

A Year in the Life of Kiev Kostas

by

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School

I get it – really, I get algebra. I understood it then. I understand it now. X is x and y is y, so stop droning on about it. I was sure everyone else understood it as well, and if they didn't, that was their own fault. They should have paid better attention. It's school – what's there not to get? I put my head on my book and closed my eyes, letting the coolness of the pages seep into my skin and cool my brain. Just ten more minutes. Mr. Pinkerton continued to talk in the same monotone he had been using for the last forty minutes and which never seemed to vary, even when the girls in the front row asked the same question, again – for the fourth time.

Everyone seemed to think those girls were so smart because they brown-nosed their way through middle school and now that they were finally meeting some challenge in the 9th grade and seemed interested, the teachers still thought they were smart. The truth was they just wanted to keep their good grades and were actually having to work for them for the first time. If a single brain cell existed between those giggles I didn't think it could be found with a microscope. Okay, that wasn't fair. At least they were trying. At least they ignored me, which was better than I could say for Billy Jackson.

Billy sat two rows of desks over from me. We both sat in the back – me so I could sleep, him, so he could look at the porn he kept in his math binder. I was in the 9th grade. Billy was in the 12th. In a small (okay, super tiny) school like this mixed grade classes weren't uncommon, but it still was unusual for a situation like this to arise. I was far ahead of the rest of my class and he was a little behind, but at least he was going to graduate. Another year of Billy Jackson would have been the end of me, I'm sure.

I had my head down, of course, and my eyes closed. A wad of paper struck my head. I realized that if I looked up now I would catch Mr. Pinkerton just as he was turning around from

the whiteboard, which would just attract attention. I declined the invitation. Billy could be a jerk all he wanted. I had seven minutes to go.

The bell rang. The semi-comatose class erupted with sudden life. I opened my eyes, raised my head and made sure I had finished all of the correct problems listed for the assignment on the whiteboard. Today was one of those lucky days when Mr. Pinkerton had remembered to write the assignment down at the beginning of class, so I had been able to finish everything long before the bell rang rather than having to wait to finish it a few minutes before school Monday morning. People would be expecting me to have the answers on Monday and I never disappointed. Cheaters, I reasoned, were only cheating themselves and as far as I was concerned they could cheat their way into oblivion – especially if they were willing to pay, even it was only with candy. One pack of skittles could get you all the answers to a weekend’s worth of homework.

The school had only one hallway with lockers – okay, it really only had one hallway. I had visited lots of other schools as a child and on all the road trips for wrestling and track and whatever else my mom made me do after school to “keep him out of trouble,” as she said. Other schools had different halls for freshmen and seniors. Other schools had two gyms or two football fields. Other schools had swimming pools and tennis courts. My school had forty year old paint and a dirt track that ran around the same football field my grandfather had played on. My school was built in the 1940s for a tiny farming community that had never outgrown its great depression roots.

In the freshmen section of the hallway I unloaded my books into my locker. Around me people were trying to remember what assignments they had to finish for the weekend, or making their big plans. They swarmed like cockroaches after the lights have been flipped on.

“Hey, Kiev, did we have anything for history?” The voice belonged to Erin Davis. The voice was slightly irritated, but mostly disinterested. That voice always made my heart stop.

I was so startled to hear her address me that I nearly dropped my books. I turned my head, and responded. “What?” Ugh! I felt so stupid. Why did I always sound like an idiot when any girl talked to me. It wasn’t my fault Erin was beautiful. I wasn’t my fault I had brand new hormones raging through me. She was dating Blake Johnson, a junior, and it was easy to understand why. She had this amazing auburn hair and these green eyes that just seemed to absorb you into them, but not in a creepy way, like Mr. Engles, the shop teacher’s eyes.

“I said, ‘what did we have for history homework?’”

“Chapter 26 questions,” I replied.

“Damn.” Erin swore a lot more in 9th grade, I noticed. In the 8th grade she had been a pretty big suck-up with all the teachers. But she had started to develop an attitude when she started hanging out with older kids.

“Don’t worry, they’re easy. Everything is in bold,” I told her.

“Sure. Everything’s easy for you.” Her sarcasm was not of the playful species.

Then Erin was gone. She had turned her back and was already striding toward the door with her two best friends and I was alone in the hall. 77 other students had already disappeared – into buses and cars, or were already walking home. I shut my locker door. I had no need to bring any books home. I had finished all my homework in class.

That rare weekend between basketball and track and baseball when nothing was happening hit me full in the face when I walked out the school doors. My school had a four day school week, so it was only Thursday, and I had nothing to do. The sun lit the sky like a painted picture. Three uninterrupted days of video games waited at home. Or perhaps a good dive into a

few books. High school, I had discovered, turned out to be little more than an irritation to interrupt my week. The work was far too simple, and it didn't seem like anyone had any idea how to make it interesting. It wasn't that school didn't interest me – they were just so slow getting to the good parts.

The sun messed with my eyes and I sneezed loudly, three times. I cut back behind the school, circling the football field before passing through an opening in the fence. My mother rented a little house from Mr. Myers, an old farmer whose fields lay just beyond a strip of trees past the football field. On a day like today I loved the walk. The silence of it comforted me like a blanket. No rude remarks. No awkward glances at or from girls too pretty for me to talk to. No pushes just a bit too rough in the hallway.

Not that I was weak or anything. Once, Billy Jackson had started pushing me around between classes one morning. Billy was just joking around, of course, and I knew it, but that day he pushed just a little too far. Then something in Billy's face told me that Billy had switched gears from joking to something more serious. Usually there was some teacher watching the halls, or old Mr. Stradlater standing near the pop machine watching everything, but that day half the teachers were gone to some training or something and nobody was watching. Billy pushed and I just reacted. Billy was about a foot taller, okay fourteen inches taller, and I just lifted my knee – hard. So hard that Billy actually left the ground, and I walked to class while Billy crouched on the ground holding his groin. I'm small, and as a freshman, I was tiny. I wasn't even 5 feet tall yet, not even close, and I only weighed about 70 pounds. But I was strong and fast and able to drop a much larger boy head over heels with hardly any effort. I had been involved in wrestling since I was just four, but I really didn't like confrontation and I never knew

what to say. Billy mostly left me alone after that, but sometimes, like in math, he would still do crap just to be annoying.

I hated being short. What do you say to the girls who tower over you like some kind of bosomed tree? Seriously. Even the short girls were taller. The tall ones? It was like trying to talk to a bra, unless I wanted to practically break my neck to look at their face, or stand back about ten feet, which is what I usually did. Girls don't really like it when you look at their boobs for an entire conversation, even when it is just to keep your neck from breaking.

Mr. Myers owned all the land behind the school, which overlooked the town, and I had worn a little trail from our house down to the school property over the last two and a half years. We moved there in the 7th grade, "to start over," my mom explained. A little stream ran behind the school and a line of trees bordered the stream, and I had found a little meadow inside – a place where the trees were wider apart and the stream was just a tiny trickle and the grass grew tall. My trail went through my meadow. It was faster to walk than the dirt road, and once I crossed the bank I could reconnect with the dirt road that ran between Mr. Myers' fields and get home easy enough.

I'm not sure why I chose this day to begin my story, but probably because it was that day that I found the cigarette butt in my meadow. For two and a half years I had walked daily from house to school and back again, and each time the meadow was empty. Sometimes birds appeared or a squirrel, but there was never a sign that another human being had ever been there. It was a border between two worlds – the world of home and silence and the world of school and noise.

That day I found a cigarette butt next to a wide willow stump. The stump was ragged and rough, but somebody had sat there or stood there and smoked a cigarette and tossed the butt in

the grass next to the stream. I saw it and I tried to think of all the people I know who smoked. Billy? Mrs. Liddell? A history teacher wouldn't come up here to smoke. I really didn't like the idea of Billy coming up here to smoke. I guess it didn't matter – it wasn't like I owned the place or anything.

Their car wasn't in the drive when I got home – I didn't expect it to be. Mom worked until five and then it took her at least twenty minutes to get home. She worked at the bank in the next town over – a town large enough to have a bank and a school with tennis courts.

I stopped on my front steps, hand on the front door. I couldn't go in. It wasn't locked or anything. We never locked their door. I just couldn't go in and face the loneliness again. The emptiness. Nobody was there. Jen wasn't there – my sister, who was dead; or Randy – my brother, who was in college. I didn't want to go in and heat up a frozen pizza and eat it alone in a silent house. I didn't want to hear the empty nothing that reminded me I had no friends and no purpose and nothing but a stupid Xbox to keep me company until Monday.

I dropped my backpack on the front steps and walked around the house to our little back yard. It had started to get raggedy as the grass had begun to grow in uneven splotches. The dandelions hadn't begun to sprout up just yet, but they would soon. The season was still early – we had another week before Spring Break. Without really thinking about it, I got out the lawnmower, found the old gas can, and mowed the lawn. Normally Mr. Myers would come by with his riding mower and cut it, but we had the old push mower and I was in the mood.

The lawn was huge and it took forever to cut, but I enjoyed the feel of working. I swear we have the biggest back yard in the county. The noise of the engine was just loud enough that I couldn't really hear anything else, not even my own depressing thoughts, and the mower was big and heavy enough I really had to work hard to get it moving. I moved methodically, enjoying

the smell of the cut grass and the exhaust from the lawnmower. I let my mind wander. I let the poetry of the world around me fill my head and spill silently out to mix with the shards of grass and fumes of gas.

I was just putting the mower away again when I heard the sound of tires on gravel and I realized that my mom was home. I heard her open the front door and after a few seconds call my name.

“I’m outside, in the back,” I yelled.

She came outside and examined my work. “That was nice,” she said, with a big smile. Vera Kostas, my mom, is short (but still taller than me), has curly black hair, and, let’s be honest, put on some weight since we moved. She’s not gross fat, just normal fat – heavy, like pretty much everyone else I know who’s over forty. One day I’ll get fat too, and that doesn’t bother me. Then at least there would be one thing about me that’s normal.

“Hi, Mom,” I said. “I was bored so I mowed the lawn.”

“I see that. That was really nice. You didn’t have to do that,” she replied.

“It was fun. I was getting bored of video games anyway,” I said.

“Well, it’s going to get dark soon. Come on in and help me with dinner.”

I didn’t mind helping my mom make dinner. At least it was some human interaction that didn’t feel awkward. We didn’t really talk. We never really had anything in common. She would go on and on about stories from when she was a teen and I realized that I was her total opposite. She was into music and boys and had always been pranking other kids or doing crazy stuff I never even thought about. I just went to school to go to school, and sometimes I learned interesting things. My mother went to school to hang out with her friends. She went to school to be with people she liked and maybe find a cute boy.

She stared at me again – Vera Kostas worrying about her kid. She was definitely worried. Maybe it was frustrated. She did this a lot, and it really bothered me. “Are you okay, Kiev?” How was I supposed to answer that?

For one brief moment I wanted to shout at her. I felt it building up in my throat. I wanted to scream that everything in my whole life was completely wrong – that I missed Jen so much I imagined seeing her sometimes – that I hated Randy for being popular and smart and good looking – that I hated my father for being a, a, a, I couldn’t even bring myself to think about it. “I’m fine,” I said, half mumbling.

Then her arms were all around me and I was crying and I didn’t even understand why I was crying or have words to even begin to describe how I felt. Why aren’t there words enough to describe all the feelings we have?

“Are you going to be all right here by yourself tomorrow?” she asked. “I can call in if you want.”

“I’ll be fine, Mom,” I said. She looked at me, as if by looking into my face she would somehow be able to tell the future. “Really. I’m okay.” I can’t be sure if I was saying it to reassure her or me.

“Okay,” she said.

Down to Business

I heard my mom making toast and getting ready for work the next morning. I got out of bed and walked out to the kitchen. Outside the sun was coming up, and it was supposed to be another beautiful day. The thought of spending the day inside just made me feel miserable. The thought of spending the day outside alone made me feel miserable. I took the box of miserable cereal and poured myself a miserable bowl.

“You got any plans today?” My mother asked the question in that tone of voice that told me she didn’t need or want an answer.

“Not really.” Of course I didn’t have any plans. What was there to do?

“Well, stay out of trouble. Okay?” She grabbed her purse and was out the door, and I wondered what kind of trouble I could possibly get myself into.

I ate my cereal in silence and looked around the drab brown interior of the house. I could stay in here . . . or . . . or what? I dumped his bowl in the sink and got dressed. In just a few minutes I was outside.

A soft breeze blew, making the spring air too cold to not have a coat. I darted back inside and grabbed my sweatshirt – a grey thing with red wrestlers grappling - and then walked back to the meadow. Mr. Myers was already in a tractor, working his fields. The grass and weeds were growing ragged and green along the edges of the dirt road, sprinkled here and there with little purple flowers that I didn’t know the name of. Under the trees near the stream the air was even colder, but the shadows were quiet and peaceful. No sounds but the stirring of the air and the burbling of the water disturbed the scene.

I looked near the stump. Nothing, thankfully. I wandered up and down both banks of the stream – grabbing sticks and tossing pebbles into the water. Finally he grew bored.

A little trail wandered around the edge of the school property, but still in the shadows of some untended trees, that lead into town, or village, or whatever you called a place with population under 500. I don't know how many people actually lived there, but there weren't that many houses. In fact, almost all of the kids at school didn't live in town. They lived on the numerous farms that surrounded the town, or in houses rented from farmers, and if they didn't have a car or a license, they just didn't go anywhere. Hence I just didn't go anywhere. The trail emerged atop a hill that overlooked the town and I stopped to take it in. Nothing seemed to move in the town – just old cars and old looking houses and ragged lawns, and not very many of them.

The sun was beginning to warm the town a little, and I dreaded the thought of going home again and sitting inside with nothing really to do except stare at a screen. A sudden idea came to me and I ran home, jogging up the dirt road. I grabbed the lawnmower and gas can, and laboriously pulled them back along the road. When I reached the brook I realized my planning had been ridiculously poor, but I still managed to find a narrow place to lift the lawnmower across. I drenched my sneakers and socks, but I didn't ruin the lawnmower or anything. I then pushed the machine up the little trail and then down into the town until I reached the first house.

I realized that I didn't know who lived in that house. I had lived here for two years now, since we moved away from the big city after Jen died, and I had never been over to visit anyone in that town – had never once been inside anybody's house except my own in all that time. I had no idea even how to begin doing what I came there to do. I hesitated for just a moment, and then knocked lightly at the door. A lady with graying hair and wearing an enormous flower print dress with a seam fraying at the bottom opened the door. She looked like some grandma cat lady, but she was nice when she talked.

“Hello,” she said. “Who are you?”

“Uh, um,” I stammered. I was so nervous that first time I basically forgot what I came to say. “Uh, I noticed your lawn looks like it could use cutting. Can I mow it?”

“How much?” she asked.

I hadn’t even thought about charging anything. I just wanted something to do. I only came to the door to let the people know what I was doing on their property. “Uh, well, I just kinda wanted to mow it. Um, you can pay me whatever you think it’s worth, I guess.”

The lady smiled slightly – not a bright, warm smile or anything, just a half crack in her face that made her look slightly less intimidating and slightly more awake. “You sure you can manage that thing? You look a little small to be totin’ a machine like that.”

“Oh, I can handle it all right,” I said.

“Well, okay, then. Just knock when yer done.”

“Uh, thanks, uh . . .” I realized I didn’t know her name, and that’s when I knew that I wanted her to know who I was. “Um, I’m Kiev,” I said.

“My name’s Bell. Just knock when yer done.” She closed the door, and I went back to my machine.

I mowed Bells’ lawn. The sun shined down, a little warmer each minute, and I worked and forgot that I was a runt kid that nobody seemed to like. The whir of the motor pushed my thoughts away from the noise of school and the silence of home – away from the senseless idiocy of irrational teens and away from the senseless rationality of a hurting family. Why didn’t my mother ever talk about what happened? She was like a wall of drying paint – inevitable and silent. Why didn’t I talk about it? Because the pain stabbed, cut, shredded; because if I did I would come apart. Nobody at school even knew that I had a sister – that I had ever had a sister.

Nobody at school knew about my father, and at home it was like both of them had never existed – as if I had appeared here with no past, and nobody seemed to care.

I mowed Bell's lawn. She watched me from her window. I caught her shaking her head at me. I must have made an absurd scene, awkwardly small pushing that rusty machine back and forth across her grass. I toiled without complaint, without stopping. I to enjoyed the peace of working.

When I finished I knocked at Bell's door again. This time she responded much more quickly, and now she was wearing blue jeans and Boise State University sweat shirt. The blue and orange bronco on front had cracked some with age, and the cuffs were frayed. "That was faster than I expected," she observed, although she was definitely smiling. "What was yer name again?"

"Kiev Kostas," I said, not really looking at her. I always felt uncomfortable around new people. Most of the time I still do.

"Who's yer mom?"

What kind of a question was that? I looked at her. I wanted to see who was prying into his life. "Vera," I told her. I left off the last name on purpose.

"Vera Cardinas?"

"Uh, yeah. Uh, how'd you know?" Now I was curious. Not only did she know my mom, she knew her maiden name.

Bell laughed– not loud or anything, more of a chuckle-snort. "I taught science in that high school for forty years. You have her eyes or nose or something. You look like her."

"You were a teacher?" The question was lame, but it was out before I could stop it.

She looked at me like I was some kind of idiot, but then smiled again. “Your mother caused me plenty of headaches in her day. I didn’t realize she had moved back. I was happy when she went off to college.” Bell must have noticed how uncomfortable this was making me, and then remembered why I had come to the door. She grabbed her purse and brought out ten dollars, handing it to me.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Thank you, Kiev. Come back in a week and do ‘er again. I never seem t’ git around t’ doin’ ‘er myself.”

“Uh, sure, thanks. I’ll be back.” If I had known then what I know now, I don’t think I would have left her porch. Instead I just stepped off the porch, grabbed my gas can, and pushed the machine out of the yard.

I pushed my lawnmower to the next yard and knocked on the door. Nobody answered. I tried again. The driveway was empty so I figured nobody was home and went to the next house. This time a scary looking man with a shaved bald head and tattoos on both arms came to the door. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and his scraggly chest hair was a mix of black and grey. He had a cigarette hanging from his lips and a beer in his hand.

I almost choked, but at the last second he managed to say, “I’m here to cut the grass.”

The man looked like a skin head Nazi, and he probably was, but he was nice when he talked and offered me five dollars. I hadn’t really come for the money, so I just said, “Okay.”

I worked my way around the block, mowing lawn after lawn until I made it back to Bell’s house. I really enjoyed the work. These yards were normal sized – nothing at all like our back yard. Sure I got tired, and my hands started to hurt by the time I was almost back around to Bell’s house, but at least I didn’t feel lonely. I saw people – old people or little kids or moms,

and I felt like I was part of them and they were part of me and I wasn't alone. On a normal day off of school I could spend an entire day without seeing or talking to anybody other than my mother, and sometimes, like when she was at work, or if she went out with her friends, that could mean hours of solitude broken only by an artificial, forced conversation – or even no conversation at all. Then I crossed the street and began working my way around again. I had no idea what time it was or how much people were paying me. I didn't care.

When I circled the second block and got back to Bell's house she was waiting for me. She must have been watching me the whole time or something. I guess it's kinda creepy now that I think about it. My hands were hurting by now, and I was using my sweatshirt for padding when I pushed the mower. "Well, how's the work so far?" she asked, her face broken by a mischievous grin.

"Pretty good, I guess," I said.

"About time for lunch, wouldn't you say?" she asked.

"I guess. I hadn't thought about it." I realized that I was very thirsty. I should have brought some water or something. "I guess I'm more thirsty than hungry."

"Come on in and get some lunch." Bell didn't ask. She used her teacher voice and I almost snapped to attention. She had obviously been one of those teachers you just obeyed without question, but without resenting. I set down the gas can and went to her porch, and when she held the door open for me I marched inside. "Go ahead and wash your hands in the bathroom. Down the hall. Door on your left."

Her house was neat and orderly. It smelled mildly of cigarettes and not so mildly of scented candles. The front room had a small television, but was dominated by a vast collection of books and little ceramic animals. I recognized the fantasy or science fiction novels because I

had read most of them, but most of the books I had never heard of – some mysteries or romances, and some of them biographies and histories. Obediently I went to the bathroom and washed my hands. The cool water felt nice on my hands and face. I had never really done work like this. It felt good to be tired and refreshed all at the same time.

Bell had sandwiches and iced tea set for me on TV trays in the living room. I hadn't noticed on my first trip through her house that she didn't have a dining table. I guess she just ate in front of the TV all the time.

“Pull up a sit down,” said Bell sardonically. “I don't have much company, and I only cook for me, so I hope it doesn't kill ya.” She winked and took a bite of her sandwich. Her relaxed, easy way made me feel relaxed. She didn't seem to mind that I was just a kid and she was a creepy grandma cat lady, so I didn't care either.

I ate my sandwich in about two bites and drank three glasses of iced tea. If Bell was surprised she hid it well, and quickly got to up to make me another sandwich. I was starving.

“You got any brothers and sisters?” asked Bell as she made the sandwich.

“Yeah. My brother's in college, uh, Montana State.” Now came that awkward part I didn't know how to answer, so I usually just didn't say anything, but before then the words were rolling out, “My sister died two years ago. That's when we moved here.” He hadn't told anyone, anyone at all about his sister.

“They usually come back after they get divorced,” said Bell. “The girls, I mean. I've seen 'em for years and years. They don't come back till things go wrong. The boys – well, sometimes they come back too, but not as often. Usually they just don' leave. What about you? You gonna take off as soon as yeh finish school?”

“Uh, I guess. I mean I want to go to college,” I said. I didn’t mind that she talked. I could tell she was just saying her thoughts because she was lonely too. Or maybe she was talking because I didn’t.

“How are your grades?”

“Good. I mean school is easy. I don’t get it. Why does everyone make a big deal about how hard it is?”

Bell brought me my sandwich and eyed me curiously. “What math are you in?”

“Algebra two.”

“What grade are you in again?”

“I’m a freshman.”

They ate quietly for a few minutes. Bell seemed to be thinking. She seemed to know things about me that I didn’t know about myself, and I wanted to know them too. I don’t like people keeping secrets from me.

“What was my mom like?” I asked.

Bell laughed that same weird laugh she had laughed before. If she wasn’t so nice I would have sworn she was a creepy cat lady – of course there weren’t any cats either. “She was a boy chaser. Smart as a whip, but she couldn’t seem to stay interested in anything that wasn’t a boy. I was so happy when she went to college.”

That’s when I made the connection. “You’re Mrs. Pope. Pope the dope.” The words were out before I realized what I was saying, and I felt my ears burning with embarrassment. But Bell didn’t seem to mind.

“Yeah, they called me that – at least some of ‘em. Little shits,” but she winked when she said it. I had never heard a teacher swear before, but of course she wasn’t a teacher anymore.

“At least that was nicer than what they said about Mr. Dickey.”

Lunch was over, and I didn’t know what else to say and I wasn’t sure what to make of this new discovery, that a school teacher had a real personality, and might even say a swear word. I stood up.

“Going back to work?” asked Bell.

“Uh, yeah, I guess,” I said.

“Gimme yer hands a minute.” There was that teacher voice again. Obediently I held out his hands. “Yep, rubbing ‘em raw.” She went into the kitchen and rummaged around in a drawer. She took out a pair of leather work gloves. “Here. Better take these or you’ll have blisters. You can give ‘em back when you’ve bought yerself a pair.”

I thanked her and stepped back into the sun.

My New Car

I went across the street and knocked on another door. It opened and I fell into what had now become a routine for me. I met people I had never met before that shared the same place and same time with me and with whom I felt I should have some connection and now I did have some connection, however thin it might be. I greeted a new face and I learned to smile at them and to introduce myself. People seemed to like it when I told them my name. I learned that as long as I was pleasant to them and didn't mention money or make excuses that they were friendly back to me. Some of them were lonely or friendly and just wanted to talk. Some of them wanted to know about my parents and how old I was or what grade I was in or what I was going to do with the money. (I had no idea what I was going to do with the money, only that it was in my pocket). Some of them made connections to people I knew from school.

Sometimes a kid from school opened the door. This was usually followed by a yell of, "Mom," followed by my customary introduction yet again. Sometimes they paid in advance. Sometimes they paid afterwards. Some people gave me five dollars, others ten or even twenty. A few of them wrote checks but most paid with cash – always even bills. They never asked for change or questioned my work. I'm sure I wasn't that good at it that first day, but they didn't complain. A few of them said they couldn't afford to pay me or that they would have to pay me later. I cut their grass anyway.

So I passed the day in a labor that brought me out of myself. I discovered that despite my painful shyness – my complete inability to interact socially at school – I was able to have meaningful contact in this formal business, and I enjoyed it. There was no loneliness once the door opened and that next person smiled at me. The emptiness vanished and I felt I was doing

something important. When the motor of the mower started I felt I was at my business – the business of driving away lonely.

As I worked I learned better and better how to manage the mower. I learned how to push it with less and less effort. It still cost me much of my strength to wrangle it across those lawns that had been less cared for (I was still a tiny kid), but I learned to do it more effectively as the day wore on. I don't know what I would have done without Bell's gloves. I realized, once, that I had enough money to walk to the hardware store and buy some gloves of my own, but I was too absorbed in my work to feel like stopping.

Even with the gloves my hands were tired when I reached the last house of the day – a little beige double wide. I had already cut a dozen or so lawns, and had reached the end of my fourth square block. I didn't own a watch, but I knew it had to be four o'clock or so, and even if it wasn't late I had decided I was tired and it was time to quit after this one. I knocked on the door and Erin Davis opened it. She was fixing one of her earrings and was wearing more makeup than she usually did at school. I also noticed that her hair was done with baffling complexity, but at the same time was unquestionably attractive. I always noticed her hair. I felt my heart drop into my shoes."

Uh, hi, Kiev," she said.

I looked at my shoes, and said, "I'm here to cut the grass."

"Uh, okay. Watch out for the toys." She closed the door without another word. I wasn't surprised by her rudeness. I wasn't surprised that she treated me worse, far worse, than she would treat a dog. It still hurt.

I quickly realized she hadn't been wrong about the toys. Erin, I remembered, was the oldest of five, and her parents had recently divorced. Toys were scattered across the yard in

complete disarray. The lawn hadn't been tended in forever. I had to clear a path before I could even begin thinking about starting the mower. The task was trickier than I had first realized because some of the toys appeared to have been buried there from last fall and had apparently been out there the entire winter. Some of them were stuck in the grass, almost buried. Then, once I finally began to cut the grass I had to stop often because I discovered some new buried treasure. I piled everything on their porch until I had amassed a small mountain of matchbox cars, stuffed animals, and broken dolls.

I was so absorbed in my work that I didn't hear the pickup pull up in front of the house. It was cherry red and sparkled with a new wash and wax. When the pickup door closed the sound pulled me out of my reverie and I saw Blake Johnson walking up to the house. Blake was 6'2", and had thick, curly black hair. In addition to being the star of the basketball team, he also was the football quarterback. All the teachers seemed to like him, but I wasn't alone in thinking that he was really just a jerk and a complete idiot.

"Dude, Kostas," Blake said when he saw me. "What in the hell are you doing here?" He wore a smirk of derision like a badge of honor across his lips.

I stared at him for a minute, as if what I was doing wasn't completely obvious. "Uh, mowing the lawn," I replied, sending my sarcasm out like a superpower.

"Uh, yeah, no shit. But why? Don't you live on a farm or something?"

"It's my job, duh." I knew I shouldn't aggravate people who were at least twice my size, but Blake was such an ass sometimes. He might be able to throw a football, but I could throw emotions.

“Hey, you don’t have to be an asshole about it. Besides, you’re going to put some Mexican out of a job or something?” Blake laughed as if he had just invented comedy or something.

I shook my head at him in disgust. “You are such an idiot, Blake. That isn’t even funny.”

Blake suddenly turned red – hot with anger. One second he was laughing, and the next he was pissed as hell. He was standing on the porch, surrounded by the toys, and he stooped down and scooped up a little metal car in his big hand. “Shut the hell up, faggot,” he yelled, and threw the car with quarterback precision at my head. I have to say, I never expected it. The car hit my face, just below my right eye. White light flashed in my eyes, and I dropped to my knees. Damn, that hurt. I heard him knock on the door, and I heard it open.

“Uh, what’s wrong with him?” I heard Erin’s voice. All I could do was clutch my face and try to hold back the sobs that were building up in my throat. I really didn’t want him to see me crying in her front yard.

“Uh, he got something in his eye, I think,” said Blake.

“Shouldn’t we help him or something,” asked Erin, at least partially concerned.

“He’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

They got in his truck and the damn of tears rushed out and mingled with the blood that was streaming from the gash under my eye. My hands were covered in the blood. My shirt was covered in the blood. My pants were covered in the blood, and I felt as alone as I had ever felt in my life sitting there surrounded by weeds and covered in the smell of gasoline. Blake Johnson was an asshole. Erin Davis was a bitch – beautiful, but a bitch. But the thought that kept pushing its way to the surface was that I hadn’t finished mowing the lawn yet.

I got to my feet and went to the porch and knocked on the door again. A younger version of Erin opened the door. Sheyla Davis was in the eighth grade and had the same long auburn hair and the same green eyes, but was still awkward from her recent growth spurt and completely embarrassed at both having an older boy show up on her porch and by the complete disaster that was their living room. I didn't know Sheyla that well. Sure I had seen her in middle school and stuff, but our classes were all separate, and it wasn't like we ever did anything together during lunch or anything. "Holy shit!" The words escaped her mouth before she had the presence of mind to censor herself. "Uh, I mean, what happened Kiev?"

"Blake threw this at me." I held up the toy car for effect. It was one of the old style cars, made of metal and it felt heavy in my hand. "Can I use your bathroom?"

Sheyla was on the verge of being sick at the sight of blood, but with no adult in sight she realized that the responsibility would have to be hers. "Yeah, follow me."

Together we managed to wash the blood off of my face. The cut was deep and wide and wouldn't stop bleeding, and it hurt a lot. Sheyla found some gauze and medical tape and bandages and together we made a total mess of covering up the wound. It hurt. I mean it really hurt. I couldn't tell if the bleeding had stopped, but at least it wasn't oozing out from under the gauze anymore.

"Where's your mom?" I asked.

"Working. Yours?" Said Sheyla.

"Working."

"You have blood all over your clothes." Sheyla pointed out the obvious, but she was just feeling awkward, not being sarcastic or anything.

“Yeah, I guess. They’re old anyway. Except the pants. My mom’s going to be pissed about that.” Silence fell between them, and I decided to risk another look in the bathroom mirror. My mom was going to be pissed about more than just his pants. She was going to freak out completely.

“Um, you don’t have to finish the lawn today or anything,” offered Sheyla. “I mean, you should go home and rest or something. You should see a doctor or something. You can use our phone to call your mom or something.”

A feeling of false bravado over swept me before I could stop and think. “No, I’ll finish.”

There was no way I was going to call my mom.

So, with my face throbbing, and with an eye that was swollen and nearly shut I pushed my mower through the tangle of weeds that was the Davis’ lawn. I didn’t ask her, and she didn’t say anything, but Sheyla came out and cleared the way before me of any hidden toys that I had missed. It was nice to have her there, even though we didn’t really talk. I pushed the mower steadily on and on, and then it was done.

The grass still grew ragged next to the house where I couldn’t reach with the mower, but all the way into the street (there was no curb), the grass was smooth and even, or at least as even as it could be, and I was extremely grateful to stop. The motor sputtered and quit and I sat down. Sheyla came and sat next to me, and so did a little redheaded boy. The front door of the house erupted like a volcano and two other kids poured out and began chasing each other and the hill of toys spilled from the porch.

The silence felt a little awkward, and I was just working myself up to say something when a blue Honda pulled up next to the house. Mrs. Davis got out and looked at the yard. She was tall and moved with purpose and poise. It was obvious where all of the kids got their hair,

and where her daughters got their looks. Weariness dripped from her features like water from icicles.

“What’s this?” she asked, obviously surprised.

I stood up, a little embarrassed. “I came to cut the grass,” I said, falling back into my door approach.

“I see that. It looks great, but what happened to your eye?”

Sheyla immediately answered, “Erin’s jerk of a boyfriend threw a car at him. She didn’t even see if he was okay. She just drove right off.”

“What?” Mrs. Davis was angry – screaming mad. “She took off? Again? That’s it. Oh, I swear. Okay. You guys get in the house. All of you. Now.” Then she turned to me, calming down as she spoke. “What’s your name?”

“Kiev,” I said.

“Okay, Kiev. Thanks for the lawn. How much do I owe you?”

“Uh, whatever you want,” I said. “It doesn’t matter to me, really.”

Mrs. Davis fumbled with her purse a minute and brought out a twenty. “Here,” she said. Then, to more to justify to herself spending more than she could afford, she added, “It looks really good. You did a good job.”

“Thanks,” I said. I took the money and stuffed it in my pocket with the rest of the bills, and went to grab my lawnmower and gas can. I just wanted to get out of there. I didn’t want to get mixed up in some family argument – especially because I already felt like it was my fault.

“Hey, it’s late. Do you need a ride home or something?”

I looked at her blue Honda. There was no way the lawnmower was going to fit in that tiny car. I almost laughed – I would have if my face didn't hurt so much. "That's okay, Mrs. Davis, it isn't that far." Besides, I wanted to walk.

She looked almost pained at my refusal. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, no problem."

I pushed my lawnmower out of their yard and back towards Bell's house. I heard the door of the Davis house close, and when I looked back I saw a face disappear behind the curtains. Was Sheyla watching me?

I wasn't going to knock on Bell's door – just leave the work gloves on her porch or something – but she opened the door when I came up to the house. She immediately saw my eye, but she didn't ask me anything, just took the gloves from me and smiled her crooked, almost demented smile. I was turning to go when, without warning, she pulled me into a bear hug that filled my nostrils with cigarettes and laundry detergent and scented candles. Then she let me go and I immediately missed her.

"Leave that machine here. You can pick it up in the morning," she said. "I'm sure you'll have more work to do."

Mom

I'm not sure why Bell didn't freak out about my eye and take me in to bandage it again. Maybe she hadn't realized how bad it was or maybe she just didn't want to get involved. Maybe she just understood that I didn't want to talk about it – that I had already pushed myself beyond my ability to reach out for one day.

My mother wasn't home when I got there. I went inside and the house gaped back at me like an empty cavern. The air was cold and stale, and after being outside all day it was dark. Even after flipping on the light I had to wait for my eyes to adjust. I glanced at the clock and realized she would probably be getting home in a few minutes.

I rummaged through the pantry and found a cup of dried noodles, added water, and popped it into the microwave. I didn't feel hungry, just tired, but eating felt less lonely than watching TV.

I heard the car pull up outside and my mother walked in just as the microwave beeped and I was taking out my noodles. "Hey, Kiev," she called.

"Yeah, Mom," I called back.

"Hey, I'm going out, okay."

Vera Kostas was already walking to the other end of the house and out of hearing. She came back through a few minutes later, but I had my noodles in hand and didn't see her leave, and when I found myself replying to thin air I just stopped. I put the noodles on the table. We had a cabinet in the kitchen where we kept aspirin and stuff, and I decided to find something to take for my eye; my face hurt. I took two Tylenol and sat on the couch to wait for my noodles to cool. I don't remember falling asleep.

The sound of tires on gravel woke me. A little puddle of drool had collected on the couch cushion and my face throbbed. I had fallen asleep on my wounded eye, and the bandage caught a little when I sat up, pulling and sending shards of pain through my face. The lights were on, and the TV was on. I shivered a little.

The front door opened and my mom walked through, still humming the tune of a country song. She was wearing a tight black dress she usually reserved for parties, but her hair was slightly disarrayed. She hadn't had time to fix it before going out. "Oh, hey, Kiev, I thought . . .," the obvious statement died in her throat when she saw my eye. "Oh my God, what happened to your face?"

All I could do was blink at her. I was still sleepy, and the pain made me stupid.

"I said, 'What happened to your face?'" repeated Vera.

"I, uh, I mean Blake, uh," I struggled to find the words.

"Blake? You mean Blake Johnson? What? Did you start a fight or something? You have such a mouth sometimes, Kiev," she said. Her words were thick and a little slow.

"No. I didn't start a fight. He just flipped out and threw a little car at me. It hit my eye," I said. Why was she acting like this was my fault. She didn't even know what happened.

"Shit! I turn my back for one second. Shit! Well, let's take a look." She came over and took my face in her hands. She smelled of cigarette smoke and beer. My mother didn't smoke. She had never, as far as I knew, smoked, so she must have gone to a bar or something. She also didn't drink much – at least she didn't keep beer in the house, but beer was on her breath and smoke was on her clothes. "Oh my God," she repeated. "Your clothes are a mess. You are a mess. Get into the bathroom. Let's fix this."

I followed her directions and she did a much better job bandaging my cut than Sheyla had done. She covered it with antibacterial ointment and bandaged it carefully. It felt better when she was done, but she made me take two more Tylenol anyway. I didn't care about the pills; I just wanted to sleep. She didn't talk while she worked; she just finished the bandaging, but I knew she was curious. Then she ordered, "Change your clothes. Then tell me everything."

I was glad to get out of the clothes I had been working and sweating in all day. I was tired – not just sleepy, but really, really tired. It felt like after wrestling practice, only better because I had actually done something. I had just changed when my mother came into my room, now wearing sweats and using wipes to clean makeup from her face. Her hair hung loosely around her shoulders, now in even greater disorder than when she first came home. She was calm now. The shock of having her Friday night interrupted by finding her son caked with dried blood had worn off. She pulled me into a hug and held me close. "I'm sorry I flipped," she said. "I didn't mean to. I guess I didn't expect it. Tell me about it."

It felt nice for her to be a mom again.

"I was mowing the lawn at Erin's house," I began, but immediately she interrupted.

"What? You were doing what at whose house?"

"Mowing the lawn. It's what I've been doing all day. I started with Bell's house, uh, Mrs. Pope. She remembered you. Uh, then I just kept working." I tried explaining my day, but my mom interrupted every other sentence. She seemed to know everyone, even Chuck the skinhead Nazi. She wanted to know exactly who I had seen, but I didn't remember everybody's names, just their houses.

“Pay attention to names,” she cautioned me. “People love their own name. Even if they think it’s stupid, they still love it, so remember them.” That’s just like my mom. The entire world could be in nuclear war and she would still be giving me social advice.

I shrugged at her. I liked to act like I wasn’t listening, but inside I tucked her advice away in a useful place. I always remembered what she told me, even if she didn’t think I was listening.

“So tell me about your face already. What happened?” She sounded sincere, so I told her, again.

“He was there to pick up Erin. He pulled up in that pickup he is always driving, and he just started being a jerk,” I explained.

“What? He’s dating Erin? She’s too young for him. Isn’t she in your class?” I didn’t mind that she had obviously missed the inference that I was too young to date. I wouldn’t want to take the risk of talking to a girl anyway. Besides, who would I ask out anyway?

“Uh, yeah, Mom, we’re the same age. And she’s been dating him since like September or something, and he’s an asshole.” I didn’t swear much, and never to my mother, but if it bothered her she didn’t say anything. “All I did was call him an idiot and he flipped out. He even lied to Erin about it and then just drove off.”

“Well, at least he’s graduating next year. Then he’ll be gone,” she said. If that was supposed to be comforting it had failed. But something in her voice sounded like she wasn’t even talking to me anymore. “I’ll talk to his dad, okay. You better get some sleep.”

So, for the second time that day, I went to sleep.

A Friend?

Saturday morning burned in through my window with an intensity that called to me. It was early. My bedroom faced the rising sun and one ray landed on my face and I looked around my room despairingly. My laptop seemed to stare back at me impassively. I moved. My face crackled with pain from my wound, but as I sat up the feeling subsided. I noticed my dirty jeans from the day before on the floor, and realized I didn't even know how much money I had made. I dug out the wadded bills and checks I had collected the day before. Dully, by the light of the dim morning sun, I counted them out. I had more money in my hand now than I had ever held at one time up to that point in my life - \$105. Somehow, though, the money didn't hold the charm for me that the feeling of working had held. I didn't really need the money. I had nothing to spend it on.

The gash under my eye was painful to deal with and it re-opened slightly in the shower, but I had to get clean. My eye was black and blue, but the swelling had gone down significantly. It was still puffy, but nowhere near as bad as it had been. I was more careful about my clothes today – I chose an old wrestling t-shirt that was getting too small for me, and I didn't care if it was destroyed. Utah state championships, from two years before, freestyle. I had dominated, but the victory felt hollow. I didn't even know where the medal was from that day. I pulled the shirt over my head and went to find some breakfast.

Mom came out as I was munching my cereal. She was wearing her pink bath robe over her sweats and looked exhausted.

“How ya feeling, son?” she asked. Her voice was thick with sleep and the effects of her night out.

“Fine, Mom,” I replied. My words came out automatically, like a robot or something – my mind completely absorbed with getting my lawnmower. I thought of it as my own now, even though two days ago I hardly even realized we owned one.

“How’s the eye?”

I looked up at her so she could see for herself. I had been able to cover the cut with a much smaller bandage this morning.

“Looks better,” she said.

A sudden thought popped into my head. “Hey, Mom, can you do something for me?”

“Uh, sure, I guess. What is it?” Her voice was curious but slightly dubious as well. I darted to my room and came back my with lawn mowing plunder from the day before.

“Uh, you work at the bank an all, right. Can you put this in?” I asked.

She stared at the cash, more than slightly surprised. “Where did you get all this?”

“Mowing lawns – I told you. That’s my job. I cut people’s grass. It’s what I do.” I stated the facts as if they should have been obvious to everyone on the planet, which of course I firmly believed.

“Okay, sure. You’ll have to sign these.” She got up and started looking around for a pen. “I’ll get it set up. You’ll need to do a signature card and all that, but I can bring the paperwork home. Sure. We can do this.” She found a pen and showed me how to endorse the checks. I hadn’t really ever signed my name before. “Did you want to deposit all of it?”

I he took back a twenty. “I have to buy some gloves, and some gas. Bell lent me her gloves yesterday, but I should get some of my own?” Today I was going to be better prepared.

“Bell?” She asked.

“Uh, yeah, Mrs. Pope. She remembered you,” I replied.

“I know Mrs. Pope. I just don’t remember her as the kind of person to lend someone her gloves. She was always so mean in school,” said Vera.

“No. She’s really nice,” I said. Obviously she still thought of Bell as a teacher.

I left the table and found my sweatshirt. It was mostly clean; after all I had only worn it until it got warm.

“Hey, do you want a ride or something?” asked my mom.

“No, that’s okay,” I said, and then I was out the door and walking down the dirt road between the fields and back into town. If she thought it was weird at least she didn’t stop me. I think she was just glad to see me out of the house.

I found my lawnmower exactly where I left it the day before, on the sidewalk in front of Bell’s house. I pushed it the two blocks to the gas station. It was really just a pump in front of Gary’s Garage – a dilapidated affair where cars were in a perpetual state of disrepair. I had never operated a pump, and I had to walk around to find someone to help me. Besides I didn’t have a credit card or anything so somebody would have to take my cash. I found a greasy looking fat man who wore blue coveralls with a nametag – Mike – sewn onto it, and he looked at me with such disdain that I hardly had the courage to even talk to him. The man was bald except for huge tufts of graying hair that covered his ears and clung greasily to his neck. “Remember his name,” my mother’s voice told my mind.

“Whatcha want, kid?” he asked mercilessly.

“I need some gas,” I replied. My hackles were raised. I knew I sounded surly, but I didn’t much care. Mike wasn’t being that nice on a Saturday morning.

“It’s right there,” said the man. “Where’s your money?”

I dug out my twenty. “I need some help,” I mumbled.

“What?” The man hadn’t heard me. I realized I was talking too quietly again – something everyone had been complaining about ever since I was a little.

A little louder I said, “I need help.”

“Help with what?” Now Mike sounded a little confused.

“I’ve never got gas before,” I explained.

The man chuckled – no longer disdainfully. “Come on,” he said.

He showed me how to operate the pump and helped me fill my lawnmower and the gas can.

“Come on back anytime, kid,” the man said.

The gas cost four dollars and thirty eight cents. Next door the hardware store had gloves, and I bought the smallest pair I could find. They had little purple flowers on the cuffs, but I didn’t really care – they were comfortable. Besides, anybody who wanted to check out my gloves obviously had too much time on their hands.

As I was checking out the lady behind the counter observed, “It’s going to be hot out today.”

I didn’t reply. She was tall and heavy set, and the wrinkles in her face looked to me like creases in a brown leather jacket. “You might want a hat if you’re going to be outside,” she clarified.

“Uh, I don’t have one,” I said, feeling lame again.

“Right behind you,” she replied, and I turned around. They were ugly brown fishing hats that grandpas wore or old ladies in the garden, but I bought one anyway. Again, I wasn’t planning on making a fashion statement. I also bought a bottle of water.

I still had enough money left to buy some snacks later if I wanted. I had my gloves, my hat, and my gas. I felt ready to face the day.

The town had four primary streets running perpendicular to the highway with a couple of other streets that didn't manage to make themselves into regular town blocks and with the four streets running parallel to the highway that made sixteen square blocks. Most of the houses didn't have sidewalks or paved driveways, just grass that ran to the edge of the street with a vague gravel barrier between the grass and the road.

I have no real sense of direction, but I knew the layout of the town and figured I would just pick up where I left off yesterday. If I finished four blocks yesterday I would at least match that today. So I made it back to the Davis house and then crossed the street, and knocked on the door. Just like that I was working again.

The sound of the lawnmower brought a pile of redheaded faces to the windows of the Davis house. I noticed them as I worked the front yard of that house. A minute later Sheyla Davis crossed the street and waved at me. I stopped the mower.

"Uh, hi," she said. "You working again today?"

"Looks like it," I said, a little sarcastically, but not mean.

"I guess that was dumb, huh," she said, and laughed a little nervously. "You need any help or anything?" Why was she nervous?

I didn't really need any help, but since she was offering, I might as well find something for her to do. Besides it might be nice to have her around for a while. "Uh, I guess you can move things out of the way and carry the gas can and stuff. I mean, if you want."

"Okay."

So together we mowed the lawn. Sheyla cleared the way of sticks or rocks or anything that normally would have made me stop and then have to pull the cord to start the mower again. Starting and restarting the mower was the biggest pain of my job. Of course there wasn't any talking. I couldn't really hear much over the sound of the motor, but that didn't bother either of us. We just had fun working because it was something different from what we usually did – a bit of freedom from adults or chores or loneliness.

When the lawn was finished we just kind of grinned – a friendship grin of accomplishment. “Uh, don't you have to babysit or something?” I asked. I had forgotten it was Saturday.

“Nope.” Sheyla's grin grew even more. “My mom's home, and Erin's totally grounded, for like forever. Mom was so mad. She took away her phone and everything. Mom said it was okay if I help. So nice to get out of the house.”

“Cool.” I didn't have much else to say, so I just started pushing the lawnmower to the next house. Sheyla grabbed gas can and followed me without question or comment. She didn't know what else to say, and the silence felt less uncomfortable than forcing a conversation.

I knocked at the next door and Sheyla waited near the lawnmower, watching. I realized that she was probably just as shy as I was about knocking on people's doors. She was tall and a little bony at the shoulders and her clothes were too big. I realized she was wearing Erin's old clothes – I remembered that pink shirt; I had sat behind it enough times. I delivered my door approach, changing only the pronoun “I” to “we” and then transacting business as usual. So we moved from house to house down the quiet streets. There wasn't much time for talking because I was such a persistent worker, and we still didn't know each other very well.

Sheyla pointed out to me bits of trivia that she knew about the town. She had lived there her whole life, and always in that same house. She knew the names of most of the neighbors – those who smoked pot, and those who went to church each Sunday, and those she suspected were hiding something.

“I never really knew any of my neighbors where I lived before, and I don’t really have any neighbors now,” I observed.

“Where did you live before?” Sheyla asked.

“Utah. Payson.” I said. That’s where I grew up.

“Was it big?” Sheyla asked.

“Yeah, kinda. I mean not like Salt Lake or anything, but way bigger than here. My middle school had tons of kids. It was huge – not like here at all,” I explained. Payson wasn’t all that huge, but definitely bigger than here. Everything was bigger than here.

“Hmm,” observed Sheyla. She was having some trouble picturing the wide world beyond the limits of their little town. Sure she had been to Boise and even over to the Oregon coast once when she was little, and they had gone through Portland and stopped at the mall, but sitting in a class with thirty kids and having different halls, all full of lockers and noisy bustling kids was like something from a TV show. Here the high school had a gym and one main hall. The middle school was in the same building; they just had a separate hall, and the elementary was just across the street from the high school.

I moved in a steady stream from job to job without rest because the work wasn’t overly difficult and because it gave me a sense of purpose and focus. Sheyla seemed just as blissful and dedicated and challenged herself to spot any obstacle in my path or any defect in my work. These she pointed out as a matter of course and I obediently remedied my mistakes until the job

was completed to perfection. The terms of the partnership were not discussed, but I could tell we did a better job working together than I had done on my own.

After we had completed circling the second block, I realized that I really had no idea what time it was. He was feeling thirsty and hot, and noticed that Sheyla's cheeks were flushed and she looked hot and thirsty too. The bottle of water was warm, but it was wet. I drank off half the bottle and then offered it the Sheyla. At first I thought she might refuse, but then she took it and finished the bottle.

"Let's go get something to drink down at the market," I suggested.

"I don't have any money," Sheyla replied, slightly embarrassed. Of course she didn't have any money, I realized.

I dug into my pocket and brought out the morning's profits. I handed her twenty dollars. "But I didn't really do anything," she protested.

"Neither did I," I replied. I had just done what I wanted to do anyway.

She took the money and folded it carefully. "Are you sure?" She asked.

"You earned it."

She slipped the money into her pocket. "I never had more than about five bucks before," she explained. "My sister has a phone, and I don't even get an allowance. Everyone kisses up to her because they think she's so pretty."

"Well, she is," I said.

"She's bitch!" Sheyla was a little angry just thinking about her sister.

"Yep, she is." I couldn't argue with the obvious truth.

We left the lawnmower at Sheyla's house, which had a nice central location to the town, and walked the few blocks to the little market and got water and snacks. Today was hotter than

either of us had expected, and when we saw the pickups and jeeps driving past with their loads of outdoorsy folks going to do outdoorsy things we felt our separation from the cool people of the world; we felt a little less than normal.

“So, you really never lived anywhere else?” I asked.

“Nope,” replied Sheyla.

“But now your dad lives in Washington?” I asked.

“Yeah. He took off with Julia. He calls sometimes. He said when they were getting divorced that we could visit him on weekends and stuff, but that didn’t last very long. Mom says Julia’s a whore.” Sheyla explained all this in a way that made it clear to me that she didn’t fully understand what had really happened between her parents, but I didn’t really feel like it was my business. “I haven’t talked to him in months.”

“What about your dad?” she asked. “What about your brothers and sisters?”

“My dad is in prison,” I said. Immediately I wanted to take the words back. I had just let slip a secret that I had been hiding even from myself. My dad, stuck at the Utah state penitentiary. I had never been there.

“Oh.”

“My brother is at college.”

“Oh.”

“My sister is dead.” Somehow I guess that letting out one secret opened a door inside of me and another one escaped with it.

“Oh.”

The conversation died. Sheyla felt the unbearable embarrassment of her questions and I felt the unbearable desire to tell her everything, to pour my soul out to this person, but I said

nothing more. I couldn't. There were no words to explain what I felt. There shouldn't be words to describe my life.

"I'm sorry," she said. I didn't know if she was sorry because my dad was in prison and my sister was dead or because she had asked a question with a hard answer or because I had said something that bothered us both.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm sorry about your dad."

"It's okay."

And it was okay. We were okay with each other's secrets.

We worked away the afternoon. We worked and sometimes we talked and sometimes we laughed, and each of us reveled in the idea that at least parts of our lives weren't as bad or as difficult or as lonely as the other's. We didn't ask each other any more questions about parents or divorces or prison or anything embarrassing or difficult; those explanations would have to wait for more than just drinking out of the same bottle of water. This was small town America – tiny town America – this was a place where embarrassing things weren't supposed to happen. When we had made our rotation of five square blocks, I decided to call it quits. I was tired and Sheyla was tired, and although neither of us knew what time it was we felt like it was time to quit. The sun was threatening to start going down soon anyway, and we were getting hungry. So I pointed the lawnmower back to Sheyla's house and we walked.

"You going to work tomorrow?" asked Sheyla.

"Nah, I guess not," I said.

"Good. I got church anyway, and I like workin'"

I laughed. "Well, how about Monday, after school."

"I got practice," she replied.

“Practice?” I asked.

“Track,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. I totally forgot. That’s starting this week. I wasn’t really planning on going out this year. I did in middle school, but high school is different. I don’t know if I want to,” I said. The truth is I didn’t want to be out there with Blake and his buddies watching them be real athletes while I looked like some kind of midget freak. There was only one track coach so the middle school and high school more or less practiced together, but the middle schoolers usually kept to themselves and this year would be the first time he would be thrown in with the big kids.

“Yeah, I guess,” replied Sheyla. “It’s something to do after school.”

“Well, I guess, maybe track wouldn’t be so bad,” I said, and she smiled. Yeah, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if there was somebody there I could talk to.

Sunday

Darkness had begun to creep through the willows surrounding the meadow on my way home. The ghosts of past frolics on my way home from school had disappeared to be replaced by the harsh reality of getting that lawnmower across the stream again. I managed, but once again my shoes were soaked and my pant legs drenched and now I had to walk home with cold soggy feet, my socks sloshing loudly in my shoes.

Mom was gone. The house dark.

I parked the lawnmower in the back yard and dropped the gas can next to it. The evening settled in on me silently and, as the sun dropped, cold rushed over me. I shivered. I didn't want to go into the house. I didn't want to face the specters of my own life – the picture of Jen that my mother kept on the wall right next to my own. She was gone and I was here and yet – yet what? What did I have to complain about? Did I have a right to complain that my mother still missed her? That she talked about Jen and how beautiful she was and how wonderful she was? I missed her too, but I missed my mother more. Jen had no right to take my mother away. Besides, what did she know – I knew everything. I saw everything.

In the house I found a frozen pizza for dinner. The aroma of perfume hung in the air a little, and I felt that I had just missed my mother. After dinner I showered and then read a book, another fantasy novel, and then fell asleep early.

I didn't get up early on Sunday. My mother didn't get up until noon. I had no idea when she came home, and no inclination to ask her about it. She had never stayed out this late before – not that it was any of my business, but something about it bothered me. So I didn't ask and she

didn't tell. Instead she pretended a cheerfulness that was both unexpected and unconvincing; she was hiding something, but I didn't have enough experience with people to guess their secrets yet.

"You want to go to the movies or something later?" she asked over a bowl of cereal at lunch time.

"Uh, yeah, sure, I guess," I replied. Why wouldn't I?

"You work a lot yesterday?" Her persistent cheeriness was beginning to grate on my ears.

"Yeah. We mowed quite a few lawns, I guess. We did pretty good," I said.

"We? Who's we?" Some of the cheer dropped from her voice.

"Uh, Sheyla – you know, Erin's little sister. She helped," I explained. Who did she think I was hanging out with?

"Oh, I see." The cheer was back, but now it mixed with insinuating tones.

"Oh, Mom, no. Ugh, no, really, no. I mowed. She helped." I melted into a puddle of mortification, fully realizing that not only had I given my mother ammunition for months, if not years, of ridicule, I had probably – no, certainly – created a public image which everyone in town had quite literally seen and which nobody at school would ever let me forget. I was hanging out with an eighth grade girl, and in this town high school and middle school just didn't mix.

"Okay. I understand." The tone of insinuation had not left my mother's voice. Then her cell phone rang and she disappeared into her room. She didn't come out until it was time for the movies. She talked and laughed in her room all afternoon.

Angry Monday

Monday rolled around with its usual force of after weekend shock that slapped me harder than usual when I got to school. It seemed like everyone had forgotten to do any homework over the weekend, and practically everyone mobbed me to copy my homework again. “Pay up,” I said simply, and the routine was so normal I took the candy and passed them the answers. One day, I thought, I really should just say no.

Nobody mentioned seeing me with Sheyla, but Erin tried to give me a meaningful glare. Apparently she must think it was my fault she got grounded or something, but I just shrugged it off. It wasn't the first time somebody at school was angry with me or thought I was weird or something. I had practically made a career of being ostracized, so what was new? Besides, if she wanted to be an idiot she could.

Pop quiz first period. Mrs. Liddell was one of those teachers who liked to give kids a shock with a quiz now and then – not that I really minded. She was also one of those teachers who liked to grade on a curve – or that is a modified curve or whatever they wanted to call it. I hated it. I hated it because grades were supposed to be what you earned. If you set 100 at whatever the top score is and then just move grades up, then nobody really gets what they earn. It got worse about two weeks before the end of the first quarter when she realized her system just wasn't going to work this year. Her tests were ridiculously hard – mostly because she never really taught anything, and it all came from the book. Normally she could count on a few kids doing okay on her tests and then everyone sort of falling into a nice range behind them so the kids who usually got A's still got A's and the B kids got their B's and so forth, but this year I scored high, really high, on all the tests. The A kids had C's. The B kids had D's or F's. In

twenty years of teaching this had never happened. She either had to fail half the class, write tests that were actually fair, or just throw out my scores. Which option was easiest?

I hated Mrs. Liddell. I hated unfair.

She passed out her quizzes and I finished before she even finished passing them out and put my head down on my books. It would be another ten minutes before everyone else finished, and then Mrs. Liddell would assume her normal position at her desk at the back of the room where she would either start a documentary or else conduct an ineffectual question and answer session. It was like trying to have a perpetual conversation with someone in the backseat of a van while you were sitting in the front.

The minutes ticked by. I allowed my attention to wander. Others were starting to finish their work.

“Mr. Kostas, will you please remind us of the definition of communism?” As predicted, she was picking on me first thing on Monday. Mrs. Liddell’s voice was always slightly breathless, as if she had just finished running, although I found it hard to imagine her running anywhere. She carried her considerable bulk in slow, careful movements at all times. Between being obese in the extreme and smoking like a fiend, if she ran anywhere she would probably kick the bucket then and there.

Flashes of sarcasm burned through my mind. “Communism is the idea that everyone deserves the same thing – that you can take something, like my grade and give it away.” I almost said it. The words had formed themselves in my mind and I even opened my eyes and almost moved my head. Instead I ignored her. I pretended to be asleep. I clenched my teeth and waited for the wheezy, breathless voice to repeat the question.

“Mr. Kostas, will you please remind us of the definition of communism?”

I sat up. I couldn't keep pretending I was asleep. I straightened myself in my chair, taking my time, and then in a perfectly level tone said, "I have no idea what communism is." If she wanted the class to know what communism was she could teach it herself.

There was no irony or sarcasm in my voice, so nobody in the class knew if I was trying to be funny or not so nobody laughed. At the same time they knew I had to be lying. Never, not since I had moved here, had there been a question any teacher had asked that I couldn't answer.

Mrs. Liddell breathed loudly for a few seconds, as if she hadn't understood what I said. Then she tried again, "Well, then, perhaps you recall where we left off last week."

Again, keeping my voice perfectly level, and I well knew, perfectly infuriating, I said, "No, Mrs. Liddell, I don't."

I put my head back down on my book and waited to see if she would get out of her chair or give up the fight. She gave up. She turned on the projector, got a kid in the front row to pull down the screen and started another documentary.

I felt myself in a trance all morning. I moved from class to class feeling irritated and elated. The world felt new to me, but it was the kind of new you feel when you unwrap a package of underwear from your aunt at Christmas – it's new enough, and you know it should feel exciting, but it fails. I knew where these people lived now – at least some of them. I knew aunts or grandparents. I had been in their back yards, and yet I was no closer to any of them.

In gym class I put on my gym clothes slowly and didn't even bother trying the workout. None of the teachers bothered me – I usually didn't have much to say anyway unless someone called on me, and in general I was normally perfectly happy to participate and enjoy the classes, but today I couldn't bring myself to be interested in much of anything. A grey film seemed to cover everything, even the sounds.

When lunch finally drew the masses into the little cafeteria, I sat once again alone at the edge of the table where most of the freshmen sat – not included, not really excluded. At my old school we had enjoyed a variety of options each day, and could avoid the main entrée with choices such as hamburgers or pizza. Here the option was whatever they happened to be serving that day together with a few healthy choices of fruits and vegetables. I pushed my food around the platter and tried to get a grasp on why I felt so strange.

The eighth graders came in while I was still eating and I saw Sheyla. She was with a group of other eighth grade girls, but it wasn't really part of the group – just kind of tagging along. She saw me looking at her and smiled. I smiled back. It was against the rules for middle school kids to sit with high school kids, so I just pushed food around my tray some more.

After eating the kids all gathered in the one main hallway where the lockers were, or into the gym where they played basketball. I'm not the basketball type. Not only am I short; I don't dribble well, and I can't shoot to save my life. I had learned, painfully, that being undersized was not conducive to having fun with the rough and tumble basketball crowd. Instead I usually just sat with a book and tried to ignore the world as it eddied in loud, slow circles around me.

The bell rang and I stood up. I grabbed my English book and notebook from my locker and started to walk across the hall the classroom. A voice accosted me from across the general cacophony. "Hey, Kostas." Blake Johnson's irritation hit me like a head slap. I stopped and turned, facing the boy who towered over me. Blake stepped over to me, covering the ground quickly with his long, athletic legs. Our two classes were separated only by the width of the hallway, and the tardy bell wouldn't ring for another full two minutes even though the hall was already almost completely empty. "What's the big idea?"

“What are you talking about?” I had no idea what was going on. Blake had never talked to me at school before – ever.

“You, shootin’ off your mouth to your mom.” I began to remember the conversation I had with my mother. What exactly was I supposed to tell her? Was I supposed to lie about something I didn’t even do?

I just looked at him blankly, and half turned to go to class. Blake stepped menacingly into my personal space, towering over me, and glared down at me. I could see the dark stubble of his weekend beard, and I could smell the light sweat he had worked up playing at lunch. I stepped back on reflex, and then Blake reached out to grab my shirt. But I wasn’t going to let anyone push me around – not today. As soon as Blake’s hand made contact I ducked under the taller boy’s arm, and brushed his hand over my head. Blake lurched forward, and his foot caught on my shoe; he stumbled and fell forward, slamming into the lockers. The sound jolted through the hall, and then I looked up and saw Mr. Stradlater staring at me. How much had the principal seen?

“Blake, Kiev!” Mr. Stradlater’s voice rang imperiously across the hardwood floor and bounced off the lockers and into my skull. “My office. Let’s go.”

I had never seen the inside of a principal’s office before. I had never really even looked that closely at Mr. Stradlater before. He kept his hair cut in an impeccable flat top and always wore a nice shirt and tie. He gave the appearance of having dropped directly out of some private eastern prep school and having landed against his will in this little dust bowl of a town. He was tall and athletic and even after the age of fifty appeared well fitted to his multiple roles as principal, teacher, and coach. I sat in one chair, while Blake waited outside. Divide and conquer, I assumed. Mr. Stradlater took his seat behind the desk.

I fidgeted nervously; I felt scared.

“Well?” With one word Stradlater opened the conversation.

“He pushed me,” I said.

“Why? What’s going on?”

I tried to remain obstinate, but in the end Stradlater proved to be a better interrogator than I would have assumed, and much smarter than the crew cut hinted at. In the end I told the whole story about Blake throwing the car and then about telling my mother. The bandage below my eye was obvious.

The conversation ended with, “Well, fighting isn’t something I can allow. Your mother will have to pick you up. Take the rest of the day to cool off at home.” Then Mr. Stradlater switched Blake for me while the secretary dialed my mom at work.

Vera was polite to the secretary, and silent to me. She smiled when she went into Mr. Stradlater’s office and she was still smiling when she left, as if all they had been doing in there was swapping old jokes. She turned to me and said simply, “Let’s go.”

I followed her out to the waiting car. Exasperated fumes of frustration seemed to seep from my mother like a noxious odor at being inconvenienced from work and the mortification of having her son caught up in a public dispute. She said nothing, neither asking for explanations nor condemning my behavior, but I understood her anger. Although it would have been closer to walk than to drive me home, as she had come from work driving, she drove me the long way around to our house – in complete silence – and then stopped.

“Stay out of trouble,” she said. She didn’t turn off the car, just waited for me to get out, and as soon as the door closed she drove off again – back to work.

I wanted to argue with my mother. I wanted to explain to her that it wasn't my fault – that I hadn't started it – that I didn't even really do anything besides get out of the way – that I didn't even mean to trip Blake – that she was being unfair. But I couldn't make myself speak. The words bounced around my head, screaming inside my skull over and over, but they choked inside of me and dissipated into nothingness long before I could even open my lips, so I had just sat there in the car, looking out the window, feeling her frustration pushing against me. Maybe she was smart enough to know that if she said anything I wouldn't be able to hold the words back; maybe she really just didn't want to hear it.

I stared at the empty house. I blinked and stared. At least Stradlater had listened. I was only suspended for the rest of the day. I understood that Mr. Stradlater was only keeping up the appearance of fairness – that in a small school like this he couldn't afford to let incidents like this pass without some consequences or else discipline would just erode. I understood school. I had no problem with Stradlater.

I grabbed my lawnmower, gloves, and hat. Without bothering to change my clothes I dragged it down the dirt road. When I reached the stream I decided I needed a bridge, and left the machine there until I figured out a way to make a bridge. I spent the afternoon dragging some boards that I found laying around the back yard and some branches laying around the meadow over to the stream and then making them all as level as possible and wide enough to provide passage for the lawnmower. The sharp whistles of the first track practice of the season reached me from the football field just beyond the meadow. The first track practice of the season had begun, and down there Sheyla was running, and up here I was working, and I realized that I had definitely decided to go out for track. By the time I had finished I realized that it was

already getting late and I probably shouldn't be found off wandering the town when my mother got home.

Still, I didn't go home, not for a while. I sat in my meadow and enjoyed the sounds of the practice beyond the trees and the sunlight on my face and back. There were no cigarette butts here today – nothing pushing me out of myself – nothing getting in the way of my anger or sadness. Then I went home.

Vera drove up not long after five o'clock, and I looked up from my television show in anticipation of her arrival. She seemed much more relaxed when she came in, and I breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't ask me about my day, but she didn't give me the silent treatment either like she had earlier in the car.

"I don't understand why you can't just get along with Blake," she said as she began making dinner.

"Why don't you ask him? I never did anything to him." I felt surly, and I certainly didn't feel like I had done anything wrong.

"You pushed him into a locker, Kiev. That's doing something," she retorted.

"I didn't push him. He tripped. He's twice my size, Mom, and you're acting like he's the victim here. He started pushing me around. All I did was get out of his way. Why are you defending him?"

"I'm not defending him. I just wish you would get along, that's all."

"You want me to get along with Cro-Magnon man? Fine. I won't beat up any more Neanderthals." I went to my room. I really didn't want any more of this nonsense. Why couldn't she be the kind of mom that yelled at the school or something instead of wanting to be friends with everyone and expecting me to be friends with everyone too?

Track

A few glances from my peers at school Tuesday morning, and the distinct absence of asking me for homework answers told me that the rumor of my half day suspension had made their way all around the school. Of course nobody else had seen anything, so all they could do was guess and wonder. Nobody bothered to actually ask me, so I let them think whatever they wanted to think.

Mrs. Liddell looked at me like I was some kind of juvenile delinquent as I walked into her class that morning. I wandered to my seat near the back of the class and watched the other kids wander in. I just caught a glance of Blake as he escorted Erin to the classroom door. His left eye had a light green bruise. Had I done that? I didn't think he had hit the locker that hard. His eyes flicked my direction, but then he turned and was gone. Erin gave me her most evil glare. A laugh started building up inside my chest – she was so stupid. I had to bury my face in my arms so to not attract attention as the laugh escaped me. Something about how serious everyone was taking this just struck me as funny.

Mrs. Liddell didn't seem disposed to do any real teaching, not that it surprised me or anything, and I had time to work ahead. Her course never varied. Each week we had to turn in the questions at the end of the chapter. There wasn't much else to do, so I worked ahead. I only had four chapters to go before the end of the book, so I started working them out in the semi-darkness of the documentary light.

About half way through class, though, Mrs. Liddell interrupted me. “What are you doing, Mr. Kostas?”

I thought it was obvious what I was doing, but apparently it wasn't. I showed her my work. She took my papers.

"Pay attention to the movie," she said. She tossed my work into the trash can next to her desk and sat back in her seat.

I took out another piece of paper and started again. I could be obstinate too.

Three minutes later she got up again. In six months of class she hadn't left her seat once, and now she had moved twice in five minutes. She took my papers again and threw them away.

The situation was getting beyond awkward, but I had no intentions of backing down. Some of my classmates had noticed Mrs. Liddell out of her seat and were turning to look at what she was doing. This time she didn't sit in her chair, but stood there, leaning against her desk, watching me.

I took another piece of paper out of my notebook. I wrote my name at the top. She watched. I wrote the date. She watched. Then I opened my text book. She practically sprang from her desk and was actually panting by the time she covered the three steps to reach me.

She grabbed my book.

I grabbed it back.

She pulled.

I pulled.

Her grip slipped and I watched in horror as she stumbled backwards. Desks tumbled in disarray under her bulk. One of them bent horribly when most of her weight landed on it, and then she slid from the bent surface onto the floor. Everyone watched as it happened in slow motion.

Then the class burst into confused laughter.

Red, panting, and too angry to speak coherently, she screamed, “Kiev, go to the office. Now!”

I wanted to offer her my hand, to help her up. She looked like one of those people on those commercials for the elderly. Then someone whispered, “Help! I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!”

Fresh waves of laughter rippled through the room, and I scooped up my books and made my retreat to the office.

Mr. Stradlater was on a phone call when I arrived. His door was open, when he saw me he cut the conversation short and waved me in.

“What can I do for you, Kiev?” he asked.

“Uh. You should probably ask Mrs. Liddell. Uh, she sent me. Uh, I didn’t do anything, honest.” I was talking gibberish, and I knew it, but apparently he had enough experience with incoherent kids to understand that something was going on.

“Wait here,” he ordered. Then he was gone and all I could do was sit and wait.

When he came back after about ten minutes he had the papers that Mrs. Liddell had thrown away, and he was shaking his head. He sat down behind his desk and looked at me.

“Well?”

The question had all the power of a master interrogator. I knew that he knew what had happened.

“I was working on history – in history class.” I paused to see if my answer was adequate. His silence compelled me to go on. “I was bored. All her quizzes and tests come from the book. She just shows those stupid documentaries so she doesn’t have to get out of her chair. Since when is it a crime to do school work?”

“Mrs. Liddell could have been seriously injured,” he said. He had genuine concern for her.

His concern made me feel guilty. “She had no right to take my book – my history book,” I defended.

“Kiev. Are you bored with history?”

I hadn’t expected this line of questioning.

“Uh, yeah.” I think I sounded a little sarcastic.

“What about math?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah.”

“Science?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s all so basic. I finished the book weeks ago. And English and everything else.”

“Kiev, I’d like you to take some tests, with Mr. Banks, okay?”

“What? You think I’m Special Ed? I’m not retarded.”

“Mr. Banks is the only one here certified to administer IQ tests. They’re for smart kids too. I think part of the problem here is the teachers are frustrated dealing with someone as bright as you are. If you take the tests and qualify, then maybe there are some things we can do to keep you out of trouble.”

It didn’t sound so bad the way he explained it, but then I had no idea what was really going on.

“The bell is about to ring. Why don’t you go to second period? I’ll have to call your mother and get her permission to test you.”

“Am I in trouble?”

He chuckled a little. “Yeah. You’ve been kicked out of history class.” I must have looked worried or something, because he added, “Don’t worry. We’ll find someplace for you. You’ll still have to do the work, and you’ll still have to pass the tests. We’ll figure it out.” The bell rang and I went to my locker.

Chad Berkin, who had the locker next to mine asked me, “Dude, what happened?”

“I got kicked out of history.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“She’s such a fat bitch. That’s messed up. Uh, do you really have the answers for the rest of the book?”

I just nodded, grabbed my stuff for science and moved up the hall. Chad hadn’t talked to me all year, and now he was acting like my best friend or something.

“I mean seriously, kicking you out for doing work in her class?”

I guess it wouldn’t kill me to be friendly. “She also fell and about died,” I said.

“It’s a good thing she has all that extra padding,” agreed Chad.

We both were still laughing when we went into science.

I can’t say there was much different about that day, except of course that everyone was talking about what had happened in first period, and what had happened the day before. I had become a sort of mini celebrity, to the point that people were actually talking to me. Of course I had no idea what to say, but that didn’t seem to matter; people just wanted to pass the time. At lunch people even sat around me. For the first time ever I was part of the group – I was the center of the group.

Then that afternoon Mr. Banks pulled me out of English class. I had never really even talked to him before, except to say, “Hi.”

“Kiev, Mr. Stradlater asked me to give you some tests. I have some forms I need your mother to sign before I can do it. Would you please take these home for her to read and sign?” He was a tall, skinny man with thinning hair, a thick black mustache, and thick glasses. He had a sort of nasally voice that probably would have gotten irritating if the conversation would have gone on for very long.

“What kind of tests?” I asked. I really wanted to know.

“IQ tests, basically. That is I will give you a series of different tests to measure different aspects of your intelligence. I will also be talking to your teachers, and I would like to talk to your mother as well. If, as we suspect, you are bored with your classes because you are just smarter than other kids, then we’ll try to do some things to make school more interesting.”

It felt kind of weird to have someone talk to me like I was an adult. He didn’t try to explain anything to me in baby terms. It was nice. Maybe the guy behind the thick glasses wasn’t as dumb as he looked.

“Okay, I’ll make sure she gets them.”

Everyone seemed to think I was in trouble again when I went back to class, but I just ignored them. They could think what they wanted to think. Besides, Ms. Schaeffer was in the middle of her explanation of Mercutio, and I actually liked that character. Old Romeo was kind of a bore, but Juliet and Mercutio were interesting, even if Ms. Schaeffer skipped explaining half of Shakespeare’s jokes to the class.

I was actually kind of excited about track practice – not the running part, but just hanging out with people. Chad was going to be there, and it turns out he was kind of interesting. I mean

he spent way too much time thinking about girls, and I don't think he had ever read a book or anything, but he had seen a lot of movies and stuff, and that was at least something we could talk about. Besides, he lived out of town too, and didn't have a lot of chances to hang out with anyone else either, so I think he just liked talking with pretty much anybody.

Yeah, Sheyla was there. We said hi and talked for a quick minute, but then it started to get awkward because boys and girls weren't supposed to be talking together unless they were dating or something, and middle schoolers and high schoolers weren't supposed to be talking together at all by the same unwritten social laws. We were supposed to start our warm-up laps, so we started jogging, and the conversation died – not that we really needed to talk; at least I didn't – I just enjoyed her company.

Ms. Schaeffer coached the track team in addition to teaching English. She didn't ask for any explanations why I had missed the first practice, and I was glad about that. She was a nice person, and easily the most lenient of all the teachers when it came to things like late assignments, but she was also one I learned a lot from because she made us write so much. She liked to push us all hard, and got as much work as she could from us, which, as I knew from middle school, wasn't much.

It turns out I really am not cut out for track. I don't have long legs or strength or stamina or much of anything that makes for a good runner. All I have is persistence and that just means the coach put me in all the events nobody else wanted. So I was placed in the 1600 meter and the 800 meter runs. If I had been there because I wanted to win anything I think I would have quit that same day. Instead I persisted. I ran lap after miserable lap. I focused on the lessons on form – how to use my arms properly and how to hold my head properly because it took my mind off of the burning in my lungs and legs and it was easier than trying to go faster.

I wasn't really good. I knew it. I cared deeply because I wanted to win. It would be lying later when I told my mother that I didn't care. So I ran. I ran as hard as I could manage, holding back nothing. Around me the others seemed to be looking for excuses to get out of running. Most everyone slacked off as soon as Ms. Schaeffer turned her back, but I just kept doing laps until she called us in to do our cool down routine.

In the locker room, for the first time, I realized I was doing a sport with Blake Johnson. Sure he had been out practicing, but he was doing throwing events and our paths never crossed. After warming up he spent his time throwing and I spent my time running, and when we were stretching and stuff he had his little group of friends and I had Chad, so we didn't talk. The locker room was different.

Most of us didn't bother showering or anything after practice because we were headed home anyway, and some of us just sort of hung out in our shorts and stuff because it was a nice day. I grabbed my backpack – I had a library book, and headed home. Outside I met Blake. He was waiting for me.

Of course I was nervous – who wouldn't be with somebody as big as Blake, and especially now that I knew what kind of a temper he had. I was going to just walk on past him, but he called to me, “Hey Kostas! Come ‘ere.”

I stopped. I kept my distance. “Yeah?” I asked.

“Hey, look, man, I'm sorry about your eye. I didn't mean anything – really. Look, I was just pissed because my dad was being such a bastard, okay. Look, besides, we gotta do something, okay. I mean, with our parents and all.” He sounded jumpy as hell. I'd never seen him like this. He kept looking around too, making sure nobody else was seeing us or hearing us or anything.

“What are you talking about?” Of course I felt perplexed, but his nervousness was making me nervous.

“Dude, our parents.”

I really hated the way he dropped “dude” into every sentence. It made me feel like we were stuck in an old 80s movie or something.

“What about our parents?”

“Dude? They’re banging each other. Shit, man, I thought you knew.”

“What? What in the hell are you saying?” I instantly wondered if he was trying to play some sick joke on me or something.

“Dude, I swear, I’m not screwing with you.” I guess I should never play poker if my emotion was that obvious. “Where do you think they’ve been all freakin’ weekend. I figured it out a while ago, when I borrowed my dad’s phone. I just needed to make a quick call, and then he gets a text from your mom. I guess they knew each other way back. They dated and stuff back in the day and then when you guys moved back they just kind of picked up again where they left off. I mean of course they had gone their separate ways and all, but some things I guess you just don’t forget. Shit, I don’t know what to do. It’s got me all on edge and shit.”

I really was too stunned to take it all in, so I just kind of let him ramble. I mean I knew my mom was going out and all but I figured it was with girl friends from high school. Then I finally realized why he was so pissed off.

“What about your mom,” I said – half to myself.

“What do you think I’ve been talking about? Shit, sometimes I think you’re the dumbest fucking genius on the planet. Your mom is screwing the pants off my dad and I don’t know if my mom knows or not, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

I just walked away. I couldn't handle his shit on top of my own. I walked away and I didn't say a word. He called after me a couple of times. I kept walking.

Next

Of course I didn't say anything about it to my mother. There are some things you just don't talk about with your mother. Under no circumstances whatsoever do you talk about sex with parents. Whatever their habits, predilections, or misdemeanors might be, you just didn't go there. We all knew they had to have had sex at least once in their lives, but we liked to think it had stopped immediately after conception. Besides, you didn't just say, "Hey, Mom, I heard you were out wrecking a family." No, some things you just didn't say.

Instead I gave her the papers Mr. Banks had given me, and, to avoid mentioning anything that Blake had said, I told her about getting kicked out of class.

"Dammit Kiev! Why can't you stay out of trouble?" She exploded on me before I could even begin my explanation, but then she paused long enough for me to jump back into the conversation. I remembered that Mr. Stradlater was going to call her, and now I had opened a fresh wound.

"I didn't mean to. She was being completely unfair. I was doing her work in her class. I wasn't even screwing around or anything."

"What?" Somehow she managed to see through her anger long enough to catch my sincerity.

"She was trying to take away my history book in history class. I was working on history questions. She grabbed my book and then she slipped and fell. Besides, I didn't even get in trouble." That last sentence seemed to catch her attention.

"Oh, okay." I guess somehow in my mother's logic it was okay to do whatever I wanted at school so long as I didn't get in any trouble. The fact that a teacher could have broken her

neck and been paralyzed or something didn't even faze her so long as I didn't get detention or suspended again. She was instantly her cheerful self again.

"But I am kicked out of class." She frowned. "But it's okay. See, Mr. Banks wants to do an IQ test and Mr. Stradlater said I would just have to be somewhere else to work on my history. So just sign the papers and I'll take 'em back and everything will be fine.

"Fine." She signed the papers and the conversation died. We made spaghetti. Life returned to normal.

How normal can life be when your mother is sleeping with the father of your mortal enemy? What was she thinking?

Tests and Change

So I showed up a little early for school on Wednesday. I knew that old Stradlater got to his office long before I usually showed up at school, and I went to see him first thing. He took the papers and then dialed Mr. Banks. Mr. Banks showed up a few minutes later, and since I didn't have a first period class anymore they agreed to shift around Mr. Banks' schedule so I could go ahead and start testing. They acted like it was just another thing they had to deal with, and some of my excitement began to wear off, which was probably a good thing. I was feeling more than a little nervous at the prospect of being tested, even though it probably wouldn't change much about my life.

The fact that I no longer had to endure Mrs. Liddell first thing in the morning made whatever else might come totally worth it. Some people, as far as I was concerned, had no business working in a school. Even if I totally failed this test, even if I ended up having to sit by myself in the sick room studying history by myself or staring blankly at the walls for an hour each day, at least I wouldn't have to listen to her anymore.

The tests were tests. The only difference is that there were some things that took me longer to work out than expected. I thought we might only be there for an hour or so, but after the bell rang to go to second period we were still there working hard, and I felt just as pleased to miss science class. After all there wasn't a whole lot there for me to do either. I could either sleep through another class or work out increasingly interesting problems; the choice was quite simple. The bells continued to ring, and Mr. Banks didn't announce that we were finished until it was nearly time for lunch.

At the lunch table I found that once again my mysterious disappearance had stirred an increasing amount of curiosity. Of course I didn't really know what to say other than that I had been kicked out of history class and they hadn't figured out where to put me yet. Mrs. Liddell hadn't been in class that morning, and there were a number of jokes circulating about the possible causes. Liddell and little made obvious rhymes, and my classmates felt free to disabuse themselves of their teacher. I just felt confused at it all, but it was nice to have people to talk to.

In the afternoon I got to return to my regular schedule and for the first time I stayed awake through all my classes. I had too much nervous energy inside of me and I could hardly sit still – not that the lessons were any more interesting. In reality I didn't pay any more attention to anything that was said or done than I ever did, but it felt nice to be involved in something.

Track practice increased in vigor, and with it I found myself running a workout harder than I was truly prepared to endure; the physical stimulation turned out to be just what I needed to bring myself back into focus. I think that in my zeal I worked harder than I intended and pushed myself a little too far. By the time practice was over I already was beginning to feel a little sore.

Sheyla and I still managed to exchange greetings at the beginning of practice, but Ms. Schaeffer reminded the middle schoolers to run their own practice, and I was swept up in the routine of running and we didn't get another chance to talk.

I was so tired by the time I got home that I forgot to be angry with my mother. I ate my dinner and complained about being tired and listened to my mother's laughter. She was in high spirits. "When I did track," she said, "our coach was this fat guy, Mr. Ackley. He would disappear somewhere and smoke, so we all wandered down to the store and bought sodas and hung out until the end of practice. The track meets were fun, though. I met all kinds of boys."

I personally had a little difficulty picturing my mother chasing guys. I mean she had put on a little weight since high school, and nothing she could say would convince me she was ever athletic. Then, of course, this line of thinking reminded me of what Blake had said, and I felt angry again, but I was too tired to deal with being angry.

“Ms. Schaeffer takes track pretty serious,” I said. “We stretch. We run. We work on form drills. I think she expects us to win state or something.”

“Well, maybe you’ll me a nice girl at one of the meets.” My mother winked at me. I think she meant it to be playful, but I think I threw up a little bit in my mouth.

“Girls don’t chase short guys,” I said.

I don’t think she had an argument for that. If she did it was cut short by a text she got on her cell phone. She checked it, smiled, and disappeared into her room. I rolled my eyes behind her back. No, I was not going to look on her phone to see if Blake was right. Whatever my mother was going to do she was going to do. I had seen enough movies to know that nothing ever got better because somebody spied on somebody else or tried to run someone’s life.

Besides, I was sore from practice.

Thursday brought one more round of changes to a week that had already been anything but routine. Before school I had a meeting with my mother and all the teachers. They had a bunch of paperwork that I guess Mr. Banks had spent half the night working on. I guess they all thought this was some kind of emergency or something. Maybe it was because the quarter ended in a week, when Spring Break started.

“Mrs. Kostas, these are the results of Kiev’s IQ scores, and as you can see, they are exceptional.” Mr. Banks was talking in his same nasally voice that made him sound almost British, but more like a Brit with a cold. “Now, your first reaction, as is typical in situations like

this may be to have Kiev retested, but let me assure you that the tests were administered according to procedure. I spent fifteen years working in the New York public schools before I came out here, and I tested hundreds of students, for various reasons, and to be blunt, he is so far off the charts you won't find tests anywhere really designed to test him."

"What does that mean?" My mother had to ask the obvious question. She was in a hurry to get to work.

"Let me put it another way. You see here. This is normal." He pointed to a line in the middle of a bell curve. "This is gifted." He pointed to a line that marked 3% near the end of the bell curve. "Down here I have made a new chart. This is a bell curve of gifted children. Here is average, meaning where the top half of gifted children normally fall." He pointed to a line in the middle of this second chart. "This is Kiev." He pointed to a dot to the extreme right of the curve, way up past the 1% line. "His is somewhere up beyond the top 1% of the top 1%. In terms of IQ, he's the smartest I've seen."

"So, what does that mean?" My mother repeated her question.

"It means that he is bored. It means that school is generally too easy. Even tasks designed for gifted kids don't offer him much of a challenge," Mr. Banks continued.

"What we'd like to do, Mrs. Kostas," interrupted Mr. Stradlater, "is give Kiev some chances to learn at his own pace. Now, that doesn't mean he's going to graduate early or be pulled out of class away from his peers – not without your consent, but it does mean that we would like to make some changes to his curriculum. We would like to give him an hour or two each day to take some online courses at a college level, and to work ahead in most of his core classes. He would receive credit for all the work he is able to complete, of course."

“Okay.” I don’t know if my mother even read the papers. I don’t know if she understood or cared. I do know that she needed to leave in the next five minutes or she would be late.

“Where do I sign.”

The meeting was over, and I could tell that the teachers were a little stunned at what they perceived as being snubbed. She signed the papers, grabbed her purse, gave me a kiss on the forehead and was out the door.

“Uh, so where do I go first period?” I asked.

“For now, you’ll be in my office,” said Mr. Stradlater. “Next week we’ll have you set up in the computer lab with Mr. Jamison. Ms. Schaeffer and Mr. Pinkerton will explain to you how the curriculum will work in their classes. You can take the history and science tests as soon as you are ready. That will give you two free periods this year to work on something else. Ms. Schaeffer has suggested that you enroll in the college writing course after Spring Break, and I think that’s probably a good idea.”

The teachers had classes to get to, so it was just me with Mr. Banks and Mr. Stradlater now.

Mr. Banks said, “Everyone, all of the teachers and Mr. Stradlater and I, will help you with anything you need. All you have to do is ask. I’m guessing your mother may not understand everything, so you will want to explain it to her. Okay?”

“Uh, sure, I guess. Does this mean I get to graduate early?” I asked.

“That’s up to your mother,” said Mr. Stradlater. “Until you are eighteen, that is in her hands. You’ll have the credits, but the choice is hers. Either way, though, don’t worry about it too much. There are plenty of ways for you to get college credit while you’re in high school. I’ll talk to her.”

Then that was it. I spent first period taking history tests, and second period taking science tests. I was glad I had worked ahead in both of those classes. Stradlater told me I didn't have to do them all in one day, but I really didn't want to do anything else with history, and I had been so interested in science I had finished the book first quarter and read it again second quarter. When I asked Mrs. Jamison (uh, yeah, she's married to the business teacher) if there was anything else I could read she had let me borrow some old text books she had laying around, physics and chemistry from the 80s. I had been reading those this last quarter.

Ms. Schaeffer explained to me the rest of her high school syllabi. She laid out the typical reading list she had and the papers that she usually had her students write. Then she said, "Read at your own pace. When you think you're ready for the test just tell me. When you're ready to start the next paper, tell me. If it's too distracting to be in the classroom you can go to the library. I'm going to leave it up to you."

Mr. Eckles said pretty much the same thing, except he seemed really excited. Whereas Ms. Schaeffer seemed to feel almost sorry for me (I swear she was about to cry when she was talking to me), he was so excited I think he about had a heart attack. "This year you probably won't get too far, but next year is going to be exciting stuff," he said. "I never get enough advanced students who aren't foreign exchange students. You'll be able to give them a run for their money. No more sleeping in class for you." He winked. He actually winked. This was the same guy who talked in a monotone for an hour straight, and he winked at me. He was nuts.

"Uh, maybe I need my naps," I suggested.

He seemed to think about what I had said. I think he was trying to decide if I was serious or not. I had been joking, at least half joking. "Well, you'll just have to do without." Now I

couldn't tell if he was serious or not. I was beginning to guess that there were more layers to this guy than I had imagined. We both chuckled.

Of course there were more questions from Chad. He had attached himself to me in the last two days, and now he chatted me up every chance he got. I told him all about the changes to my schedule. He seemed to think I had won the lottery or something.

“Whoa, two free periods? You are so lucky,” he said.

“No. Two periods where I actually get homework,” I corrected him.

“Yeah, but who's going to be checking? You can sleep all period and nobody's going to say anything,” he said.

“I sleep all period now, and nobody says anything,” I countered. “Now all the teachers expect me to do something besides sleep.”

He wasn't convinced. I guess from his point of view he already had so much homework there was no way for me to change his mind.

At track I was still so absorbed from my crazy new day I didn't hardly even notice Sheyla when she tapped my shoulder. She had this sort of shy look on her face, like I was a stranger or something. But then I guess I had been a stranger the last couple of days. “You workin' tomorrow?” she asked.

I hadn't thought about it, but I couldn't see a reason I wouldn't. “Sure. I'll be by in the morning. Probably around eight or so.”

She smiled. It was a bright, toothy smile – the kind you only see at Christmas or birthdays. It was contagious. I smiled back.

Then I was running.

Routine

I showed up at Sheyla's house and she was waiting. She even had these work gloves with flowers on the cuffs just like mine, and a cheap hat from the hardware store, just like mine. We could have been twins except for the fact that she was a good six inches taller, and she was a girl. She looked like my older sister or something, except Jen was dead, of course.

We worked hard that day. I know she had to be just as tired I was from running track, but she didn't complain, and there was no way I was going to let a girl be tougher than me. So we worked.

I saw Bell on my way past her house, and she waved and said, "Hello." I waved back, pushing my mower along. She seemed to understand that I had to be about my task, and she didn't stop me or judge or give me one of those looks like I was being a jerk for going about my business without stopping.

We worked and met new people. I learned their names and tried to remember them. I named their houses with their names so I could remember them. "Hello, Dave," I said to myself over and over again to the front door as I walked past, pushing the mower.

"Who are you talking to?" asked Sheyla, when she overheard me.

I explained my system.

After that she would wave goodbye to each house, "Goodbye Dave," she called in a whisper. Then she giggled, and I giggled because she giggled. She got me.

Of course we talked. She asked about my week. She knew about me being suspended and all about Mrs. Liddell. She didn't know about my new schedule and all the testing.

"So you're really smart?" she asked.

“Only according to Mr. Banks,” I said. “Blake Johnson still thinks I’m an idiot,” I joked.

“Blake Johnson is a supreme idiot,” she said. She sounded disgusted by just hearing his name.

“I guess he’s been around?” I asked.

“He only calls about every five minutes. Oh, and I guess you haven’t noticed at practice how he and Erin both seem to disappear at the same time?”

I hadn’t noticed. “Uh, am I the only one at practice who actually practices?”

She laughed so hard she about split a gut. “Yeah, you are.”

“And Erin is as bitchy as ever. I swear she worships the ground he walks on. Ask her to and she would lick his shoes, I swear. I don’t know what she sees in him. He’s an ass.”

We bought drinks at the store again and ate snacks together. We were awkward and silly and comfortable together. People who didn’t know us would have thought we were brother and sister, I’m sure of it. There was none of that flirty uncomfortableness that works its way into conversations between boys and girls. She didn’t make my stomach do flip flops or my tongue stop. She was Jen, only not Jen. She had the wrong hair and the wrong eyes and the wrong personality. Everything was wrong about her and yet everything was right about her. I swear I just wanted to give her a hug and tell her thanks for being Jen, but that would have ruined everything and I didn’t want to ruin Sheyla. You don’t ruin something perfect.

After lunch we went back to work. By now our routine was so simple and easy we could easily finish a lawn in about half the time it had taken me when I first started out. Add to that the fact that there was a little more daylight, and we worked well past five, and we finished the last lawn of the last block before quitting.

“We’re out of lawns,” I said, as if the fact were some sort of revelation.

“Well, can’t we just start over?” asked Sheyla.

“Yeah, I guess we can,” I admitted. “There are quite a few we missed last week, and most all of them need to be mowed again anyway.”

“Then you can pick me up in the morning,” she said, and laughed.

“Uh, sure, you can ride my lawnmower.” She really got my sense of humor.

We walked back to her house as the sky began to darken slightly. Some of the emptiness I had been feeling seemed to have been pushed out by the hard work. “Hey, you wanna come in and watch a movie or something?” Sheyla’s voice kind of shocked me a little. I was so lost in my own thoughts I didn’t know how to answer her.

“Uh, I better call my mom first,” I said.

I parked my lawn mower in her back yard and went in to call my house. Their house was a wreck compared to mine. It looked like a moving van had vomited in their front room. Books and toys vied with photos and knick knacks for a place to reside, and in the middle of it all scrambled the four youngest Davis kids. It wasn’t dirty. They just had stuff, and that stuff needed a place to be. I didn’t know the kids. My appearance in their house seemed to confuse them, but only for a moment until they returned to their diversions. Mrs. Davis was in the kitchen, trying to scrape together dinner.

I dialed my house. Nobody answered. I dialed my mom’s cell. “Hey, Mom, I’m over at the Davis’,” I told her. In the background I heard country western music.

“Okay. I’ll be home late,” she said. Then she hung up. No word about where she was or what she was doing, but I knew – I suspected.

We watched a movie on TV. We popped microwave popcorn. There was a brief argument with the little kids about the movie to be watched, but they had a bunch of Disney

productions on their DVR, and since I didn't care I told Sheyla, "It doesn't matter. Let them pick." So they picked and we ate popcorn and drank Kool-Aid. We sat on the floor and let the movie wash away the day's exhaustion.

Then it was over and I was walking home. Without the sun the land had turned cold. I had no coat so I hurried. I didn't worry about my lawnmower – I would just be getting it in the morning when I got Sheyla anyway. It was cold enough that I think I would have ran home except I was tired of running.

I almost missed it in the darkness, but a sliver of moonlight lit it up somehow. There was another cigarette butt, in the same place next to that old stump in the meadow. It aggravated me to no end. I picked it up. I ran home with it and threw it in the trash, burying it under some other trash to make sure nobody ever saw it again. Who in the hell was smoking in my meadow?

Saturday went like Friday, with only a couple of notable exceptions. First, it was a lot easier working on lawns that I had already mowed once. People seemed to be expecting me, and I was proud I didn't have to ask too many people their names again. Bell wanted to talk when I got to her house, and I didn't mind giving her some of my time.

"I talked with Mr. Stradlater," she said. "He told me he worked out your schedule." Then she grabbed my shoulders and made me look her straight in the face. "Kiev, not many kids get an opportunity like this. Please study hard. Okay?"

I just nodded. I couldn't figure out why she cared so much if I studied or didn't study or even if I never did anything at all.

Sheyla was watching us but she didn't ask me about it. I think she was just as confused as I was about Bell. Bell saw Sheyla and said, "Aren't you a Davis?"

"Yeah," said Sheyla.

“Your mamma’s a darling. Yer gonna be as pretty as she is some day. Keep away from boys and you’ll do alright.” But there was a laugh in her voice, something that told us both she didn’t count me as a boy to stay away from.

Then we worked. I had forgotten to split the earnings with Sheyla the day before, but I didn’t forget Saturday. I counted it out and gave her half. It was a lot of money – at least we thought it was a lot of money. For a couple of kids who never had money to spend on anything before we felt rich.

“What are you going to do with yours?” Sheyla asked.

By now I had actually spent some time thinking about it. I took out twenty dollars and folded them nicely and put it in my right front pocket. “That’s for me to spend,” I said. “The rest goes in the bank.” I put it in my left pocket.

“I don’t have a bank account,” she said.

“Then open one.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Just go to the bank. Have your mom take you or something.”

Then she took twenty dollars and put it in her right pocket. It was settled.

We got candy and pop at the store before we went to her house. I called my mom again, and again there was the sound of country music. I hadn’t seen or heard her come home the night before, and I left the house before she got up on Saturday. Again the conversation was short. At Sheyla’s house we watched movies. We played Uno and poker with candy for money and told jokes and just had fun. I learned everyone’s names.

By now Erin wasn’t grounded anymore, so she had disappeared. She had told her mother that she was going over to MaryAnn Listler’s house, but we all suspected it was a lie. Mrs.

Davis played with us. She joked with us, but she didn't tease us or anything. I was just another kid there to hang out with her kids, not some boy trying to date Sheyla, which I definitely wasn't.

Mrs. Davis offered to drive me home, but I walked. I guess it must have been around ten o'clock or something. I really don't know. I do know that she had already sent the little kids to bed and that I was tired. I don't know. I know I was freezing. I forgot my coat again, and the night was like ice. I shivered and ran practically the whole way. I only stopped running because I saw a car parked in our drive. It wasn't my mom's little red Toyota.

A lady got out. She was short and fat – fatter than my mom, but not at all as fat as Mrs. Liddell. She had this round face that looked all washed out in the moonlight. I didn't know who she was or what she wanted.

“Where's your mom?” she asked.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I asked where your mom is?” She sounded angry.

“She's not home,” I said. That much was obvious to anyone. “Who are you?” I asked again.

“She got a cell? I want to talk to her.” This lady was on the verge of crazy angry.

I felt my surly attitude surge a little. “You got a name?” I sounded sarcastic as hell, and I knew it.

“Look you little son of a bitch. I want to talk to your goddamn mother.” Her anger hit me, and I knew I was safe. I can't say how or why. I just knew that she was all bluster and desperation, but not dangerous.

I walked past her and her car. “Piss off lady. She's out. She'll get back when she gets back.”

“Then I guess I’ll just wait for her,” she said.

“Then I guess I’ll just call the cops.” I mimicked her intentionally. I let my sarcasm sweep across the driveway and blow the wind from her chest. I opened my door and went inside.

I don’t know if she really thought I would call the cops or not, but about a minute later she drove off.

I took a shower and went to bed.

Sunday, Doomsday

The slamming of the front door woke me up. “That bitch! That fucking, goddamn bitch!”

I didn’t often hear my mother screaming. Silence was the rule at our house – the unspoken (pun intended) rule. If you were mad at someone you gave them the look. If you were proud, you gave them a different look. My mother screamed every epithet under the sun and tried, unsuccessfully, to invent new ones.

I didn’t ask what happened or what was wrong. I just stared, sleepily. I don’t even know if she saw me or not.

She sat down at our kitchen table, took out a cigarette and lit it. She had stopped swearing long enough to light her cigarette. She did it with practiced ease. She smoked. I had no idea.

Then she saw me standing there. She sort of looked at me and then half nodded. “Sorry I woke you,” she said.

I must have been staring at the cigarette as I walked over to the table.

“What?” she asked in a hyper defensive tone.

I didn’t say anything, I just shrugged a little. I had learned to be an expert with using looks. She took a drag of her cigarette and shrugged back.

“Don’t start smoking, kid; it’s bad for you.” She said it in a tone like a TV commercial or something, and it cracked me up. We sat there at the kitchen table at midnight chuckling about her cigarettes and secrets. But something in her eyes was broken. She finished her

cigarette, used an old plate for an ash tray, and went to her room. I went back to bed. She had taken her secrets with her to bed, and I knew she wouldn't say anything to me about it – ever.

Sunday lolled listlessly to one side under the weight of an upturned world. A day when all should have been right in my world had rolled under the pressure of silence into something completely wrong. I slept late. My mother slept later. I heard her sobs through the paper thin doors of the manufactured home, but they were as mysterious to me as the pack of cigarettes sitting on the kitchen table. The depths of the secrets she withheld from me loomed back from their black waters and I realized I knew nothing about my mother.

I looked in vain for something clean to wear in my room and realized I needed to do laundry. So I tossed clothes in the washing machine and decided to eat something. In the kitchen, next to the cigarettes my mother's cell phone stared back at me. The blank touch screen offered no clues, and not only did I not touch it, I actually sat on the opposite side of the table, munching Lucky Charms™. Milk dribbled down my chin, and with it I lost my will to endure the cold silence of the house.

I had nowhere to go, nothing to do, and nobody to see, and no clean clothes to wear. Sheyla had said her family goes to church on Sundays – she wouldn't be home. Maybe she would. I couldn't just show up at her house in my pajamas. I realized I didn't even know her phone number. I realized we didn't own a phone book.

I spent the morning surfing the web and waiting for my clothes to dry when I heard my mother's bedroom door open. I heard her in the kitchen. She knocked on my bedroom door.

“You doin' laundry?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah. I couldn't find anything clean,” I said. I didn't mean it in a bad way or anything.

“Well, I’m not your goddamn slave,” she replied.

Her voice was thick and strange. I opened the door and she stared back at me with puffy red eyes. She smelled of cigarettes and alcohol. She slouched in my doorway dumbly for a minute and then walked slowly back to her room.

The dryer buzzed. I tore my clothes out and threw on the first shirt and pair of pants I grabbed, dumping the rest of everything on my bed. Then I left.

I wandered down to my meadow and waited. I suppose I could have just curled up in my room playing video games and ignoring whatever was happening with my mother, but I realized in that moment that I had been doing exactly that for the last two years. It became instantly obvious to me that she kept some alcohol in her bedroom. She hadn’t had it with her the night before. So she drank where I couldn’t see and when I wouldn’t see. I didn’t care that she smoked and drank, and I don’t know that I really cared that she was sleeping with a married man, but it really bothered me that she thought she needed to hide everything from me. So right there, leaning against my stump I learned the meaning of betrayal – at least I thought I did.

Redeemed

I wandered down into town. I didn't have any real plans, so I just wandered down the hill and found myself in front of Bell's house. By now I had pretty much lost any compunction I might have once had about knocking on someone's door, so I knocked on her door.

Bell answered the door, and if she was bothered by me showing up unannounced, she certainly hid it all behind her smile. "Howdy, Kiev. You out crusin' the town?"

I think about then she realized that I was more glum than usual.

"Well, come on in and sit a spell," she said, inviting me in. She had been in the middle of reading a book, I noticed.

"What are you reading?" I asked.

"*Walden*," she replied. I looked at her, expecting more of an explanation than that. She smirked playfully. "You wanna know what it says?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess," I replied.

"Then yeh better start readin'." She laughed and tossed me the book.

Obediently I sat down and began reading. It was definitely not the kind of book I was accustomed to opening, and within its pages I discovered an entirely new world of literature. Ms. Schaeffer encouraged us to read, but she seemed perfectly content most of the time to have us read from our big literature book with its collection of short stories and poetry with the obligatory Shakespeare thrown in for good measure. What I now held in my hands fully qualified as a book, and I knew it. I read with gusto.

We sat there reading. I can't say that we read together because she had her book – a biography that escapes my memory now – and I had my book. We didn't talk. We just kept company and turned pages, and I discovered that silence could also be friendly.

Some time later we ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and Bell retired to take a nap. “Yeh kin borrow the book if yeh want,” she offered, and then she wandered into the back of her house, leaving to my own devices. She was the craziest person I think I have ever met. She did whatever she felt like doing without a care for whatever social grace she might be ignoring. I finished the book, and then I went out.

The afternoon sun was fighting through clouds, and I felt cold as I pointed my feet towards Sheyla's house. I hoped they would be home from church or whatever they did on Sundays. I had no idea what anybody did on Sundays. At my house nobody did anything.

Blake's truck was parked in front of the house, and I wanted to turn around and go home. I knocked on the door anyway, and Sheyla's little brother opened the door and let me in. Erin and Blake were watching a movie in the front room, and the younger kids were playing a game at the kitchen table.

“Kiev's on my team,” piped up a tiny voice, and I found myself dragged into the game at the table. I allowed myself to be dragged. Sometime later Sheyla came out of her room where she had apparently been hiding from Erin and Blake.

“I didn't know you were here, Kiev,” she said, and she smiled when she said it. Nobody ever smiled when they said my name – that was something I had learned a long time ago.

“Yeah. I didn't have anything going on.” I lied, and I felt the lie burning in my throat. I seemed to be swimming in a rushing river of wild goings on in my life. I was here, I realized,

precisely because I wanted to ignore what was going on in my own house – because I didn't want to see my mother standing drunkenly in the doorway of my bedroom.

We played away the rest of the afternoon. We popped microwave popcorn and made macaroni and cheese out of boxes and ate ramen. Nobody complained that dinner wasn't some nicely cooked meal, but seemed rather to be excited that everyone had a chance to pick whatever they wanted and got to make it for his or herself.

About the time it started to get dark, Mrs. Davis intervened and broke up our little party. Throughout the afternoon she flitted between the games that the younger children engaged in and conversing with Blake and chaperoning Erin, and trying to manage household chores. She seemed to be everywhere and nowhere all at once. Our game dispersed, and I found myself saying goodbye and walking out the door.

The evening had turned frigid, and I had no coat – having once again forgotten to think ahead, so I jogged home. When I arrived I realized that once again my mother's car was absent. The house was dark and silent. It was only about seven o'clock, so I pattered around my room. I put away the clothes I had dumped on my bed earlier, and then made myself a snack. My mother's cigarettes were gone from the kitchen table, and the plate she had used as an ash tray had been washed and put away. Everywhere I looked all signs that my mother did anything other than work, eat, and sleep had been erased.

A loud crash woke me in the middle of the night. I sat up in my bed, startled. Lights blared in through the window. I pulled aside the curtain, and saw my mother's car – it had smashed into our mailbox and bent the post sideways. My mother was standing in front of the mailbox looking at it and swearing. Then she got back into the car, put it in reverse, turned, and pulled up into our drive. She swayed considerably as she walked to the house. I lost sight of

her, but I heard her being sick outside. More swearing followed by the front door opening and closing.

At this point I rolled over and went back to sleep.

I woke up when my alarm sounded in the morning. Typically I would see my mother making coffee or eating toast or hear her running water or something when I got ready for school, but that Monday the house was a silent as a tomb. Nothing moved but me. I showered, got dressed, and ate my breakfast. During all that time my mother never stirred from her room.

Finally I knocked on her door. No answer. I went in and called to her. No answer. She lay sprawled out on the bed, still in her clothes from the night before. She smelled slightly of vomit and strongly of pee. I touched her shoulder.

“Huh,” she mumbled. Well, at least she was alive, I thought.

“You going to work?” I asked.

“Huh,” she mumbled.

I tried again, but the only response I got for my efforts was a series of completely incoherent grunts. I found her cell phone and looked through her contact lists. Sure enough there was a Arnold Johnson – Blake’s dad. I was looking for her work number, though, so I just made a mental note to myself and kept looking. When I found it I pushed the button and waited for it to ring. It reached an answering machine. I recognized the voice and knew it was her boss.

“Uh, yeah, this is Kiev Kostas, Vera’s son. She’s sick today. Uh, I guess you can call her, but she’s pretty sick and might not come to the phone. Uh, I got school, so, uh, I guess she’s not coming to work. Uh, bye.”

I really hate talking into answering machines. I always feel like a real idiot whenever I do, but at least I got the message done. I put the phone back into her purse and left her room. I really didn't want anything more to do with whatever was going on with her.

Sure, I love my mother and all, but there are some things I just didn't feel like I needed to deal with. Was my mom an alcoholic or something? If she was, what was I supposed to do about it? Maybe she was just going through a phase or something. Do adults have phases? There are some problems that 14 year old boys really aren't equipped to deal with, and moms coming home too drunk to stand up are one of them.

The mailbox was trashed. The front end of the car didn't look too good either.

I was glad to get to school.

Mr. Stradlater had me set up on a computer program where I could do some placement testing for online college courses.

"I'm working on getting you special permission to take college classes when they start their new quarter after Spring Break," he explained.

"So I'll be doing college on the computer?" I asked.

"Yes, if we get permission. Otherwise you'll be working independent study on social studies, but I have a friend who works there and I'm sure it will work out. For today, work on the tests. Tomorrow you can work on math during this time, or English. Have you talked to your mom about graduating early?"

"Uh, no, I didn't get a chance," I said.

"You are going to want to do that soon, okay?"

“Uh, she isn’t so easy to talk to, you know.” I was kind of floundering here. I didn’t know what to say without sounding stupid, but I didn’t want him to think I had just forgotten or been lazy or anything.

School went by much faster now that I had things to do in class. I discovered that English wasn’t so bad when I could read through the books without interruptions at my own pace. I felt a special power being able to ignore the teacher and just read – it was much more interesting than sleeping.

Math was a little more difficult. Sometimes I had to raise my hand to get help from Mr. Pinkerton, but he seemed extremely happy to come and help me out. I got the impression that he liked the break from the monotony of re-explaining the same concept over and over again.

After only one day school had already turned into a new routine for me.

Mom was waiting for me after track practice. She had dinner cooking – steak and potatoes and fresh baked bread – when I walked in the door. She seemed happy, and scooped me into an unexpected hug as soon as I walked in. The events of last night were completely forgotten – at least in her mind.

“How was school, buddy,” she asked, in a sickeningly sweet mother voice.

“Uh, it was good,” I said.

“Anything new today?” she asked.

I knew she was just asking questions to be friendly, but since something new had happened, I seized my opportunity. “Mr. Stradlater is trying to get me into college classes. And, uh, he wants to know if you are going to let me graduate early.”

I don't think she had been expecting me to actually have anything important to tell her, and this news caught her off guard. She recovered quickly with a smile. Was she wearing lip gloss? Since when did she wear lip gloss? "That's great!" she said.

"Uh, there are some papers I think you have to sign and stuff," I said.

"Great! I'm so proud of you." She gave me another hug.

She finished cooking, and we ate dinner together amid a torrent of exaggerated smiles and gestures. She asked me all about mowing lawns and hanging out with Sheyla. She seemed to think that Sheyla and I were more than just friends, but I quickly shot down her few playful comments. She made no reference whatever to the previous night or to crashing the car or to her affair with Blake's dad. I didn't bring any of it up. If she didn't want to deal with it then I didn't want to deal with it. She offered to deposit the rest of my weekend's earnings into my account the next day, and I gave her the money. Then she suggested we go out and see a movie.

"It's a school night," I said. I wanted to go, of course, but I thought the suggestion was strange.

"So? You stay up that late anyway, playing games or whatever."

I wasn't going to argue. So we went to see a movie. We got back after eleven. We had a good time, and I almost forgot that my mother was full of secrets – almost.

Crash

The rest of the week played out uneventfully until Friday. Spring Break was next week, but we had our first track meet on Friday. That meant a long bus trip there and a long bus trip back, and a day of trying to stay warm. The weather had turned cold, and the wind blew incessantly at the track meet. At about two in the afternoon it started to rain – not a heavy rain or anything, but just enough drops to make things colder and more miserable than they had been to start with.

The middle school had their first meet on Wednesday, so I didn't even have Sheyla to talk to, and Chad's parents had a big trip planned for Spring Break and they had already left for their trip. That left me with absolutely nobody to talk to. I definitely wasn't going to try to make friends with Blake or Erin, who spent the day snuggling together under a blanket that she had brought. Ms. Schaeffer didn't say anything to them – probably because she was embarrassed, and possibly because she didn't want to make Blake mad. As far as I could tell he was by far the best athlete on the team and our best prospect for winning a state championship – or of at least scoring well at state.

By the end of the meet I was ready to quit – not just for the day, but for the rest of the season, for the rest of my life. How had I let Sheyla talk me into this? I thought about our conversation, and I realized she hadn't talked me into this; I had volunteered. I was an idiot.

I finished somewhere near last place in my two events. But I didn't finish last. I emphasized this point strongly whenever the point came up, which, thankfully, wasn't often. I thought I did well for a guy whose legs are half the size of everyone else's.

The weather was still cool at home, but it wasn't raining when we got home, about six o'clock. The house was empty when I got there. My mom knew about the track meet, and neither of us had been sure what time it would be over. I guessed she had just gone out with some friends after work or something.

I had just finished eating some ramen, when I heard a knock at the door. I almost jumped from my seat at the kitchen table. Nobody ever knocked on our door, except Mr. Myers when he came for the rent, and it was not that time of the month. I opened the door and it was Sheyla.

"Uh, hi, Sheyla," I said.

"I, uh, wanted to see if you could come over," she said.

I realized that in all the time we had spent together we had never exchanged numbers. Good thing we didn't live that far apart. "Uh, sure. Just let me grab my coat," I said.

"Do you need to tell your mom or anything?" she asked.

I looked around the empty house. "Uh, I don't think so," I said.

We watched movies and played games with her brothers and sisters at her house, repeating the scenes we had played through the previous weekend. Despite the fact that we played at their rickety kitchen table or on the carpet of indistinguishable color in their living room among clutter and chaos, I always felt that somehow we were stuck in one of those cozy Christmas paintings stores bring out during the holidays because when I was with Sheyla the loneliness evaporated. We played until almost ten. Sheyla and I made an appointment to mow lawns in the morning, and I went home. I was glad I had remembered my coat and I treasured the quiet in the darkness on my way home.

I hadn't expected my mother to be home when I got there, and she wasn't. The mailbox post had been fixed by Mr. Myers earlier in the week, but not all the traces of the accident had been removed. Our car was gone. I went to bed and slept almost instantly.

About six in the morning I was woken by screaming voices.

"I don't need a fucking lecture, okay!" My mother was yelling viciously at the top of her lungs.

"It's not a lecture, Vera. It's a warning. Get some goddam help!" I peeked through the curtains of my window. I didn't recognize the man's voice, but I did recognize the bald head in the glare of his minivan's headlights. My uncle Ron. We had only visited him twice since we moved even though he only lived about forty minutes away. He had two kids, a boy and a girl – Jamie and little Ron – and I liked to visit them, not only because they were about my age, but also because they always had something new to show me, but I don't think my mother really got along well with her brother. She never talked about him. They never had a fight or anything, but I just had a feeling things weren't great between them.

My mother turned her back to her brother and stomped to the house. He stood there with his hands at his side, clenching and unclenching his fists. The front door slammed. She tromped down the hallway, and then I heard her bedroom door slam. My uncle walked to the front door, and I listened to see if he would knock or come in, but then I saw him walking back to his minivan. I ran out of my room and out the front door. I wanted to know what was going on, and I knew I wouldn't get any answers from my mother.

"Uncle Ron," I whispered as loudly as I could. He stopped and turned.

"Oh, hi, Kiev. I guess we probably woke you up." He sounded tired, and I realized that he was wearing sweats with dress shoes. Apparently he had left his house in a hurry.

“Yeah. Uh, hey, what’s going on?” I was still whispering. I really didn’t want my mother to hear.

Ron looked at the house. He seemed to be carrying on a debate in his head.

“C’mon, Ron. You know she won’t tell me anything. Really, I need to know what’s happening.” Please, please, let him tell me something. I realized that he didn’t know me much better than a stranger, and that he probably felt as awkward about talking to me as I did about talking to him.

“Okay. Get in the van,” he said.

I got into the passenger seat and he got into the driver’s seat. Ron didn’t start the car. Instead he turned off the lights and sat there fidgeting for a few moments.

“I guess you know your mother has a drinking problem,” said Ron.

“Uh, no, not really. Until a week ago I didn’t even know she drank at all,” I told him.

“Well, I don’t know if that’s good or bad. Maybe she’s been sober for a while,” said Ron.

“What do you mean a while? How long has this been going on?” I asked.

“Vera started drinking way back in high school – way before you were born. She partied quite a bit back then, and it got out of control – showing up to class drunk, coming home drunk. You name it; she did it. I’m surprised she got through college, actually. She spent some time in rehab. Then she met your dad, and I don’t really know much after that,” he said.

“I never saw her drink at all. I remember my dad used to keep a few beers in the fridge, but I never saw her drink. “I didn’t think she ever did anything,” I said.

“Well, then she must have stayed sober, I guess. Of course I don’t know anything. I haven’t really seen you guys for years. I think I only saw you two or three times before you

moved here. But the long and short of it is she's off the wagon. She got a DUI. I bailed her out tonight," explained Ron.

"She was drunk last week. She ran over the mailbox. I think she's been partying for the last couple of weeks," I said.

"Well, she's in a lot of trouble now. Keep an eye on her. She's going to need somebody looking after her. It looks like I might have to drive her to work for a while. I don't know how all this is supposed to work. I guess I better get home. Your aunt is waiting for me," he said.

I told him goodbye and got out of the car. I felt cold as my uncle drove away, and I hoped that my mother had gone to bed. I wasn't in the mood to face her questions or explanations. I had no idea what to expect from her. I went inside and ate some breakfast.

My mother didn't come out of her room, and I didn't try to talk to her. I wouldn't have known what to say to her, and I certainly didn't want her to yell at me the way that she had yelled at my uncle. Something about people yelling really bothered me. So I showered, put on my work clothes, and began my day.

Work and Play

As I pushed my lawnmower down the dusty road and through the meadow I felt glum. The weather didn't help my mood either. Gray clouds gathered overhead, darkening the world around me and threatening to drop rain. I didn't think it would rain, and in fact I really hoped it wouldn't. I wanted the solace and silence of working. I wanted the escape.

I knew that people would be expecting us to show up to mow lawns again this week. By now I knew who would be waiting for us and which houses to skip. I knew how to approach the front yards and the back yards. I knew the tricks of the gates and which yards had the dog crap in them and which yards could be cut without much trouble.

Sheyla was waiting for me, sitting on her front steps. She had a jacket that was too big for her and her work gloves. She broke into a smile when she saw me and just about jumped from the steps. "Where do we start?" she asked.

"Bell's," I said. "Then we'll work our way around. I hope it doesn't rain."

"Me either," she agreed.

Then we worked. We felt pressured because of the threat of rain, so we worked fast, hardly talking or stopping. Not only had we missed out on a whole day of work because of the track meet, so we had some catching up to do, we didn't want the rain to come down and spoil everything. Our luck held out, though, and the clouds blew over by the afternoon. But even without the clouds the day remained cool, even cold. It never warmed up enough to take off our coats. Of course we couldn't finish all of the work in one day.

"Hey, why don't we stop by and see if we come tomorrow," asked Sheyla.

"What?" I asked.

“You know, make appointments,” she suggested.

“Don’t you have church and stuff?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah, but you can go without me. I’ll catch up with you.”

I liked my day to rest, but I didn’t really see a reason not to, so we spent the last half hour of the day knocking on doors we hadn’t been able to get to, and made arrangements to mow lawns. Some of them didn’t want us working on Sundays, and some of them told us they wouldn’t be home but we could mow the lawn anyway and they would pay us if we stopped by during the week. I learned to be flexible with my work, and I actually enjoyed the process of negotiating with people. These were nice folks. It made the work feel honest – something I didn’t feel at home.

“Do you want to come over and watch movies?” asked Sheyla.

“Uh, I don’t know if I can,” I said.

“Just call home, then,” she suggested.

“I’ll take the lawnmower home and talk to my mom. I’ll call you,” I said. I asked her for her number again, and we parted.

All the way home I wondered how my mother was doing. What had she done all day? Had she gone anywhere? Did she have her car back? Normally she was gone at least a couple of times during the week and she never stayed home on weekends. She always went to town to do some shopping or errands or something – pretty much anything to get out of the house.

There was no car, but my mother was watching TV when I got home. She looked up when I came in, but didn’t really smile or frown or anything.

“How was work?” she asked. Her voice didn’t really have any emotion to it – just a greeting.

“Uh, fine, I guess. I have some lawns set up for tomorrow. I kind of have a weekly thing going on, and I missed some because of the track meet,” I explained.

“That’s good,” she agreed, though I don’t know how good she really thought it was.

“How was your day?” I asked.

I noticed that the house was spotless. Normally it was pretty clean, I mean we didn’t have all that much stuff so it was never really dirty or cluttered or anything, but now it practically sparkled. It even smelled clean. I noticed she had some candles burning.

“I cleaned,” she said. “I already ate, but there’s a plate in the fridge if you want.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I heated up my food and she went back to her TV show. I ate in silence. Then her show finished and she came and sat with me.

“I guess you heard me come in this morning?” she asked. She sounded a little embarrassed, a little nervous, and a little curious.

“Yeah, and I talked with uncle Ron in the car,” I said.

“Oh. What did he say?” Now she was definitely more curious, and slightly angry, but I didn’t think she was angry at me.

“He said you got a DUI,” I told her.

“Yeah. I can’t drive for now. I have an appointment with a lawyer, though. Hopefully I’ll be able to drive to work and back,” she said.

“Doesn’t that cost a lot?” I asked.

“Yeah, but don’t worry about it. I have some savings. Not a lot, but enough. We’ll manage,” she said.

“He also told me you have a drinking problem,” I said.

She scoffed. “He would say that.” She shook her head angrily. She grimaced. “I haven’t had a drink in years – I hadn’t had a drink in years,” she corrected herself. “Then . . . I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. I got drunk, okay. Yeah. I’m an alcoholic, okay. I made it through all that shit with your father, and then I screwed it up.”

She seemed on the verge of tears. I hated it. I hated it when people cried. I put food in my mouth and chewed. I didn’t know what to say.

“Does Randy know?” I asked. I’m not sure why it was important for me to know if my brother knew or not, but it felt important in that moment.

“No. I’ve never taken a drink around him. Never,” she said.

“What about dad? Does he know?” I asked.

“What in the hell does it matter if he knows or not? He’s out of our lives for good,” she said.

“I don’t know. I’m just curious. I don’t know anything about you or about him.”

I took my plate to the sink and set it down. I almost threw it into the sink but caught myself at the last second. I was angry. I felt that I lived in a house where the walls were made from lies and silence and I just wanted to take a sledge hammer and knock holes in everything.

At the table my mother was crying again.

“I’m sorry,” I said. Then I went to my room. I left my mother crying at the kitchen table and took my anger with me into my own den of sorrows. I sulked alone for a while. Then I showered and went to bed. My mother had returned to her television, and she didn’t try to talk to me again that night.

The next day I got up before my mother and went to work. I didn’t really expect her to be up when I got up – she had no reason to get up early on a Sunday. I mowed lawns and waited

for Sheyla. I didn't have that many to do, so I didn't work that fast. Besides, I felt distracted. Honestly a lot of different thoughts kept rummaging through my head, and I spent all morning trying to sort my way through them – without success.

When Sheyla showed up I was super happy to see her. She brought a ray of sunshine into an overcast day that melted away the loneliness. She fell into step with me. Of course there wasn't a lot for her to do now that we had a system going on these lawns, but her company made the difference between a lonely job and an interesting afternoon.

“You coming over today?” she asked.

“Uh, maybe. I have to call my mom,” I said.

“Is everything okay? You seem a little different,” she said.

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I guess my nerves were showing. Maybe the confusion was seeping out of my pores or something. “My mom got a DUI,” I said.

“What? She was driving drunk?” Sheyla about died when I told her.

“She's been through a lot, and I think when her boyfriend dumped her it sent her over the edge. She was sleeping with Blake's dad,” I said.

“What? Are you serious? Holy shit! How do you know?” she asked.

“Blake told me. Plus I think his mom came to my house looking for her. I'm not sure about that, though. I mean some lady came to our house and then later that night my mom came home, pissed. I think Blake's mom found her and broke it all up. I'm just guessing here, but after that she was depressed as hell,” I said.

“So now what?” she asked.

“I don't know. She can't drive anywhere, I guess. I feel bad leaving her there all by herself,” I said.

“Well, then invite her too. I don’t think my mom will mind. It would give her someone to talk to,” suggested Sheyla.

At the time I didn’t see anything wrong with inviting my mom over to hang out with Mrs. Davis. She was really nice, and I knew that my mom would like her – my mom liked just about everyone. Plus if she had a friend in town she wouldn’t have to worry about not being able to drive anywhere, and she would be able to get a ride if she really needed to without having to ask my uncle Ron – which I figured she didn’t really want to have to do. So I called her up and asked if I could hang out with Sheyla. Then I invited her to come over too. At first she hesitated, but then I pleaded. Finally she caved, and a little while later she was knocking on the door.

As soon as she came in, I realized my mistake.

Blake and Erin were sitting in the front room on the couch watching a movie.

My mother took one look at Blake, and her expression changed from trepidation to shock. Blake looked up to see who was at the door, and the anger inside him crawled onto his face like some sort of parasitic alien. He looked at Erin. He looked at me. He looked at Mrs. Davis. He stood up, got his coat, and walked out. My mother crossed over to the kitchen table where I was playing a game with the kids. Erin followed Blake out the door.

Sheyla realized at the same time I did exactly the stupid mistake we had made. “Shit,” she said, but only loud enough that those of us right next to her could hear.

Mrs. Davis looked confused. She opened her mouth, I assume to ask what had just happened, but I cut her off. “Hey, Mom, I’m glad you came. You can be on my team,” I said.

She scowled at me, but kept her composure. “I didn’t realize there were teams in Monopoly,” she said.

Business Expands

Spring Break morning slipped onto me, and I realized I didn't have anything to do. I got up and showered and my mother was cooking breakfast by the time I finished and was dressed.

"You got any plans today?" she asked.

"Uh, not really. I already mowed all the lawns in town this weekend," I said.

"Your uncle Ron is picking me up in a bit. I have to go see the lawyer, and then I'm going to work. Maybe you would like to mow lawns in a bigger town – make some more money," she suggested.

"Sure, but what about the lawnmower, and the gas? What about Sheyla?" I asked.

"I'll call Ron. I'm sure we can fit the lawnmower in his van. You might have to take down the handles, though."

She called her brother, and I went outside to figure out how to get the handles to fold down so the lawnmower could fit into the van. The screws were rusty and stuck, and I couldn't get them to move until my mother came out, saw what the problem was, and sprayed them with WD40. I learned that my mother wasn't as dumb as I thought, and that WD40 is good for rusty bolts.

"You better call Sheyla. Ron won't be happy about picking her up, especially if she isn't ready," warned my mother.

I ran into the house and dialed her number. I was still breathing a little fast from running when she answered the phone. Of course she was excited, and she promised to be ready.

Half an hour later I found myself outside a lawyer's office with a Sheyla, a lawnmower, and a can of gas. I had forgotten my water, and so had Sheyla, but at least we remembered our jackets. The weather was still cool, and I expected it might rain.

Even though we were in the business district I knocked on the first door I came to. The secretary or receptionist or whatever she was answered very politely, "No." Then she went on to explain what "No Soliciting" means and gave me directions where I probably could scare up some work. Of course I thanked her.

I didn't really know my way around town, but I quickly figured out that all the streets in this part of town were labeled with names of trees, going in alphabetical order, and the cross streets all had numbers. I wished I had a piece of paper and a pencil so I could start making a map. I knew where the main business part of town was, more or less, but I had never walked there. I had been to my mom's work a couple of times, but we always drove there, of course. The plan was to work all day and then meet up with my mother at the bank just before closing time.

People here weren't quite as nice to strange kids knocking on their doors as they were at home – not that they were rude or anything, just more surprised I guess. About every third or fourth house we knocked on got us some work, and that was plenty. We figured out a new scheme by the time we had done two lawns. To save time Sheyla would start knocking the next couple of doors before I finished mowing the last lawn so we could go directly there instead of dragging the lawnmower from place to place.

Around noon we asked directions to get to a store where we could get lunch, and a kind lady with two little kids pointed us in the right direction. We found our way back to the business district. We found a local hamburger place – Darcy's Burgers – as soon as we left the residential

area. Neither of us had ever eaten there before, but the prices were reasonable, and we had already earned about thirty dollars each. Across the street from Darcy's was a drug store.

"Hey, let's get a notebook," I suggested to Sheyla.

"Why?" she asked.

"To make a map – so we know where we've already worked, and to write down people's names and stuff. If we work here all week, then we'll cover a lot of area."

"Sounds good to me. Are we going to work every day?" she asked. I couldn't tell if she was asking because she wanted to work all week or if she didn't want to and would rather do something else.

"Uh, I guess. I don't know," I said.

"Cool."

So we bought a notebook and a couple of pens – small enough that Sheyla could keep it in her pocket. We wrote down where we had been – each address and the name of the person we met, and a little line about them so we could remember. Sheyla was in charge of keeping the notebook. I was in charge of mowing the lawns. I also put her in charge of the money, which wasn't that big of a deal to either one of us. We just had fun working together, and that was fine.

I had been right about the weather. It sprinkled a little on and off all day and stayed cool, almost cold, but it was nice enough to work in. We didn't get cold unless we stopped, so we didn't stop.

I was surprised to see my mother's car parked at the back of the bank when we got there. We went inside, and my mom actually seemed pretty happy.

"Hey, kids," she called. She had a little desk sitting away from the counter where people came to make deposits and get money and stuff. "How'd you do today?"

Sheyla dug out our pile of cash and checks.

“Wow. That’s pretty good,” said my mom.

“Uh, Mrs. Kostas, can I open an account?” asked Sheyla.

“Sure, honey. I’ll help you do that.”

So we split the money and deposited what we had. Outside the rain started to pour. I was going to ask if we could stay in town and work another hour or so, but not if it was raining that much. Instead I asked, “Can I go over to Sheyla’s?”

“Why don’t you invite Sheyla over to our house this time?” suggested my mother.

I figured she wanted to get to know Sheyla better, but didn’t want to hang out where Blake might be – that had been really awkward. “Okay,” I said.

So Sheyla came over to my house – for the second time, except this time she actually came inside. Mom stopped off and bought a take ‘n bake pizza and some sodas and snacks and stuff, so we watched movies and ate pizza and played Uno and poker with my mother.

We sat and played and talked. Something about the normalness of the situation reassured me while simultaneously creeping me out just a little. Here was someone sitting at our kitchen table, filling the room with laughter and smiles – someone who got my jokes and who wasn’t afraid to tease me back – someone who spilled chips and crumbs and didn’t feel compelled to clean them immediately – a total stranger – my best friend.

My mother was actually cool. She had fun with us, and I think I talked more to her that evening than we had said to each other in the past month or maybe even the past year. The awful silence that seemed to seep out of the walls and up from the floorboards was pushed back into the dark places because we enjoyed each other’s company – and it all felt normal, natural, like a gift from nature.

Truth

My mother drove us in to her work each morning. The lawnmower was folded into her trunk, which wouldn't close, of course; and Sheyla and I sat quietly together in the back seat. Money seemed to pile up bit by little bit. Tuesday was cold again and it had rained in the night, but Wednesday and Thursday it warmed up, and Mom let us work until the sun started to go down. Of course on Friday and Saturday Sheyla and I stayed closer to home and mowed the same lawns he had mowed a week before.

As we finished mowing lawns on Friday, Bell waved us over. I hadn't talked with her much the last couple of weeks, although I always waved and said, "Hi," when I saw her. I had to walk right past her house when I walked down the trail back to my house, so we saw each other pretty much every day.

"How you been?" she asked, waving for the both of us to come over and talk.

"Good," I said.

"I seen yer lawnmower in the back a' yer mom's car. You been workin' in the wide world?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah, I guess." I said.

"Makin' any money?"

"Yeah."

"Watcha gonna spend it on?"

"I don't know," and I really didn't know. "I'm just saving it for now."

She looked me right in the eye and said, "College. You save it for college. Got it?"

Then she looked at Sheyla. "What about you? What're you gonna spend it on?"

Sheyla half giggled, “Uh, college.”

Then we all laughed.

Then Bell changed the subject. “How’s yer mom?” I knew that she knew about Mom’s DUI.

“Okay, I guess,” I told her. I didn’t really know what to say.

“Look, Kiev, I know I’m a nosy old sow, but you gotta know I’m here if ya need. I know’d yer mamma when she was knee high to a pill bug. Come in here a minute. I gotta show ya somepin.”

I only half suspected that Bell talked like a redneck because she wanted to – like she was putting on an act or something, but it just seemed to come so natural. I didn’t really know anyone who talked the way she talked or acted as casual about everything the way she did. She opened her front door and held it for us both as we walked into her house.

She invited us to sit down on her little couch and then started searching among her shelves until she found a newspaper. She handed it to me, and as my eyes scanned the page my heart almost dropped through my seat. I felt the room closing in on me. My vision blurred a little.

“Course I only know the parts they printed there,” said Bell. “I’m sure ya don’ like me snoopin’ an’ all, but I always check up on the ones as come back. Theys always a story behint ‘em, an’ I git curious.”

I had nothing to say, really. I didn’t know what to say.

Next to me on the couch Sheyla must have been getting more and more curious by the second because she blurted out, “What’s going on, Kiev?”

I think Bell took the newspaper from me and gave it to Sheyla, or maybe Sheyla took it out of my hands. I really don't know. By this time I was crying and the lump in my throat stuck so hard I couldn't even begin to talk. I have no idea how long I sat there crying. I didn't really know why I was crying; part of me felt relief to know that someone else was now in on the family secret; part of me felt scared that maybe everybody would know now. Mostly I didn't know what to think, and I think I just cried because it felt like the right thing to do or maybe because I couldn't think what else to do.

"He killed your sister." It was Sheyla's voice, although I had expected Bell to talk first. "It doesn't say her name or anything, but it says here that your dad killed his daughter. There was a big trial and everything. It has his picture and your mother's picture. Wow."

"They's more to't, honey," said Bell. "I had ta do sum diggin', but I foun' most all the story. 'Course they's parts I had ta guess and figger 'bout, but I jest 'bout got her figgered. But I think Kiev's gotta tell it if he's willin'"

I looked up. I knew my eyes were puffy and red, and I knew that I must have looked a regular hot mess, but I also knew I had to talk – not so much because they wanted to know, but because something inside of me had to be heard. Something inside of me had to say something to someone.

"It was a while after he was arrested before we moved here," I began. "My mom had to go back and finish some college classes and take care of a few things, but we all knew he was going to prison long before the trial even began. He knew. The way I understand it, the way my mom explained it, the only reason he went to trial was because they didn't even bother offering him a deal. His choice was go to prison for the rest of his life or go to trial and hope not to go to prison for the rest of his life. They don't make deals with guys who rape and kill little girls."

“What happened?” asked Sheyla.

“You mean, how did Jen die?” I asked.

“Yeah. What happened?”

“I don’t really know all that much. I was still a kid. I was at school, and then my grandma came and got me and I went to her house and then later my mom came and they told me all about it. I guess my dad had been doing things to my sister for a long time – sex and stuff – ever since she was just a little girl, but nobody knew about it. Then something happened – I guess there was a video or something that she had made with her phone or something. He picked her up from school and they argued. He brought her home and they argued again and he killed her – stabbed her to death. My mom came home while he was cleaning up the mess and found him. She never talks about it.”

I couldn’t believe I was there telling my story to these people who were still practically strangers. Of course I never talked about any of this with my mother – or with Randy. I never talked about anything with Randy. I hardly talked to him at all. I probably should have been angry with Bell. I should have been yelling at her to mind her own business and go to hell and go bother somebody else, but instead I felt relief. I felt like an overstretched balloon that empties out all its air just before it pops.

I don’t know if we talked or didn’t talk after that. I don’t remember when we left Bell’s house or what Sheyla said to me for the rest of the morning. We went from house to house and mowed lawns. I felt a fog over my mind all morning, pushing the machine automatically. I was glad that Sheyla had taken over the door knocking part of our little business; I just couldn’t have done it that morning.

I found out later that day that Randy had called and talked to my mother. She told me that he wouldn't be coming home for Spring Break, which was a week later at his school than it was for us. He had plans to go with some friends down to Arches national park. I envied him, but I also understood.

Back to School

The end of Spring Break hit me hard. I was not ready for school to start up again. Some kids I know complained about having to work on the farm all week, or complained that there wasn't much to do, or complained they had gone on some lousy trip or had to spend it with a divorced parent they never really saw so they didn't have anything to do at that house, but not me. Other kids talked about how great their break had been because of the same things, but not me. I didn't really have words to explain why my break had been so great, but I was really sad to see it go.

I started a college history class on Monday. The text book didn't seem all that much more difficult than the book I had read for Mrs. Liddell, but it went into a lot more detail, and the chapters were much longer. Mr. Stradlater explained the syllabus to me and explained that I would have to do a lot of reading – about a hundred pages each week – and that I would have to write papers for the class and take some computer based tests. I had never had an online class before, and I really didn't think I would like it that first day.

Mr. Stradlater also gave me a new student planner. All the kids had gotten them the first week of school, but since I never got behind in any of my classes, and I never really needed to bring home any work I had lost mine months ago. I never really understood why anybody would need one – it wasn't like we had all that much to do. I kind of wondered what he was doing when he handed it to me, but all he said was, "Trust me – you'll need it."

Mr. Pinkerton really pushed me harder in math. I was actually surprised to find out how much he really knew. I thought he was such a boring teacher all year long, but I think I realized that he was only boring because he was tired of teaching the same old stuff over and over again

and nobody seemed to get what he was trying to do. He actually got excited every time I came to class. I mean all year he had kind of yawned and slumped at the beginning of class, and now he was all energy. He asked how kids were doing and got through the regular lesson efficiently, and then he was back to check on what I was doing, and then practically bounced back up to work with the rest of the class. We were all put a little off guard by this new attitude, but it certainly made class more interesting for everyone.

For the first time ever I had homework. I almost forgot to bring my books home with me. I guess old Stradlater was right. It was comforting to know that adults were right sometimes.

As soon as I felt the sunshine after school I wanted to quit track. I had just spent an amazing week working hard and enjoying myself and earning money, and now I faced the prospect of running pointless circles. On the other hand I had no way of getting my lawnmower out of town. My mother was at work. I had no car, and I couldn't drive it anyway. What else was there to do? So I ran pointless circles, avoided Blake, and hung out with Chad.

I think the only thing I liked about track was that I at least felt like I was getting into shape. I mean my times were slow and I felt like a midget out there next to these full grown guys with their deep voices and chest hair and stuff, but at least I was taking care of my body. That is about all I could think that was good about track, and as the season progressed I just had to hold onto that thought.

Once, when we had back to back meets on Friday and Saturday I skipped the Saturday meet. I knew Ms. Schaeffer wouldn't do anything about it – she wouldn't kick me off the team or even make me run laps or anything. There weren't enough people on the team for her to get that angry about it. I wanted to cut grass instead, so I did. I ditched the meet and went and worked around town instead.

Besides, the middle school track season ended just a couple of weeks after Spring Break, and I didn't even get to say hi to my best friend anymore, so I couldn't really figure out the point of keeping up a sport I didn't care about. I just did it because I didn't want to be a quitter.

Randy

School passed by in a whirl of homework and track. On weekends I worked when I wasn't running in a meet somewhere. I had to hang out less and less with Sheyla because I actually had homework to do now – not every night, but often enough that I ended up spending more and more silent evenings home with my mother. I don't know if that is good or not. We didn't talk much.

I ate dinner. Then I worked on homework in my room while she did whatever it was that she did – watch TV or go for walks or whatever. Then we watched TV for a bit and then I went to bed. We didn't talk. Sometimes Sheyla came over and we hung out. Sometimes I went to her house and we hung out. We never talked about my dad or Jen or that day at Bell's house.

My mother got her license back after a while. I really don't understand everything that happened because she told me absolutely nothing. I guess she had a good lawyer; I heard her say so over the phone once, but what exactly that meant I didn't really know. Either way life had sort of returned to normal – except that school was more interesting.

Then one day the phone rang when I got home from school – it was Randy.

“Hey, what you up to, kid?” he asked.

“Uh, track, school, you know,” I said.

“Yeah, I know. Mom says you're taking college classes or something. Is that for real?” he asked.

I guess sometimes my mom talked to Randy when I wasn't looking. She never really had anything to say to me, so I guess I assumed she wouldn't really have anything to say to him either. Funny she would tell him about me, but not tell me about him.

“Uh, yeah. A history class this year, but it looks like I’ll be doing some college writing next year, and maybe some math too. Mr. Pinkerton is still trying to figure out where I am with my math – at least how fast we can go and all that. He says I’m as smart at math as anybody he’s ever seen, so I guess that’s good,” I said.

“Who would’ve guessed – my kid brother a genius.” He sounded sarcastic and proud all at the same time.

“You coming home this summer?” I asked. “We missed you at Spring Break.”

“I scored an internship with a business in Colorado,” he said. “It’s a pretty big opportunity for me, but I’ll be home for a week or so in June.”

“Did you tell Mom yet?” I asked.

“Yeah, I told her a couple of weeks ago. Is she around?” he asked.

“No, not at the moment,” I said.

“Okay, I’ll try her cell.”

Then he hung up. I couldn’t figure out why he would call at that time and look for Mom and then act surprised when she wasn’t there, and once again I felt as if I had missed out on some important conversations between my mother and brother. I felt that they shared deep secrets that I would never be a part of. Add to that the fact that he had showed about as much interest in my life as a television rerun, and I sort of despised him right then.

Districts

The last track meet of the year, for me anyway, came two weeks before the end of school. The district meet reared its head before I really even realized it was coming. I had become so absorbed in my extra school work I hardly thought about what was happening after school until I found myself swept up in practice. My teammates bubbled with excitement, talking about how they were going to set personal records or qualify for state and then go on for further glory and fame. I, on the other hand was almost equally excited at the prospect of no longer having to endure practices after school. The fact that my times had improved only marginally over the course of the season did little to encourage enthusiasm of any other sort.

I would gleefully argue with anyone who suggested that my doleful improvements were due to any lack of effort on my part. I did everything the coach asked me – even when I knew for a fact that the rest of the team were off messing around somewhere or putting in only a token gesture of effort. I ran and worked on my form. I sprinted when told to sprint and jogged when told to jog. Yet my efforts paid low dividends and I found myself at the end of the season in very nearly the same position as I was at the beginning – still finishing close to last in every race and still coming home at the end of each practice tired, frustrated, and most of the time sore.

Our district meet was combined with districts from a bunch of larger schools. We didn't compete against them or anything, we just had to share the facilities. There weren't too many schools our size that even had an old dirt track, and none of them had the stuff to run a real track meet. At a large school, I often reflected, they would have had the good grace to kick me off the team.

The bus ride to the district meet was oddly subdued. The week long excitement that had preceded the event seemed to have worn itself out or else worked into some silent fervor; I couldn't tell. The spring rains that had spattered the countryside off and on over the last few weeks threatened again that day to freeze us half to death as we spent the day in the open.

Mr. Pinkerton had assigned me some rather challenging new problem sets, which I needed to work through before Monday. I had passed the required basic skills graduation exams the week previous in reading, writing, math, and science, and was now working my way through some placement testing for next year. Mr. Pinkerton wanted me to take college algebra in the fall, and he didn't want me falling behind, so he had me working ahead on it now. I was going to be taking the college placement testing next week, and I felt far more nervous and excited about math at the moment than I did about track.

By now I knew the track meet routine. Ms. Schaeffer had us all go through a warm up routine as soon as we got there – just to get the stiffness from the bus out of our system, but I kind of thought it was pointless. There was always a wait of about half an hour before they started doing anything; the coaches had a meeting and then they started field events. My first event wouldn't happen until long after we got there, and the girls always ran first, so I could just warm up while they were running, which I always did. So naturally I got off the bus, found a place for my stuff and sat down to keep working on my math.

These girls from another school were warming up in the middle of the field, and I hadn't noticed where they were, and they practically jogged right into me. They knocked over my water bottle and nearly tripped. One of them, a skinny Mexican, got pretty angry about it, but the other one, a gangly blonde with braces noticed that I was doing my homework and apologized.

“College algebra, huh?” she asked, as if I was supposed to feel smart because of it.

“Yeah,” I said.

“You look kind of short to be a junior,” she said.

“I’m a freshman,” I replied.

I have to admit she had no poker face whatsoever. She was surprised, and kind of impressed too. Her friend, on the other hand, was surprised and a little disgusted.

“Let’s go, Carla. Leave brainiac here to his books. We need to focus,” she said.

They left. Focus. Focus. How many times had Ms. Schaeffer said the same thing to me? What were we all supposed to be focusing on? You get on the track and you run – preferably as fast as you can.

I was still trying to regain my focus when a shadow loomed over me. “Dude, those girls were hot! Did you talk to them?” It was Blake. I don’t think he had said two words to me since he had talked to me outside the locker room that day, even though I saw him all the time over at Sheyla’s.

“Uh, yeah,” I said.

“Well, they’re hot. Did you get their numbers?” He sounded like an idiot – just like some surfer wannabe from one of those lame Disney shows for teens.

“I don’t have a phone,” I said.

“Damn, you suck! You should have gotten their numbers. They’re smokin’.”

I looked around for Erin, but she was off warming up with some of the other girls on our team. Blake saw noticed what I was doing and sort of chuckled. “Hey, I can still look, right,” he said. “Besides, what Erin doesn’t know won’t hurt.”

What I really wanted to know was why he was standing here talking to me. He had plenty of other friends on the team he could talk to, and now that I wasn't in anybody's classes anymore there weren't any answers I could be passing around.

"Uh, I guess so," I said.

He sat down on the grass next to me. I closed my book. I hoped this wouldn't be another of those talks like the last one, but it was obvious I wasn't getting out of it.

"Dude, Kostas, you aren't like bangin' Erin's sister are you?"

Seriously? Did he seriously just ask me if I was having sex with a middle schooler.

"Uh, no," I said. "She's like twelve or something. That's just - yuck. Hell no,"

He laughed. "Well you spend all your time with her. Erin just wanted to know, you know?" He said it like it should make perfect sense, which of course it didn't.

I felt capricious – and yes, I do know what the hell that word means. I asked him slyly, "What about you? You bangin' Erin?"

I knew the question would be completely unexpected, and I knew it would make him mad too. He turned red, which could have meant either that he was screwing her and he was embarrassed about it because she was so young, or that he wasn't and he was embarrassed because he couldn't close the deal. I didn't really care either way, but it was fun to see his face.

"None of your fucking business, Kostas," he said through clenched teeth.

So, he was. His eyes told me everything.

"I didn't mean anything," I said, trying to sound genuinely sorry for asking a rude question. I wasn't sorry of course, but I didn't want to get my face pounded – or worse, get suspended.

He looked a little embarrassed and changed the subject. “Hey, Kostas, is your mom, uh, you know, seeing my dad again?”

Now it was my turn to be angry, except I couldn’t. I mean I knew why he was asking, and I didn’t think it was because he was trying to be a jerk or anything. I figured his parents were having trouble and he was worried that they might split up or something. He was just worried, that’s all.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Look, Blake. You’re the one who told me last time, remember. I am not my mom’s Mom, okay. What she does is her own business, but she just got her license back. Unless your dad has figured out some secret stealth mode for his truck, then no. It’s not like he’s been picking her up at my house or anything – so no.” I knew I sounded sarcastic as hell, but I didn’t care. This was not a conversation that I wanted to have.

“Okay, okay. Jeez, relax.” He got up and went to find Erin.

I would have to remember to have a talk with Mrs. Davis when I got back.

I finished my math and watched people run. Eventually they called the warning for the girls 1600 meter run, so I got up and started warming up. I went through the whole routine, just like we did in practice. Fortunately the day had turned out just about perfect – not too hot and not too cold, and it felt great to get warmed up. I had no real expectations of getting a great time or anything, but at least I wasn’t going to be freezing cold.

All through that race I couldn’t think about running, not at all. Instead my mind just kept thinking about Blake and Erin, and then him asking me about Sheyla. Were other people thinking that we were dating? Did they think we were going out having sex too? She was like

my kid sister or something. And it was true, she was twelve or thirteen or something. So the whole race I didn't even pay attention to where I was or who I was running behind or in front of or anything. I just ran and kept bouncing the problems I was dealing with around in my head, and before I realized it the race was over.

I walked over where they had us lined up so I could get my time. Sometimes I didn't even bother checking my times because I didn't really care, but I did know what my best was. The first thing that I noticed was that I was nowhere near last place. Usually there were a couple of front runners – kids who always placed in the top three, and then a big pack of kids that kind of strung out and finished all within thirty seconds or so of each other, and then the stragglers that kind of came in one at a time, and I was usually about third from the last. This time I came in about eight from the last. My teammates were cheering – for me. I hadn't even noticed.

I checked my time, and yes, I finished way ahead of my personal best. Cool. I had no idea why or how.

Ms. Schaeffer ran up and gave me a hug. She was so excited. She acted like I had just parted the waters of the Red Sea or something – she couldn't even talk. I just shrugged her off and went to get a drink. I had achieved mediocrity, and everyone was proud of me for it.

I had a good break before my next race. People kind of kept crowding around me for a while, but then their events called them away and I was glad to be able to sit down. I didn't know why I ran faster.

Then they called the warning for the girls 800 meter run. I was going to be up again soon, so I warmed up again. The second race was always the hardest because I was tired from running the first race – but then so was pretty much everyone else in the race. Most of us did both events.

I started the race pretty good. The first part of the race is the worst for me because I'm so much smaller than all the other guys and we're all stuck together in a big pack and it feels like their spikes are coming up to my nose or something. Once I made it out of the pack then things were fine – and today I got out of the pack just fine.

I made it the first lap and I felt pretty good, and I was focused on the race and thinking about trying to catch the kid in front of me. I reached the last curve when my shoelace got caught up in my spikes and I tripped. I hit the track hard, and skidded for a while. The kid behind me was running close behind me – too close to swerve very well – and he stepped on my hand. I tried to stand up, but all I could do was stay there on my hands and knees for a second. I felt like throwing up. I started jogging, and slowly I reached the finish line. Everyone cheered me to the finish line. This time I finished in last place.

I think Ms. Schaeffer just about died. Some other coach ran out with her. They sat me down and started asking me questions.

“Are you okay? Where does it hurt? Your hand is bleeding, can you move your fingers?”

The world started spinning, and I retched. Ms. Schaeffer dodged, and it was a good thing because I would have puked all over her if she hadn't. That was when I discovered that I really don't stand being cut very well. It's not that it hurts or grosses me out or anything – my body just doesn't like it. I get sick. I get light headed. I throw up. I can't do anything about it.

I was mortified. I was too sick and embarrassed to talk.

My hand was bleeding everywhere and it had started to swell up. My knees and the palms of my hands were also scraped up pretty bad and had bits of black track embedded in them. And my hip hurt, but I couldn't tell why, until Ms. Schaeffer saw the blood seeping

through my shirt and shorts. Apparently I had landed there and it was scraped worse than my hands and knees.

“Get your mom to take you to see a doctor,” she said. “There may be a problem with your hand where that kid stepped on it.”

“You think it’s broken?” I asked.

“I don’t know. For now, keep ice on it.”

She had Chad walk me back to the bus where I could lay down under the seats and sleep.

The Brace

My mother was not home when I got home. I called her cell and told her I needed to go see a doctor.

“What happened?” she cried.

“I fell. Some kid stepped on my hand. It might be broken,” I said.

“Okay. I’ll be home in a bit.”

She was home twenty minutes later. She smelled like cigarettes, but not beer. She looked worried but not angry, and I hoped I hadn’t upset her or anything. She drove me to the emergency room, and because it was Friday night they were busy, so we had to wait forever.

They took x-rays and the nurse cleaned the wound thoroughly.

“It’s not broken,” the doctor said. “You’ll have some pretty serious bruising, and it is probably sprained. I’m going to give you a brace. Wear it for the next couple of weeks.” Now he turned to my mom. “I’m going to give him something for pain. He can have one every four to six hours if he needs. Bring him back if he develops a fever or if the pain seems to get out of control. Any questions?”

There were no questions. We picked up the meds. I took a pill and went to sleep. It had been a long day for everyone.

My hand hurt the next day, but it wasn’t so bad. My mom made me take another pain pill after breakfast, and then I wanted to go to work.

“You got your brace?” she asked.

I showed her that I was wearing it. “I’ll take it easy,” I said.

She took out another couple of pain pills and put them in my pocket for me. “Take one at lunch time, and another when you quit work. You going over to Sheyla’s later?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably. You going out?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably,” she mimicked me. We both laughed, and I knew she wasn’t mad at me or anything. “By the way, how did your other race go?”

“I got my best time. It was pretty amazing, I guess,” I said.

“Don’t work too hard,” she warned, and then I was out the door.

Pushing the lawnmower with the brace on was a pain, but there was no way I was going to stay at home because of something that had happened at track. I was just glad it was over. I don’t even know who made it to state and who didn’t or how well the team did or anything. I just knew that Monday after school I didn’t have to go to practice. What exactly I was going to do with my new free time I didn’t know, but I wouldn’t be running laps.

I picked up Sheyla, and of course she saw my brace.

“Is it broken?”

“No.”

“Erin said you puked. She said you looked like you were going to pass out or something and that your hand looked like it had been in a grinder or something.”

“Uh, yeah. I puked. My hand isn’t that bad. Sore and stuff.”

So we worked. By now all the houses we visited already expected us. We just let ourselves into the back yards and mowed the grass and then collected afterwards. Most of the people had the money waiting for us. I greeted them by name, and some of them even remembered my name and Sheyla’s name – it made it fun, like we were all friends or something. That was getting to be my favorite part of this little job – getting to know people.

“You know Blake and Erin are having sex,” I told her between lawns.

“Really? I figured, but how do you know?” she asked.

“Blake. I asked. He got all embarrassed. I could tell,” I said.

“Mom’s going to kill her when she finds out,” she said.

“Are you going to tell her?” I asked.

She smirked. “Maybe. Depends. If she’s a bitch to me then of course I’ll tell.”

“You’re evil,” I said, but I meant it as a compliment, and she took it that way. I didn’t tell her what else Blake had said about us. I wanted to, but I just couldn’t. There just was no way without sounding stupid. So all I said was, “Blake’s an ass.”

She nodded her agreement, and we went back to work.

We worked all day Saturday and all Sunday afternoon. I stayed late over at Sheyla’s house hanging out. My mother stayed out later – doing whatever she did.

My hand was feeling better, and even though there were four distinct puncture marks where the guy’s spikes had driven into my hands, the swelling had gone down and the pain was manageable. I didn’t ask my mom for any more medication, and she didn’t give me any more. I kept icing it at night when I took the brace off, just because it felt like the right thing to do, but I knew it wasn’t as serious as everyone had thought at first.

Outrage

After school on Monday Sheyla was waiting for me. At first I didn't even see her there, but then she walked over, and I realized she was waiting.

"Whatcha got planned?" she asked.

I had no idea. I realized I had two free hours and nothing to fill them with. "Gardening," I said.

"What?"

"Yeah, I'm going to plant a garden. In my back yard," I said.

"Really?" She looked at me as if I had just made some important technological breakthrough – like I had just landed a rocket on the moon or something.

"Sure."

"Can I help?" She sounded just like a puppy would if it could talk – I swear that's exactly what she sounded like.

"Sure."

I have no idea why I thought planting a garden was a good idea, but when you're forced to make decisions sometimes you make stupid decisions. I didn't know anything about gardening. All I really knew was that you were supposed to put seeds into the ground and give them water, but I figured it couldn't be all that hard if old ladies did it, so I figured Sheyla and I could do it.

After toiling for over an hour to dig up a little chunk of our back yard I realized that gardening was not really meant for little kids with wrist braces on. Sheyla ended up having to do most of the digging, and she wasn't any good at it, so we had to take turns. It took us forever.

I think if I had been by myself I would have just quit. I think that if I had made the suggestion to Sheyla that she would have quit in a heartbeat, but I was too embarrassed to admit that this was possibly the worst idea in the history of the planet, and she was too determined to show me how tough of a girl she was. So instead of doing the sensible thing we worked at that patch of ground until blisters were starting to form on her hands and my hand was getting sore again.

But at least we had a little patch of ground dug up and ready for planting. Of course then I realized that we didn't have any seeds or anything. We were both tired and our hands hurt, so we quit for the day.

The next day at school Erin was giving me her stupid mean stare again. I really didn't understand her one bit. If she hated me so much why didn't she just ignore me or something? Why go out of her way to let me know she was mad at me? It's not like I cared one way or the other. So I decided to mess with her.

Blake had just come down to her locker to pick her up so they could sneak off to make out somewhere or something, when I called out, "Hey, Blake, you're girlfriend's giving me the eye again today, you better watch out."

They both stopped and turned in unison. It was like watching that synchronized swimming on the Olympics or something.

"What?" he growled at me.

"It's true. She's been staring at me all day long – can't keep her eyes off of me."

Erin blushed about forty shades of red, and everybody in the hall laughed because it was true. She made it so obvious when she was staring – I mean it was like she was trying to kill me with laser vision or something.

“Yeah, she’s been using her super vision on him.” I was going to say that, but Chad beat me to it. This caught me totally off guard, and it cracked me up. I started laughing and then so did everyone else.

“Well, if you didn’t have such a big mouth,” Erin screamed. She was tearing up now, and her voice was shrill and angry and on the verge of a sob.

I know that I can be mean. I know I have a mean streak in me, but I think it comes from being picked on so much, or being ignored or whatever, and she had hit a nerve. I felt my face grow hot, and I stopped laughing instantly. “I have a big mouth?” I said. My voice was deadly serious now. “Nobody in this school says two words to me in a day. I go from class to class around here like some kind of ghost, and I’ve been doing that for two years now. I didn’t know if anybody here even knew my name until last year, and I have a big mouth? Since when? Nobody in this whole . . .” I stopped myself from swearing loudly in the hallway. “Nobody here even talks to me. So explain exactly how I have a big mouth.”

Nobody was laughing now. I was fuming red and angry and she was fuming red and angry and Blake was confused and angry. I glared at them and they glared back at me, and then Blake put his arm around Erin and they walked away.

“Dude, what was that all about?” asked Chad.

“I have no idea,” I said, and I didn’t. “I think she just hates me.”

A lot of people apologized to me that day. I mean all sorts of people who never talked to me before came up and talked to me. One of the problems with tiny schools like ours was that sometimes people get into a routine and if the new kid is kind of a loner, like me, then it can take them a long time to figure out how to fit in and kids just get into their own routine sometimes and forget to include the new guy.

Almost instantly I had become part of the school. In PE I got picked to be on a basketball team. In English they asked me to be part of their study group – even though I was reading a completely different book by now, and in Math I got invited to sit next to kids who were working problems.

Erin still hated me – that much was obvious – and so did her friends, but I was fine with that. She couldn't glare at me anymore, though, because if she did people would mimic her and then everyone would start giggling, so she just made a point of avoiding me whenever possible.

I think that if this was my story it would be over right here – it could have ended nicely with a happy ending, because this was a turning point for me. Erin, in all of her bitchy glory, had accidentally turned me from a miserable outcast into a mostly normal kid who now felt comfortable walking to school and saying hello to everyone and dishing out high fives or whatever. But this isn't my story.

Not at Work

I found a beer can in my meadow on my way home from school. It was empty, and there were two cigarette butts next to it. Actually Sheyla saw them first, but it was my idea to take them home and throw them away. I couldn't explain to her how it made me feel. I mean I had told her about the meadow already, of course, and I had showed her pretty much everything I knew about the stream, like where I caught a crawdad with my hands and where I saw a snake and stuff, but I don't think she really understood that the meadow was my special place – mine alone.

We were going to finish planting our garden.

She met me right after school and said, "I got seeds."

It took me a second to realize what she was talking about. Then I said, "Cool."

We planted some squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, and beans. They were seeds her mom had from last year. I didn't know anything about it, and it wasn't until after we had already planted them that we read the instructions on the packages.

"It says here you have to start the tomatoes inside," I said.

"Do you think it makes a difference?" Sheyla asked.

"We'll find out, I guess."

I just liked the fact that we had done something that felt useful.

"Why don't we mow some lawns," suggested Sheyla.

"There aren't any more," I said.

"Not here – in town." Of course she meant getting a ride and going where there were lots of houses.

“My mom’s at work, and so is yours. We don’t have a ride.”

“What about Bell?”

I hadn’t thought of that.

So we walked down to Bell’s house and knocked on the door. She wasn’t expecting us, so it took her a second to get to the door, but she smiled her huge smile when she saw us.

“What you kids want?” she asked in pretend anger. She liked to pretend to be a cantankerous old grouch – she got a kick out of it, and so did we.

“We was wondering . . .” began Sheyla, but Bell interrupted.

“Were wondering. We were wondering,” corrected Bell. “Y’all talk like hillbillies.”

Sheyla rolled her eyes and began again. “We were wondering if you could drive us into town so we can mow lawns after school.”

“Oh, well, lemme think.” Bell actually had to pause and think. “Well, I kin getcha there, but you’ll hafta fin’ a ride home. Yer momma workin’?” This last question was directed at me.

“Yeah. I can call her and see if she’ll bring us home. Can I use your phone?”

Bell let me in, and I dialed the bank. After that episode a few weeks ago when I had called in sick for my mom I had decided to memorize the number.

“Can I talk to Vera Kostas,” I asked, when the bank lady answered; learn her name, I reminded myself.

“Vera’s sick today,” she said.

“Uh, what? Are you sure?” I asked.

“She’s not here. She’s sick. She called in this morning. Who is this? I can take a message and let her know you called.”

“This is Kiev, her son.” Crap! I just realized I had probably gotten my mom into trouble. If my mom was supposed to be sick, then I had just given her away. I panicked and hung up.

Bell and Sheyla were both looking at me, and had overheard my half of the conversation and seen me panic and hang up the phone.

“Somepin wrong, son?” asked Bell.

“She’s not there,” I said. I was still going through the conversation in my head. My mother wasn’t home – we had just been home. The car was gone and she was gone. And she wasn’t at work.

“Well, I guess we can mow lawns tomorrow,” suggested Sheyla.

We left Bell’s house and wandered down the street towards Sheyla’s house.

“Where do you think she is?” I asked.

It took Sheyla a few seconds to realize what I was asking. She had been so focused on going out and mowing lawns that she didn’t realize what had just happened. “My mom. Where do you think she is?” I repeated.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Well, if she isn’t at home and she isn’t at work, then where is she?” I asked desperately. I must have sounded a bit crazy because Sheyla stepped away from me and gave me a very strange look.

“Why don’t you call her and find out?” Sheyla’s suggestion made perfect sense. I felt like an idiot.

We walked over to her house and I called my mom’s cell. I didn’t want to just ask her why she had called in sick to work when she wasn’t sick, so I tried to play it cool. “Hey, mom. It’s me. Uh, me and Sheyla finished planting the garden today. Uh, it’s pretty cool.”

“That’s nice, Kiev,” she said. Her voice sounded normal enough. I was straining to hear any background noise that might tell me where she was, but I couldn’t hear anything.

“Uh, what time are you getting home? I wanted to show you the garden.” That sounded plausible to me. I was starting to feel a little awkward. I never asked my mom when she was coming home – I never asked my mom anything, I realized.

“After work, just like always,” she said, a little sarcastic.

“Okay. I’m going to hang out at Sheyla’s until you get home, okay?”

“Okay, Kiev. Have fun.”

She hung up. She had lied to me. The lie had rolled off of her tongue like a bowling ball, and it hit me in my gut. I felt a little sick and a little dizzy.

“She lied,” I said.

“Figures,” Sheyla said. She kind of shrugged her shoulders when she said it. “Adults lie. Everyone lies sometimes.”

“Yeah, but not about stuff like this. What if she gets fired or something?” I asked.

“Well, you could always come live with me,” she said. She said it with that little kid innocence that some kids manage to hang onto even after they get into middle school, but then her brain kicked into adult gear and she blushed. “Uh, no, I didn’t mean it like that or anything.” She blushed furiously and stammered.

“I know what you meant,” I said. “We’re just friends, okay?”

She nodded, but was still too embarrassed to talk.

That’s when I realized something. It had taken me forever to make the connection because I just didn’t think about it until I realized that Sheyla was embarrassed about us “living together.” I realized why Erin must have been so mad at me at school.

“Did you tell your mom what I told you about Blake and Erin?” I asked.

“What? Oh. Yeah, I did. Sunday night. She was being a bitch about cleaning her room and stuff, and it just came out. My mom freaked – I mean totally freaked. She took Erin to the doctor’s yesterday.”

It clicked. Erin had missed school Monday morning, and I hadn’t even noticed. “I’m not in her classes in the morning anymore,” I said.

“I guess she’s on the pill now,” said Sheyla.

“No wonder Erin was so pissed at me all day. She blames me. Blake must have told her about our conversation at the track meet.” I started laughing. “I couldn’t figure it out all day. No wonder she said I had a big mouth.” Now I couldn’t stop laughing and Sheyla realized what I was saying and started laughing too. I knew it wasn’t nice to be so happy about making somebody mad, but by now neither of us really cared.

I made a big deal about showing my mom the garden. She didn’t seem that interested, and when I looked at it I didn’t think that much of it either – it all just seemed like a pile of dirt to me.

Then I asked her if we could mow lawns after school on week days.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said.

I was going to ask her why and press for details, but she had spoken with that tone of finality that told me not only was it futile to ask again, but it very probably would get me into trouble. Okay, so she had a secret and she was going to defend it to the bitter end. I guess I could live with that.

Oops

On Monday my mother was fuming mad when she got home. I was in the back, trying to figure out if there were weeds in my garden or not.

“Kiev Daniel Kostas! Where are you?”

I came around the front of the house and I knew I was in big trouble.

“What in the hell were you thinking? Do you realize you almost cost me my job? Why in the hell would you tell them I wasn’t sick?”

For a minute I didn’t know what she was talking about. I had forgotten that I had told her boss, or whoever that lady was that she wasn’t sick. “I was just trying to call you,” I protested.

“Well, did you ever stop to think that maybe I have my reasons?” She was approaching hysterical now, and I knew better than to say anything back to her. “I had a court date, Kiev, and I didn’t want anybody at work to know, okay. Jeez. I could have gotten into so much trouble.”

“Sorry.” I had a million other thoughts going through my head, of course, and there were a million other things that I wanted to say to her, but I said nothing. The fact that all she had to do was tell me she wasn’t going to work that day seemed to have escaped her mind – she didn’t even have to tell me where she was going. I just looked at her and waited for her tirade to pass.

She ranted a little longer about how immature I was and how stupid I had been. Then she stormed into the house and I went back around to where Sheyla was waiting for me. I don’t know how much of what my mom had said had reached the back yard, but she just kind of shrugged and said she needed to get going. I didn’t make any objections. A thick, uncomfortable blanket of feeling had fallen over everything, stifling everything. Sheyla left and

I found a rake to lean against while I gathered my strength before going into the house to deal with my mother.

She was still sulking when I finally when inside. I said nothing. I didn't understand, but the heavy wall of silence that kept me away from her all the time was now my shield. Perhaps if I stayed quiet she would stay quiet and that would be better than having her hate me.

She was smoking a cigarette and making dinner. I went to my room. I flipped on my Xbox. I hadn't played on it in ages. None of my games interested me, but I started one at random just to have something to do.

When she got me for dinner she had calmed down. She didn't say anything to me and I didn't say anything to her. I pretended to forget the harsh words she had said, and I think she was pretending to forget that she had said anything.

"When school is out can we go to town and work?" I asked.

She sighed heavily, meaningfully. I knew that my timing was rotten in the sense that it would annoy her, but it was also perfect in the sense that she was probably feeling a little guilty about yelling at me earlier. "Yeah, sure, I guess." She realized I had won a little victory and added, "Fine. Whatever." She lit another cigarette.

After tomorrow there was only one more week of school anyway, so I didn't really feel like I was missing out on much.

I ate dinner, and after dinner my mother lit another cigarette. I worked on math, read a book, and went to bed.

Business

The last day of school is reserved for checking out of classes and then there is this awards assembly. All the teachers give out certificates to the kids who did the best all year in their classes. Plus there are awards for citizenship – for the kids who didn’t get any detentions or tardy slips or who generally qualified as the best brown-nosers in the school. In middle school I always got citizenship awards – mostly because I never said anything, but I was pretty sure I wasn’t getting anything of the kind this year.

Blake got most valuable player in track. No surprise there, but I couldn’t help feeling a little proud of him. He had worked pretty hard, and he did really well. I got an award for most improved in track. I hadn’t expected to get anything, but everyone clapped, and Blake even gave me a high five.

I always dreaded the part where they gave academic awards. The teachers always created awards for just about everything, so nearly everyone ended up getting an award of some kind. I knew I had the highest percentage in most of my classes, but I didn’t know how that would work out since now I wasn’t really in the same classes as anyone any more. It turned out in my favor – I got no awards and didn’t have to walk out in front of everyone again.

After school I went over to Sheyla’s and we spent the afternoon playing games and watching movies. Blake and Erin were there, and they even joined in some of the fun. Spirits were high. We felt that nothing could possibly get in the way of our fun. When Blake and Erin finally sneaked out, Sheyla and I walked down to the store, bought ice cream and soda and together with all her brothers and sisters we had a little party.

Then summer vacation was upon us. Sheyla and I started working. We had our usual weekend route in town, and together we worked it. On Sunday afternoon – since we didn't have any lawns to mow – Sheyla and I planned out our system for the summer. We knew we wanted to get a regular route as soon as we could – something that would bring in at least fifty bucks apiece each day. Of course we could do a lot better than that if we were lucky, and if we didn't have to do a lot of extra walking. We also made sure we had everything we were going to need – drinks, plenty of drinks, some snacks, good shoes, our dorky hats, and gloves.

When we unloaded the lawn mower the next day, we were just flat excited, and that excitement held even after several doors rejected us. I hadn't forgotten the lessons I had learned earlier in the year, and Sheyla seemed perfectly willing to do whatever it took. She was much more interested in the money making part of the business, and kept coming up with all sorts of ideas.

I shot down all of her ideas, one after another, until she finally hit on one that I thought might actually work. There are these no-name brand juice pops – long plastic bags filled with juice – and all day long we kept seeing these kids all over the place with nothing really to do, and they all wanted to know what we were doing. They kept asking us if they could have our water or a drink or something; well she figured we could sell those juice pops for fifty cents each or something.

I pointed out that we would have to drag around a cooler full of ice if we wanted to do that. She pointed out that her mom had a cooler with wheels on it. I pointed out that we would have to buy the juice pops, and freeze them. She pointed out that there was a store right there where we were working, and that we could freeze them the night before. In the end we decided to try it. We sold out our first hundred the next day before noon.

She hit on this system pretty quick. While I was busy mowing a lawn she would park the cooler and put up this sign we made. Kids all over the neighborhood swarmed us. If nobody came in like the first five minutes she would start yelling – advertising the product, and before you knew it there would be a half dozen kids. Sometimes moms would come out, and that was always the best because they would just buy five bucks worth at a time. We could sell three hundred of those things in a day easily.

So, yeah, we made bank, and the best part was we didn't really even realize how much money we were making because each day we just stopped by the bank and made our deposit, so we never had much cash to spend. On days when Mom didn't want to drive us, or if she had court or an appointment or something, we got Sheyla's mom to drive us, or else Bell did. Sheyla tried to talk me into giving up our normal weekend route because of the juice pop scheme. We just couldn't sell as many in our tiny town as we could where more people lived. About as much as I was willing to concede was travelling on Fridays and then doing our village route (as we came to call it) on Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

Of course there were days when things happened to get in the way of our routine – just about every day something came up, but that was also just part of the routine. The best part of all was that when we were out there working there was nobody to tell us what to do or where to go – nobody interfered with us at all. Sometimes parents would ask us what we were up to, but when they saw that we were sincere and just trying to do some honest work they went out of their way to help us. They would offer us drinks or sandwiches or give us overly generous tips and then give us advice like, “Save up for college,” or, “Don't spend it all in one place.”

After about two weeks we had a route for each day, more or less. I had warned Sheyla about how important it was to remember everybody's names, and she had listened. In our notes

we had a map that included not only house numbers, but the names of the people we had met, so whenever we knocked on a door the second time we could call the people by their name or ask for them by name, and this really impressed people – I mean it made the difference between getting booted and getting major repeat business. Just about every other time when we knocked on a repeat door and they came out, we could tell that they were annoyed, but as soon as Sheyla or I called them by name and asked them how their week had been, they immediately gave us their business. We hardly ever got turned down by a repeat customer.

Break Down

Our lawnmower broke down, irreparably one Monday. At first we were pretty desperate. It was about two in the afternoon, and Sheyla just about started crying. We were in the middle of mowing a lawn and everything. We explained it to the folks at the house and they understood the problem. They also told us about a place about a half a mile away that sold farm equipment, including lawnmowers, and we pushed the mower down there.

I have no idea what the man must have thought when I walked into his store.

“Can I help you?” he asked. He was a big guy, wearing a button down shirt that seemed to hardly cover his big belly, but he seemed friendly enough.

“Our lawnmower is broken,” I said. I think he saw Sheyla standing there looking as skinny as a rail and sunburned and dirty from working.

“Well, I guess we can take a look.” He dialed a number and pretty soon a guy in coveralls came out, wiping his greasy hands. “Jodi, can you take a quick look at these kids’ lawnmower. Seems they’ve broken down.”

Jodi was happy to help. He checked to see if there was gas, and then tried to start it. When he took the cover off, I knew we were in trouble. He called in the manager. “I can fix ‘er, but we’ll have to order parts, and it won’t be cheap,” he said. “Kid, you’re better off buying a new one.”

I looked at Sheyla, and asked, “How much we got?” She handed me a little over three hundred dollars. “What can we get for this?” I asked.

I think they about died when they saw the cash. “You kids work hard,” observed the manager.

“All day, every day,” I replied with a smile.

They had one model we could afford and one that I really wanted, but that was about a hundred dollars more expensive.

“What about that one?” I asked.

“You’re a hundred bucks short,” said the manager.

“What if we give you the three hundred now and the rest tomorrow?” I asked.

“You want me to give credit to a kid? How old are you anyway?”

“Fifteen next month.” I looked him in the face and decided to hold my ground. “We’ll make that hundred today – tomorrow by noon at the latest. You’ll get your money.”

He must have seen the determination in my face or heard it in my voice or something.

“I’ll tell you what, kid,” he said. “You give me that busted one in trade for sixty bucks, and I’ll give you a ten percent discount on that one because it’s the floor display.”

I did the math in my head. “Deal,” I said. So we walked out with a brand new lawnmower that was ten times easier to start and about a hundred times easier to push.

We went back and finished the lawn we had started, and finished the rest of our normal route in a lot less time. I think I fell in love with that lawnmower that afternoon. Of course we didn’t deposit as much money as we usually did that Monday, but neither of us minded much.

New Clothes

My mom made me buy all my own school clothes and supplies that summer. “You make as much as I do,” she said. I knew that she knew how much money I made because she handled all our deposits, so I didn’t even try to argue with her. I had over five thousand dollars in the bank by the end of the summer, and that didn’t count the pocket money I kept back each day and then never spent. So my mother drove Sheyla and me to Wal-mart one day (by now we were completely inseparable), and we shopped.

My mother taught us how to use our debit cards. She taught us how to read our bank statements, how to write checks, and how to balance a checkbook.

I was happy to discover that I needed all new clothes. I had outgrown all of my pants and most of my shirts. I think I grew about four inches that summer and put on about twenty pounds. I was still a shrimp, and I knew it, but I wasn’t as much of a shrimp.

Sheyla had grown too. Somewhere during the summer she had developed curves. I didn’t really notice until that day of shopping because she always wore these t-shirts that were way too big for her and her jeans were hand-me-downs as well. My mother doted all over her. I think we spent two hours just having Sheyla try on clothes and then another hour buying shoes. But Sheyla loved it – all of it, and I knew she did because this was going to be the first school year that she had all new stuff.

When her little brothers and sisters also showed up with new stuff to school, I knew that she had put her debit card to good use.

I just bought the bare minimum. I don’t much care for the feel of new jeans. I like them after they’ve been worn in for a while, and they didn’t have any t-shirts I liked, so we went to the

thrift stores and hit a few garage sales until I found some shirts that were, in my opinion, properly worn out. My mother made me buy new shoes and underwear and socks, and I didn't argue. Truthfully I just didn't much care. She had already given me all of her fashion advice growing up, and now that I didn't have to listen to it, I didn't. If she was going to make me buy my own clothes then I was going to buy clothes I wanted.

Then school was upon us. At registration Mr. Stradlater pulled my mother aside and explained to her all the options for graduation to me, again. He explained that I could have all the credits I needed by the end of this school year, if I wanted, but she refused. "He's too young for college. He just turned fifteen."

I think I hated her for that, but I kept my mouth shut. She signed all the paperwork so I could take college credit classes, and I realized my schedule was going to be much more intense this year.

Butts

Football season kicked off, but without me. Despite the fact that I now weighed 90 pounds, I still felt too small to play football – that and I don't like football. Coach Neilson tried to get me to come out for the team, but I sincerely had zero interest. After the first week of homework hit me, I was pretty glad I didn't go out – I had never had to really work at school before, but now I did. It wasn't that the work was more difficult, but there was so much more to do, and my teachers weren't really there to explain things I had questions about.

In English class, for example, Ms. Schaeffer had me writing essays about literary periods that I had to research on my own because she was busy working with everyone else most of the time, and when I was participating with everyone else it was because we were doing some group project that I needed to do on top of everything else I was also dealing with.

Math wasn't as bad because I was doing college algebra, which Mr. Pinkerton always taught, and at least there were some other students in the class with me – two girls, Jane, a senior, and Mikaela an exchange student. Both of them were 18 already, and at first they were intimidating for me to talk to – especially Mikaela because she was at least a foot taller than me, and she was beautiful. Why are pretty girls so scary? They're just people too. I mean, at least when you're out mowing lawns, they're just people like everyone else.

Then I had an online writing class. That class was just about as easy as they come, except I had to manage my time on my own. I was so glad Mr. Pinkerton warned me about having a planner to keep track of my assignments. That thing saved my bacon.

It felt good to be an achiever – to be living close to my potential. That is a feeling I had never had before in my life. It is a feeling I can't begin to describe because nothing else I had

ever encountered had ever made me feel that way – not my family, not hanging out with Sheyla, nothing, not even mowing lawns all summer. I think it made me feel human.

That fall the cigarettes returned to my meadow – almost like clockwork they started showing up on Mondays after school. They wouldn't be there when I walked to school but they would be there when I walked home. I would check each day because they always appeared in the same place every time. Whoever it was that came there to smoke came there when I was at school. He or she would sit or stand next to that old stump and smoke a cigarette and then drop the butt in the same place.

I saw less and less of my mother now that school was in session. Of course through August (school started about two weeks before Labor Day) and September we still mowed lawns each weekend. Mom went to work and I did my homework and then if I had time I called up Sheyla and we would go hang out. Sometimes this meant I would help her with her homework, and sometimes we just watched TV or played a game with the younger kids.

Then one day when I was over at Sheyla's helping her with her homework Erin came over to the kitchen table where we were working and sat down. She never talked to us – I mean not a word, not a "hello" or "goodbye" or even an epithet thrown our way. She just sat there, pulled out her math, and started doing her homework.

She hadn't talked to either of us all summer long or for about a month after school began and then all of a sudden she was doing her homework with us. Then she said, "Kiev, can you please explain this one."

At first I didn't realize she was talking. She had to ask again before it registered to me that she was serious. She wanted help with her math. So I explained the concept, and she went back to her work like nothing had happened. Sheyla and I kind of exchanged glances, as if to

ask each other what was going on, but she didn't know any more than I did about what had come over her sister, so we just shrugged it off.

Erin never joined us at the table after that if Blake was there, but otherwise she would sit and do her homework at the same time as Sheyla and me. If she needed help she would ask for it, but otherwise she didn't really say much of anything. She didn't joke around with us or talk about her day or ask us about our day, but it was like there was a silent truce between us; as long as Blake wasn't around it we were humans.

For his part Blake lived up to all his jock potential. I didn't think it was possible for him to become any more athletic, but over the summer he had been working for his uncle on his farm, and had also attended a football camp and a basketball camp, and according to Erin he was lifting weights. He dominated the football field. Of course you have to keep in mind that we were a tiny school playing against other tiny schools, and even in eight-man football it takes more than one player to win a football game, but it took at least six members of the other team to tackle Blake when he had the ball; it was like watching an odd sort of one on one game when Blake decided to run a quarterback keeper play. He ran and their whole team chased him, but they never caught him.

Homecoming

Homecoming week in these small towns, as I later discovered, is pretty much the same everywhere. Each class decorated the halls in outlandish and generally amateurish colors and ideas stolen from previous Homecoming years or the internet. We held assemblies and friendly competitions during lunch. Then, of course there was the float building.

Every year each class had to build and decorate a float for the Homecoming Parade – which amounted to about six cars driving the four blocks through town – and the class with the best float won bragging rights for the rest of the school year. Our class had the worst ideas for floats in the history of the school (according to the teachers anyway), and on top of that we had the worst float building skills and the worst organizational ability, so we did horrible as freshmen. It was traditional for the freshman class to do horrible, but not to fail as spectacularly bad as we had done.

This year would be different, I hoped. Erin had been elected class president because she was pretty, which meant the guys voted for her over Andrea, who was a little heavier. The only good thing about that was the class felt bad for Andrea so they made her vice president, which is why I had some hope we might accomplish something this year. Andrea is actually smart, and she isn't afraid to tell people what to do.

We decided on this theme of cage the tigers for our float. We would build a cage and put a giant stuffed tiger inside and then all of us would dress up as jungle natives and dance around the tiger wildly. We had a good idea, so the first hurdle had been overcome. She then drew up a schedule and browbeat people into signing up for specific times to come and work on the float after school starting the week before homecoming week. We had a good plan, so the second

hurdle had been overcome. Finally, she forced Chad to get permission to work on the float at his house. Chad's dad is a contractor and worked as a framer for years; that man knows everything about building pretty much everything. We had skills. Final hurdle overcome.

Despite the fact that our class president, Erin, didn't show up to a single work session for the float – she was spotted several times working on the senior class float with Blake – and the fact that several other members of the class flaked out on work, we got the thing put together well before our Thursday deadline. Of course there were the usual problems of getting together materials and trying to follow directions, but I was really, really proud of the way we worked.

The day before the big game we get out of classes for the afternoon to put the finishing touches on our floats. Then we have the big parade and the whole town comes in for this huge assembly where we get excited for the big game. So we got out of class and started working on the finishing touches. All we really had to do was put on our costumes and get a bunch of willow branches that looked like jungle trees and we were basically ready to go.

We had painted this really elaborate backdrop with our theme in big letters and all these awesome looking jungle trees and wildflowers. In essence it was amazing. I had never seen anything so cool, and all thanks to the foresight of Andrea.

Erin showed up about two minutes before we were supposed to be getting onto the thing and pulling out into the parade. She didn't even have a costume, and stood out like a sore thumb, but then again she had been against the idea from the start, so we didn't expect that much from her. She also had the stuffed tiger with her.

We were working outside near the auto shop, and of course there were plenty of ways to make a mess with everything. Erin, in her rush to get aboard before we had to leave, dropped the tiger in this oil/gas/who knows what mess that somebody had left there. So not only does the

tiger now look like a diseased panther, it stinks to high heaven, and nobody wants to get near it. So instead of dancing around the tiger like jungle maniacs we were standing as far away from it as we could, trying not to breathe in the fumes.

Then, just as we are pulling out of the parking lot behind the school and getting ready to pull away from the auto shop, Mrs. Liddell came out of the auto shop. She had a lit cigarette in her mouth. Of course she wasn't supposed to smoke on school property, but she had discovered that on every school day besides this one she could smoke in the auto shop bathroom and nobody would find her. She had forgotten what was going on, and when she realized she was surrounded by students – all of whom saw her smoking – she did the first thing she thought of: she got rid of her cigarette, by tossing it onto our float.

Nobody realized the significance of this at first because we were all too busy laughing at Mrs. Liddell for being a complete idiot. The cigarette smoldered beneath that tiger, and just about the time we pulled onto the main road where the parade began the tiger ignited. Thirty seconds later the greatest float in the history of Homecoming was nothing more than a raging ball of flames. Fortunately nobody was injured. The float moved no faster than a quick walk and everyone jumped off safe enough, but by the time it passed the judges all they got to see was a blackened charcoal skeleton of a cage.

So, despite our best efforts, our float had managed to receive even lower marks than the previous lowest marks in history. At least it was memorable.

Homecoming Part 2

Of course the important events of Homecoming are the football game and then the traditional dance that follows. Our class had the honor of putting on the Homecoming dance, which means that we had to do the decorations and supply the music, but we got to keep the proceeds for our class.

At first this might sound like a lot of work, but at our school, where there were really only about thirty or forty people who would even attend, it really amounted to nothing more than getting permission from Mrs. Adams, the music teacher, to use her speakers so somebody could hook up their laptop or Ipod or something while we put up a poster and rented a fog machine, which we hooked up in the shop. It was a simple affair but people had a good time.

One side effect, however, was that we needed parents to come and chaperone the dance. I asked my mother, and she agreed to do it – in fact she was excited to come. Her excitement made me rethink whatever twisted logic had gotten me to ask her, but it was too late. She was going to be at the dance. I was also going to be at the dance – at least for a little while. Why? Because my mother was going to be there, and she said that if she had to go then I had to go as well.

I went to the game. I watched Blake throw touchdown passes to every single eligible receiver on our team, even the freshmen who normally never got to play. Typically for Homecoming they choose an opponent that isn't very strong, just in case we have a bad team and we need the win, but in this case it was overkill. None of the seniors even played the second half. I could tell that if there was a year when we had a chance to win state or to at least go far into the playoffs, then this was our year. A part of me realized that if I had gone out for the team

that I would have seen playing time – that those people in the stands would have been cheering for me, but another part of me realized that it wouldn't be me they were cheering for; it would just be more glory added to Blake and I would be nothing more than a vampire to his fame, and that thought made me sick.

I left the game early to go set up for the dance. There wasn't much to do: Andrea had it under control, but I was bored with the game and just wanted to make my dance appearance and then go home. I helped put up the poster. I figured out how to work the fog machine. I even hung a few streamers. Then I found a quiet spot to watch the dance.

My mom found another mom to talk to and essentially ignored the kids, which was fine by me. All the girls got there first, and the non-jocks. The dance started right after the game, but the football players all had to shower and change and stuff, so they wouldn't get there anytime soon. Erin was one of the first ones there, of course. She danced wildly with her friends – just goofing off before any of the interesting boys showed up.

Andrea made me get up and dance a little, and I did because she is perhaps the most intimidating person I have ever met, and if she wanted me to dance I would dance – at least until her back was turned. A couple of eighth graders tried to get in, but were promptly kicked out, which was funny to watch because my mom had to act like some authority figure. They feigned surprise at being kicked out and told bold lies about how they always got to come to high school dances before, but when Ms. Schaeffer came on scene they gave up and left. I kind of expected Sheyla to be there because she was a freshman now and could go to the high school dances, but then she might have to babysit or something. I hadn't really thought about her being at the dance or anything until I was there – but she never came.

Then the football players began to trickle in. Most of them had dates already waiting for them at the dance. Some of them didn't have dates and just came to dance with whoever was there or just to hang out – there wasn't much else to do anyway. No surprises. Erin and Blake paired off and danced.

I had just about had enough, so I decided to leave. I acted like I was going to the bathroom, so my mom wouldn't catch me and make me come back, but I didn't get very far. Down the hall from the bathroom I heard voices, and there were Blake and Erin. They were talking loudly, but I couldn't make out the words because the dance music was still ringing in my ears. Then all of a sudden Blake walked away from her, heading back into the dance. I ducked into the bathroom because he was walking straight toward me. I was in the bathroom, so I went to the bathroom, and then I went back out. Erin was gone.

I went back to the dance. I wanted to see what had happened. Blake was there dancing with his buddies, but I didn't see Erin anywhere. I waited around for a good fifteen minutes, but she never showed. We had reached the half way point of the dance, and Ms. Schaeffer was calling for the Homecoming court (Blake was Homecoming King, of course), to get their pictures taken together.

After the pictures were taken it became abundantly clear to me that what I had witnessed in the hallway was some kind of a breakup because Blake was dancing way too close to Chelsea, a senior girl who he had been dating back when I was in middle school. Then they left together holding hands. I didn't feel like dancing and I had lost interest in what everyone else was doing, so I left the school and started walking home. I played a few video games when I got home, and then I went to bed.

Sometime in the middle of the night I was woken up by loud music blaring in our driveway. Headlights poured in through my bedroom window. I heard my mother's slurred words, "Shh, yer makin' too much noise." I peeked out through my window and saw her stumbling towards the front door. Blake, Chelsea, and another guy I didn't know were still in Blake's truck. Then I heard the front door open and the truck backed up and then turned and drove off, spitting gravel behind its wheels and leaving marks in the driveway.

My mother stumbled around the kitchen for a while, and then went to bed. I just lay there for a while trying to comprehend the fact that somehow my mother had managed to go out partying with a bunch of high school kids and had come home drunk in the middle of the night. I thought vaguely how that was supposed to be my job, but then I realized she was an adult and there definitely wasn't anything I could do to stop her. Oddly enough, the real focus of my thoughts was the fact that somehow she and Blake had obviously become friends.

Cold Weather

I no longer had lawns to mow. The weather had turned cold, and there really wasn't a lot for me to do on Saturdays at this point, so I played video games and read books until about noon. Then I decided to go for a walk down to the meadow and mess around. Maybe I would walk down and find Sheyla and see if she was doing anything, which I knew she wasn't. As I was walking down the dirt road I heard a car door slam and I turned around just in time to see my mother driving away.

Down in my meadow I found seventeen beer cans and too many cigarette butts to count. My first inclination was to just walk down into town, but I couldn't. Instead I went back to the house and found a plastic garbage bag and went back down to the meadow and picked up everything. I dumped out the half full cans and rooted out each cigarette butt until I was sure that every vestige of the party had been removed. Downstream from the meadow, not very far, but just out of view of the stump, I found another cigarette butt and a bra.

At first I just rolled my eyes. Obviously some kids had come here after the dance and had a party – no big deal I guess. Then I realized that the bra belonged to my mother. I had done enough of the laundry at our house to know what she wore, and it was easy to remember because she always made a big deal about her clothes – even her underwear. That meant that my mother had come here, partied with Blake and his friends and done – I didn't want to think about what else she might have done, or with whom. I put the bra into the trash bag.

I wanted to yell at someone or hit someone. But I was alone. I hefted the bag of trash back to the big trash bin outside our house, fuming angrily the whole time. I hurled the bag,

together with its offending underclothes into the garbage can and then kicked the can for effect.

What else could I do?

The wrongness of it bothered me, but worse than that was the feeling that there was absolutely nothing I could do about it – nothing. I could yell at my mother, but that would accomplish nothing. I could call my uncle, but that would obviously also accomplish nothing. What was worse, if I did do anything to get my mother into trouble, then where would that leave me? Homeless or in foster care I figured. Best case? My mother pissed at me for eternity.

I walked down to Bell's house. She was raking leaves in her yard.

"Need a hand," I offered.

She smiled at me, and I think she realized that the work would do me good. "Sure," she said and she handed me the rake.

I worked steadily and quietly while she made comments about the weather and the football game and just talked to fill up the void of quietness.

"Ya seem a little down, Kiev," she observed at last.

"Yeah. My mother is being an idiot," I said.

"You wanna talk it over?" she asked.

I shook my head, "No," and kept working. There was just no way to begin to explain my suspicions.

When I finished Bell gave me another of her smiles and said, "Fella might make some extra money rakin' leaves and such."

"I'll need a rake."

"Ya got one in yer hand, don' ya?" she said, and she winked as she said it and went into her house.

I walked over and found Sheyla.

As I suspected she wasn't doing much, just watching TV with the kids. Erin was there. She looked pretty depressed, and barely even looked up when I came in.

"Hey, you want to do some work?" I asked Sheyla.

Her eyes brightened at the prospect of avoiding another day of boredom. "Sure."

We raked leaves at her house and then worked our way around town. Of course we weren't going to rake all the leaves in the whole town in one day, but it gave us something to do, and it gave us both a chance to tell our stories about what had happened after Homecoming.

"Blake dumped Erin," said Sheyla. "He told her she was too clingy. I knew there was something up when she came home so early. She cried all night, and hasn't hardly said anything to anyone all day. She really had it bad for him, you know."

"Yeah, I saw them arguing in the hall. Then I saw Blake dancing with Chelsea. I think there was more to it than that, though, because it sounded to me like Erin told him something he just didn't want to hear. He was pretty mad when I saw him," I said.

"Well, all I know is what she told my mom when she got home. She's really depressed – I mean really depressed," said Sheyla.

I changed the subject. I had to say something to somebody, and Sheyla was the only person I could ever really talk to. "My mom got drunk last night – with Blake and Chelsea and some other guy."

"Probably Matt Berker," said Sheyla. "He graduated a couple of years ago, but Blake always used to hang out with him."

"I don't know, maybe it was. All I know is they were partying half the night, and my mom came home drunk. Then I found her bra in the woods by the stream."

“What? Are you serious.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” and she looked sorry when she said it. She understood how messed up this was and how helpless I felt. “She’s old enough to be their mother. Ugh.”

“Tell me about it.”

We worked without talking for a bit. When it started to get dark I took Bell’s rake back to her and then went back to Sheyla’s house. Erin was still sitting in front of the TV, but now she had a big bowl of popcorn. She seemed pretty oblivious to what was going on in the house. I said, “Hi,” and she just nodded. Part of me figured that she had spent so much time ignoring me that for her to acknowledge my presence now would just be too much effort.

I called my house to let my mom know where I was, but nobody answered. I wasn’t surprised. She obviously had things to do and places to be, so I decided to hang out with Sheyla. We couldn’t pry control of the television away from Erin, even after we offered to let her pick the movie, so we ended up playing board games instead, which was fine with me. Movies got boring most of the time.

I went home around eleven o’clock, and my mom’s car wasn’t back yet. I wasn’t really that surprised, but I think it would have felt nice to maybe have her there waiting to yell at me for staying out so late and not calling her to tell her where I was or what I was doing. Instead I went into the cold dark house and went to bed. I hoped that when my mom got home she would have the decency to be quiet about it.

Vodka

Erin wasn't at school on Monday. I figured she was still at home sulking, but when I went over to Sheyla's house later that day Erin wasn't sitting in front of the TV like I expected. She wasn't at home, and Sheyla didn't know where she was either. Sheyla assured me that she wasn't in her room (Sheyla and Erin had to share a room), and she wasn't anywhere to be seen. When Mrs. Davis came home a little later Erin was with her, but neither of them said where they had been, and when one of the younger kids asked, Mrs. Davis just said, "I took Erin to an appointment."

What kind of appointment? Was she seeing a shrink? A doctor?

When Erin didn't come to school on Tuesday my curiosity only grew. This time Erin was at home watching television after school. When Sheyla asked her where she had been, Erin gave her a dirty look and said, "None of your business."

Erin didn't come to school that week, but she did show up the following Monday. I had never known anyone to get that depressed over a breakup, but then they had been dating for a whole year, and Blake had been her first flame, so I guess she just took it hard.

Blake was at school, of course, but he acted like I was invisible. That didn't bother me in the least. I liked it better than when he was trying to be nice around Mrs. Davis. I knew he had to be feeling at least a little guilty after partying with my mother but I didn't see why he would have any reason to suspect that I knew. It didn't matter. If I was off of his radar, then there wouldn't be any more awkward conversations or confrontations.

After Homecoming, life fell into a grotesque routine. I went to school and my mom got up late for work. Sheyla and I raked leaves until it got dark. Then I came home and did

homework while she drank vodka and watched television. She didn't get plastered every night or anything, but she drank steadily. I knew she must be drinking at work too because she kept alcohol in the car. I know this because when she drove me to Wal-mart I saw it.

Sheyla and I finished raking the leaves in town. After that there wasn't much to do, but I decided to work ahead on my school work because wrestling season was going to start soon, and I wanted to wrestle but I didn't want to get behind in school. I hated the empty time after school when there wasn't anything to do but wait for my mother to get home. If anything, it was worse when she came home – not because she yelled at more or got mean or anything. She just sat in front of the TV and drank and laughed at whatever she was watching and ignored me. She ignored me to the point of never cooking or washing dishes or doing laundry, except she would wash one dish so she could heat up a microwave pizza or something for herself. It was like I had ceased to exist.

I think it was a good thing that Sheyla's mom didn't care how often I stayed over for dinner because I probably would have starved to death otherwise. We didn't have much food in the house except for ramen and frozen dinners and pizzas, and there were never enough of these. Besides, I didn't want to eat any of that because it just reminded me that it was what my mother was eating for dinner instead of cooking like she used to.

Once I made dinner for both of us. I cooked some spaghetti and toasted some garlic bread. I thought it was pretty good. My mom came home, took a look at it, and then got her vodka out of the fridge. She took her plate of spaghetti and sat down in front of the television – all without saying a word. I didn't cook anymore after that. If there was only one frozen dinner left or if we were almost out of ramen then I would just go over to Sheyla's and eat something at

their house instead. Or else I would take some of my leaf raking money and walk down to the market and buy a snack or something.

Thanksgiving

Wrestling season started with its usual flurry of pushups and running, but I loved it. This was the one thing that just felt natural to me. When I stepped onto the mat it felt like coming home; it felt like eating apple pie and chicken soup all mixed together; it made me happy. It was also miserably exhausting work that stressed every part of my body to the limits, but I didn't care.

My body knew where to go and what to do. I didn't have a lot of memories of my dad – and most of the ones I had were a mixture of adoration and terror – but I remembered all the wrestling trips. I remembered watching him and Randy wrestle before I really understood what it was all about. I remember working out with the big kids as soon as I was able to walk. To me wrestling was my happy place – not only because of all the happy memories, but because I was a winner. I had always been a winner.

There would always be some kid somewhere who was better than you, but after the age of six that kid was me. Randy and I would wrestle at home in the living room or in our bedroom or on the kitchen floor. It drove my mom nuts, but when she yelled at us it was usually that mixture of pride and anger that lets you know that you're not really in trouble – just take it someplace else; so I learned. My whole body learned. I didn't have to think about all the steps to all the takedowns or escapes because my body already knew where to go and what to do. I learned to deal with a brother who was bigger, stronger, and more skilled, and because of that I got better.

I don't think I ever told my brother thanks for all the help he had given me, mostly because it never came in the form of help but rather in the form of picking on an easy target; but

I did owe Randy a lot. Of course I was in the lightest weight bracket, which made Coach Dave happy because in a small school like ours we never had enough people to make a full team and we almost never had anybody in my weight bracket. Naturally this mean that I had to work out with kids who were a lot bigger than me, but I had gotten used to that routine when I was still just a little kid.

Practice started on Monday a few weeks before Thanksgiving. That night I came home and I think I just sort of fell asleep right after doing my homework. On Tuesday I didn't even make through my homework before I fell asleep. School became torture for the rest of the week. Every muscle in my body ached. Just sitting in the hard desks at school was painful. We had practice on Friday, and coach gave us instructions to run on Saturday. I didn't have anything else to do, and there was no way I was going to stay at home, so I went for a run on Saturday.

The dirt roads go for miles and miles between and around all the fields if you get outside of town at all, and I knew my way around Mr. Meyers' fields pretty good, so I picked out a route that took me out between the fields and to the edge of the sagebrush that marked the beginning of BLM land. As I ran I found myself thinking about the problems I was dealing with: my mom, school work, and the upcoming wrestling season. But instead of all these thoughts overwhelming me and making me depressed like they usually did I was actually relaxed when I finished my run. That had never happened before.

Normally for Thanksgiving my mom and I would go over to uncle Ron's house and spend the day over there. I didn't know how it would work out this year. I wasn't even sure if my mother realized that Thanksgiving was coming up. Then one day she came home with a big frozen turkey and said, "Why don't we have Thanksgiving here this year." It wasn't really a question.

“Just us two?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’ll be nice,” she said.

Behind the sunglasses that she now wore almost perpetually I knew that her eyes would be bloodshot. Behind the mask of her smile I knew that she was afraid of the inevitable confrontation between her brother and herself. Behind the disgustingly fake optimism she put into her words all I could feel was a sense of dread.

“Okay,” I said.

Personally I was looking forward to the holiday because I wanted the break to get back on top of my homework. My college classes just didn’t give me the break I normally would get, and if it hadn’t been for classes in my schedule like health and art I think I would have sunk under the pressure. And I was starting to feel some pressure. Mr. Stradlater had gotten me signed up to take the SAT in December, and I was super nervous about it because I just didn’t feel like I was really ready.

The soreness of wrestling practice had begun to level off to a point where I almost felt normal at school. Of course there was a little rivalry between the basketball boys and the wrestling team. The school was so small that just about everyone played sports, and there were hardly enough boys to go around between the two sports, so both coaches were constantly recruiting whenever possible. Mr. Stradlater, who also coached the boys basketball team, didn’t really try to recruit me, though. Even in a school as small as ours there was still a minimum height requirement before a kid is considered basketball worthy.

When Thanksgiving week came I felt depressed. All the other kids had plans to visit relatives. Everyone seemed to be going somewhere except me. When I told them that I was staying home they said things like, “Cool,” or , “That sounds fun,” but there was no question that

they kind of felt sorry for me. They all knew that it was just me and my mother, and it didn't actually sound fun to any of them.

Of course Sheyla's family was going over to her grandma's house. They would be gone the whole weekend, which left me with precisely nowhere to go and nothing to do. Even Randy had called and told us that he was going to see his new girlfriend's parents for Thanksgiving. The other wrestlers on the team were worried about eating too much over the holiday and having to move up a weight class. I was worried whether or not there would be anything to eat.

Thanksgiving day dawned crisp and cool, and I decided to go for a run because there wasn't much else to do and my mother wasn't up yet. The entire world felt like it was asleep when I went out running that morning. I didn't see anything moving anywhere. The fields lay covered with frost and patches of snow, and the bare open fields gave room to my mind for thoughts and I let my mind wander away from this place. I thought about what it might be like to be in a place like where Randy was – maybe college would be different and better. Maybe there I wouldn't be surrounded by silence all the time. Maybe things would make sense. Running was a bad idea, I decided, and I stopped and walked. I couldn't bear being tired on top of feeling miserable – not on Thanksgiving.

I walked home and found the house cold and empty. Mom wasn't up yet. I showered and ate some cereal. I did homework for a couple of hours until I heard my mom moving around. I went out to see what she was doing, and found her sitting at the kitchen table. She looked like she was sick. She was sipping a cup of coffee, but the bottle of vodka was open next to her.

"No point cooking a fucking turkey," she mumbled through her coffee. "No fucking body here to eat it anyway."

Well, I guess that settled Thanksgiving dinner. I went back to my room, and two hours later I heard the front door open and then I heard her car driving away.

By this time I was starting to get hungry. I scrounged around and found stuff to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. As I was looking in the fridge I saw that big turkey sitting there. I went ahead and made my sandwich, but as I did I realized that even if my mother wasn't around to enjoy it that there was no point in watching that turkey go to waste. I did a quick internet search and figured out how to cook it. We didn't have the things to make stuffing or all the fixings that go with Thanksgiving dinner, but at least I was going to have the main course, and I was happy with getting that much.

I spent the rest of the day watching football and reading a book. By the time the turkey was done I was starving, and I was really glad that we still had the internet because without it I'm pretty sure I would have completely ruined the turkey. It didn't turn out perfect or anything, but it definitely was much better than I had hoped for. Of course I didn't know if my mom was going to come home any time soon, but I assumed that she was at a bar someplace or else she had another secret boyfriend. Either way I didn't try to save her any – not that I could eat it all myself. I put the leftovers in the fridge and assumed she would figure it out on her own when she finally came home.

All she said the next day when she opened the fridge was, "Oh, you cooked it."

The weekend crawled by slowly. I ate leftover turkey in solitude while my mother celebrated in her own way.

Tournament

When Monday came and I could go back to school I just about did somersaults all the way to school. I couldn't believe how relieved I felt just to be opening the door to the school and walking inside. The familiar sights and smells – albeit ones I still didn't really care for – were far better than being stuck at home with nothing to do and only periodic checkups from a drunk mother. Also I was looking forward to school lunch. The food might not be the best on the planet, but at least it wasn't leftovers, and at least it was actually cooked rather than zapped in a microwave.

The weekend after Thanksgiving was our first wrestling tournament and I was beginning to get excited about it. I felt like this year I could actually compete because I only weighed about ten pounds less than the limit for my weight class, which was so much better than it had been last year. Coach Dave had also bought us these cool t-shirts with the school colors and the motto, “Win first, ask questions later,” on it. I didn't much care for the motto, but I really liked wearing the shirt because I was pretty proud of being part of the team. The basketball team always had new shirts every year that they got to wear and this was the first time that the wrestling team got anything, and it naturally made me happy.

We left on Friday about noon. It was a two day tournament – most of them were – and I can hardly remember the ride over there. I was so nervous and excited my mind had practically shut off. I knew that my mom wouldn't be there. Last year she had come to watch me as much as she could, but I knew even if she remembered she would be lost somewhere in a bottle. But that didn't make me nervous. What I worried about was that I would get out there and I would totally forget everything that I knew.

I didn't forget. My first match put me against a kid who had never wrestled before in his life. I felt bad for him. If I hadn't been so nervous then it probably would have lasted longer, but because I had so much energy I took him down and pinned him in just a few seconds. He was crying when I shook his hand at the end of the match and I felt horrible. I couldn't look his coach in the eye when I had to go and shake his hand. Coach Dave gave the kid a big hug and told him how good he had done, but he was still crying when I went back to the bleachers to sit down.

Then I was glad I had brought my homework. It took my mind off of things for a while. I would have one more match that day and then win or lose I would be wrestling on Saturday as well. I watched my teammates wrestle, but they didn't do that good. That was pretty normal. There were a lot of bigger schools here and we only had one other kid on the team who was any good. He won his first match as well, but the other three guys on our team lost.

My second match was a lot tougher. I got taken down pretty quick in the first round and I had to scramble. I managed to get to my feet and escape, but we went out of bounds. I was glad we did because Coach Dave caught my attention and brought me back into focus. I relaxed and let myself wrestle my own match. This time I got the takedown. He got away and scored an escape point, but I took him down again and I was leading the score. He had choice of position in the second round, and he chose down. He got away again but I took him down right away. Coach signaled me to let him go, so I did and then took him down again. So slowly I built a lead until he started to get tired and discouraged. In the third round I sort of felt him give up and I managed to turn him and pin him.

I think that was the first time I discovered what wrestling in high school was all about – it was about not giving up and keeping your head even when you get into trouble. I realized that I

was in good shape and that I had the skills I needed to win, and I felt happy. I didn't even start to get depressed when Coach Dave dropped us off at the school. Even when I opened the door to the empty house I still had that victory to keep me company, and I held onto it.

I didn't see Mom that night and I didn't see her in the morning either. She never even had a chance to ask me how the tournament had gone for me. I knew that she would care – I hoped that she would care. She had always seemed so proud of me before when I wrestled; it didn't matter if I won or lost.

The bus left at seven thirty.

I had my first match pretty early – it was a semifinals match. I was so relaxed that I went through the match without even having to think about what I was doing. I could tell that the kid was a pretty good wrestler, but he was nervous or tired or something and he just reacted too slowly. I pinned him in the second round.

Then I had a long day of waiting ahead of me. We weren't going to wrestle the finals until five o'clock that evening, so I really didn't have anything to do for a couple of hours. I called home and my mother answered; her voice was full of sleep.

"He mom, it's Kiev," I said.

"Yeah, what is it, son," she said.

"I'm in the finals!" I said.

"Oh, great. That's awesome. Do you know what time you'll wrestle?" she asked.

"Five. Can you come?"

"Maybe. We'll see, okay."

I was pretty sure that maybe meant, "No." I tried to stay optimistic anyway. At least she was awake and moving before noon, and I was pretty sure she hadn't been drinking yet today.

That was a long wait. There are always lots of long waits at wrestling tournaments – always. There are hundreds of kids and each of them has to get his turn, so of course there is lots of waiting, but I had brought homework, and there were plenty of people to talk to if I got bored. I finished my homework pretty quick and then just sort of watched wrestling for a while. I can really get into watching matches when I'm in the mood and I'm usually in the mood when I'm at a tournament.

Then these cheerleaders from another school came over and started talking to some guys who were right next to me. I looked over and realized that I recognized the blonde. "Hey, don't I know you?" I asked.

She looked at me like I was some kind of an alien or something. "Uh, I don't think so." She sounded kind of snooty, but I could tell it was just because she thought I was a stranger, which of course I really was.

Then I remembered. "You were in track last year," I said. I held up my math book.

She laughed. She remembered. "Yeah. I remember. You ran the mile." I had no idea she had watched me run that race.

"Your Carla," I said.

"Yeah, how did you know. I don't think I told you," she said.

"Your friend called you Carla. I'm Kiev." I held out my hand for her to shake. I know that most kids my age don't really shake hands with each other when they meet, but I had gotten into the habit of shaking people's hands when I was working, and I just did it. Not only did she shake my hand, but she actually moved from where she was sitting one bleacher up to come and sit next to me.

I felt my heart skip a beat. Yeah she was taller than me. I had to crane my neck a little to look at her face, but I didn't mind.

"So how's the tournament going for you? Have you won any?" she asked.

"I'm in the finals," I said.

She looked really surprised. "You must be really good then."

"I guess. I've been wrestling my whole life," I said.

We sat there and had a conversation. Let me repeat that. I had a conversation with a cute girl for like two hours. We talked, even when her cheerleader friends tried to get her attention we talked. She was taking all these college courses as well, except hers weren't as intense as mine, but we could talk about books and things we cared about and it felt normal. She even went and got her college algebra and brought it over and I showed her how to do stuff, but I didn't feel like I used to feel when I helped people with their homework because she didn't just want the answers.

Then Carla asked me for my cell number.

"I don't have a cell phone," I said.

"What? Are you serious? Everyone has a cell phone," she said.

"No me," I said.

"Well, let me give you mine. You have to get a phone. Why won't your parents let you have a phone?"

It was a good question. "I don't know. I guess I never asked for one. I never needed one before."

"Well how are you going to call me? How am I going to call you?" she sounded a little desperate.

“I’ll get a phone. I have money. I can get my own,” I said. I realized that it was completely true. I could totally afford a phone if I wanted to. I didn’t need my mom’s permission to get a phone.

“Good.” She wrote her number for me, twice, on separate papers.

Carla finally had to go when her cheerleader coach came and got her. I guess she was in some trouble, but she didn’t seem to mind.

I saw her again a couple of times, but we couldn’t talk. She had to go around with her cheer team from match to match to cheer for whoever was wrestling, and that kept her pretty busy. I decided to take a nap.

They cleared out the gym before finals. A lot of tournaments do this so they can charge people extra to get back in again. That was my signal to go and get warmed up and ready. They called all the finalists together and explained that we needed to form weight lines so they could call us out to face off. This was pretty standard procedure and I had seen it lots of times before, but I had never been in the finals at a big tournament like this before – not in high school.

My teammates had been out researching my opponent, and apparently he had won gone to state last year or something. I didn’t know, and I tried not to think about it. I did see that he was bigger than me – clearly one of those kids that has to cut weight in order to make it. He looked like a miniature body builder or something. I just looked like a skinny short kid who was about to get crushed, and that’s exactly how I felt. I think he about crushed my hand during the face off.

After all the other weight classes faced off I was up. They always make the lightest wrestlers go first in these big tournaments. He was a lot stronger than me, and he knew what he was doing. I was down five points after the first round, and I honestly had no clue what to do to

get myself out of that kind of a hole. I looked at Coach Dave and he clapped and encouraged me, but he didn't seem to have any specific advice. It was my choice of position to start the second round, and my coach told me to choose down. That meant I had to move hard and fast to try to escape. I did.

I stood up right when the whistle blew and I was just about free when I felt my feet leave the ground. He had me from behind and picked me up. I don't remember hitting the ground.

Guilt Shopping

I woke up on a stretcher. Some strange guy was asking me my name. I told him. He asked me the date. I couldn't remember. He asked me where I was. "Disneyland." He asked me how old I was. "10." He asked me who the president was. "Lincoln."

"My head hurts," I said.

He asked me if anything else hurt.

"My shoulder," I said.

His questions kept coming. I don't remember really well exactly what happened or in what order, but I remember being on the stretcher and being taken out of the gymnasium. Normally the gym was a loud, throbbing place, especially during the finals, but now it was quiet.

I felt sick. The world began to swim. I threw up. Thankfully we hadn't made it to the ambulance yet and the EMT managed to dodge my lunch – otherwise the ride to the hospital would have been very stinky. He seemed pretty good natured about it, but I felt even worse.

"Try to relax," he said.

I tried. They hurried me to the ambulance and started giving me oxygen. I started feeling better as soon as the oxygen started. They put a blanket over me and I started to be able to relax.

One EMT started talking over the radio to the hospital while another started asking me more questions. I felt sleepy. "I want a nap," I said.

"You need to stay awake, Kiev," he warned, but his voice was kind. "Just stay with us for a while, okay. Can you tell us your mom or dad's phone number?"

I tried to remember. I gave them a number. I hoped it was right. He called the number on his cell phone.

“Nobody is answering,” he said. “Is there another number we can try?”

I gave them Mrs. Davis’ number. “She’s a family friend,” I said.

When we got to the hospital Coach Dave was there. He stayed with me and talked to the nurses and doctors and answers questions about what had happened. Of course he had seen everything and could explain it all better than me anyway. Of course there were x-rays and stuff and then the doctors explained everything.

I had a concussion, and I had dislocated my shoulder. The doctor was pretty worried about the concussion because he thought it was pretty severe. He told me I was out of sports for at least a month and I needed to take it easy for a while. The shoulder would heal pretty quickly if I just followed his directions.

Everyone tried calling my mom. I think Coach Dave tried about ten times and I know the hospital people tried too. Mrs. Davis showed up. She asked the doctors what was going on and what she needed to do. When she got there Coach Dave had to go. He still had to drive the mini bus back to the school and there were kids at the tournament that needed him to take them home. It was a bit of a mess, and I don’t think the doctors liked the fact that my mother wasn’t there but I ended up going home with Mrs. Davis. She took me straight home and made me get in bed. She wrote down all the instructions, even though the hospital gave us printed instructions, and then she had to go home.

I don’t know when my mother got home.

On Sunday I woke up in pain. My shoulder didn’t feel good at all. I took one of the pills they had given me. I ate a bowl of cereal. Apparently my mom had done some shopping yesterday.

My mother came out while I was eating breakfast. She looked tired. She made coffee and toast. Then she noticed the sling.

“What happened to you?”

“I got slammed. My shoulder is dislocated and I had a concussion.”

“Why didn’t anybody call me?” Her voice was starting to get hysterical.

“They tried like thirty times.”

“What?” She looked around desperately for her purse. She found it. She found her phone. “Shit! It was on silent.”

“How did you get home?”

“Mrs. Davis brought me.”

“What hospital did they take you to?”

“I can’t remember, but they gave me some papers.”

“Are you going to be okay? Do you have to get a cast or anything?”

“I’m going to be fine. I just have to take it easy for a while.”

She read the papers from the hospital and then called them. She explained that her phone was off and apologized. The people she needed to talk to weren’t going to be there until Monday but she still apologized about twenty times to whoever she talked to.

“I want a cell phone,” I told her. It felt kind of random, but I had been thinking about Carla.

I can’t say I was really surprised because I know she was feeling pretty guilty, but she said, “Sure. Let’s get dressed and go get you a phone. We can go out to eat someplace too. How does that sound?”

“Great.”

So we drove to town. All morning long I kept thinking how lucky I was that it was my left shoulder that had been dislocated because I was right handed and I didn't want to have to write things with my left hand. I also kept thinking that I was going to miss a bunch of school because the doctor had said that I wasn't supposed to go to school or really do anything for at least a week – not even homework – or else my concussion might not heal properly. That was going to really suck.

I had no idea just how guilty my mother was feeling until we got to the phone store. “Pick out whatever you want,” she said, and I knew she literally meant whatever I wanted. I could have chosen a thousand dollar phone and I don't think she would have batted an eye at it. I didn't choose a thousand dollar phone. I chose one of the cheapest ones they had. I just wanted to be able to text Carla and call Sheyla and maybe do an internet search now and again. I didn't need anything fancy.

“Are you sure you don't want a nicer one?” my mom asked. She was trying to assuage her guilt by spending more money.

“No, I'm sure.”

“Well, then why don't we get you a nice case for it? And maybe a headset? And you'll want a car charger and some headphones so you can listen to music.”

“Uh, I don't need a headset.”

She bought every accessory she could think of. Then she made the guy in the store activate it and make sure everything worked perfectly. She wouldn't leave until she was positive.

My mother kept giving me hugs too, all day long, and she told me she was sorry about a thousand times. I knew that being sober today was probably killing her, but she didn't get a

drink with lunch. I knew she was struggling though. She took some Tylenol, but she was extra nice to me, even when I knew she wasn't feeling good.

She took me out to eat a steak, but by this time she really wasn't feeling good, and neither was I.

"I think I need to go home," I said, and she looked relieved.

After we ate we went home, and I got to rest.

I have no idea what my mother did while I was sleeping, but when I woke up she looked like she felt better. I looked around and I didn't see any alcohol, and she didn't smell like she had been drinking. She gave me a big hug and asked how I felt.

She never did ask me how well I did in the tournament.

Carla

I had to spend a whole week doing nothing. My mother doted on me whenever she could. Of course she had to go to work, but she came home right away after work each day. She took me in to see another doctor on Monday and got a second opinion. That doctor explained to her how dangerous concussions can be and that I really shouldn't use my brain for anything for at least a week and that sports were out; he wasn't going to clear me to wrestle for a month – no practice, nothing. Then she sent me out into the waiting room and stayed to talk to the doctor for a while herself.

We went to the pharmacy and she picked up some prescriptions. She didn't say anything to me and put it in her purse. I knew she was trying to keep it secret from me, but I saw that one of them was Valium. I didn't see the other prescription. I didn't pry. If she wanted her secrets I guess she could have them.

Doing nothing, I discovered, is much harder than it sounds. No video games. No television. No books. Just sitting there or lying there and doing NOTHING. That was the slowest, most boring week of my entire life. I cleaned my room. I organized my books, but when my mother came home and saw that I had been doing something she freaked. "Go lie down. Go lie down, now."

Then she cleaned the entire house – everything. She re-cleaned my room. She vacuumed, swept, mopped, scrubbed – everything. Nothing was left to chance so that the next day there was literally nothing for me to do. I slept. Then I took a nap.

I texted Carla even though I knew she was in school. She texted me back and promised to call as soon as she could.

Sheyla came over after school on Tuesday just to check on me. It was nice to break up the monotony.

“Anything new?” I asked.

“Everyone is talking about you. Tommy is saying that you just about died, but I guess they disqualified that kid for unnecessary roughness, so technically you won. Coach Dave has your medal.”

“Wow. I hadn’t even really thought about it. I guess I’m undefeated this year then.”

We both laughed a little. It was funny that I won on a technicality. It didn’t feel real.

“Tommy was saying that you’re ranked number one in the state now in the 1A-2A division.”

“That would be great if I could actually wrestle, but considering that I won’t be back until January I don’t think the rankings mean very much. I can’t even practice.”

“How’s everybody else?” I asked.

“Erin just keeps moping around the house. She went to the basketball game to watch Blake play, but then she came home and cried half the night. You would think they were married or something. I really don’t get it.”

Then my phone rang. Sheyla was surprised – I had forgotten to tell her that I had a phone. I saw Carla’s number on the caller ID and suddenly I felt nervous. My hands started to sweat a little.

“Hi, Carla,” I said.

“Hey, Kiev, I got your text – obviously. Are you okay? What happened. I saw them taking you out on the stretcher and I’ve been worried sick. I didn’t have a way of getting a hold of you. I’ve been freaking out all weekend.”

“I’m okay. I have a concussion and a dislocated shoulder but it’s going to be fine. I have to sit out for a couple of weeks.”

I realized that I was having this conversation in front of Sheyla, and that she had no idea who I was talking to or what was going on, and I felt kind of bad, but at the same time I really wanted to talk to Carla.

Then I heard somebody calling to her in the background.

“Hey, Keiv, I gotta go. I’ll call you later, okay.”

“Sure. Bye,” I said.

“Who was that?” asked Sheyla.

“Uh, a girl I met at the tournament,” I said.

“So now you have a girlfriend?” She was half serious and half teasing, I think. It was hard to tell.

“Uh, no, uh, I don’t think so. She’s just a friend,” I said. I didn’t know what Carla was, but I knew that I liked her a lot.

“Kiev’s got a girlfriend.” Now Sheyla was teasing me – no question about it. “I can’t wait to tell everyone.”

I knew I was blushing, and Sheyla loved every second of it. She laughed uproariously, and there was really nothing I could do about it. I hit her with a pillow but she couldn’t stop laughing.

Then my mom came home and she had brought fried chicken. Sheyla went home and I had to eat dinner. Of course my mother made sure I hadn’t actually done anything all day, and I confirmed that I hadn’t. In the middle of dinner Carla called back.

“Who is it?” my mom asked.

“Carla. I met her at the tournament,” I said.

My mom winked at me mischievously, and I got up and left the room.

We talked forever. I had nothing better to do – after all I had even been forbidden from doing any homework, so talking to Carla was the only entertainment I even had access to.

Besides she didn’t want to talk about things that didn’t interest me, and for some reason she found the things that I did were interesting. I have no idea why she would think that, but she listened as I told her about working all summer mowing lawns.

“Wow. You really have a lot of initiative,” she said.

“It was just something to do,” I replied.

“Yeah, but you could have spent all summer playing *Call of Duty* or *Halo* or something. That’s what my brother did. I swear he never leaves his TV screen.”

We laughed and talked like I had never talked with anyone before. All the silence in my life was pushed away by the sound of her voice. Something just clicked. I mean it wasn’t like we had that much in common; she had never lived in a place as small as me, and in her school there were about a thousand kids, which wasn’t as big as my school in Utah, but still it was a lot bigger than where I was. She was older too. She was a senior and had already been accepted and had her scholarship to Idaho State. Carla was really smart, which made it kind of nice. We could talk about the same books and stuff and I didn’t feel like a dork when I did because she understood.

Also she had her own car and offered to drive over on Saturday to visit. That was awesome.

Carla called me every day after she finished her homework, and we texted constantly throughout the day – at least whenever she could. It was against the rules at her school to use her cell phone during class, but she did anyway when she was sure she could get away with it.

When Saturday came I could hardly sit still. I had been worried that my mother would fall off the wagon again, but she had behaved herself really well. In fact she had poured out all of the vodka and even cleaned out the car. She had been on time to work every day and came straight home. She seemed happier than she had been, and I found it ironic that my accident would be one way of pushing her in the right direction.

Carla showed up at about nine o'clock in the morning. She was driving this little green Ford that her dad had bought her the year before. She lived about an hour away, but the GPS brought her right to our house.

We heard her driving up and my mother opened the door and walked out to greet her before she could even get out of her car. I think my mom was expecting some short fat girl with huge glasses that wore old clothes or something. Carla was tall, athletic, and dressed in a sort of casual way that still looked classy.

“She’s cute,” said my mother. “You picked a good one, Kiev.”

So I was already blushing before Carla even got out of the car.

“You’re all Kiev has talked about,” said my mother before introductions could even really get under way – although it was obvious that we all knew who each other was.

“Uh, yeah, my dad wasn’t sure about me driving all the way out here, but I just had to come and see Kiev. I’ve been pretty worried since I saw them taking him out, said Carla.

By now I was really to self conscious to say much of anything, but that was okay. Carla took my hand and we went in the house. She didn’t let go of my hand, and I didn’t want her to.

After a while my mother suggested I take Carla and show her all around the town. December was already getting cold, so I grabbed my coat and took Carla's hand and we walked down the dirt road towards my meadow. Of course the trees were bare by now, but they still held a piece of serenity for me.

I must have looked like her kid brother or something standing there beneath the bare trees in the cold December air. She was about eight inches taller than me, and when I turned to face her, my heart beating up into my throat and choking off my words, I was looking just above her bra line, but she didn't seem to care. She pulled me close and I held her tight. We kissed. It was dry and quick and we both felt a little embarrassed, but it also felt good and right and the little jolts of electricity that shot through my body let me know that for now at least there was one good thing in my life.

We walked and we talked. I found out that she was seventeen and would turn eighteen in May. She found out that I was fifteen and would turn sixteen in July. I found out that she had lived her whole life in the same house, that her dad was a financial advisor and her mother was a lawyer. She found out that my father was in prison, that he had raped and murdered my sister, and that my mother worked at a bank. She wanted to be a lawyer like her mother and planned to go to law school after majoring in English at Idaho State; I planned to major in physics and had no idea what I wanted to do or which school I wanted to go to. It didn't much matter because we still had time to figure out what we really wanted to do anyway.

We came to Bell's house and I decided I wanted Carla to meet Bell. I knocked on the door and Bell cracked one of her crazy smiles as soon as she saw Carla. "Look what the cat dragged in," she said.

"Hi, Bell, this is Carla," I said.

“Ain’t she a darlin’,” said Bell. “Well bring ‘er in. Don’ keep ‘er standin’ in the cold.”

Bell doted on Carla. She liked her right away, which pleased me more even than when my mom liked her. Somehow I trusted Bell’s judgment on people more than my mother’s. She made Carla tell everything I already knew like where she was from and how old she was. She asked Carla about her parents and how she did in school and what she was planning. “Kiev’s a good ‘un,” she said at last. “Careful whatcha do w’ my boy.”

Carla and me both kind of laughed at that but we could tell that Bell was serious – but Bell never took herself too serious, and she laughed at herself right along with us. Then she just about pushed us out of her house and we were moving down the street. My feet just automatically walked over to Sheyla’s house, and before I knew it we were standing on her porch and I was knocking at the door.

A little redheaded face opened the door and cried out in glee, “Kiev’s here.” Three more kids appeared and all of them screamed and clapped as if Santa had appeared on their doorstep. Then Sheyla was there, gaping at Carla and blushing at her beauty. “Wow, Kiev, she’s beautiful,” said Sheyla before she had even thought about what was coming out of her mouth. Then her face flushed. Behind them all Erin poked her head up from the couch and couldn’t help but stare a little, but then she got up and left the room without saying anything.

Sheyla asked Carla a million questions, all of which Carla answered patiently – or at least tried to because Sheyla’s little brothers and sisters also asked a million questions, both of Carla and me. I hadn’t been gone a week from their house for months – I was basically another brother to them by now, and they wanted to know all about my injuries.

“This is my other family,” I explained to Carla.

“I can see that,” she said.

“Mrs. Davis picked me up from the hospital. Sheyla’s my best friend – as close to a sister as I have anymore,” I said.

Parents

We hung out with the Sheyla's family for a while and then Carla asked if I wanted to drive into town, we could get a hamburger for lunch or something. I hadn't been out of the house all week, so I was dying to go anywhere and do anything. We walked back up to my house, and I noticed that my mom's car was gone. I wasn't really surprised, but it did bother me a little that she hadn't bothered to call and let me know that she was going anywhere.

I went ahead and called her, just to let her know that I was going out.

"Hey, Mom, we're going to town," I said.

"Great, Kiev. I'm just doing some shopping. Let me know if you're not going to be home for dinner." There was real feeling in her voice, almost as if we were having a real conversation. She sounded sober, but I still felt nervous.

Carla must have noticed something different in my voice or maybe my hand started sweating again. I don't know, but she asked, "Is there something wrong, Kiev?"

"I'm just worried about my mom," I said.

"Why? She seemed fine earlier," said Carla.

"Well, it's hard to explain," I said.

"Try. I'm sure I'll understand," said Carla.

"Look, she's got a problem. I mean she drinks a lot – at least she did up until this week. I mean before my accident. Something has changed since then. I don't know how to explain it, but she's more normal now I guess."

"So she what? She got sober?"

“Yeah, I guess. Look, I don’t understand it myself. I mean I only found out what was going on a few months ago, and she hides it really well.”

Carla smiled at me. “Hey, if she’s doing better then she’s doing better. Don’t jinx it. Okay?”

Her smile turned my insides upside down. Really. I just kind of melted when she smiled. “Okay,” I said.

We drove to town and I showed her the burger place where Sheyla and I usually ate lunch when we were working. It was a little family run shop that had great fries. I could tell Carl really liked it.

After a while, though, our conversation started to slow down, which would have been just fine except I was starting to get a headache and I felt a little queasy after eating.

“Are you okay, Kiev?” Carla asked.

“I haven’t been out of the house. The doctors told me to take it easy. I wasn’t supposed to even watch television or anything this week. I think I’m getting a headache,” I said.

“Then I better take you home,” she said.

“But I want to be with you,” I protested.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. I have all day,” she said.

So our first date ended with me throwing up in the bathroom and then driving back home. We didn’t talk much as we drove because I was feeling more and more tired all the time. Once we got to my house Carla turned on the television and I fell asleep with my head in her lap on the couch.

Mom came home a little while later and I woke up. She had a couple of bags of groceries and Carla got up and helped her bring them in, which pleased my mother to no end. When I got up to help my mother said, “Oh, no you don’t. Just lie down and rest. We’ve got it.”

So I rested and Carla and my mother talked and made dinner together and my silent house felt like a home – like it hadn’t felt since before Jen died. We ate homemade tacos and then sat around the kitchen table and played Uno. We laughed and talked and enjoyed an evening that would have felt normal if I hadn’t become completely used to almost complete silence. Then I started getting tired and Carla decided she should go.

I walked her out. My heart felt sick, but not because of my concussion. I didn’t want her to go, and once we got outside I realized that she didn’t want to go either. She stood on the ground and I stood on the bottom step of our front steps and I pulled her to me. She held me tight, and because I was on the step I could look her in the face and her eyes sparkled a little.

On the steps beneath the stars on that crisp December evening I kissed Carla for the second time, and this time the kiss was not quick. We kissed and kissed, and a little breathlessly our lips parted. I held her and felt her heart beating next to me. I held her until the cold outside became too much for me to stand and I had to let her go.

“Call me when you get home,” I said.

“Sure. Of course.” She smiled and she almost danced to her car.

An hour later my phone rang.

We talked until late in the night about everything and nothing. Just the sound of her voice on the phone seemed to send little jolts of electricity into my chest, and I loved it. We made plans to meet up again the next day, and she would drive me back to meet her family. I

instantly felt more than a little nervous, but at the same time I was really excited to see where she lived and what kind of a house the daughter of a financial planner and a lawyer would live in.

Accordingly, the next day she showed up and once again my mother greeted her with a degree of affection I found almost nauseating. All the same I would rather prefer her doting on Carla than having her ignore her the way that she had been ignoring me for all these months or else sitting there with her bottle in front of the TV. Carla drove us the hour to a town with actual subdivisions and mini malls. All these were things that had mostly faded from my memory of living in Utah with a much bigger school, where playing outside was something done only under strict parental supervision and everybody locked their cars.

Locking my door was something that would take some getting used to, and Carla had to remind me when I got out at her parents' house. The place was enormous, with a perfectly tended lawn, a long graceful driveway, and amazing windows looking out over the golf course. A light dusting of snow covered the lawn, but I could tell that in the spring and summer the view was probably amazing, and I felt significant twinges of jealousy as we drove up.

"This is amazing," I commented to Carla.

"Yeah, my parents are pretty well off," she said.

"My mom could never afford anything like this," I said.

"Well, maybe there's more to life than a big house and nice cars," she said.

"Yeah, but it's nice anyway," I said.

She didn't say anything for a minute. She seemed nervous. Her anxiety had been building throughout the trip, but I really didn't know why. "Maybe this was a mistake," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

“Well, look, my parents aren’t like your mom. I mean they aren’t as down to earth,” she said.

I scoffed. “Look, my mother isn’t down to earth. You don’t know. Really. What you saw yesterday isn’t my mom. She’s a secretive alcoholic that I barely even know and who never talks to me. How bad can your parents be?”

“Bad.” She was chewing her bottom lip, smudging her perfect lipstick a little. “I’ve never brought a boy home before. I mean I’ve never really had a real boyfriend before.” Of course I couldn’t believe that was true, but I didn’t say anything. She must have seen the doubt on my face, though. “Really, it’s true. I mean of course I’ve dated other boys. I know I’m pretty – I get asked out all the time, but I never felt like this about anyone before. I know that sounds a little crazy, but it’s true. But, look, I don’t know how my parents are going to react. Okay?”

“Okay. Really. Either they like me or they don’t. Either way, I’m okay. I’m here because I want to be with you.”

She parked her car in their huge garage and we went in through the garage. The huge house felt empty. Our footsteps practically echoed on the kitchen tiles even though Carla and I both took off our shoes when we came inside. She led the way through their living room and over to her father’s den. He was sitting behind his desk looking at his computer when we came in. He seemed pretty focused on whatever he was doing and didn’t even look up when we came in.

“Hey, dad, I want you to meet someone,” she said.

He looked from his screen to us. “Who?” he asked.

“This is Kiev,” she said.

“He looks like he’s twelve,” he said, as if I wasn’t even standing there. “How old are you kid?”

“Fifteen,” I said. I felt my jaw tighten and set. He had raised my hackles. I looked him in the face, and said, “How old are you?”

I don’t think he appreciated the question, but he wasn’t going to throw off my some sassy teenager either. “Old enough to be your dad,” he said, but he said it with a good humor that told me he got my message and rather than escalating the tension in the room he eased it a little. “Well, what’s your name.”

“Kiev Kostas,” I said. “What’s yours?”

“My friends call me Chuck. You can call me Mr. Caulfield. Do you have a job, Kiev?”

“Yeah, when I’m not in sports. I mow lawns,” I said.

“What do you get paid?” He had taken on a business tone, and now it was if Carla wasn’t there.

“Depends. Most days about a hundred bucks,” I said.

“Who do you work for? Is it a good company?” he asked.

“Nobody,” I said.

“What do you mean, nobody?”

“I work for myself I guess. I mean it’s my lawnmower and everything.”

He looked at Carla. “Okay. He can stay,” he said, and that was it. As far as he was concerned the conversation was over. He turned back to his computer and Carla and I left the den. Of course I felt strange, but I figured it could have gone a lot worse.

“Told ya they were a little cold,” said Carla in a whisper.

“At least he didn’t throw me out,” I said. I meant it to be a little bit of a joke, but she didn’t laugh. I got the idea that she had expected her father to throw me out.

“I think he’s glad you make your own money. I think he’s afraid he’s going to have to support me my whole life,” she said.

“Doesn’t your mom make money?” I asked.

“Yeah, but according to him she also spends it all. Plus I don’t know how much she actually makes. I mean she has an office and everything, but I don’t know how many actual clients she gets. At least she never really seems to be working. I get the impression that her business is just for show or something. Does that sound strange?”

“Yeah. Where is your mom?”

“No idea – probably shopping. She isn’t around much most of the time.”

“Then what are we going to do?” I asked.

“Well, you want to see my room?” she asked.

“Sure.”

She led me upstairs to where her and her brother’s rooms were. There was another spare bedroom upstairs, and downstairs she said they had practically a whole other house in the basement, but they never really used it. They had a big game room and another big screen television and two more spare bedrooms but they were where her mom kept her stamping stuff and her dad kept his fishing stuff, but nobody was hardly ever home so none of it was hardly ever used.

“That doesn’t make any sense to me. Why on Earth do they think they need all this stuff when they never really use it and they aren’t ever home to enjoy it anyway? I mean my dad

works so much we never see him except on Sundays, and most of the time he stays in his den working anyway. I don't get it," she said.

I knew she was just venting, so I just shrugged in agreement.

Her room was pretty plain, except that her bedspread was hot pink. Unlike my room everything was organized. Her dresser had a picture of her family and a few bottles of perfume organized very neatly on top. She had a little table with a mirror and her makeup was laid out and organized on it. I suspected that all of her clothes and shoes were organized by color or something behind the closed closet doors.

She pulled me into her room and closed the door, and in the same motion pulled me into a tight hug, crushing my head into her chest, which basically smashed my face into her boobs. It was awkward, but also pleasant, and when I looked up to her face I saw a mix of mischievousness and relief in her eyes. "I just wanted to get you all by myself," she said.

We hung out at her house for a while, and then she called her mom's cell phone. She was going to have lunch with a friend and invited Carla to bring me along to have lunch with them. Carla said that we had plans, but that we could stop by and meet them for a minute. Of course that was a lie, but I got the impression that Carla didn't really want to spend an hour eating lunch with her mother. When we met up with her mother later I understood why.

Her mother was gorgeous – an older version of Carla with perfect skin and hair, and although I don't know much about clothes I could tell that she didn't shop at Wal-mart. She took one look at me and her nose wrinkled involuntarily. I was wearing a t-shirt from an old wrestling tournament and jeans and shoes that I had worked in last summer – there were grass stains on both.

"This is Kiev," said Carla.

“Nice to meet you,” said Mrs. Caulfield.

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“Tell me about yourself,” said Mrs. Caulfield, and she said it with the same tone of voice that I would later come to recognize in job interviews – the question, of course, was also one I heard in later job interviews.

“I’m short, smart, and so handsome all the girls are dying to meet me,” I said. Somehow I just couldn’t help myself. When someone looks down their nose at me (which in my case was quite literal), I just get this knee jerk sarcasm that snaps out. Mrs. Caulfield was not amused.

“Really,” she said, and she said it all condescending and snooty.

“Well, of course then I’m also fabulously rich and all,” I said, laying it on a little thick. “But then who cares about money, after all.”

That last crack hit home. Her eyes held the exact same tint of hatred that Blake’s had held when he threw that car at me the year before. The only difference is that she had slightly more self control than Blake did. I couldn’t see Carla, but I felt her hand give mine a squeeze so hard I think she cut off the circulation in my fingers.

“Where did you find him Carla? He’s so very clever,” said Mrs. Caulfield, and her voice was a careful cocktail of sarcasm, threats, and cordiality – there were more levels of meaning in her words than I had ever before imagined possible in one statement. I had to admire her ability to use her voice.

“Kiev wrestles,” said Carla. “He also runs track. I met him last year, and then again at the wrestling tournament last weekend. He took first place.”

I can’t say that the conversation got any easier the longer it lasted, but at least I kept my mouth shut. I remembered what my mother had said about my mouth getting me into trouble,

and for Carla's sake I didn't say anything to piss off Mrs. Caulfield. I knew I was out of my depth with her, so I let Carla do all the talking. She understood her mother on a level that I never would, and I decided to let it go. If Carla could convince her that I was okay, then okay; if she couldn't, then I realized right then and there that there was no way I could.

The New Year

Carla and I were officially dating. She was still supposed to be doing her cheerleading, but she faked an injury all through December so that she could drive over every weekend. She even skipped school on Fridays so she could come over and spend the day with me – there were no more visits to her house; she had given up on the idea of endearing me to her parents for the present. Instead we devoted our time to homework and making out.

At first Sheyla was jealous that Carla had usurped her place in my life, but they quickly became friends and I ended up spending almost as much time at their house as I always had. I had a ton of homework to catch up on after being out of school for a week with orders not to think, and I really appreciated having Carla around because, in spite of the distraction that she presented, she was smart and a methodical worker. Everything had always been so easy for me in school that I wasn't very organized when it came to studying or doing homework. Carla was smart, but she always had to work in school, and she had a system for everything. I was smart enough to adopt her system, and by the end of the week I was back to coasting through school.

My mother, as far as I could tell, remained sober throughout December. She went out with her friends on Fridays, but she didn't stay out that late, and because Blake wasn't dating Erin anymore she even came over to the Davis' once in a while and watched movies or played games with us. Those were great evenings. Mom liked Carla – a lot. More than once she came to me and said, "She's a great girl, Kiev – a real catch. Hang on to her son. Don't let her go." There always seemed to be more feeling in her words, more meaning than I was ever able to really understand, but just like most things she said, I never forgot them.

I also took my SATs. We hadn't planned it or anything, but Carla and I both took our tests the same day and in the same room, which was cool. She said she had already done them last June, but she was trying to get a higher score. I just shrugged. I'm not going to tell my scores. It's always embarrassing – I mean nobody likes to feel inferior to a short kid, and it kind of made Carla mad when I scored higher than she did.

The doctor cleared me for practice on December 29th. We had already finished our semester exams and let out for Christmas break. Carla's family had gone skiing and were going to celebrate the new year with her grandparents, and I was back at practice. I discovered that coming back to wrestling mid-season was much worse than starting the season out. Everyone else was in far better shape than me, and I felt like I was just trying to catch up the whole time even though I had been able to come and watch for the last couple of weeks. I mean I knew the moves and stuff already, but I was so out of shape it was really hard to keep up with those guys.

I felt like life was finally getting back into a normal routine until New Year's Eve. The Methodist church across the street from the market in town was holding an alcohol free family party, and Sheyla's family was going, so I figured I would go along with them. They had games and food. They had these little carnival type games set up and all the kids got tickets to go and toss bean bags or do the cake walk and stuff. It was pretty fun – especially because Mrs. Davis really needed an extra hand with all the little kids so I got roped into helping out, which was just fine. My mom even decided she would come by, which was pretty awe-inspiring considering that she had sworn she would never cross the threshold of a church.

I really missed Carla, but we had been texting all the time, and we called each other quite a bit, so it wasn't all that bad. I mean even though we only lived like an hour away it was still almost a long distance relationship just because of our schedules. We wouldn't be able see each

other every weekend after Christmas break, and we both had really started to feel that loss even though it hadn't happened yet.

About eleven thirty I had to go to the bathroom, and I had never been in that building before and I got lost. I turned a corner, and there was Blake Johnson with his tongue down Erin's throat. I was so embarrassed I forgot what I was doing. They had their eyes closed and I just sort of backed up around the corner again. I was pretty sure Mrs. Davis wouldn't be happy if she knew, but I also didn't think it was any of my business. I decided I was just going to find the bathroom and pretend that I hadn't seen anything.

When I went back to the party I literally bumped into Sheyla, and she asked, "Have you seen Erin? Mom's looking all over the place for her."

"Uh, no," I said, and I really hoped the lie wouldn't show on my face.

"Damn. Mom is going to be pissed. The Johnsons are here and Mom thinks Erin still has a thing for Blake. I don't know what she sees in him," she said.

I couldn't say anything else – not without giving away what I had seen, so instead I occupied my time by looking around the room. That's when what Sheyla had told me really sank in. Blake's mom and dad were here, and so was my mom. I looked frantically around the room to see if I could locate my mother. I didn't want her and Blake's mom getting into a scene or anything. I saw Blake's dad, and next to him I saw the woman who had come to my house last spring looking for my mother – that's when I made the connection that she was Blake's mom. I couldn't see my own mother anywhere.

Then Sheyla's little brother latched onto my hand and pulled me over to the fishing game they had set up. The kids pretended to fish at this pond that was really a shower curtain and behind the curtain older kids and moms attached little prizes to clothespins that the kids fished

out. I still kept glancing around, but I didn't see my mom. We went from the fishing game to where they were blowing bubbles, and then my cell phone buzzed. Carla was texting me. I snapped a pic of the kids in the bubbles and sent it to her by way of explanation of what I was doing.

"Cool," she replied.

I still didn't see my mother. She had said she probably wouldn't stay long, so I assumed she had already left. I started to relax. Then I realized that Mrs. Johnson seemed to be looking for something – or someone. At first I figured it must be Blake because I knew he had sneaked off to make out with Erin, but then I realized her husband was gone. "Shit."

"Kiev!" said Mrs. Gates, a woman I mowed lawns for.

"Sorry, Mrs. Gates." I hadn't realized I had said that out loud.

I held onto hope. Maybe my mother had just decided to meet up with some friends somewhere and everything was fine. I'm sure Mr. Johnson had plenty of other places he would rather be and that my mother wasn't the only distraction he had in his life. I tried to put my suspicions out of my mind and enjoy the party.

Then Mrs. Davis found me. "Kiev, have you seen Erin?" She asked me directly. I didn't want to lie. I also didn't want to get involved.

"Yes. She's with Blake." The words left my mouth automatically. There was no way to lie to Mrs. Davis.

"What? Are you sure?"

"I saw them when I was looking for the bathroom."

"Shit! When will that girl learn?"

"Have you seen my mom?" I asked.

“What? Oh, I think she left,” said Mrs. Davis, but she was lost in her own concerns now. I saw her leave the room, and I knew she wouldn’t be coming back without Erin even if she had to spend all night looking for her. It would obviously be up to Sheyla and me to get the kids home.

After midnight we took the kids home. They were falling asleep and I had to carry the smallest one all the way. I put him in his bed and said goodnight to Sheyla.

“Do you think she’s okay?” she asked me.

It took me a second to realize that she was talking about Erin. “Yeah, why wouldn’t she?”

“She had an abortion.”

I just looked at her. The news hit me like a brick. Sure I thought Erin was the consummate bitch, but I hadn’t realized she had been dealing with something this serious.

“After Homecoming. I found out because I overheard her talking with Mom. That’s why Blake broke up with her. She told him that she was pregnant and he didn’t want anything to do with it. He said that she was a stupid little girl to get herself knocked up when she was supposed to be on the pill. It was Erin’s choice. She said she wanted to have an abortion. That’s why she missed that week from school.”

I gave Sheyla a hug. I held her and told her everything was going to be okay. I didn’t know if it was or not. I think I only half believed it, but I knew she needed somebody to tell her things were going to be fine, and I also knew it was my job. I was her older brother.

My mother’s car wasn’t there when I got home. This didn’t surprise me.

I stayed up late texting with Carla, but I still fell asleep before my mom got home.

Victory

If she had been out drinking I never found out. She didn't leave any evidence anywhere, and I preferred to believe that she hadn't. Erin, on the other hand, as I found out when I went over to Sheyla's later, together with Blake, had been caught drinking by the sheriff. Sheyla told me all about it.

"Mom came home right after you left, but then she got a call on her cell phone, and it was the sheriff. I guess Erin got cited – minor in possession or something like that. Blake got in a lot more trouble, though, because he's eighteen now. I think the basketball team can kiss their chances at winning state goodbye."

I kind of felt bad for Erin – I mean she had to share a room with Sheyla, which meant that she couldn't hide anything from Sheyla, which meant in turn that I was going to find out everything she did. I really felt bad for her. Some kids thought they had problems in life because their parents yelled at them to clean their rooms or because they brought home C's. Erin was dealing with adult problems, and no kid should have to do that – at least in my opinion.

Sheyla was right about the basketball team. Despite the best efforts of his dad at the next school board meeting they decided that he couldn't play. I expected Mr. Stradlater to be upset about it, but I guess he had been coaching and teaching for so long that he just kept doing what he did – at least that's what Chad said when I asked him about his practices. Erin got community service hours, but I had more things to worry about than her problems. Coach Dave had big expectations for me, and wrestling practice didn't get any easier. We had a big tournament every weekend, and I found myself thrown right into the middle of competition I wasn't really ready for.

Because of my perfect record and big win during the first tournament I found myself with a high seed, which meant that I got an easy opponent in the first round. Unfortunately I couldn't hold up deeper into the tournament and finished in fourth place. The losses hurt – not physically. I felt like quitting. I hated being behind and I felt like I had too far to go in order to catch up with everyone who had been wrestling the whole season. I think if my mother hadn't been to that tournament I probably would have quit – or if Carla hadn't called me an idiot and a quitter.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself and get back in the game,” she said.

She was right.

Getting back into shape wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I hadn't exactly been sitting on my butt all summer, and I had started running and working out as soon as the doctors let me, so in retrospect I wasn't as badly out of shape as I thought I was. It just took a couple of weeks for me to get back into the routine. I was also happy to notice that I had continued to put on some weight. I was still growing.

The next tournament was all 1A schools, and the competition wasn't nearly as tough. I only had to wrestle twice, and I pinned both of those kids quickly. The rest of the team was coming along pretty good too. All of us landed somewhere in the top four, which was impressive. Overall our team finished in second place, which was by far the highest our team had finished in a wrestling tournament ever. If we had had more guys on the team we probably would have been able to win or something, but there is only so much you can do with five guys.

Mom didn't make it that weekend, it was too far to drive. I got home late on Saturday night, but she still wasn't home. I saw her Sunday morning, and she was proud of how I did. She didn't have those bloodshot eyes I had gotten so used to before Thanksgiving, and I was pretty sure that whatever else she was doing she wasn't out drinking. Of course there was no

way for me to be sure, but at least we were feeling like a family, except of course that Randy hadn't come home for Christmas. He had gone to visit his girlfriend's family again.

The next weekend I actually felt ready to wrestle. I was back in pretty good shape, and I wrestled well. It was another pretty big tournament, and Carla was there. Her cheer coach kept her pretty busy, but we still got to hang out most of the time. My mom was working on Friday, but it was a two part tournament and she promised she would be there on Saturday if I qualified for the second day. I only had to wrestle once on Friday because I had a bye, and I won my match, so mostly I just got to hang out with Carla.

Then on Saturday I had my semifinal match. It was a tough match, but I got a win. Then I found out I would have to wrestle the same kid I had wrestled back that weekend in December in the finals. My heart started racing the second I found out, and I just couldn't get my nerves under control the rest of the day. Coach Dave tried everything to get me to calm down, and so did Carla, but I could tell that she was just as worried about the match as I was. My mom tried to get me to relax as well, but when I went out there for the finals face off I was still feeling nervous.

When the whistle blew to start the match my palms were still sweating. Of course he took me down right away and I had to scramble to keep from giving up even more points. Near the end of the first round he turned me, and I was down by five points – exactly where I had been a month and a half ago. Coach Dave wasn't saying anything from the chair where he sat. My mother was screaming her head off, but I couldn't hear what she was saying through the headgear. What it was that calmed me down out there in the middle of all that noise and confusion with my heart racing a million miles an hour and this guy who was bigger and stronger and better than me pushing me around was the thought of Erin Davis dealing with an abortion

and community service and a boyfriend who was a real bastard. Out of nowhere the thought came to me that she was the one dealing with the real shit in life and all I was doing was playing a game. Sure it was tough and this guy was a gorilla, but it was a game – and I knew the rules.

I didn't win the match. I lost in overtime. I tied it up in the second round, and we traded points in the third. In the third overtime period he scored. I was exhausted. I mean I had wrestled as hard as anyone I knew and I just ran out of gas, but everyone in the gym – everyone who knew what had happened the last time – knew who had really won. I shook his hand and he gave me a hug as the ref raised his hand. I didn't mind second place that day.

Break Up

I didn't have any classes with Blake Johnson, so it was pretty obvious he was looking for me when we ran into each other in the hall on Monday after school. Erin was back to hanging on his arm like some sort of wide-eyed badge of honor. "Dude, Kostas, I thought I told you to tell you mom to back off." He sort of sneered and that wild look was back in his eye, but it no longer held the same terror for me. I felt my hackles raise, though, and the capricious little demon inside jumped.

"Why don't you tell your dad to stop screwing everything in sight," I said. Then I noticed his fists clench. I saw Mr. Stradlater walking past on his way to the gym. He saw us and stopped. Blake's back was to him and he didn't see. I stuffed my hands into my pockets.

"What did you say?" He was trying to be threatening.

"Or maybe you'd feel too hypocritical. I mean a couple weeks ago you were screwing Chelsea and now that she wised up you had to fall back on plan B – or maybe when Erin isn't looking your still banging Chelsea on the side."

I didn't see what Erin's reaction to what I said was. I was mouthing off as much for her benefit as for Blake's, but his fist connected with my face almost before the words were out of my mouth, and I fell pretty hard. I barely had time to get my hands out of my pockets to balance myself and keep my head from bouncing off the floor. But I was just laughing.

"Johnson! My office," commanded Mr. Stradlater.

He turned and so did Erin. She was torn between shock at seeing her idol hit a defenseless little kid and anger at seeing him caught and ready to be suspended again. She

turned to follow him but Mr. Stradlater stopped her. “And you, Miss Davis, should go home. As far as I know you have no business here after school hours.”

She stood there unable to say anything as Blake marched to Stradlater’s office. Then she looked at me and the mix of anger and sadness on her face perplexed me. Then I realized she was looking at the scar under my right eye. Something in her brain was remembering that day when Blake had thrown that car.

“You didn’t get something in your eye that day, did you?” she said.

“He threw a car at me,” I said.

“And what you said about Chelsea? Is that true too?”

“I saw them at Homecoming – right after you guys broke up. I saw that too. I was trying to sneak out of the dance and I saw you in the hall, but then I went back in and I saw him with Chelsea, and later that night I saw them in his truck.”

She was crying now – not sobbing or sniffing – just tears rolling down her cheeks. Something had happened and I knew it wasn’t all bad because there was a light in her eyes that I hadn’t seen before.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Sorry for what?” she asked, but her voice didn’t sound bitter.

“I’m sorry for everything you’ve been through,” I said.

I think she realized that Sheyla must have told me everything, but I didn’t say her secrets out loud. She deserved better than that. Then she went home. She went out the side door – away from Mr. Stradlater’s office, and I went to practice. On Tuesday Blake wasn’t at school, and I never saw him with Erin again.

Like

Of course that didn't resolve in my mind the fact that apparently my mother had hooked up with his father again. I didn't have any answers to that dilemma, and I didn't blame Blake for being angry about it either. After practice I called Carla and told her what had happened. I also took a picture of my new black eye and sent it to her. Of course she freaked out about that, but I told her it didn't hurt that much, which was true. Then I had to explain basically everything that had been going on in my life since last spring. She didn't have any answers, but it was nice to have somebody to talk to.

My mother freaked when she saw my eye. "What happened? Did you get into a fight again? Please tell me you weren't mouthing off again."

"I bumped heads at wrestling practice," I said. It was plausible. It had happened before.

"You guys need to be more careful. Let me get an ice pack. Doesn't your coach know enough to put ice on these things?"

Yes, Coach Dave does know enough to put ice on these things. In fact he had me icing it during practice even though it didn't happen at practice. He had also told me to ice it at home, but I had been talking to Carla and forgot.

She made me ice my eye, and I secretly gloated that my lie had worked – at least it would work until she talked to Blake's dad after Blake got suspended, I realized. I guess I would know if she saw him after all – unless Blake lied to his dad.

As it turns out my mother never mentioned my black eye so I assumed Blake was wrong about her and his dad.

I really wanted to graduate this year. Mr. Stradlater sent home the paperwork to my mother the day after my fight with Blake, but she hadn't turned it back in to him. She had until March, he said, but after that it would be too late. I pressured her but I could tell it wasn't something she wanted me to do. I even filled the forms out completely except for her signature – I could have forged it, but it would have been kind of obvious to my mother.

I realize now that she must have been dealing with some pretty mixed emotions about it all. For one thing, when she came home late from work the next day I knew she was definitely dealing with something. Her car wasn't there after wrestling practice on Thursday either. We had an overnight trip that weekend for a two day tournament, which happened fairly often, but this time she forgot to put together my cooler of snacks and stuff which she had promised to do. I didn't mind all that much – I mean it wasn't that hard to make some sandwiches, and I had money to buy food with, so no big deal, except it was a big deal. I mean she promised.

I got home late on Saturday night – well really Sunday morning, and her car wasn't there. Coach had dropped me off at the school and I walked up through my meadow. It was cold and new snow covered everything there and thin ice covered the stream. I was just thinking to myself how pretty and quiet everything was when I saw the car was gone. It hit me like a punch to the gut.

The car was gone and on Sunday morning that fact stood between us like an invisible wall. She knew that I knew she was hiding things from me but I didn't have the guts to say anything. I pretended I didn't care or that everything was innocent and normal – that all the little signs I had seen from New Year's until then had been just coincidences, but as hard as I tried I just couldn't deceive myself. She didn't ask me how I'd done at the tournament. She didn't ask

me how Carla was. She just sipped her coffee and looked at me out of the fluffy pink bathrobe and I just looked back at her.

The Christmas miracle was over and I just had to accept that. Carla came over and noticed right away that something was wrong. My mother, of course, was still as cheerful as ever to Carla. She still doted on her, but then she got a text on her cell and disappeared into her bedroom. We saw her half an hour later dressed and headed out the door. “Don’t wait up,” she said.

“What’s up with her?” Carla asked.

“I think she’s having an affair with a married man,” I said.

“What? You can’t be serious,” said Carla.

“Yeah – my arch-enemy’s father,” I said. We both chuckled.

“I’m pretty sure both of my parents are having affairs too,” said Carla after a few minutes.

I just looked at her to see if she was being serious. She was.

“It’s kind of sad really. They live together but they don’t really live together. I mean they live in the same house, but it’s almost like they aren’t ever there at the same time. And they never talk or anything. It’s kind of creepy,” she said.

“Why don’t they get divorced?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean I don’t really want them to or anything, but I don’t understand why they stay together when obviously they don’t really even like each other. I don’t get it.”

“I’m sure they loved each other once,” I said.

“They probably still do, but they don’t seem to like each other anymore,” said Carla.

“How can you love someone you don’t like?” Somehow that concept had never occurred to me before.

“Well, like with kids. I mean I know my parents love me and all, but I don’t think they want to hang out with me or anything. You know, I don’t think they like me, you know, like a friend. I think it’s that way with my parents. They just don’t like each other very much.” She made sense.

We were sitting in my couch. I’m sure we made a pretty odd scene – I mean she was so much taller than me, and I’m kind of dark and she’s so blonde and light skinned. Then she pulled me close and sort of laid back on the couch, resting her head on the arm of the couch and pulled me on top of her so we were close. I think she needed that closeness right then.

“Are you worried?” I asked.

“A little,” she said.

“I love you,” I said. I hadn’t planned to say it, but I meant it, and I know she needed to hear it.

“I love you too,” she said. I melted inside.

“I like you,” I said. She giggled.

“I like you too,” she said.

All the problems in the world seemed to disappear then.

District Wrestling

The last couple of weeks leading up to the district tournament, which was the second to last weekend in February, saw a return to the secrecy and silence I had dreaded and hated all last summer. I didn't see my mother much. She didn't come home after work. Blake was suspended for a whole week for throwing that punch, and when he came back to school he avoided me. He avoided Erin too. It was kind of strange to see him without a girl hanging on him like some dolled up Christmas tree ornament.

Valentine's Day happened on the Saturday of a big tournament. Carla said she didn't care about the holiday much and she didn't mind if we didn't do anything for it, but she came over on Friday anyway and we went and had dinner. I got her a t-shirt with a teddy bear on front and a pair of earrings. She got me a backpack to carry my school books in because my old one had so many holes in it all my pencils and stuff kept falling out. I liked that about Carla – she was practical.

I wished my mom would have been at the district tournament. I wished Carla could have been there. She had to go and cheer at the district tournament for her school. I don't know where my mom was, but I'm pretty sure she wasn't sober. When Carla dropped me off after our date on the Friday before the district tournament I went straight to bed. I heard my mom puking outside my window when she came home later that night. There was a bottle of vodka in the fridge next to the milk the next morning.

I think it really bothered me because I struggled to wrestle on Saturday – I mean I couldn't relax or anything. I had a bye the first round, and it was an eight man bracket, so I only had to win the semi-finals to move on. I made a stupid mistake in that first match and got behind

on points against a kid I had already beat twice that year. Coach Dave was actually yelling at me. Usually he was pretty calm, and sure he yelled a lot like all the other coaches, but that was just so he could be heard – but that time he was angry. That made me angry. I pinned the kid in the second round. I don't know who I was madder at – myself or my coach, but at least I had won. Coach pulled me aside after that match. He had calmed down, and had that concerned adult look on his face.

“What's going on, Kiev?”

“I don't know,” I said. I mean in that moment, right then, I don't think I was lying because I really couldn't think straight – at least I wasn't trying to lie to him.

“Look, buddy, if there's something wrong, now is the time to speak up. You've got to figure this out before the finals get here. The top two go, so you're headed to state either way, but you need this win today if you want a good seed. State's no joke. You need a win today.”

I didn't know what to say. I just kind of looked at him and I could feel my eyes starting to tear up. I felt like such a little baby right then. I hated the fact that I was so small right then because I knew it made me look like some little kid, but I wasn't a little kid anymore. Coach saw he wasn't doing much good talking to me, so he gave me pat on the back and said, “Okay. Get some water.”

By the time the finals came I had managed to get my head on straight, which was a good thing because that was a tough match. I mean I was the kid to beat, and all the coaches had spotted my weaknesses which meant they drilled their guys to counter me. By the end of the season pretty much everybody is wrestling in top form, and there isn't a lot of room for error. I found an empty place in my head somewhere before that last match – a place of white where no thoughts came in and I went there. I let my body move the way it wanted to move and that

strategy worked. I won. I caught him in a fireman's carry in the second round and took him straight to his back. I had over a minute left on the clock, and he ran out of fight after about twenty seconds.

That empty place I had found – the one that let me just act without thinking – sort of stayed with me the rest of the day. I mean I watched Rickie, our other best wrestler but I didn't see anything. He lost in the finals. It was a close match but I couldn't tell you what happened because even though I was there and saw everything my mind was just empty. I talked with people. I even texted Carla, but I just couldn't feel because I knew that if I let myself feel anything right then it would hurt.

We got home late – it was after midnight. Mom wasn't there. The emptiness was beginning to close by the time I went to bed, but it was replaced with anger, and when I heard that car pulling up outside (I hadn't been able to sleep), I sort of snapped. I jerked open the front door and there was my mom – stumbling drunk – getting out of her car.

“Where in the hell have you been?” I screamed at her.

She looked at me but there was nothing behind her eyes.

“What in the hell do you think you're doing?” I kept screaming.

“Fuck you,” she said. She wasn't yelling. She just said it and the words hit me harder than Blake Johnson ever did.

“Go to hell,” I yelled. Then I locked the front door.

“Open this fucking door!” I heard her screaming outside for a while, but I was already in my bed. I lay there listening to her and trying to ignore her.

It took her a while to go around to the back door, which we never locked, and which I hadn't bothered to go lock. Then she came into my bedroom.

“What in the hell is your problem?” Her words came slightly slurred, and that made the anger in them hurt even more.

I wanted to ignore her, but I couldn't. I looked up at her from my bed.

“You are my problem,” I said. “You're a God dam drunk.”

“Fuck you,” she said. Then she went to bed.

I don't know if she even remembered that conversation the next day or not. I didn't see her. She wasn't awake when Carla picked me up and she wasn't home when Carla dropped me off.

In fact I didn't see my mother all week. I went to school when she was still sleeping and she only came home after I was in bed. I heard her come in at night and I'm sure she heard me leaving in the morning, but we didn't see each other or say anything else to each other. On Thursday I told her through her bedroom door that I was leaving for the state tournament and that I would be gone all weekend. She didn't respond. I don't even know if she was awake or not.

Phone Calls

We drove over on Thursday and Rickie and I shared a motel room. Coach Dave stayed in the room next door. He told us we weren't allowed to have girls in our room, but Carla came over anyway. She was there to cheer for her school. Coach Dave told us to keep the motel room door open instead of kicking her out. I think he realized I would just take off if he did. He did kick her out about ten o'clock, but I didn't mind. We both knew I needed to get my sleep.

State is no joke, as Coach Dave likes to say. The competition is tough and most of the wrestlers don't know what to expect because most of us have never been there before and most of us have never wrestled each other before. Plus it's a whole new experience in terms of scale. There are tons of mats and we got to see all the wrestlers from all the big schools as well. Some of those 5A guys wrestled like college kids. I watched and learned.

I think I was lucky that everything was so new because if it hadn't been I probably would have been replaying that last conversation I had with my mother over and over again in my head. As it was there were so many new things to see I felt kind of overwhelmed and lost. But Carla was there and Coach Dave was there and he reminded me that all the mats were still the same. I had wrestled in a huge tournament once before this season, and I had finished in third place, so I knew I had what it takes to win, but I still felt overwhelmed.

Once I stepped onto the mat, though, I managed to just go into gear. I wrestled and I won. I didn't have to think about it at all. It helped that I had a strong seed in the tournament, otherwise that first match might not have gone quite so well. The second match that day was much more difficult. He was a tough competitor. Neither of us scored in the first round, and for

a while I thought he might beat me. But when I scored a takedown in the second round my confidence really boosted, and I was able to relax and wrestle my match. I won on points.

I had a long break before my semifinals match. Usually they wrestled the semi finals on Saturday at the big tournaments, but I guess they did things differently at state. By the time my match came around I was feeling a lot better than I had been in the morning. I mean it still bothered me about my mom and stuff, but I had finally kind of gotten my head straightened out.

My match went into overtime. I knew I should have beat him in regulation time, but I just couldn't quite manage to get the takedown I wanted in the last seconds of the match. He was a tough competitor and he hadn't come all this way just to lose. We were both on our feet at the beginning of the overtime period and I shot off the whistle. I caught him a little by surprise and he wasn't able to sprawl completely. It took another fifteen seconds or so of fighting but I got around him and scored. I was completely worn out afterwards, but it felt good to get that win.

I had just gotten my sweats on and was going back to the bleachers when my phone rang. Of course it was almost impossible to hear anything there in the arena, but I didn't recognize the number and I was curious. I stepped into a quieter hallway and answered the phone.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, is this Kiev Kostas?" It was a man's voice – deep and gruff.

"Yeah," I said.

"Kiev, I'm deputy Franks from the sheriff's office. Where are you right now?" he said.

"I'm at the state wrestling tournament in the Idaho Center. I just got off the mat," I said.

"Okay, Kiev. Can you go to the main entrance? I'll have a deputy meet you there," he said.

"What's going on?" I asked.

“Just go to the main entrance. Bring your coach. We need to talk to you. It’s important. Okay?” he said.

“Okay,” I said.

I found Coach Dave. I told him about the phone call, and he, Rickie, Carla and me all went to the main entrance. Of course I didn’t know what was going on, but I suspected that my mother was in trouble. We found a sheriff’s deputy standing near the entrance. He spotted us and he waved us over.

“Are you Kiev Kostas?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

He knew I was nervous, and of course I was sweaty and looked like a mess. “You aren’t in any trouble, Kiev.” He looked around. There were people everywhere. There was a bench behind us. “Come here. Have a seat.” I complied. “Kiev, there’s been an accident. Your mother was driving. Apparently she had been drinking. She hit another car head on.”

“Is she dead?” I asked.

“She’s been taken to the hospital, but it doesn’t look good,” he said.

“What about the other car?”

“There was a man in the car with her – an Arnold Johnson, maybe you know him?”

“Yeah, I know him. Blake’s dad. A kid from school.” I said.

“He was badly injured. The other car was driven by a woman. She had two kids with her. It looks like the kids are going to be okay, but the woman died instantly. The kids are at the hospital too. I’m here to take you to the hospital to see your mother.”

“Okay,” I said.

I didn't know what to feel or what to say. Carla wanted to come with me, but the deputy told her she wasn't family and had to find her own ride. Of course she had ridden on the bus over and she didn't have her car, so she just walked with me out to the police car. Coach Dave gave the officer his phone number and told him which motel we were staying.

The deputy asked me if I had any other relatives. I told him that I had an uncle Ron – Ron Cardinas. I didn't know his number but I told him the town where he lived. He asked me if I had a place to stay while my mom was in the hospital. I said I did. He asked where and I told him I could stay with Mrs. Davis.

She was unconscious when we got to the hospital. She was in surgery. A nurse stayed with me until a social worker relieved her. Her name was Nancy, and she seemed nice. I don't remember much about her except that she didn't talk very much and let me just be myself. She sat with me in her office instead of making me sit in the waiting room. She explained to me that my mother was in really bad shape. She asked me if there was anybody I wanted her to call – anybody I wanted to be there with me.

“Carla, my girlfriend,” I said. “But she doesn't have her car. She's still at the tournament.”

“Why don't you call her. You can at least talk to her while you wait,” suggested Nancy.

So I did.

“How's your mom?” Carla asked.

“She's in surgery. It doesn't look good,” I said.

“I wish I could be there. Coach Dave said he would let me ride over with him as soon as Rickie finishes,” she said.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

I didn't know how I was doing. I couldn't really even explain how I was feeling.

"She told me, 'Fuck you,'" I said.

"What? When?" asked Carla.

"We had a fight this week. She came home drunk. I yelled at her. I told her to go to hell. That was the last thing we said to each other. We haven't talked all week," I said.

"I'm sorry, Kiev."

"I know it was just the alcohol, but it's all I can think about," I said.

Then Nancy came back into the room. She had a doctor with her. He was a young guy with dark skin and he spoke with an accent. "I'll call you back in a minute," I told Carla. I hung up.

The doctor looked at me, and he didn't look happy. In fact he looked like he was barely holding himself together. "Kiev, I'm doctor Kakar. We did everything we could, but I am sad to say that your mother passed away in surgery."

I'm glad he said it straight out like that. Of course I didn't know how to take it. I mean these are the kinds of things that you don't deal with very often, and I had no tools to deal with it at all.

I just sat there for a while. I didn't think to call Carla or Coach Dave or anybody. When my uncle Ron showed up I didn't really know what to say or do – I didn't even really talk to him. I didn't know him. His wife, my aunt, gave me hugs and tried to get me to open up, but I didn't know her. I just waited there in Nancy's office until finally Carla and Coach Dave showed up. He took me back to the motel and I went to bed.

I'm sure there were a lot of discussions that went on between uncle Ron and all the legal authorities, but he kept me out of it. I suspect they even had some discussion about where I was

going to go and who I was going to live with, but they didn't yank me out of the tournament or anything.

Uncle Ron showed up at the tournament the next day, but he didn't talk to me about what was going on until after my match. I lost that match, by the way. He pinned me in the second round. I could make a lot of excuses for why I lost, but the reality is I lost because he was a better wrestler and there was no way I would have won that match on any other day – none at all. Then we drove home – that is I went with uncle Ron.

“Child services says you are our responsibility now,” he said once we got into the car.

“I'm graduating this year,” I lied, “I don't want to change schools.”

“Is there somebody you can stay with until school gets out?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think so. We can ask Bell, or Mrs. Davis,” I said.

“Okay. You make the calls and I'll drop you off,” he said.

I didn't know Bell's number, but uncle Ron agreed to swing by her house. The ride home was pretty quiet. None of us felt like talking. I texted with Carla. She was on the bus and didn't want to talk about it in front of her friends, and I didn't want to talk about it in front of uncle Ron.

I knocked on Bell's door and she came out in her nightgown. “What's wrong, kiddo?” she asked.

“Mom's dead,” I said. “I need a place to stay.”

“Go git yer stuff,” she said.

That was our whole conversation. She understood the way only someone who has spent her entire life working with kids can possibly understand a teen. I packed a bag and I grabbed the papers that Mr. Stradlater had sent home for my mom to sign.

Plans

Monday hit hard and fast. Wrestling was over. March was nearly here. The weather outside was still too cold for much of anything fun – not that much of anything fun really ever happened to me anyway. All the homework I had ignored over the weekend, all the little details of burying somebody rushed at me like zombies from some cheesy horror film. Uncle Ron called. Carla called. Bell complained exactly once – when I didn't eat breakfast.

“All the trouble to flip these flapjacks and you won't open yer trap t' swaller 'em,” she said.

Then I ate.

Then I went to school.

I arrived late, of course, but that wasn't my fault so much as it was uncle Ron's. There were a lot of things to do, but, as Bell explained, none of them were things that I needed to do and I would just be in the way if I tried to help. I didn't want to help anyway. All I wanted to know was what was going to happen to me now, and what was going to happen to my mother – I mean how does one go about getting someone buried and all that. School distracted me from those thoughts and kept me focused on not losing my grades or thinking my way into depression. Bell knew this, of course.

Mr. Stradlater called me into his office and asked me if there was anything he could do to help. “You don't need to be here, Kiev, if there are more important things you need to take care of,” he offered.

“Bell thought I should come,” I said.

“She’s probably right, but I think you should know that we will support you with whatever you need. There are some special programs we can offer to you now that you are homeless,” he said. I must have winced at the word, “homeless” or something. “It’s just a category on the paperwork we have to fill out. Look, did your mother ever sign those papers?”

“Yes,” I said, “They’re in my locker.” I was ready for this. I just expected to talk to him after school about it.

“Good. Bring them by as soon as you can. I will help you get your college applications finished. We don’t have a lot of time. Most of the scholarship application deadlines are March 15, so we need to get those done right away. There is a gal I know from social services that I think could help you out. Would you mind if I gave her a call?”

“Okay, I guess,” I said.

“Then I will. She will probably call you at Bell’s house, but she might want to talk to you at school. Is that okay?”

“Sure. Why not?” I said.

“Kiev, it’s going to be tough for a long time – a really long time. The truth is that this is going to affect you for the rest of your life. I know it. Bell knows it. Don’t be afraid of that.”

I had no idea what he was going on about. It sounded like nonsense – like those things we say to each other to make each other feel better, but which, when you think them through, don’t really say anything at all, but at least he was sincere. He mean to be helpful, and I’m sure that on another day, in another place and time, after the numbness had worn off, it would have been comforting, maybe even uplifting, but right then in his office it bounced from my skull right back into his face without even sounding in my ears.

“Okay,” I said.

Mostly people at school left me alone that day; mostly they left me alone the rest of the week, except of course for Chad. He asked a million questions, and I didn't yell at him. He wanted to know where I was living now and who had custody of me and all that. I just told him I was staying with Bell until graduation.

"Graduation?" he asked.

"Yeah – you know, when you get your diploma."

"What? You're graduating?"

"Yeah. Then college. I'll pretty much be on my own then. You know, getting on with life and stuff."

"That's so awesome! I only wish."

Sheyla was waiting for me after school that Monday. She knew I didn't have practice anymore or anything, and of course she also knew all the details of everything that had happened. She was trying to be cool and stuff, but I could tell she was just waiting around to see me. We hadn't really spent a lot of time together this school year, I realized. I mean we were still good friends and I had been hanging out at her house with Carla and stuff, but already the state tournament felt like it had happened a lifetime ago and an ocean had opened up between us somehow.

Out of habit I had started walking back to my house, rather than to Bell's. She fell into step beside me. Now that she was in high school it was okay to be seen with her, although people still thought we were dating or something.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

I stopped. "Oh. Habit I guess. I might as well walk up to the meadow, though. You want to come?"

“Sure.”

We kind of walked without talking. I mean she was feeling sorry for me and I was still pretty numb from the weekend. I didn't know what to think about my mother and everything that had happened. I didn't know what to expect, from a legal standpoint, or how everything would play out. I just knew that I had a college application to fill out and a scholarship essay to write, and that I wasn't in the mood to do any of it.

The meadow was empty. No beer cans or cigarette butts hidden anywhere or littered over the crumbled leaves that covered the shoots of the new grass that struggled up from the mould. I little breeze sifted through the trees and I was glad for my coat because it was still too cold. Soon it would be lawnmower weather again – maybe in another week – maybe not. This year had been colder than last year.

“You working this weekend?” Sheyla asked.

“Maybe,” I replied. “I have to save up for college one way or another.”

“You going to run track this year? Sheyla asked.

“Maybe,” I replied.

“You mean, if Carla does?” Sheyla teased. Somewhere in her teasing that ocean between us was swallowed. I laughed.

“No. It depends on what happens with Bell and uncle Ron and stuff, and my college applications and stuff. I have to get things straight with Mr. Stradlater. Carla isn't running track anyway. She already has all the scholarship money she needs and doesn't want to deal with the stress of running when she isn't going to win anyway,” I said.

We fell silent. I looked at the wispy, cold clouds. The numbness in the pit of my stomach spread across my brain.

“You working all summer?” Sheyla asked. I hardly heard the question.

I faked a smile. I sighed. Then I replied, “Yep. I got bills to pay.”

“You think Carla will be with us?”

“Nope. She’s already got a job.”

“You going to move in with her at college?”

“Nah. She’ll be in one dorm and I’ll be in another.”

“You going to get married or something?”

I laughed. Erin laughed. The laughter was soft, like tiny ripples in a spring brooklet.

The laughter began to melt away some of that numbness on my brain. Her smile pierced the gray cloud of unanswerable questions that swirled around my eyes.

“You’ll be the first to know,” I said.

THE END