sometimes, but you don't seem scared of anything. At that point, he was putting powder on my face, and he stopped looking me in the eyes, like he was scared of what he was saying. His voice was more quiet. I think lots more people are scared of what they are saying than what I used to think.

Not to brag, but when I looked in the little mirror after the makeover, I looked amazing. Very different. I have some freckles usually, but those were gone, and my eyes looked way bigger and they sparkled, and my face looked sorta skinny, more like Mel's. Aileen and Brandee came back over, and they freaked out, and Brandee took a picture of

me with her dad that she'll probably post on Instagram and Facebook. I have a lot of followers now.

When Mel got back from the bathroom and saw me, it looked like she took a deep breath in before she said anything, like she was really thinking. Aileen and Brandee sort of crowded into her face, and said, doesn't she look amazing? and can you believe it? and stuff like that. I almost made a joke or a dance move like yeah, don't I? but I decided not to. I just watched Mel look at me, and she sort of shrugged her friends away from her and walked to me. She had a look in her eyes like Steve's, like she wanted to tell me something serious, but she didn't.

She was just crying, just a few tears. I saw Steve see it and then Aileen and Brandee gave each other this look, like they were telling each other they both saw it, and that the situation was awkward.

Oh no, honey, Steve said. He was smiling. My work has that effect on people sometimes, he said. He got one of those wet cloths to remove make-up, and he wiped her tears off. Want me to do you too?

No, Melanie said. She pushed his hand away from her, and she gave me a hug. I felt her body shudder a few times, while she finished crying, but when she broke away from the hug, I knew she was done.

Do you want to talk about it? Aileen said, standing behind her.

It's nothing, Melanie said.

Aileen and Brandee looked at each other again.

It was raining when we got out of the mall, and Melanie and Aileen went to get the car, and I stood waiting with Brandee.

You have a bad family life, she said.

Not really, I told her. My dad is just busy with work a lot.

Oh, she said.

We watched the rain fall. Some of it was getting on my face, and so I stepped under the cover.

Let's make a music video together sometime, she said. My dad does producing on the side.

That sounds amaze-balls!

We don't have to tell Melanie about it, she said.

Sometimes, I feel bad about it. My dad does it too when we have a lot of fun together—says we don't have to tell her about it—and it's like we're all trying to protect Melanie because she's so sensitive or emotional or just boring. We don't want her to see things. Like, I'm having so much fun at school this year. I'm popular again. Melanie Frances Grayson is probably just jealous.

Dad told us he wanted to take us to the October fair, which is maybe why Melanie pretended she was too busy for the whole weekend. She could have always done her homework at the smart desk is what Dad joked, and he pointed to his lame kitchen table.

When my mom was still alive, apparently all four of us used to go to this fair. First, I put on my favorite Abercrombie and Fitch shirt which is super tight with my blue jeans, but then, I decided to change into a different shirt. The bunny is eating an olive on a toothpick, and she says, Olive you. Daddy got it for me. It's getting too small. When I came downstairs, Dad was really happy about it I think, and he said olive you to me, and I said it back to him. On the car ride, when Daddy asked me if I thought there was anything wrong with Melanie, he laughed so hard when I said, she's just being her normal, boring self, and I rolled my eyes. But then, he got serious and told me that Mel had a lot to deal with. He said she remembered mom more than I did, and so she probably had more real sadness about it. I know what he means. Sometimes, she reaches over and puts her hand on my knee, but then once she realizes she's doing it, she grabs it away.

When we got to the fair, dad brought us funnel cakes from a vendor in the parking lot before we even paid. We didn't say it out loud, but we were both glad Melanie wasn't there to watch us eat. The person who checked us into the fair had awesome tattoos on her arms and an eyebrow ring. She smiled at me. Dad didn't look at her, just at the money. What should we do first? Dad asked. I said, the Ferris wheel, which was the biggest thing you could see. We stood in line. It was a little chilly. I stood right next to my dad, so the sides of our bodies could help warm each other. My dad asked the Ferris wheel people how many times it went around before we got on, because he liked to know stuff like that, which is probably because he's an ER nurse, and so his job is full of surprises. They said three. When we got in, my dad put his hand on my knee. Watch out for all the people that kiss on these things, he joked. Eww gross, I said. Good, he said.

Stay that way. I put my hand on his knee too, but then he shook his leg, and so I moved it.

See? He said, pointing to the people in the cart across from us.

When we got off, I slowed down to stare at the boy and the girl that had been hardcore making out. The girl looked like she was older than he was. He was skinny and had lots of pimples, and she looked so happy she could burst.

OMG but later it was so awkward. My dad said, do you know those girls walking up to us? We were in line to get hot dogs. Oh my god, one girl with really short hair said. You're that girl from YouTube. Can I please have your autograph? Of course, I was freaking out inside, but I had to act cool. What are you talking about? My dad said. I was so glad he said that, because they looked surprised too, because they definitely knew who I was, and then I said, yeah, what are you talking about? I looked closely at the other girl, and I tried to give her a signal with my eyes. She got it, and she pulled at the short haired girl's arm, and said it's not her. We got the wrong girl.

What was that about? My dad said. I have no idea, I said. I think he believed me. When the man asked if we wanted French fries with our hot dogs, I said yes, and then my dad said, we don't need them in this really serious voice. So we just had hot dogs. We each got two though. Just to make him happy, I rode around the merry-go-round with all the kids so he could take my picture. Later on, I saw the two girls who saved me. They were holding hands and leaving the park. For some reason, I was glad my dad didn't notice.

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Melanie's dad was coming to stay at Nema's on Saturday night. It was early November. The air was getting colder. Melanie brought heavier blankets out to the porch when she napped. Whenever her father came over, Nema assigned him little things to do, like fix the gutter or the door won't stop creaking, as if to tell her son she disapproved of the entire arrangement. When he walked in, Nema told him to his face that his legs made him look like he hadn't been eating, but he was still fat around his stomach. It was true. Before she spoke to her father, Melanie would look him up and down, and Chelsea would run forwards to hug him, screaming loudly, running in circles around him, making him laugh.

He was still in his scrubs, carrying a twelve pack of beer. Melanie liked to imagine her mother, who'd been a surgeon, asking for some tool and her father handing it to him, but that wasn't accurate, because they'd never worked together. They'd met at some conference. Melanie's mom had been thirty-five and never thought she'd marry. Her dad was much younger, and he swept her off her feet, according to his version. Chelsea would laugh uproariously at that, but Melanie took the story much more seriously, not finding the humor in it exactly, finding something else in her dad's voice, perhaps the straightforward sadness of grief or maybe something a bit more unsettling, like one of her parents hadn't deserved the other one, but she could never figure out exactly who or why.

Nema took the beer from him and walked towards the fridge.

"Don't know why you need that much, Zachary," she said.

Her father pretended he didn't hear, and he reached out to Melanie for a hug. Melanie went for a side hug and when her dad went for a front one, they bumped into each other. Chelsea laughed. Nema looked away, began to talk about dinner. Her father went to the fridge for a beer, and he sat down at the kitchen table. "How're all my girls?" he said.

"I got asked to dance five times at the dance," Chelsea said.

"Shit," her father said to his daughter. "Do I need to come set some boys straight?" He reached out and pinched Chelsea's cheek.

"Zachary," Nema said. "Seriously?"

"Is that make-up you're wearing?"

"Yes," Chelsea said. She looked happy he'd asked, and she lightly stroked the side of her face. "Mel's friend hooked me up."

"I like your old face," her dad said.

Me too, Melanie thought, and she was remembering the seventh grade dance. She'd completely forgotten about it. Chelsea had gone straight from school to a friend's house and then straight to the dance, and she'd spent the night out afterwards. Aileen and Brandee had been busy, which was happening more and more recently, and so Melanie had come home last night, eaten dinner with Nema, gotten in bed with re-runs of Dawson's Creek. Lately, she'd been making goals with herself to stay awake until 10:30, but last night, she'd failed. In the middle of the night, she'd woken up, checked Facebook on her phone. She saw some photo someone tagged of Chelsea. It was just Chelsea's backside and this really cute boy who was slow dancing with her was waving

at the camera, giving a thumbs-up. *Tommy loves Chelsea*, the caption said. Chelsea was wearing a shirt that didn't cover her whole stomach, and her ankles were so big they hid her flip-flops.

After dinner and a game of charades, Nema headed to bed. "Don't stay up too late," she said to Chelsea. She didn't say anything to Melanie. Chelsea said she was getting tired too, and she kissed her dad on the top of the head. "Sleepy tighty," she said to him. "Righty, righty," he said back. They rubbed noses. Melanie looked away. Melanie knew Chelsea just wanted to be on her computer, checking all her social media. The video hype had calmed down a bit, especially in the past couple of weeks. That was how the Internet worked. You loved someone for a few weeks, and then you got to love someone else. There was a whole world of people out there, waiting for a spotlight. Chelsea's time was hopefully over.

Still, this dwindling fame didn't seem to faze Chelsea. She seemed happier than ever. No longer did Melanie feel she was intentionally ignoring Chelsea, it was the other way around. Chelsea was retreating more and more into herself at home, but at school, she was screaming with popularity. Melanie could tell from online. Brandee and Aileen had been distant too, or she'd been distant with them. What did it matter, really? Aileen had stopped being a true friend once Brandee came into the picture anyway. She listened to them gossip with a sort of distant disgust, and she found ways to avoid lunch. There were tests to study for in the library. She stayed after class to get help on some



homework. She dressed up as a princess and passed out candy to sick kids at a children's hospital on Fridays.

"You're not going to bed yet, Mel?" her dad said. Her dad was on beer number five. "Don't leave your pops all alone here." He grabbed a deck of cards. "Rummy?"

"Fine," Melanie said.

"Let's go out on the porch."

The night clouds were bright white, making the sky appear strangely glossy. Her father brought a blanket with him. He placed it over Melanie when she sat down, and he sat across from her.

"Thanks."

"What's wrong with you these days?" He missed the shuffle, and half of the cards fell on the ground. He began to laugh. When Melanie reached down to help him gather them, their hands brushed against each other, and Melanie moved her hand away and put it under the blanket. He started to shuffle them again.

"Nema says she's worried about you."

"Why?"

"You're not getting out or talking much." He started to laugh again. "You've never talked that much." He dealt ten cards for each of them.

"Chelsea talks for all of us," Melanie said, trying to sound light and funny about it.

Her father laughed again. Melanie picked up her cards and began to sort them.

“That’s for sure,” he said. This was always how it was. Alone, they talked about Chelsea, and with her, they talked about her too. Her father laughed more when they talked about her, and it was easier to bring her up, rather than to sit in awkward silences or to face personal questions.

Her father reached in his pocket. “Do you mind?” he said. He was holding a cigarette.

“No,” Melanie said.

“Don’t tell your grandmother.”

“She’ll smell it.”

“I’ll deny it.”

Her father took out a lighter, and Melanie watched him suck his breath in. He took a deep breath, sat further back in the chair, apparently forgetting about the cards. Melanie put hers down and watched him.

“Do you want one?”

“No,” Melanie said.

“You remind me of me,” her father said, sitting suddenly upright.

“Why?” Melanie said.

“We’re observers.”

“Yeah,” Melanie said.

She leaned her head against the back of the wicker couch. She pushed her cheek hard into the weave, so it pressed into her face.

Her father began to talk. “Your mother,” he said. “She was a do-er. And a people person. I watched her once in the ER, and it was like she found a way to save your life and also something in your personal life too. Chelsea is like her. Like, your mother was always wanting to socialize, and I don’t think she liked me until she realized I was funny, but I didn’t like to be funny in big groups of people, only to her, and she would always ask me to repeat that joke, or say that thing, because we’d always be out with people—especially when she got skinny, and she’d say, honey, honey, I just want a chance to wear this dress—and then, I’d get mad at her because I don’t like being funny in large groups of people like that, but I’d never tell her, and I’d just nag her until we finally went home. She was always mad at me on those car rides home, and I was mad at her.”

“Yeah,” Melanie said.

“It’s like... how can you tell a joke on command? Please explain that to me.”

Melanie started to laugh. “Chelsea can.”

Her father laughed too. “I know,” he said, and he began to laugh even harder, and Melanie joined him.

“You’ve gotten skinnier,” her father said.

“Like mom.”

“Be careful,” her father said. “Your mother became a different person when she lost all that weight.”

“What do you mean?”

Her father looked serious, like he was trying to find the right way to explain it. Melanie realized, suddenly, that she didn’t want to know.

“Can I show you something?” She reached for her phone. She watched her hand reach for her phone.

There were all these barriers in life. Whenever she got to one, Melanie gave up, like her mother’s brain one day, like Chelsea’s notes which stopped her from getting rid of the videos. Like the stupid videos, which had given her friends a reason to feel more popular when they were with her, which had given the world a chance to laugh at a fat girl. Melanie had to fight to stay awake and witness all of it. All these people riffing to Melanie about how inspiring her sister was. But the people were weirdos, all tattooed or fat, nose rings and band geeks. Melanie was not one of them. The normal girls—the pretty girls—told Melanie how much they loved Chelsea with a tone of slight mocking, and some of the boys spoke of Chelsea with something nearly resembling sex, like I saw your sister get weird and sexy on camera, now what about you? Melanie didn’t want to be noticed when she walked down the street. It was what her father wanted too. When her mother lost all that weight, she’d been all bones and it’d been embarrassing to him, like her body was a map to all their problems.

“Come sit over here,” she said to her father, patting at the seat next to her. The way a command came out of her mouth. It surprised her. She patted at the seat again.

She put the blanket over him too, and she looked through the screen at the sky. The clouds were gone. It was just a dark, normal night.

The lights started to flash, on and off, on the screen. Her father had no idea what was about to happen. Melanie turned away from the screen and watched his face. The brightness from her phone made temporary flickers on his cheek. He hadn’t realized yet,

and then, he did, and for a moment, Melanie thought he was trying to suppress a giggle, and maybe she'd been wrong about how he'd feel. Melanie felt that delicious desire for sleep, but she widened her eyes awake. At last, it happened. She watched her father as he became angry and then disgusted. It was all there on his face, in a snarl, which arched up towards his left cheek, which was much more serious than the toilet of tampons, much darker than the day of her mother's funeral, much more intense than how he'd reacted to her mother saying at a party, "Oh Zach, can you do that impression again?"

Melanie wasn't sure if she'd planned this whole thing all along, or if it would have just happened without her.

"How many people have seen this?" His voice was piercing now and loud.

Melanie clicked out of the full screen and showed him the 439, 275.

But there was something she hadn't seen before next to the video. She clicked on it.

The video started to play. There was Steve's back. Katy Perry was singing.

"Days like this I want to drive away." Steve was wearing a purple sparkly three-piece suit and platform shoes, and he shook his butt to the beat.

"Who's that homo?" her father said.

"Shh."

The camera moved forwards and spun around, and there was Chelsea, and Steve was flamboyantly putting make-up on her, waving the powder brush to the beat. Cut. On the backdrop were bright pink and purple fireworks. Chelsea was standing at the front, wearing bright leggings and a shirt that cut off before her stomach, and a side ponytail.

Aileen and Brandee were dressed in 80's attire too, but they were matching, and they stood in a triangle behind her. "Throw your sticks and stones," Chelsea walked to the camera while she mouthed it. The video was high quality. She looked clean, ferocious, almost pretty. "Throw your bombs and your blows." Aileen and Brandee were doing something like a 1,2 step. "But you're never going to break my soul," Chelsea sang.

Cut. They were all on the beach. When had they gone to the beach? Chelsea was in a bright purple bikini. Her stomach rolled over. Aileen and Brandee were wearing matching one pieces behind her. "This is the part of me that you're never gonna ever take away from me." Chelsea was still mouthing it, and she was rubbing her body up and down, slowly and then quickly, as if to tell the world that the lyrics of the song were true, and soon she was jumping and dancing, and Aileen and Brandee were blowing bubbles, and Chelsea threw her hands in the air and was popping them. Chelsea ran towards the ocean, and then she turned back around to the camera. Confetti started falling from the sky, and more and more people joined them, like a flash mob, and they all waved their hands behind Chelsea like she did.

"Shut it off," her father said.

Her father stood up. Melanie knew where they were going. She'd be right behind him to support him. Her father put the cigarette out on the table, and he pulled open the door. Melanie paused. She watched the ashes shrink. She followed her father into the house and up the stairs to Chelsea's room. Finally, Melanie was behind the someone, that strange, stomping shape, who was going to ruin it, like she already was.