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## Perfect Order: A Collection of Short Stories

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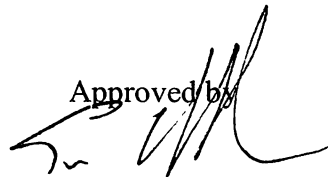
PERFECT ORDER: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by  
Virginia Shields

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

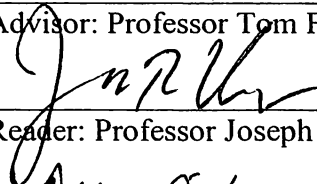
Oxford  
May 2005

Approved by



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Advisor: Professor Tom Franklin



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Reader: Professor Joseph Urgo



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Reader: Professor Ann Fisher-Wirth

## ABSTRACT

### VIRGINIA LYONS SHIELDS: Perfect Order: A Collection of Short Stories (Under the direction of Tom Franklin)

The stories in this collection have been written over the course of the past school year. I participated in a writing workshop in the fall semester that was instructed by Tom Franklin, and in which I was able to learn the importance of peer revision in the writing process. Over the spring semester, I have worked on several new stories, which are included here, as well as the stories from the writing workshop. My purpose in writing this thesis is to explore the creative process of writing and to produce original works of fiction.

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## Introduction

So, here's the question I keep coming back to: why do I put myself through the grueling process of writing? Why don't I become an accountant? How often could your feelings get hurt if your job was to file taxes? Numbers can't talk; they can't tell you that you're an idiot for adding them incorrectly or that your intention was good but you used the wrong formula. Writing fiction is the hardest thing I've ever done. I'm scared sometimes of the words that land on the page in front of me, and I'm scared of the potential criticism I face, but for some reason I can't stop writing.

Intense pressure to be perfect, never ending criticism, and constant self-doubt—these are my enemies. But I also have some friends—a couple of revised stories that I don't hate, the feeling of satisfaction after pulling a good sentence out of nowhere, the moment when an idea for a new story crosses my mind, the moment when I think of a better idea, and the last period on the last sentence on the last page of a story. Period.

I don't think I'll ever know if I'm any good. Maybe one day I'll have a few stories published or I'll write a best-seller, but even then, how will I really know if I'm good? There will always be people out there who don't like what I've written, and most likely I'll be one of those people. I know everyone says this about themselves, but I am my biggest critic. And even if I could get beyond this self-deprecating tendency that seems to come naturally to most writers, it's nearly impossible for me to view my stories from an objective standpoint. This, I've learned, is where the importance of having good readers

comes in. Ultimately, writing is a solitary task, but without an outsider to help you see things in a fresh light, you're never going to get beyond a first draft.

I ran cross country in high school, and I keep thinking how similar writing is to running—at times it's exhilarating and other times it's utterly exhausting. You go out there every day and run, hoping that your legs will carry you without too much pain, hoping that the miles will start to come naturally, and all the while your greatest fear is that this will never happen. Determination can only take you so far, and from there, it all depends on whether you have the God-given talent to push yourself the rest of the way.

Something that I've struggled with is creating tension in my stories. Perhaps the most important thing I've learned about writing, beyond the technical things such as adverbs and adjectives, beyond the type of revision that involves cutting clichés and adding fresh detail, is that no matter how grammatically correct a story is and no matter how many good details you have, none of it will add up to form a truly great story unless your story has an element of tension, unless it matters. I've found that creating conflict is one of the hardest parts of writing a story. Either I have trouble producing the right level of tension or it comes off as too contrived or manipulated. And this is all a symptom of my struggle with control, with letting go and being unafraid to put my characters in unpleasant situations. Hopefully, with each story I write, I'm getting better at cracking into the realm of insanity, at reaching below the surface of perfection and dragging out bits of chaos.

To be honest, I don't think these stories are my best because I don't think I've yet to reach my top level, to borrow a phrase from Tom Franklin. *Perfect Order* is the title of this collection, fitting because of its irony. The one thing that ties these stories together is

the characters, all of whom are striving for some form of perfection. But what they haven't learned yet is that the harder you try to reach perfect, the more illusive it becomes. Still, even those of us who have figured this out know that the desire for perfection is not easy to let go of. These characters are all grasping for control, trying to make sense of their lives or bring some sort of order into it, and I think this is something everyone can relate to.

Most of these stories are rooted in my own personal experiences. I don't think it's possible to create a story that I haven't projected a part of myself into, and this is one reason the creative process becomes so personal and why criticism is so hard to face. But it's something I have to train myself to get through because I will always aim for perfection, knowing full well that I'll never get there, and I have to be prepared to give up control, to accept the disorderly.

## Scattered Driftwood

That summer, before he drowned, Lila and I tried to teach our little brother how to swim. She and I normally fought like rowdy boys, but with Andy as our focus, we got along just fine. Mom said he was a little too young, but I thought she was afraid because he was the baby of the family. I was sure I'd been swimming since before I knew how to walk. I was also sure that I knew what was best for Andy because I thought he was part mine.

The first day of swimming lessons Lila and I took Andy down to the small beach in front of our house. We weren't allowed to swim off the wharf when we took him by ourselves because it was too deep for him. Andy wore his favorite bathing suit, the blue one with sailboats. The sails, once white, had turned light brown.

"Okay Andy, I'm gonna hold you under your stomach, and you move your arms like this and kick your legs. I won't drop you. Do you think you can do it by yourself? I'm gonna let go, but don't worry, I'm right here if you need me."

"Come on, Andy," Lila cheered. "You can do it, buddy."

I moved my hands from under his tiny stomach and he flailed in the shallow water, unable to keep himself up for more than a few seconds. I grabbed him and picked him up into my arms.

"That was great, bud. You're gonna get it really soon. Let's try a few more times."



“No, I don’t wanna,” he said.

“How ‘bout just once more, and then we can go see Mom.”

“Okay.”

After his next try, we ran to the house to tell Mom how well Andy had done. She was dozing on the screened porch with a paperback face down on her stomach and a half empty glass of white wine on the table beside her.

“Mama, mama. Andy almost swam by himself!” Lila shouted.

“Oh, hey baby. That’s great. Come here, honey, let me give my big boy a hug.”

Andy curled up into her lap. Lila and I sat down on the wicker sofa next to Mom and Andy. Lila propped her tan legs on the table in front of us and crossed her ankles. She was such a priss. We both leaned our wet heads back and sighed as if we’d just finished a tough job.

“Girls, y’all be careful with my baby. Don’t go out deeper than he can stand, okay.”

“Mom, we know.”

“Andy, go to Maggie. I’m gonna go get y’all some towels,” she said.

She came back with three extra large towels. They were the ones we’d used earlier that day and they had been lying over the railing on the back porch drying out. They smelled like bay water. Lila had picked them out at Wal-Mart; she thought they were so pretty because they were orange and pink with big palm trees on them. I told her we didn’t have palm trees at the bay, but Mom said they don’t make towels with oak trees on them.

Lila and I gave Andy swimming lessons all week, and we couldn't wait to show Dad how close he was to getting it. That was how things always went at the bay—we'd discover something cool or learn something new, tell Mom about it, then wait for Dad to come on the weekends so we could show him. His enthusiasm was always several notches higher than Mom's, but I figured it was because he didn't get to see us as much as she did.

Andy's swimming lessons were about the most exciting events that had occurred so far that summer, and when Dad's black, two-door Tahoe pulled up to the house that Friday afternoon, we ran out across that shell driveway as fast as our bare feet would take us. Dad was barely out of his truck before Lila had burst out our news and told him he had to come watch Andy immediately. He laughed at our eagerness and agreed to come as soon as he'd changed into his bathing suit.

We got to go out to the end of the wharf because Mom and Dad were with us. I could tell Andy was a little nervous about this because I had to coax him into the water. On the beach we had to hold him back from running straight in without us. But once he got in and had Dad to hold onto, he perked up.

"Andy, swim from Daddy to me," I said.

"No," he said, tightening his grip on Dad.

"Okay, why don't you swim to Mama then?"

"I don't want to."

"Andy, come on," Lila pleaded. "You know you can do it if you just try."

"No. I'll do it next time, when I'm bigger."

"Okay, honey. Maggie, go get him his floaties," Mom said.

“But Mom--”

“If he doesn’t want to do it, he doesn’t have to. Get his floaties.”

“Fine.” I pretended to act annoyed.

“That’s quite all right, little man, you can show me next weekend,” Dad said.

“And tonight how ‘bout we have a big bonfire?”

A grin as wide as a full magnolia blossom spread across Andy’s round face, two deep dimples on each cheek, just like mine. The rest of us smiled, too. If someone could’ve captured that moment on film, you would’ve thought we were the happiest family on earth. Maybe we were.

That evening we gathered the driftwood that dotted the thin shoreline and built a huge bonfire. We unraveled wire coat hangers and stuck brown Ballparks on the ends, roasting them in the enormous flames. Dad drank Budweisers in bottles, and Mom had Jack and Coke. We ate our hot dogs and chips, then used the same hangers to cook marshmallows for s’mores. Our fingers and faces were covered with sticky marshmallow goo and chocolate.

“Girls, Andy, come here and look at this,” Dad said, pointing to the sand.

The sky was clear and the almost-full moon shone down across the water. Tiny ripples of water lapped the shore and we stood—Lila, me, Andy, Mom, and Dad—our backs to the fire, staring down at little dots of electric light.

“They look like fireflies,” said Lila.

“They do, but they’re not,” Dad explained.

“They’re jellyfish. You know, the kind that don’t sting that you can pick up in the water.”

“They glow in the dark?” Lila asked.

“Yeah. Pretty neat, huh?”

“Can I pick one up?”

“No, Lila,” I said. “They don’t glow if you pick them up.” I’d discovered them the summer before by myself. Mom and Dad were fighting about something late one night, and I ran outside to get away from the noise. I saw the glowing lights and thought they were little stars that had fallen from the sky. I thought God had sent them for me to wish on. “Don’t touch them.”

Andy reached down and grabbed one before I could stop him. He squished it between his fingers.

“It’s sliiiiimy,” he said.

I started to get angry, but then he smeared it across Lila’s arm, and I couldn’t help but laugh. She frowned, then a sly grin spread across her face. She picked one up and threw it at me, hitting me on the cheek. I screamed and ran after her, tackling her into the sand. We rolled around, giggling like we were Andy’s age.

That Sunday we went to church and had a big lunch on the front porch—fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and biscuits. A breeze blew through the Spanish moss that hung from the oak branches. We could see some dark clouds in the distance and knew it would storm that day. Dad left later that afternoon, promising he’d be back before we knew it. Andy swore he’d swim for Dad next weekend.

Sure enough, about thirty minutes after Dad left, it started to rain. Mom loved to watch the storms, and we sat together on the front porch. Dark grey clouds rolled in like the waves forming in the bay, and just as a set of waves crashed onto the beach the clouds

broke, shooting down enormous, clear drops of rain. Sometimes I thought the storms were God's way of trying to wash the brown out of the water, but He could pour down all the rain in the sky and that water would never be clear. The wind ripped through the tree branches, scattering leaves and twigs in every direction. A bolt of lightning shot down from the sky to the water and back up, like a seagull darting for a fish then quickly flying back up. I counted slowly in my head—one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-Mississippi, four-Mississippi—a clap of thunder followed; the lightning had struck less than a mile away. I heard the neighbor's dog begin to howl, and Andy ran outside and jumped into Mom's lap. She rubbed his back and told him everything was okay, it's just a little thunderstorm. And just as quickly as it had come it was gone. The sky cleared and the waves died down, and we went back inside.

The next day we decided to hold off on the swimming lessons until the afternoon, and we went down to the beach first thing in the morning. Lila wanted to make drip castles. They were much better than the kind of castles you could make from the bucket molds. Those kind were too perfect and looked like what we called "pretty princess castles." We preferred the craggy, haunted look of the drip castles. We'd pick up wet sand and let it slowly slip through our fingers onto the dry sand. Even Andy could help because there was no way to mess them up. Once they got too tall, they'd come crashing down, but then we'd just start over.

Every day after lunch Mom made us have rest time. We had to stay inside and occupy ourselves with quiet activities like drawing or reading or napping. It was my job to watch Andy, although he usually took a nap anyway, and I would just read my Nancy Drew books.

That particular afternoon Lila and I were exhausted. I sat with Andy in my bed; he dozed off quickly and I fell asleep mid-chapter. Lila curled up in her towel on the sofa in the living room and fell straight to sleep. Mom was napping in her room.

Mom woke me up about an hour and a half later, asking where Andy was.

“I don’t know. He was asleep right next to me.”

I got up and followed her outside, down the porch steps onto the green lawn, past the empty spot where Andy’s tricycle usually was.

“Mom,” I said, “Andy’s bike is gone.”

We ran down to the beach, and I followed Mama between the pilings under our wharf and down to the neighbor’s. Then we climbed onto the wharf and went down to the end. No sign of Andy.

Most everything after that moment is a blur. Mom called Dad, and he came over from Mobile. They called the neighbors and eventually the police. It got dark and we still hadn’t found him. All the adults were out searching and Lila and I were told to stay with our neighbors at our house to see if he came back. It was uncomfortably quiet, the only sound being the distant voices of the adults calling Andy’s name over and over. Lila and I wrapped ourselves together in one enormous palm tree towel and huddled together on the front porch swing. I had one leg on the ground, slowly rocking us back and forth.

He never came home. They found his body washed up on the beach the next morning a few hundred yards down the shore, and later that summer some kids stumbled upon his bike in the water underneath a wharf a couple of houses down. They figured that he must’ve gotten on his bike and ridden down our wharf, straight into the water. He

hadn't learned how to swim well enough yet, and he drowned. If only we'd had some more swimming lessons.

Grief turned out to be a powerful emotion, and it ripped through our family like a thunderstorm, scattering us like pieces of driftwood. I've moved on in some ways, and at the very least, I've come to understand that guilt is not an emotion you can ever fully escape. The strangest thing to me is that now, almost ten years later, I've reached a point where I feel as though I can look at this event from a semi-objective place, like I'm watching an old movie that I watched continuously as a child, but can't quite remember all the characters and everything that happened. It's all familiar, but not so familiar that I can't form a new opinion of things, that I can't find a new way to look at the story. So, here's my new (and wonderfully optimistic) interpretation: Andy taught me to remember the good things in life as if they are children's fairy tales—colorful and magical and with a happy ending. And the bad things need be nothing more than one-liners, or at most a short paragraph, in the stories of our lives.

I was talking to Lila some time ago, and she asked me an interesting question that made me very angry. She asked if I could remember anything bad about Andy, if I had ever felt annoyed with him or wished he wasn't around. He was, after all, a little boy, and little boys tend to be a handful. But my answer was no, he was a perfect angel. The truth is, that's most likely not true, but perhaps our memories sometimes do for us what we are unable to do consciously—focus on the swimming lessons and the sunsets and the s'mores, and try to forget the rest.

## Oak Leaves Falling From Branch

Louise and Annabelle stayed with their dad on Greenleaf Lane Wednesdays and every other weekend. That was the arrangement the divorce lawyers had worked out, “joint custody” they called it, but Louise thought that term stupid; “joint” implied that her parents took care of her and her sister together. Louise wasn’t the only child of divorced parents, of course, and she knew there was nothing especially sad about her situation compared to all the other broken families, but she hated being reminded of this. It was like being told to eat all her food because children in Somalia are starving to death—don’t be sad because other people are sadder. Her parents’ divorce was considered a “good” one, that is, it was a mutual split, they could still communicate with each other on a civil level, and there had been no major disagreements regarding custody or child support. But sometimes Louise wished they fought more or that her dad was a drug dealer or that her mom was insane or that there was some major reason her parents couldn’t be together. If that was the case, then maybe she could justify her sadness, but as things stood, she was considered lucky—she had two parents who loved her and could carry on a conversation, but they just couldn’t live together.

It had been almost a year since the divorce, and they had settled into a routine when they visited their father, a routine that seemed to calm them, like a child who needs to hear the same bedtime story every night before she can fall asleep. They always had peas and spaghetti for dinner, did homework, and fell asleep watching Jay Leno on Dad’s



bed. It was a Wednesday night in September, and Dad was cooking dinner. He always bought the canned peas with pearl onions and mushrooms mixed in with them. Louise and Annabelle hated the onions and mushrooms and picked them off to the side, but Dad liked them and said it was easier for the girls to pick them out than for him to have to add them.

Louise was in the bathroom, eyeing herself in the mirror. She hadn't changed from cross country practice and was wearing black running shorts and a thin white t-shirt. The shorts had slits up the sides, a built-in pair of underwear (but she wore a pair anyway), and a pocket just big enough to hold a folded-up dollar bill or a key (those were the only things Louise could think of that someone might want to carry in such an impossibly small pocket). She pushed her palms against her flat stomach and over her jutting hip bones then down to the top of her thighs. She reached up and combed through her thick onyx ponytail with her skinny fingers.

"Louise," said Annabelle as she poked her head into the bathroom. "It's time for dinner."

"What are we having?" Louise asked, still staring in the mirror.

"Spaghetti."

"Wow. What a surprise."

Annabelle pushed all the way into the bathroom, staring up at her older sister. They didn't look much alike. Louise had always been described as striking, and people were often intimidated by her at first. She had dark, thick eyebrows which arched high above a set of pale blue eyes. Her smile stretched across her face, and her nose and lips were a little thin, which she considered her biggest flaws. The only characteristics

Annabelle shared with her sister were her blue eyes and raised eyebrows. She had lightly freckled skin and wheat-colored hair that framed a round, innocent face. Her mouth was small, but her lips big, like a little red cherry.

“Are you coming?” Annabelle asked.

“Yeah, just a minute,” Louise said. “You can leave. I’ll be down in a second.”

Annabelle glanced at herself, then Louise, and then back at herself. Annabelle turned and left the bathroom. Louise shut the door behind her and began thinking about what she’d eaten that day—a banana for breakfast, an apple for lunch, and now she just wanted to eat a green salad, but her family insisted on eating such fattening foods as spaghetti. She wished they would realize how unhealthy their diets were. Louise continued scrutinizing her stomach, trying to determine whether the 500 sit-ups a day she had added to her routine had yielded any results. She was determined to have a defined six-pack like the women on the cover of *Fitness*. She thought about adding 100 more sit-ups, then left the bathroom.

She walked across the hall and down the carpeted stairs, placing both feet on each step, as if she were an old woman afraid of falling. She stopped for a moment in front of the family photos hanging on the wall which had been taken six months ago. There was an individual picture of both her and Annabelle. She cringed every time she looked at the photo of herself; she had a horrible haircut and was still wearing braces. Annabelle’s two front teeth were missing, and she wore a big red bow on top of her head. In between Louise and Annabelle was a picture of the three of them, Dad standing behind with a hand on each of their shoulders. Louise had inherited his smile and dark coloring, so most people said she looked like him. This photo had gone in the church directory, and Louise

was still furious at Dad for insisting they take this horrible picture, full of braces and bows but lacking a mother. She had never protested, at least not out loud, making this just one more instance in which she had yearned for the courage to speak her mind, to tell her parents what she really thought, but the words always got stopped up in her vocal cords, like a fat woman stuck in a skinny doorway.

Louise walked into the white-walled kitchen and went to the sink. She squirted a dollop of Dial soap onto her palms and lathered them under a stream of water. She stared out the window into the driveway at her dad's Pathfinder. An acorn plunked down onto the hood of the car, and a few dried, brown oak leaves twirled through the air, slow and graceful like ballerinas. Louise had been a dancer for ten years, but she decided to quit when she started high school because she wanted more time to hang out with her friends. Now, she felt like everything around her had the elegance and fluid movement she thought she'd lost. Louise wished the leaves never had to hit the ground but could keep floating forever. She turned the water off and dried her hands on the blue dish towel draping the refrigerator door handle.

"Louise, honey, you wanna fix your plate?" asked Dad as he poured himself a glass of chardonnay.

"Yeah." She picked up a yellowish dinner plate with a big orange flower printed in the middle. The plates had belonged to her grandmother in the 70s, and Louise thought they were hideous. Grandma gave them to Dad when he moved into his own place because she said she didn't want them to have to eat off of Chinettes. Louise spooned some peas on top of a petal, then covered two more petals with noodles. She grabbed

some parmesan cheese out of the fridge and sprinkled it onto her palms. She put two pinches on the noodles and wiped the rest into the trash can.

“You don’t want any meat sauce, Lou?” He took a sip of wine and pulled some milk out of the fridge with his free hand.

“Dad, red meat is so fattening.”

“You’re not fat,” said Annabelle. She snatched a plate off the counter and handed it to Louise. “Fix me a plate. With noodles *and* sauce, please.”

“Well, bossy,” she said, taking the plate, “I don’t want to get fat, okay.”

“You need some protein if you’re going to be running as much as you are,” said Dad.

“No, I need carbohydrates, and I’m eating the noodles.”

She gave Annabelle her plate and walked into the dining room. Dad and Annabelle followed her and they all sat down, Louise and Annabelle facing each other and Dad in between at the head of the table. The seat across from him was empty.

“So, Miss Belle,” said Dad, “how was your day at school?”

“It was good. We watched a movie in science about hot air balloons. Daddy, can we ride in one? I wanna go in a green and blue one and go to the beach.”

“Where are you gonna ride a hot-air balloon around here?” asked Louise. “And you can’t just get in one and take a trip somewhere in it.”

“Yes you can. In the video they rode over this huge field and over some mountains then when they got off they were in a whole other place from where they started.”

“Well great, but there still aren’t any hot-air balloons around here.”

Annabelle grabbed Dad's arm. "Daddy, can we please ride a hot-air balloon?"

"Sure we can. Maybe they have 'em when the fair comes in town. We'll see, okay? I promise if we find one we'll ride it, all right sweetie?"

"Okay." She smiled at Louise with her head cocked to the side, as if she'd just beaten her at a game of checkers. Louise poked at her noodles, wrapping them around her fork two at a time. She took a bite then counted to twenty while she chewed. After swallowing she'd take a sip of water. Then she'd eat four peas, chew until twenty, then a sip of water. Two noodles, chew until twenty, sip of water. She zoned in and out of her father and sister's chatter, mostly concentrating on the food in front of her.

"Louise, how was your day?" asked Dad.

She turned her eyes away from the pea-dotted petal.

"It was fine."

"Anything interesting happen?"

"Not really. Same old, same old." She kept her eyes on her plate, telling herself she was full and to stop eating.

"Well, how about practice? Coach Carter says you're doing really well. He said you might be able to run on varsity next meet."

"I don't know. It all depends on how I do this weekend."

"Well, either way, you're just a freshman, and I'm really proud of you for working so hard. Your poor old Dad could never have run cross country. Although, I did beat you that one time we raced?" A smirk spread across his face, lines spreading out from the corners of his eyes like the sun's penciled rays in one of Annabelle's drawings.

Louise smiled and let out a tiny laugh. "Ha, the only reason you beat me is because you cheated. You told me my shoelace was untied so I stopped to tie it and you ran past me. So unfair. Besides, I was only twelve."

"Well, you shoulda tied your shoes good," he said, still smiling.

"They *were* tied. You are such a cheater," Louise said. She laughed and covered her mouth with her hands.

Louise glanced at her father. She looked down at his wine glass; it was empty but his fingers were still wrapped around the stem. Suddenly, she noticed that he wasn't wearing his wedding ring. He had kept it on all this time, perhaps, Louise thought, in some ridiculous hope that he and Mom would get back together. Louise told herself she'd accepted the fact that this would be her life, this shuffle between mother and father. She didn't understand why he wore the ring; in fact, it made her angry sometimes. It seemed so pathetic, this unrelenting optimism. Now, staring at his naked finger, she felt a knot rise in her throat, like a sudden runner's cramp. Louise pushed her chair back and rose from the table, taking her plate, still half-covered with food, into the kitchen. She came back and took Dad and Annabelle's plates, then started doing the dishes.

"Sweetie," said Dad as he carried his glass and Annabelle's empty milk glass in from the dining room. "Do you and Annabelle wanna cook some brownies?"

"No. I have homework," said Louise, her face down, focused on the dishes.

"Pleeese Loueeese," said Annabelle as she wrapped her arms around Louise's stomach. "I want some dessert, and I can't make them on my own."

"No. Y'all can make them, but I don't have time," she said, pushing Annabelle aside.

"That's okay, honey. You do your work. Belle, we can go get some ice cream from the store if you want."

"Yeah!"

"Okay, go get your shoes and we'll go. Lou, thanks for doin' the dishes. You're a big help. What kind of ice cream do you want?"

She turned and looked at her father as if he'd just asked if she'd prefer cocaine or heroin tonight. "I don't want any."

"Okay. We'll be back in a minute."

Louise watched Annabelle and Dad go out the back door, get into the car, and pull out of the driveway. She stood, arms wet to her elbows, watching the bubbles rise into the air and pop. She wondered if a hot-air balloon could pop like that if it filled up with too much pressure. She imagined herself, Annabelle, Dad, and Mom riding in a rainbow colored balloon, high in the sky straddling the white shoreline and the green gulf water. She could see shadows swimming in the water and seagulls darting past them, so close they could feel the breeze from their wings. Then the balloon popped, but instead of plummeting they floated down into the water, like oak leaves falling from the branch.

Louise finished the dishes. She started to throw away the leftover meat sauce, but instead took a bite. Then another bite and another. She never thought of stopping. She didn't think about how fattening the red meat was or how she'd explain the disappearance of the leftovers to Dad. For five minutes she thought about nothing except the movement of her hand to her mouth. But then the food was gone, and she felt the uncomfortable and unfamiliar sensation of being full. She wanted to throw up, to get the food out of her system, to rid herself of this feeling of heaviness, but she had always told herself she was

above sticking her fingers down her throat. She'd known several ballet dancers who struggled with bulimia, but the thing about bulimia was that it was a disgusting habit and it didn't necessarily make you skinny. Most girls with bulimia were normal weight to overweight, and Louise wanted to be thinner than average.

She had to run.

She put her tennis shoes on, and went to the bathroom, studying her stomach from the side to see how much it had expanded, then she headed for the front door, where she was met by Dad and Annabelle.

"Louise! Where are you going? It's dark out," said Dad.

"I'm going for a quick run at the track. I'll be back."

"Why are you running? You already had practice. Come back in."

"No. I promise I'll be just a little while. Every mile counts if I want to make it onto varsity."

"Fine," he said. "But don't be long."

She started running as soon as her feet hit the lawn. The sky was dark and clear. The moon wasn't shining, and the streetlights outshone the stars. Louise ran the four blocks from Dad's to the school and began circling the track, concentrating on every step as if she were going somewhere. She listened to her footsteps, wondering if someone else would think they sounded loud; that is, if someone else were around, for other than Louise, the only other signs of life were the hundreds of bugs flitting around the glaring stadium lights. One, two, three, four times around. Her pace was steady, though she could feel the weight of her stomach like there was a watermelon strapped around her waist. Running had come almost as natural to her as ballet had, but lately it had become, like



everything else, unnatural—too methodical, too much counting of laps and intervals and calories, too much thinking. Louise wiped a strand of hair out of her face. Her cheeks were damp from tears and sweat. She stared at the white lines on the track and picked up her speed. Then her legs gave out, and she collided onto the rubbery track surface. Her palms and knees began throbbing, but she didn't move. She couldn't see anything but blackness and her breath was heavy and raspy, as if all the bugs had abandoned the light bulbs and were now flying around in her lungs. She lay there, wishing she could pick herself up and keep running. She hadn't burned enough calories yet; she could still feel the spaghetti swirling in her stomach. She pushed up onto her hands and knees and crawled to the grassy area beside the track. She stuck her fingers down her throat—peas and spaghetti. Then nothing more.

## The Way Things Are Supposed to Be

He found her birth control pills last night but didn't say anything. He wouldn't have thought much about it, except for the fact that they had been trying to get pregnant—it made sense now why their efforts were failing. It was in the back of their medicine closet behind a box of Q-tips and an old bottle of contact solution, just sitting there, a round, pink plastic container that almost looks like something you'd find bubblegum inside. Ortho TriCyclin. Sounds like some kind of medicine for an ailing bicyclist, he thought. He held the anti-baby pills in his hand for a minute, then put them back exactly where he found them, forgetting to look any further for the Visine he came for.

The next morning he woke up early, as usual, to the sound of the local country music station; he preferred waking to music rather than the alarm buzzer. A familiar Alan Jackson song played—something about living on love in a small house with nothing but each other. He lay there for a moment, staring at the overhead ceiling fan as it twirled around on the lowest setting, not even strong enough to stir up any dust. He looked over at his wife, curled up on the other side of the bed still sleeping soundly, like a little girl almost. A little girl on birth control. She wouldn't wake for another hour, after he'd showered, read the paper, eaten a bagel, and had his first cup of coffee. He got up, easing his feet onto the chill of the hardwood floor.

Their room was big, the master bedroom in a 3,000 square foot house. Hardwood floors, a mahogany four-poster bed, two walk-in closets, damask curtains and bedspread,

everything in perfect order—clean and beautiful, yet somehow uncomfortable—a microcosm of their lives.

After he ate and showered, he started to get dressed. He stood in front of his dresser, staring straight ahead at a pair of silver, initialed cufflinks while he fished for a pair of socks in the top drawer. The cufflinks had been a gift from his wife on their third anniversary. He normally wore them to work when he had a big proposal, sort of for good luck. He would tug at the wrists of his shirt all day, pulling the shiny links into view, not so much for others to see, but for himself. He thought that's what women must feel like when they wear nice jewelry. Today he was meeting with the McNeely developers, possibly his biggest meeting of the year, but he thought he might not wear the cufflinks.

"Beau," said Millie, "do you want some coffee? You look dazed." She stood in the doorway of the bedroom in her cherry-dotted bath robe.

"Yeah." Beau kept staring at the cufflinks, then he shifted his attention to the sock drawer, finally finding a black pair. He moved to the edge of the bed, propping himself up while he put on the socks. After tying his shoes, he went to the bathroom and put on his blue and yellow striped tie in front of the mirror. He looked at the wrinkles forming on the corners of his brown eyes and reached up and mussed his hair, which he noticed was slightly receding on top but still covered in blond curls in the back. His friends called him Goldilocks.

"Here," said Millie as she placed a green coffee mug on the bathroom counter.

"Thanks. I'm late." Beau picked up the coffee and slipped between the door frame and Millie's slim figure. He grabbed his suit coat and briefcase and walked toward the front door.

"Wait," said Millie, stopping him before he got down the front porch stairs. "You

forgot these.”

“Oh, but of course. My whole day would’ve been ruined.” He held out his hand and she gave him the cufflinks. She bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

“Have a great day, honey.”

Beau drove off in his navy Land Rover, leaving his pretty wife and their house behind. He glanced at her in the rearview mirror, noticing how the cherries on her robe resembled dots of blood from far away. His coffee, still too hot to drink, sloshed out of the mug and onto the floorboard. His cufflinks slid around the center console making an annoying tapping sound. He slapped his hand on top of them and pushed them into the empty cup holder. He tried to go over some business plans in his head, but he suddenly thought of what he and Millie would look like if they had matching robes, only his would have apples instead of cherries.

He thought about what Millie would be doing all day—watching Regis and Kelly, buying Brie and soda crackers at Bruno’s, shopping for a new decorative bed pillow at potterybarn.com. She’d have lunch with some friends at the Red Brick Cafe, then go to Target to pick up that shiny new toaster they so desperately needed. Throw the junk mail out around three, spinning class at four.

Millie had sold real estate the first year they were married, but then she quit, mostly due to Beau’s urging. None of his friends’ wives had jobs, and he made plenty of money, so he saw no need for her to work. Plus, they had planned on having kids soon, and that would be her job. That was the way things were supposed to be.

Beau had gotten married much later than all his friends. He was 29, and most everyone else he knew had married straight out of college. Beau’s mother kept telling him to find a nice girl and settle down. I’ll never be able to see if the gene for twins really

does skip a generation, she'd say (she was a twin and always thought Beau would have them). But he was never in a hurry. He'd only had one other girlfriend in his entire life—Annie. They'd dated for two years in high school and broken up because he was going to Alabama and she to Auburn. Beau remembered her as being beautiful—tall with athletic shoulders, not big like a softball player but toned like a swimmer. Beau was the star quarterback, and she was the homecoming queen. It was too cliché to work out, which was what Beau always told himself. She married a lawyer after graduating from college, and they now had two kids and lived two blocks from Beau and Millie.

The first time Beau and Millie slept together, he accidentally called her Annie. He didn't think much about it; he'd hit a line of cocaine that night for the first time since his senior year and his mind was elsewhere. Beau never brought it up. He thought she pretended not to hear him, as if she were deaf to the world, she was so caught up in their love-making. From that moment he knew exactly what kind of girl she was, and he knew he would marry her.

She was 24 when they met. She had gone to another high school, and he hadn't known her until after college. Once, she told him that she had aspired to move to L.A. and become an actress. It was one of those post-sexual conversations, where you both feel the need to divulge some little secret about yourself to the other person. He asked her why she hadn't pursued it, and she just laughed and said it's a good thing she hadn't because then she never would have met him. Beau thought that answer was cute and sweet at the time, a true indication of how much she loved him, but later he came to realize that all her answers were like that—illusive and designed to please.

“Hi, honey,” Millie shouted from the kitchen as Beau walked in the front door.

“Hey,” he said.

“I ordered some take-out from Panino’s,” she said, meeting him in the living room with a glass of cabernet. “I got you chicken parmesan. Hope that’s okay. And Jimmy and Ellen are coming over to eat with us. They ordered food, too, and said they’ll pick it all up on their way over here.”

“I swear you spend more money on eating out. I bet over a thousand dollars of my paycheck goes to food every month.” He put his briefcase on the floor and took a sip of his wine. “Can’t you learn to cook or something?”

“No. Besides, it’s not like we don’t have the money. It’s just you and me. What are you trying to save for?” She sat down on an overstuffed antique chair and crossed one leg over the other. She had great legs—skinny thighs and perfectly rounded calves. She was wearing a short floral printed skirt and a sleeveless white top. Beau thought she still dressed like a 20-year-old; sometimes this made him proud, proud that his wife was still in shape enough to wear skimpy clothing, but other times, like now, it made him cringe. It reminded him of the fact that she had nothing better to do with her time than the Stairmaster.

“Yeah, you’re right, Millie. Just you and me.” He took a big gulp of his wine, draining the glass of half its contents. “When are Jimmy and Ellen coming over?”

“I told them to come about 7:30.” She fingered the rim of her glass and studied its contents, then took a sip.

He looked at the chair across from Millie as if trying to determine whether it was worth the effort to sit down. He decided against the chair and instead left the room, walking into their bedroom. He put his wine glass on top of the dresser, loosened his tie, and unbuttoned his top two buttons.

“Where are your silver cufflinks?” She stood in the doorway, in the same position she’d stood in that morning. Beau hated when she stood there like that; he thought she looked scared to come in the room.

“I don’t know. Where are your pearls?” He sat on the edge of the bed and flipped on the TV.

“God, Beau. It was just a question.” She leaned against the door frame.

He turned to ESPN and watched for a minute while he finished his wine. Then he got up and went to the kitchen to refill his glass. She followed and held out her glass to him.

The doorbell rang and Millie smiled. “Jimmy and Ellen are here. I’ll get it. Get some more wine glasses down for them, Beau. And get out of whatever foul mood you’re in. It’s just dinner.”

A perky couple entered, takeout bags in hand. The house filled with the scent of marinara and garlic, and Beau felt hungry, starving almost. He could feel the wine sloshing in his stomach, waiting for something solid to come down and soak it up.

Millie and Ellen hugged each other, and Beau and Jimmy shook hands. Beau filled two wine glasses for them, then poured more into he and Millie’s glasses. They transferred their food from the plastic to-go boxes onto Beau and Millie’s everyday china, then settled down to eat under the shimmer of a crystal chandelier in the dining room. Millie lit two green, bamboo shaped candles in the center of the table.

“Why do you think candles didn’t die out when electricity was invented?” Beau blurted, as if this was some pertinent question he’d wanted an answer to for a long time.

“Well,” said Millie in a matter-of-fact tone, “sometimes you need them when the power goes out.”

“Yeah, but how often does that happen?” asked Jimmy.

“People like candles,” Millie said, with a hint of defensiveness. “They look nice and give off a warm glow and some of them smell good.”

“So,” Beau laughed, rolling his eyes at Jimmy, “basically they’re just manufactured for aesthetic purposes?”

“Yes,” said Millie and Ellen together.

“What a stupid conversation anyway. Who cares why they still make candles? People buy them so that’s why,” said Millie. She raised her glass. “Anyway, here’s to good food and to us.” They clinked glasses and smiled at each other. Everyone took a bite.

“So, Jimmy,” said Beau, “how’s work?”

“It’s great, actually. We just wrapped up a huge malpractice case, so I’m feeling pretty good that that’s coming to a close. It’s occupied a lot of my time lately. Ya know, kept me away from home a lot.” He squeezed Ellen’s hand on top of the table.

“Yeah, well, you’ve already got your next case lined up, so it’s not like you’ll have that much time to rest,” said Ellen, pulling her hand out from under his.

“Honey,” said Jimmy, talking through a mouthful of bread, “I told you I’m not gonna be as involved in this case. I promise.”

“Okay, okay, I know. Let’s not bore Beau and Millie with our marital problems,” she laughed. “Millie, are y’all going to Caroline and Wilson’s wedding next weekend?”

“Of course, we wouldn’t miss it,” said Millie. She smiled and looked over at Beau.

“Oh no, never miss a wedding,” said Beau as he swallowed a bite of chicken.

“Don’t y’all ever feel like that’s all our social life consists of anymore? Weddings. I feel



like the past ten years have been nothing but one continuous wedding reception. I mean, is it ever going to end? Aren't all our friends married by now? Or do we have to go to everybody's cousins' and brothers' and sisters' weddings, too?"

"God, Beau," said Millie, "I didn't realize weddings were such an unpleasant thing for you. I happen to think they're fun. I love seeing the gowns and bridesmaid dresses and the flowers. Plus, the receptions are just big parties. You get to see everybody and just have fun." She flashed her smile around the table like she was a Miss America contestant answering the judge's final question.

"I agree," said Ellen. She took a bite of her chicken. "This is delicious, by the way."

"Well," said Jimmy, "I get tired of them sometimes, but I think they're fun, too. It's just another excuse for everybody to get drunk."

"Speaking of drunk, does anybody need anymore wine?" asked Beau. He refilled his glass and passed the bottle around the table. Everyone else poured themselves some more.

"Ellen," said Millie, "how are the kids?"

"Oh," Ellen cooed, "they're wonderful. Jacob just started preschool and he's so cute. He cries sometimes when I drop him off, but the teachers say he does fine after a few minutes. And Katie is just so smart. She's only two, but she already says the smartest little things. The other day she said, 'Mommy, Jakey goes to school, but when do I get to go?' How cute! She already wants to go and learn!"

"That's precious," said Millie. "I feel like we haven't seen them in so long. Y'all have to bring them over next time."

"Oh, well, they can be a mess sometimes. They're not so great at dinner parties,"

said Ellen. "By the way, do you two have any plans for kids any time soon? Oh shit, I'm sorry. That was such a nosy question. You don't have to answer that. I sound like somebody's mother-in-law or something."

"Oh, no problem," said Beau. He grinned. "In fact, we have some exciting news."

Millie put her wine glass down and looked at him. "Beau, what are you talking--"

"Millie's pregnant," Beau took a gulp from his wine glass.

"Oh my gosh, congratulations!" Ellen said.

"Yeah," said Jimmy, "congratulations, y'all."

"No, no, y'all, he's kidding," said Millie, glaring at Beau. "You're being funny, right, honey? I wouldn't be drinking if I was pregnant." She lifted her glass and took a big sip.

"Okay, ya got me," said Beau, "I'm just kidding. But it's just that I can't wait to have a bunch of little kids running around this big ole house of ours. I'm just itching to be a dad. It must be so great, right Jimmy? The joy of fatherhood and all that!"

"Yeah, I have to admit, it's pretty amazing," said Jimmy.

"Well, we're just dying to get pregnant," said Beau.

"Sure we are," Millie joined in. "We've been seeing a doctor about in-vitro. And if that doesn't work, we'll adopt. Children are priceless. We're willing to go to any length to have one of our own." She smiled with her mouth closed and reached for Beau's hand.

"That's wonderful, y'all," said Ellen. "We're here to support you if you need anything at all. Anything."

"Ya know, I think Millie might be willing to take those two hooligans off your hands sometimes," said Beau. "She's gonna need the practice, ya know." He patted Millie on the back and jostled her shoulder.

“Oh, Beau, I don’t know if Ellen needs for me to do that,” said Millie, swatting Beau’s hand away. “More wine, anyone?” She got up and went to kitchen and returned with another bottle.

“Millie, I don’t think we need any more,” said Ellen. “Jimmy’s gotta drive home, and we have to let the sitter off pretty soon.”

“Yeah,” said Jimmy, pushing himself out of his chair, “I think it’s time for us to head out. It’s been great, y’all. Thanks a lot.”

“Oh no, it’s so early, please don’t go,” said Beau. “The night is young. Let’s party all night long. Don’t go home, you old fogies. The wine’s still a-flowin’ and I’ve got cigarettes. We haven’t even had dessert. Millie made a double chocolate mousse soufflé with whipped cream and hot fudge on top. Okay, well not really, but we’ve got wine. Don’t want wine? We have Jim Beam and Grey Goose, too.”

“Ha ha. Thanks man, but another time,” said Jimmy. He put his hand on the small of Ellen’s back and they walked toward the front door. Millie hugged Ellen, and they all said goodbye. Beau shut the front door, closing out the mosquitoes and hot air that tried to finagle their way into their clean and cool home.

“What the fuck was that about?” asked Millie.

“What, darling? I thought it was a lovely evening. Oh, are you talking about that candle comment? I’m sorry, dear. I think the bamboo stalks on the dining room table give off a lovely glow.”

“Shut up, Beau. You know exactly what I’m talking about.” She stomped her heels across the hardwood floor down the hall and into the bedroom. Beau didn’t follow, but instead went back out to the front yard and lit a cigarette. She went outside after a couple of minutes.

“Why are you smoking?”

“Oh, I didn’t see you there. Want one?”

“No, you ass. What the hell is your problem? What was all that shit about me being pregnant?”

“Hmmm...life is full of complicated problems,” he took a puff of his cigarette and held it in for a long time. He turned around and looked at her standing in the doorway and blew the cigarette in her direction. “But my problem isn’t too complicated. It’s you. Plain and simple. I found your birth control, the ortho tricycle.”

“So, you’re pissed off because I’m not ready to have a baby right now?” She put her hands on her hips then dropped them back down to her sides.

“No. I’m elated that you’ve been lying to me for God knows how long. You’re a selfish bitch.” He started to sweat along his forehead.

“Fuck you, Beau.” She began to cry. “You don’t know anything.”

“Well, then why don’t you enlighten me?”

“It’s late,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I really don’t fucking feel like talking about this right now. Why don’t you come inside now and stop acting like a jackass?” She moved aside from the door as if to make room for him to walk past, but he just stared at her. He took the last hit of his cigarette and put it out on the lawn.

“No, I don’t think I’ll be coming in tonight,” said Beau. “It’s pretty fucking typical of you. You go behind my back like this, and then want to pretend like it’s not a big deal. You won’t talk about anything more serious than what we’re gonna eat for dinner. Christ.”

“Oh, forgive me. Because you’re the Dr. Phil of communication.” She crossed her arms and took a step forward.

He turned away and walked to his Land Rover. He told Millie to throw him his keys. She laughed at him, went inside and returned with the keys, then hurled them at the car, cracking the driver's side window.

"Jesus, hon, are you trying to kill me?" asked Beau. He got in and started the car. He pushed on the cracked window and it shattered, the tiny pieces falling to the ground like a sudden hail storm.

"Well, hope it doesn't rain," said Beau.

"You're drunk, and I hope you crash your car into a telephone pole," screamed Millie.

"Harsh words, sweetie. I'll see ya later."

Beau backed out of the driveway, bumping down over the curb. He craned his head through the open window, grinned and waved at Millie. His head was spinning from the cigarette, but he lit another one before shifting the car into drive. He thought about where to go—a bar, the office, Tuscaloosa, the beach. He decided to just drive and figure it out along the way. He looked back for an instant at Millie standing there, arms limp by her side like dead vines hanging from a tree. The cigarette smoke blew into the car, and the warm breeze fingered his curly locks of hair. He felt like a thief who'd stolen a car for a joy ride. The only problem was that sooner or later he'd get caught.

## Oz

I'm sitting in this bar with my friends, talking ourselves silly and drinking about nothing in particular. We may be young, but we've got fake ID's, and anyway, the owners of this place could care less, as long as we keep putting our daddys' money into the pockets of their imitation leather pants. Janie just knocked over a half a pitcher of Bud Light, and it's flowing off the sides of the table like a golden waterfall. I'd like to get underneath it and drink it before it hits the floor, but I don't think I can.

Last Friday night when we were here something crazy happened. We were on the dance floor—disco ball, black lights, and mirrored walls, oh so tacky—and Ann Raines wanted to request “Ghetto Superstar” so we went up to the deejay booth in the corner, stood on our tip-toes to peer over at the guy, and lo-and-behold, he's got his pants down. Sick 50-year-old whacking off to dancing high school girls right there in the middle of the bar. Ann Raines was like, can you play—whoa, never mind dude. We tottered off that dance floor as fast as our heels would take us.

So Janie just went to refill that pitcher of beer she spilled, and we're chugging now—Here's to you, here's to me, best of friends we'll always be, and if we ever disagree, fuck that, here's to we! I know it sounds funny with “we” at the end, but Janie decided we should change it from “here's to me” because it's so much nicer to say “we.”

“Damn, y'all,” said Ann Raines, “I'm getting pretty drunk.”

“Me too,” I said, tilting back in my chair.

“I just talked to Will,” said Janie. “They're on their way here right now. Oh listen,

y'all. Will told me that Blake's mom has some new boyfriend and supposedly he's kind of an asshole."

"What's wrong with the guy?" I asked. "Can we still go over there?"

"I don't really know anything except Will said he's an ass, and Blake is really pissed about it, so just don't mention anything," Janie said, taking a sip of her beer. "Poor Blake. I don't know how anyone deals with that. If my parents ever got divorced I'd be a complete wreck."

"Well," said Ann Raines, smiling, "my dad's a jackass and left my mom to marry a complete witch, and I'm sure if I can handle it, Blake will be quite all right."

"Who said you could handle it? But don't worry, we forgive you for being so insane," I said, patting her on the head. "Seriously, though, I think I would die if my dad got remarried. Thank God he's totally career-obsessed and doesn't even have the time to fill out a *Playboy* subscription card, much less fool with a real woman."

"Oh my God," said Janie, almost spitting up her beer, "that is a sick thought."

"Come on Janie," Ann Raines said, grinning at me, "you know your dad looks at porn."

"Ewww, okay, enough of this conversation," Janie shook her hands in the air as if swatting away a mosquito. "Somebody go get some shots now."

"I'll go," I said. I got up and walked across the bright green carpet to the bar. There's a Grateful Dead poster on the wall and a blow-up Corona parrot hanging from the ceiling. Everything in here is green and it's pretty dark except for the black lights over the dance floor. I always feel like I'm in Oz with all the green. If you walk past the bar in this room and down a hall you get to another room with another bar, although there's hardly ever anyone serving in there. But sometimes we sit in there when it gets

really packed in here. That room is totally different from this one. It's got a sports bar feel, with a pool table and college pendants hanging on the walls, and the booths are all red and yellow. I'm telling you, this place is some kind of trashy. Oh well. Maybe when we're actually legal we can go some place with a little more class.

"Here we go, shots for the girls," I said, passing Janie and Ann Raines each a shot of vodka, a lemon wedge, and a packet of sugar.

We licked our wrists and poured the sugar on, raised our shot glasses to each other, and downed them. Followed with a lick of sugar and a suck on the lemon, and we're good to go. We may be small, but we can drink with the best of 'em. Except for Ann Raines. We have to keep an eye on her most of the time. She doesn't really eat anything but grapes and lettuce and sometimes turkey, so she'll puke if we let her drink too much. It's annoying, but we've tried so hard to make her get help and we've finally realized she's never going to get better until she wants to. So we stand by her, try to treat her as normally as possible. I know deep down she wishes she wasn't sick, but it's a hard trap to pull yourself out of. People think anorexia is something you can control, something you decide to do to yourself, when in reality, it grabs hold of you and takes complete control over your life. It sucks.

"That was so gross, but so good," said Janie, smiling her big smile with her big dimples. She's so pretty, and I'm not saying that in a lesbian way; however, I am somewhat of an unreliable narrator because she's my best friend and of course I'm going to think she's pretty. She's always laughing and she has these big, brown eyes with gorgeous, long eyelashes and shoulder-length blond hair. She always has a boyfriend, needless to say.

Ann Raines never has a serious boyfriend, not because she's not pretty, but



because she says she enjoys her independence too much and, to be honest, most guys don't want to deal with her issues. She would be flawless if she just ate more. She's got long dark hair and bright blue eyes and a perfect figure, except she's much too skinny and boys don't like that despite what most girls think.

"I've gotta go to the bathroom," said Ann Raines.

"I'll go with you." I stood up and put my cup down. "I've gotta pee so bad. Damn it, don't you wish we could wear Depends out when we're drinking?"

"Wouldn't that be cute?" Janie giggled. "Our butts would be all puffy and fat looking."

"Yeah," Ann Raines said. "Fat butts are *so* cute."

We walked into the girls' bathroom. It's tiny and painted pink all over—pink walls and stalls and two fake pink flowers in a vase on the counter.

"God, couldn't they at least put some toilet paper in here?" I said as I squeezed through the narrow doorway into the stall. "I mean, they can take the time to decorate with some ugly flowers, but they can't keep it stocked with toilet paper."

"Seriously," Ann Raines yelled, as if we couldn't hear each other through the plywood stalls. "Well, I guess we have to drip dry. Ha."

"Not like we've never done that before," I said.

"Damn," said Ann Raines, "we sure are some classy girls." She started laughing like crazy.

"Stop laughing," I said. "You're making me laugh and I can't go. Shit! Now I spilled my drink."

We finished peeing and drip-drying and rinsed our hands off. We stopped for a minute to reapply our lipstick in the hazy bathroom mirror that looked like it had been in

an attic for 50 years picking up grime. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother with that considering that as soon as I take a few sips of my next drink, the lipstick will be gone again. Something my mother taught me to do, I guess. That's one image of her I always have—perfectly stained lips, just the right shade of dark pink. She's not always so put together with her jewelry or clothes, not that she's ever unkempt, but even if she's just wearing jeans and a sweater, she has her makeup done. And she's always reapplying her lipstick. I swear, she could be one of those 50's TV wives who goes to bed with her makeup on.

Ann Raines takes a long look at herself. Good thing there isn't a full-length mirror or we'd be in here for another 15 minutes. She asks me, for about the millionth time, if she looks fat. No, no, no, I tell her. You look beautiful. You are perfectly skinny. I've said these things to her so many times that they've started to sound rehearsed, like I don't really mean them. But from the bottom of my heart, swear to God, I mean everything I say to her. I hate how much she tries my patience, but there's not much I can do about it. And even though it seems like she's the needy friend, the one with all the problems, she's been there for me probably more than I have for her, helping me deal with my parents' divorce and everything. So, I say my lines and we go back out into Oz, the land where wishes are granted.

“Hey, you bitches,” yelled Janie. “Did y'all fall in the toilet or something?”

“Ha ha, funny funny,” Ann Raines said. She plopped into her chair and poured some beer into her cup. “I decided I'm moving in with my sister,” she announced.

“What?” I asked, taking the pitcher from her. “With Marilyn in that tiny apartment?”

“Yeah,” said Ann Raines. “My mom is driving me crazy. She thinks I'm gonna

die or something, and she thinks it's her fault. I just can't live there right now, and there's no way I'm gonna live with my dad and Teri."

"Are things are really that bad with your mom?" asked Janie. She pushed Ann Raines's hair out of her face. "She's just concerned about you. We all are. And is Marilyn okay with you moving in? Sweetie, where are you gonna sleep? On the couch?"

"Yeah, I mean, you'd move out too if you were me," Ann Raines pulled her hair back into a rubber band. "I really don't give a shit if I have to sleep in Marilyn's bathtub. I just need some space."

"You can't run away from your problems," I said. "What you really need to do is go to rehab and get better."

"I don't want to talk about that right now." Ann Raines stared at the green floor. "Can we take another shot?"

"Fine," I said. "But you're the one who brought it up. You can't expect to talk about your problems and us to ignore the most obvious one. But whatever. Shit. Let's get drunk."

"I'm sorry," said Ann Raines, looking up at me and Janie. "I know I'm a pain in the ass for y'all to deal with, but that's the way things go sometimes when you're best friends with a psycho female." She grinned and crossed her eyes.

"Yeah," Janie said, laughing. "Ann Raines, what would we do without you? Okey dokey, ladies," she said as she stumbled out of her chair. "I'm gonna get us some Alabama Slammers, and when I come back I want to see smiles on both of your beautiful faces."

I watched Janie saunter over to the bar. She has this walk she does when she's trying to be funny and sexy where she sways her hips from side to side. Then she'll look

over her shoulder to see if we're watching and laugh hard, leaning her head back when she sees we are. I really envy her sometimes, always so happy, hardly ever without a smile. It's because her life is so perfect. Her parents are still married, and she gets along with them pretty well. She's never had any deaths in her family besides her grandfather, which was hard but grandparents die—they're old. I know people say that everyone has some sort of problems, even if they're not evident to outsiders, but Janie is my best friend, and if something was ever wrong I'm sure she'd tell me. She gets upset about little things like messing up a Hollandaise sauce she was helping her mom make for dinner, or making a B on a biology test. Some people say that pain is relative, that what upsets one person very much may seem trivial to another person, that what we've experienced shapes how we deal with things and how much sadness and pain we can tolerate. Still, if that's true, I wish I was in Janie's category—the one where a wrinkled dress ruins the whole day.

Will, Janie's boyfriend of six months, and Blake, his best friend and Ann Raines' occasional hook-up buddy, walked in just as Janie got to the bar, so of course she was distracted from buying the shots. Will and Blake both have red hair, and I used to get them mixed up before I knew them, but now it's easy to tell that Will's hair is more rust colored, while Blake's is brighter, almost the color of an orange. I always thought it was random that two redheads just happened to be best friends.

Janie brought the guys to our table, hugs and heys all around, then they went to get more pitchers and Jaeger shots—strong shit, but oh well, I can handle it and I know Janie can. Ann Raines will be all right as long as we keep an eye on her—it's like making sure the tub doesn't overflow. We pulled up a couple more chairs for the guys and passed around the pitcher.

“So,” said Will, putting his arm around Janie’s shoulder, “y’all been having a good time talking about girlie things?”

“Of course,” said Janie. “It’s much better when it’s just us, in fact.” She tapped his cheek and smiled at him.

“Yeah,” I said, swirling my finger around the foam at the top of my beer. “Janie was just telling us all about her dad’s porno collection.”

“Shut up,” said Janie, laughing and shaking her head at me. “I was not. That is so gross. Please don’t get that conversation started again.”

“I’m just kidding, y’all,” I said. “We were talking about how lovely this place is. Well, actually, I was just thinking that. Don’t y’all just love coming here?”

“It’s very nice,” Blake nodded. “It looks like somewhere your parents would come, Ann Raines.”

“Blake,” I said, looking sideways at him, “what the fuck does that mean?” I hate how he treats Ann Raines; he can be such a jerk to her sometimes.

“Nothing,” he said, reaching over and squeezing my hand. “God, don’t get your panties in a wad. I was just joking.”

“Actually,” said Ann Raines, staring across the table at Blake, “my mom used to come here. But then one time she came and saw Blake’s mom and boyfriend on the dance floor, so she decided it had gotten too trashy.”

“Oh, that’s funny,” said Blake. He took a gulp of beer.

“Anyway,” said Will, “who wants some more beer?” He started to refill everyone’s cups.

We sat there for a couple more hours, the time passing by like a parade of elephants—slow, heavy, and gray. More pitchers were passed around the table, more

cups knocked over, and more hazy conversations flowed through the smoke-filled air. We danced on the disco dance floor with the perv in the corner, probably yanking his shit again, but we had boys with us, so I wasn't worried about him molesting us or anything. I don't think he's like that anyway; I think he's just a sick weirdo who's all alone. Maybe he picks up hookers sometimes, although I wonder where the hookers are in this town. I'm sure we have them somewhere, but I wouldn't know much about that.

We decided to leave Oz at around 10:30 because we wanted to go hang out at Blake's before our curfew, which is 12:30. He lives with his mom, who doesn't give a shit what we do. We usually go over there before going to the bar, but tonight we wanted some girl time before meeting up with the guys.

We got to Blake's—a one-story, redbrick house that's up on a hill so steep I'm afraid to take my little Civic up there—and we grabbed some Natty Lights and sat outside on the back porch. It was early May, but it felt like the middle of July. I looked over at Ann Raines and noticed that a few strands of hair had come out of her ponytail and were hanging in her face, like pieces of yarn unraveling from a sweater. Blake's eyes looked like a Chinese person's, and I might have even thought they were closed if I didn't know that they got like that every time he got drunk. Janie was sitting on Will's lap; they were like two beer cans that had been fused together and were overflowing with shiny happiness. Phish was playing in the background, layered with sounds of mosquitoes and crickets and tinkling wind chimes.

“Blake,” his mom came outside with a glass of what looked like bourbon and water, “what are y'all doing?”

“We're hanging out, Mom,” said Blake, staring at his beer can and twirling it around in his hand. “What do you want?”

“Nothing, but be quiet. Randy’s here.” She went back inside then came back with a lighter. She lit a cigarette then a candle in the center of the table.

“This will help keep the mosquitoes away,” she said, taking a puff of her Marlboro.

“Great, Mom,” said Blake. “Why aren’t you inside with your boyfriend?”

“How are you girls doing tonight?” She looked at me and Janie and Ann Raines, ignoring Blake’s question.

“Fine,” said Ann Raines. “Thanks for letting us come over, Ms. Ross.”

“Oh, you know I enjoy y’all’s company,” she said. She walked over to Blake and brushed through his hair with her fingers. “I’m going back in. Just try to keep it down a little tonight.” She kissed Blake on the forehead, put her cigarette out on the ground and went back inside.

“I hate that asshole,” said Blake, his eyes opening up.

“I’m sorry, man,” said Will, lowering his voice. “There’s not much you can do about it, though, if your mom really likes him.”

“Yeah,” said Blake, “because she’s a fucking slut.”

“Don’t say that about your mother, you asshole,” said Ann Raines, hitting Blake on the arm. “Why don’t you like him, anyway?”

“Why do I have to have a reason? He creeps me out, is that a good answer?” He got up from the table and went inside, turned up the music, and came back with another beer and a deck of cards. “Y’all wanna play Presidents and Assholes?”

“Yeah,” said Janie, always up for a drinking game. Blake passed out the cards, and we played a couple of rounds. Ann Raines got up to use the bathroom, so we told her we’d wait on her to get back to keep playing. She’s one of those people who gets upset if

you leave her out of something, even something as stupid as a card game, and I get annoyed with this childish trait of hers, but Janie always tells me to ignore it, kind of how we tend to ignore her starvation habit. It had been close to ten minutes and Ann Raines still hadn't come back, so I decided to go in and get her because I figured she had started chatting with Ms. Ross. I wish I had been right.

I found her in Blake's dark bedroom, Randy hanging over her limp figure in the bed, the lights off and Ms. Ross nowhere around. I screamed and ran into the room, pushing Randy away from Ann Raines. Blake, Janie, and Will came in, beer cans still in hand.

"What the fuck is going on?" asked Blake, looking from me to Randy, standing in the corner of the room, probably wishing he was a cockroach so he could climb up the wall and get around us.

"I found him in here hovering over Ann Raines," I said, frantic. "Look at her. She's completely passed out."

"Listen," said Randy, stepping forward a bit, "it's not what it looked like. I swear. I found her passed out on the toilet. Puke everywhere. I picked her up and was putting her in bed so she could sleep here."

"What's going on?" Blake's mom asked. "I was on the front porch and heard yelling."

"Your sick boyfriend is a molester, that's what's going on," said Blake, his eyes now wide open.

"What? Randy, what is he talking about?" She looked from Blake to Randy. Her cheeks and eyes were red from the Marlboros and bourbon.

"I didn't do anything," Randy swore, holding his hands up over his head. "I swear



to God, I was helping the girl because she's passing out drunk. Maybe you kids should pay closer attention to your friend because she's clearly not well."

"Whatever, man, I don't believe you," yelled Blake. "She was outside with us not two minutes ago, just fine. And then we come inside and find you hovering over her like some sicko. I told y'all he was a creep. Get out of my house!"

Randy turned to Blake's mom, as if pleading with her to believe him, but she didn't look at him. She just stared at Ann Raines, lying passed out in Blake's bed, then she looked at Blake and started crying. Blake went over to her, hugged her, then quick as a sober knee jerk, he grabbed the ice-filled glass out of her hand and hurled it at Randy's head. He ducked and lunged at Blake, missing him and running crotch first into a table. Blake picked up a lamp and smashed it over Randy's head, knocking him out.

"Oh my God," Blake's mom cried. She ran over and squatted down next to Randy, then stood up and looked at Blake. "Holy shit. This is horrible."

"He's fine mom," said Blake, lightly kicking Randy's side. "He's just knocked out. Maybe we can molest him now. Fucking piece of shit."

Janie was crying, and I went over and sat down next to Ann Raines, still sound asleep. I motioned for Will to help me, and we picked her up out of the bed, and she woke up enough to plant her feet on the ground as we held her up between our shoulders. Her 90-pound frame felt heavy somehow, as if the sleepiness was weighing her down. Janie wouldn't stop crying, and Blake was telling his mom to call the cops to come arrest Randy. I don't know if she did or if they just put him out in the street somewhere or if Blake started feeling bad and took him to the hospital. We said goodbye to Blake and his mom and made our way out the front door and down the steep driveway, slow and cautious, watching every step so we wouldn't tumble under Ann Raines's weight. The air

felt hotter than earlier that night, and I could feel the mosquitoes landing on my arm and neck. We never talked about that night with Blake, and we never went over to his house again.

I drove us to Ann Raines's house and we shook her awake so she could unlock the door and let us in. She didn't remember anything that had happened, and we didn't tell her, mostly because we weren't sure ourselves. All I know is that what I saw looked questionable, but Randy could have been telling the truth—Ann Raines has passed out on toilets before.

We started getting ready for bed, and Ann Raines said she was hungry. She went into the kitchen and made a toasted turkey sandwich, lots of turkey, no mayonnaise. She eats like an obese man when she's drunk. Hopefully, she won't remember eating it tomorrow because if she does, then she'll feel guilty and won't eat for a couple of days. It's a powerful cycle; Ann Raines says it's like a whirlpool—it sucks you down and you feel like you're drowning, then just when you think you're about dead, it spits you back up for air. But if no one pulls you out of the water, it'll suck you right back down.

Lying in the bed next to Janie, listening to Ann Raines fumbling around in the kitchen, I started drifting off to sleep. I was thinking about whirlpools, literal ones. My mom and I got sucked into one when we were whitewater rafting once. We went down this big rapid in a duckie, and flipped over and got sucked under. It spit us back up and someone dragged us out of the water. We haven't been whitewater rafting since.

## Cloudy Dreams

Jill was a babysitter for the Sherman family in her hometown of Peoria, Illinois until she got pregnant with little Bobby and Kacy's half-sister. Mr. Sherman was quite a gentleman; he even offered to send child support if Jill would move as far away as possible. So, she quit her job and decided to move to Destin, Florida, a place she'd visited once as a child, to raise her daughter in a place that always smells like coconuts and sea salt. When Jill said she was leaving, her mother was as indifferent as a glass of tap water. She was a woman with no passions or opinions of her own, and she had raised Jill as if she were a side dish not worth the attention of the main course. Jill vowed to raise her own daughter in the opposite manner, with love, respect, and care. Her mother told her these were vague ideals that no one really understood, but to Jill they were distinct emotions and she could clearly see them as a part of her future relationship with her daughter. Jill wasn't worried about moving to a new place alone, the one thing her mother had cautioned her of. She'd grown up on her own for the most part, and she knew that in nine months she'd have a permanent companion.

Jill had always believed that having a namesake made you more special and could, in some ways, determine what kind of person you would become. Her mother had named her from a random Jill she read about in the newspaper one day. She couldn't even remember why this woman had been important enough to be mentioned in the paper. All her mother remembered was that she thought the name sounded nice and wanted to name her daughter that. Jill decided to name her own daughter, Arianna, after

someone she admired, so she named her after a famous supermodel who was as beautiful and wispy as a cirrus cloud, although Arianna grew up to resemble the more chunky and volatile cumulus clouds.

When she arrived in Destin, Jill got a job at a make-up store in the Silver Sands outlet mall, and from the time Arianna was old enough to walk, Jill took her to work with her as often as possible. She wanted her to learn the value of outer beauty. By the time she was ten years old, Arianna knew how to properly moisturize, how to sweep her cheeks and eyelids with the ticklish end of a make-up brush, and how to make her lips look like a maraschino cherry or the juicy inside of a peach. Jill was proud that her daughter was such a fast learner, and the only thing she couldn't seem to understand about Arianna was her incessant curiosity.

“Mommy,” said Arianna one day in the make-up shop, “do ladies make themselves beautiful so that men will like them?”

“No, not so that they'll *like* them,” said Jill, as she was cleaning a palette of sample blushes, “but so they'll *notice* them.”

“Why should they notice us?” Arianna sat cross-legged on the floor twirling a tube of lipstick up and down.

“Well, it feels good to feel attractive to other people,” said Jill. “Listen, Ari, this isn't about your father again, is it? I'm tired of going over this. Don't you ever, ever feel sorry for us because we don't have a man in our life. I don't wear make-up because I'm trying to find you a father or me a husband. Do you understand that?”

“I know, Mom,” said Arianna. She closed the lipstick tube and set it upright on the floor. “But, if my dad sends me money, then don't you think he'll want to see me one day?”

“No, honey,” said Jill, looking down at Arianna. “I’m sorry. I know this sounds harsh, but he has another family, and we aren’t part of it. We don’t need him anyway because we are what?”

“Independent,” said Arianna.

“Right,” said Jill. She reached down and smoothed Arianna’s honey-blond hair. “Sweetie, pass me my purse. It’s right there behind you. I need some medicine.”

“Here.” Arianna handed the purse up to her mother. “I’m ready to go.”

“It’s almost five,” said Jill. She looked into a mirror sitting on the glass counter top and pressed her palms against her cheeks.

Jill sometimes dreamed of being a make-up artist for models and actresses in Hollywood, but she thought that everyone who had a job in Hollywood was recruited by professionals who scoured the country plucking gorgeous people off the sidewalks and transporting them to California in limousines. She was waiting for a recruiter to come into the store and find her; until then, she spent her time painting coral lipstick and baby blue eye shadow on pre-teens glossed in tanning oil and old women whose skin felt like sand dollars. Jill liked her job, and she was good at it. She always told her customers they looked like movie stars, and it made them glow.

Jill and Arianna lived in a modest apartment complex that, over the years, had been painted in different shades all named after flowers, like Wisteria, Hydrangea, and Sunflower. It was a small apartment, but Jill loved the colors, which were much brighter than the home she’d grown up in, and she always looked forward to the newest paint job. Plus, it was close to the outlet mall and within walking distance to the beach.

Jill kept in touch with her mother through brief, occasional phone conversations, most of which were about Arianna, who knew her grandmother only by the birthday cards she sent and her raspy voice. Jill didn't have many friends in Destin because she had Arianna to take care of and her job to keep, and most of the other young people in town came for spring break or summer vacation. She had had a few boyfriends over the years, but Florida men were different—they were polished and shiny, but when you were around the same one for more than a day or two, he started to give off a harsh glare like the sun reflecting off the white sand. She was a woman who cared a great deal about appearances, but she could never understand men who seemed to care as much as she did, and this was the only thing Jill missed about Illinois—men with stubble and chest hair and dirt under their fingernails, men who made her feel more beautiful because of their contrasting roughness.

Despite the lack of friends or family, Jill had no desire to return to Peoria. She was selfish about the life she'd created and wanted no one to enter or leave.

"Jill," said her mother one day on the phone, "how long are you planning to stay down there?"

"Forever, mom," said Jill. She wrapped the phone cord around her fingers.

"Don't you think that child is gonna get curious one day about her family?"

"She's got no one up there who cares about her, so why should she care about them?" Jill was sitting at the kitchen table, and she felt like her mother was right across from her.

"You're absolutely right, Jill," she said. "I don't give a damn about that girl."

"Well, one card a year sure says I love you like crazy," said Jill. She sat down at the kitchen table. "Listen, mom, you didn't try for one second to stop me from leaving, so

why do you care if I come back? And I was raised without a daddy, hell I was raised without a mother, so I think Arianna should be just fine.”

“Your problem is that you think you can do everything by yourself,” she said, “but one of these days you’re gonna wake up and realize that you need somebody else.”

“Goodbye, mother,” said Jill, getting up from the table. “I have to go, but it’s been lovely talking to you, as always.”

When she was seventeen, Arianna decided to boycott Bobbi Brown and Estee Lauder and any other woman with a strange name who produced cosmetics. She refused to put anything on her face except suntan lotion, and she refused to go with her mother to work. She made this declaration to her one night when they were eating a dinner of egg salad sandwiches and bananas.

“Arianna,” said Jill, “I don’t understand. This is my life and you’re slapping me in the face with this.”

“Oh God, Mom,” said Arianna, peeling a banana, “you don’t have to get so dramatic about it. It’s just that I feel like I’m one of those girls in China whose feet have been bound so they won’t grow bigger. Like, make-up is so confining.”

“Christ, Ari,” said Jill, “you don’t have to be so dramatic.”

“Funny, Mom. You know what I mean.”

Jill took a bite of her sandwich, chewed slowly, and swallowed. “No, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Well, it really doesn’t matter because I’m not changing my mind,” said Arianna. She tore off a chunk of the banana and stuffed it in her mouth.

“I want you to be happy, Arianna,” said Jill, her voice cracking. “That’s all I ever wanted.”

“Mom, I know. I didn’t say I wasn’t happy. I just think that make-up is a hassle and a waste of time.” She took a sip of her raspberry lemonade.

“You know I don’t agree with that,” said Jill. She picked up her napkin from her lap and wiped the corner of her mouth, then put the napkin on top of her food. “I don’t feel very good. I think I’m getting a cold.” She pushed her plate away and felt her forehead with the back of her hand. “Oh, my head hurts so bad.”

“Go lay down and take some Tylenol,” said Arianna.

“Okay. Just throw all this food away. You don’t need it. And do your homework.” She got up from her chair and slowly made her way down the hall to her bedroom. She put on a tee-shirt and a pair of pink and white striped pajama pants, took some Tylenol and Unisom, and crawled into bed to watch re-runs of “The Golden Girls.” She lit a Virginia Slim and flicked the ashes in a plastic ashtray on her bedside table.

She thought about work, imagining that someone had come into the store and stripped the counters of all the bright, colorful eye shadows and blushes and left behind only the neutral base shades. She felt like Arianna was going to leave her and go find her father, or that she would move out and get her own apartment. Her daughter would never need her again and she would leave, Jill was certain of this. She took a puff of her cigarette and put it out. The Unisom began to wash through her bloodstream, and Jill fell asleep worrying she might die and never wake up.

The next morning Arianna brought her mother coffee and a bagel in bed.



“Mom,” she said, sitting down beside her, “I don’t want you to be upset with me. I think you’re mad about this whole thing because you think it means we’re not gonna be together as much.”

“It’s not that.” She sat up and took a sip of her coffee. “I just worry that I’m not enough, that you don’t need me.”

“Mom,” said Arianna, “I’m always going to be your daughter and best friend, and I’ll always need you, even if I don’t always live in the same apartment with you.”

“I love you, Ari.” Jill reached over and pressed her daughter’s hands into hers.

Arianna was serious about her boycott, and nothing Jill said could make her change her mind. Jill noticed that Arianna was gaining weight, and she tried to help her with this too, but to no avail. Arianna loved green mint chip ice cream and cashews and chicken fingers, and she always said that life fed us so many sour disappointments and bitter tragedies that we deserved to indulge our taste buds with things that were sweet and lightly salted. Jill didn’t really understand this analogy.

One day in early June, in the twentieth year that Jill and Arianna had been living in Destin, Arianna told her mother that she was leaving. They had gone to the beach at Arianna’s insistence and were sitting on a towel watching two children chase sand crabs into their holes.

“Where are you going?” asked Jill as she lit a cigarette.

“I want to go and experience a new place for a while. I’m gonna move to Atlanta and get a job.” Arianna gave her mother a serious look.

“What kind of job?”

“Well, I’m not really sure,” said Arianna. “I’ll probably waitress until I find something better, but I really want to try and take some college classes at Georgia State and eventually I want to be a teacher.”

“That sounds like a lofty goal, Arianna,” Jill said. “Teaching is a good thing for a chubby girl to do. But you’re just throwing this on me out of nowhere. Why in Christ’s name are you doing this to me? And why do you have to go all the way to Atlanta? Aren’t there colleges in Florida?” She fanned her face with the paperback she’d brought, then took a drag of her cigarette. “Is it hot out here to you?”

“Yes, it’s hot. We’re on the beach and it’s June.” Arianna made a circular motion in the sand with her hand.

“I think I’m hotter than I should be. Feel my forehead.” Jill turned to her daughter. Arianna put her hand on Jill’s face and told her she felt fine.

“Mom,” said Arianna, “I swear to God you don’t have to worry about me. I’ve saved up a bunch of money, and I already have a place to live.”

“So, you’re not really asking my opinion,” Jill said, taking another puff of her cigarette. “You’re just filling me in on your life plans and expecting me, your mother, to say, ‘Okay darling. Run along now. Fine by me.’” She put her cigarette out in the sand and lay down on her towel.

“You remember Kate—my friend from Friday’s?” Arianna asked. “She moved up there a few months ago and said I could room with her for a while until I find my own place. The rent is cheap and I’ll probably be able to start classes in the fall.”

“Yeah, I remember her.” Jill shaded her eyes with her book. “Are you lying about this? Are you really going to Peoria and you’re not telling me? Because if you really want to do that, we can go together, okay?”

“No, mom.” Arianna rubbed her toes in the sand. “I’m not going to Peoria. You know I’m not one of those kids who’s all, ‘I have to understand where I came from.’ I hate that. This is my home, and you are my family. End of story. I’m going to Atlanta.”

“Well, I don’t want you to think I never wanted you to meet your father or grandmother.”

“You didn’t, Mom,” said Arianna. “But that’s not really what this is about. This is about me moving to Atlanta to go to school, okay?”

“Okay.”

Arianna stood up and reached down to help her mother up. “Come on. Let’s go back. You look flushed.”

They went back to the apartment, and Jill went to her bedroom to take a nap. She lay there with the fan blowing full speed, and although she felt tired she couldn’t fall asleep. Jill thought about her own mother and how she hadn’t even cared when she left home with Arianna. She almost pitied her, living alone in Illinois, as frigid as an icy statue. Unlike her mother, at least Jill had done something—she’d gotten out of town, made a career for herself, and raised a daughter—maybe simple things to some people, but Jill was proud of what she’d accomplished, and prouder that she’d done them without help from anyone. Jill suddenly felt chilled, so she buried herself underneath the covers and shivered her way into a sleep as cloudy as a tub of soapy water.

When Jill woke up the next morning Arianna was in the parking lot. Jill stood on the balcony smoking a cigarette and watched Arianna load her turquoise Mazda 626, the one Jill had bought her for her sixteenth birthday. She didn’t have much to pack—just a box of photos, sheets, and some other things from her bedroom, a small cooler with water and snacks for the road, and a suitcase filled with tee-shirts and jeans.

“So, were you just gonna sneak out on me?” Jill asked Arianna. She had come down to the parking lot and was standing on the passenger side of the car.

“No, I wasn’t gonna sneak out. You didn’t really give me a chance to tell you yesterday when I was leaving. And I knew if I held off then you’d manage to convince me to stay.” Arianna slammed her trunk. “Mom, I think I have enough money, but if I get in a bind can you wire me more?” She said she had five hundred dollars in cash, money she had been saving for the past eight years and the amount she thought sufficient to last until she got a job.

“What do you mean, ‘if you get in a bind?’ You shouldn’t be going anywhere without enough money.”

“Mom, I’m almost positive I have enough, but I’m just saying in case. I need to know that you’re not pissed off at me so much that you won’t help me if I need you.”

Jill stood in the parking lot with her arms crossed. “Ari, I love you. I just can’t believe you’re leaving me.”

“I’ll call you as soon as I get there. It’s not even a very long drive.” Arianna went over to Jill and wrapped her arms around her mother’s thin waist. “Mom, you have to understand this. You left home before, and you’re the one who’s taught me that independence is so important. You know what it feels like to want to get out and experience something different.”

“I left home because I hated my mother and because I was pregnant,” said Jill, stepping back from her daughter. “Are you pregnant? Or God, you don’t hate me, do you?”

“Jesus, Mom,” said Arianna, “you are so God damn dramatic. Of course I don’t hate you, and hell no, I’m not pregnant.”

Arianna walked around to the driver's side and got in the car. She shut the door and rolled down the window. Jill followed her and leaned into the car and clasped Arianna around the neck.

“I'll die if something happens to you,” said Jill.

“I'll be fine,” said Arianna. “I love you.”

“I love you,” Jill whispered. She backed away from the car, hugging her chest and rocking from side to side. She watched Arianna pull out of the parking lot and drive off, then she made her way back up to the apartment.

Jill got in the shower and stood under the stream of scalding water and stared at the soap scum in between the peach colored tiles. She didn't have the energy to stand up, so she turned off the shower and began to fill up the tub. She lay there and let the water inch up until it was about to spill over the edge, then she turned the knob off with her toes. Her skin turned so red it looked like she was sunburned, and she stayed in the water until her body finally cooled back to its normal temperature. She hoisted herself out of the tub, then changed into her pajamas and called in sick to work. She swallowed two Xanax and a Unisom and let herself drift back to sleep for the rest of the morning.

When she woke early that afternoon she felt nauseated and her hands and feet were tingling. Her entire body was sweating, but her mouth was as dry as an unpaid water bill—she thought she was dying. She called 911 and was taken to the emergency room where she had a nurse call Arianna on her cell phone.

Arianna had made it to within an hour's distance of Atlanta when she got the call and turned around. She arrived at the hospital that evening to find her mother sleeping in a private room. They told her that Jill was just dehydrated, nothing major, but she would have to stay overnight. Arianna sat down on the bed next to her mother. Jill wasn't

wearing make-up for the first time in years, and her sleeping face was as calm and bare as the beach in winter.

“Mom,” whispered Arianna, “oh my God. Are you okay?”

“Hey, Ari,” said Jill. “You didn’t have to come all the way back. I’ll be all right, I guess.”

“Mom, you had them call me. They said you were dehydrated,” said Arianna. She hugged her and smoothed the sheets over her chest. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t get here faster.”

“Oh, it’s fine.” Jill closed her eyes for a moment, then re-opened them.

“Well,” assured Arianna, “I’m here now, and they said you can go home tomorrow, and I’ll take care of you for a couple of days.”

“What do you mean, a couple of days?” Jill asked. “You’re not going to leave me, are you?”

“Mom,” said Arianna, “you’ll be fine. I’m still moving to Atlanta. Oh shit, I hate to think—Mom, this wasn’t some terrible scheme to get me to come back?”

“God damn, Arianna,” yelled Jill, “how could you think such a thing?”

“Calm down, Mom.” Arianna grabbed her mother’s hands. “Calm down. But Mom, I’m not staying here. You are fine, and I’ll make sure of that, and then I’m leaving.”

“Fine. Fine,” said Jill. “Leave me here. I might have cancer. I’m worried there’s something really wrong with me.”

“Mother,” Arianna looked her in the eye, “listen to me. You are a hypochondriac. You are not sick.”

“What?” Jill’s face was flushed and tears dripped down her cheeks. “I am telling you, I am sick, and I need you.”

“No.” Arianna’s voice was determined. “You are fine, and I’m going home now. I’ll pick you up in the morning, take you home, and then I’m leaving.”

Jill didn’t say anything. She watched Arianna get up and walk out of the room, and she could feel the weight of her body pressing down into the bed, as if her veins had been pumped with too much fluid and she was sinking. Her hair was splayed out across the pillow, and her hands were by her sides. She reached up and pressed the button for the nurse. Within minutes a fat, Latino woman came in the room.

“Can you take this I.V. out?” asked Jill.

“No, ma’am,” said the nurse. “We have to keep it in until morning.”

“Fine. Can I have something to help me sleep?” Jill rubbed her eyes.

“Certainly.”

The nurse handed Jill two sleeping pills and a cup of water. She swallowed them, imagining them slide down her esophagus and into her stomach. Her tears had ceased, but her body was shaking. She turned over on her stomach and pulled her knees up under her body like a small child might do. She lay on her cheek and stared out the window, but all she saw was a parking lot. She thought she saw Arianna’s car pulling out, but she was wrong. Jill closed her eyes and forced herself to concentrate on the medicine making its way through her body, and for the time being, for the moment, she was at peace, knowing that she would soon be asleep.

## Perfect Order

The walls are white and bare, except for the crucifix hanging above the doorway. The world is a hectic place, full of craziness and temptations and pain, but this place is organized, this tiny space that he calls his own.

“Son, you need some more decorations in here, for Christ’s sake,” Dad said.

“I know,” he said, laughing at himself. “But I’m not a decorator, and I don’t know what to get.”

Dad scanned the room, chairs, a couch, lamps, a desk, and a coffee table, all of which were old, stained with water rings and spilled juice and covered in scuffs and nicks. It had all come from their family home. Little littered the desk top except a calculus book, a notebook, and a rosary. The coffee table wasn’t covered with coffee mugs or magazines or anything else. James followed his father’s eyes, proud of his meager yet spotless domain. It was his space, his life.

Dad walked into James’s bathroom. Toothpaste, toothbrush, hairbrush, deodorant, shaving cream, razor, soap dispenser, mouthwash, Zoloft, Strattera, Ibuprofen—everything lined up in perfect order on the countertop.

“Son,” he said, “you sure are neat.”

“Come on, Dad, you know I can’t help it. I’m OCD.”

“What? No you’re not. No son of mine is crazy.”

“Dad,” James said, “it doesn’t make me crazy. Well, as long as I’m on my medication.” He laughed.



“What would happen if I moved this toothbrush a little? Here, just like this.” He pushed the toothbrush to an angle, making the head bump the tube of Colgate. He stared at James.

“Nothing. I mean, it bugs me a little, but I have to learn to accept when things aren’t perfectly in order the way I want them. It’s actually supposed to help me in my therapy.”

“Who told you you were crazy?” Dad asked.

“Nobody told me I’m *crazy*. I went to see a psychiatrist because I’ve known for a while that something wasn’t quite right. I have these thoughts, these compulsions that other people don’t have, and I saw a thing on TV about OCD, and I knew that’s what I had.”

“Well, I want you to get a second opinion.”

“Dad,” James said, “nobody is going to tell me anything different.”

“All right, then. Let’s do a little home therapy,” he said. He moved all the toiletries on the counter to different spots and squirted some shaving cream onto the mirror. He opened the Zoloft bottle and dumped the yellow pills into the sink. Then he walked into the kitchen, grabbed a carton of milk out of the refrigerator and started pouring it over the floor. He went to the living room and poured more milk onto the carpet. Then he started tearing tissues out of a Kleenex box and scattering them all over the room. James watched all this calmly.

“Dad,” said James, “you’re making a mess.”

He walked over to James and pushed him hard against the wall.

“You’re a pussy, James,” he said.

James leaned over and started picking up the Kleenex off the ground. His dad kicked him in the stomach and he fell down.

“Leave it.” He kicked him again.

“Dad,” James pleaded, “stop.”

“Leave everything like it is.” Kick. “And I’m gonna come back tomorrow and make sure you have.” Kick. “Crazy fuck.”

James, doubled over on the wet, tissue-strewn floor, watched his father walk out of his apartment and slam the door.