

BACK ROADS, A NOVEL IN PROGRESS

A CREATIVE THESIS

by

Krista Hudson

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Spring 2015

© 2015 Krista Hudson
All Rights Reserved

ProQuest Number: 1596860

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 1596860

Published by ProQuest LLC (2015). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

BACK ROADS, A NOVEL IN PROGRESS

A CREATIVE THESIS

by

Krista Hudson

Approved: _____
David Teague, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: _____
Jeffrey Richardson, M.A.
Interim Director, Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Approved: _____
George H. Watson, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Approved: _____
James G. Richards, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, David Teague, my department chair, Jeffrey Richardson, and the professors of the MALS program. I would like to thank my parents for their unflagging support. Finally, I would like to thank my son, Stephen, for his never-ending patience while Mommy did her homework.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	v
CRITICAL PREFACE	vi
Chapter	
1 WHEN I WOKE UP.....	1
2 WHEN I LOST MY TEMPER.....	13
3 WHEN I STARTED SCHOOL.....	22
4 WHEN I FAKED IT.....	27
5 WHEN I MET THE INTERLOPER	33
6 WHEN I HATED EVERYTHING	45
7 WHEN I STARTED CHEATING	52
8 WHEN I FELL DOWN HARD	58
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	64

ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is a work of fiction with a critical preface and annotated bibliography. The protagonist, Ryan Godwin, is trying to navigate his life after his parents' death, leaving him in charge of caring for his mentally ill sister. His wife is pregnant and Ryan also must come to terms with what being a father means. He will relapse into drug use before having a moment of clarity as a result of an accident while driving under the influence. This work is intended to examine the bonds of a brother and sister when faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges.

CRITICAL PREFACE

“If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that.” Stephen King.

I don’t remember learning how to read. I don’t remember any time in my life when I couldn’t read. I entered Kindergarten already comfortably navigating Dr. Seuss and Dick and Jane. My childhood home had a single television and no cable hook-up. There were, however, shelves and shelves of books, filled with every type of book imaginable. My mother, a teacher, was pursuing her own higher degree in education, and had children’s books, young adult novels, and her own favorite books stacked around the house. My father, a minister, had biblical research books and every version of the Bible available. If my mother wasn’t writing term papers and reading them aloud to us kids, we were stretched out on the couch in the living room or on the screened-in side porch, reading for hours. My parents had distinct views on child-rearing, vastly different from the way they were raised themselves. Bedtime was whenever I fell asleep, and I would lie awake for hours reading one chapter after another. Painfully shy, mealtimes with large groups or restaurants was torture for me, but my mother allowed me to bring my books to the table, shrugging off anyone who tried to argue that she was teaching me rude behavior. As a family, we didn’t value things like new cars or big houses. We placed value on knowledge and education, and books were cherished. Even as a little girl, I knew I wanted to be like the writers who lined my parents’ walls.

I think every writer has to be part sociologist, part psychiatrist, part journalist, paying attention to interactions and reactions of people moving through their everyday

lives and recording their own observations and understanding of human nature. A *Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, by Betty Smith, was the first novel I ever read that delved so deeply into the undercurrents of human nature; action and reaction. Smith's novel is one to savor slowly; each sentence is magnificently crafted and every character is so fully developed that upon finishing the novel, I was amazed that these people did not actually exist. To my eleven-year-old mind they were as real as the neighbors next door. I had never read something so thorough and all-encompassing and I fell instantly in love with becoming a writer. As a young reader, I had not yet encountered a book that didn't have some sort of clearly defined cause and effect. Books designed for young readers mostly have crimes committed, mysteries to solve, girlfriends and boyfriends to fall in love with, and sitcom-style endings where everything is tied up with a satisfactory, if not happy, ending. Reading a book was suddenly and magnificently transformed from What Happens Next to character studies and internal struggle. My days of Sweet Valley High and The Babysitter's Club were over.

Using Smith's detailed character studies as my models, I began to view the world and my interactions with people differently. I started quietly observing the people around me, looking for those tiny quirks, their poker tells, trying to write their back stories in my mind. In a way, I had already begun writing in that I was starting to craft agendas, motivations, and secret personalities in my friends and relatives. I began to pay attention to how the environment impacted behavior, and how a good song or joke can change a room.

My literary tastes changed as well, and I began to bond with characters full of flaws, redeemable and nonredeemable alike, which began to influence my own writing style. In *The Prince of Tides*, Pat Conroy fearlessly dives into family dysfunction,

graphically detailing alcoholism, abuse, and mental illness. His writing style is graphic and brutal, making me wince at blows, cry from devastation, and smile when Tom Wingo has his small victories. Conroy takes on the secrets that each family has behind closed doors and throws them on the front lawn for everyone to see. His characters are multi-layered and complex, their behavior unpredictable, with each chapter peeling another layer away until we arrive at the small nugget of truth within each of them. He gives his characters unexpected softness, making them more real and more relatable. While life should have made them hard and unforgiving, instead they want to find the good in people, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing. Some people aren't good, some people aren't ever going to take responsibility for their actions, and some mistakes can't be corrected. Conroy speaks to human nature while describing the setting so well you can practically smell the southern night air and feel the cool river waters between your toes.

Nick Hornby's protagonists in *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy* are similar in their non-remarkableness. They have suffered no great traumas, they don't hold fascinating jobs, and they are just everyday guys in average lifestyles. His characters speak with refreshing frankness about their weaknesses and failures. While his characters are telling their stories, they never try to paint over the truth, and are always willing to accept the blame of their mistakes, even if they don't always know the best way to correct them. This style of writing was strongly influential to me as it demonstrated that not all moments of clarity need to be pages and pages of internal monologue and dramatic prose. Sometimes the simplest sentence is just right.

In my early twenties, I befriended a Vietnam veteran, Tom, who helped me better understand irony and find humor in situations my less-mature mind had

previously missed. I had read *On the Road* once in high school, but re-visiting it with my friend showed how much I had missed. The freedom the novel proposed enchanted me, but the ending had always left me feeling despondent and alone. Depressed for the wandering Dean, and feeling Sal's loneliness left me feeling exhausted emotionally, like I had been wandering the highways with them for three long years. Tom showed me the joy in Sal's life, how settling down isn't a tragic ending, and he has his memories of a time when he and his best friend lived their dreams. He helped me understand that the end of the novel is the beginning of the rest of the story, and that the characters can live on even when the ending is sad, or unsatisfactory. Not everything needs a happy ending, because it's never really the end.

Both *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *White Oleander* confront the short- and long-term psychological impact of severe and prolonged child abuse. As each protagonist navigates their adolescence in the face of overt sexual and physical abuse, they tell their stories with the clarity of old souls who have already seen too much tragedy in their young lives. The voices of these characters haunted me for weeks after finishing each novel, but also left me longing for another chapter. The ease with which the characters tell their stories reminded me of late nights talking with best friends, telling each other your deepest secrets. These novels demonstrated to me when bluntness would be necessary in telling a story.

Shampoo Planet demonstrates how a writer can create a world of his choosing. Coupland's ability to mock a lifestyle while sympathizing with the characters living that lifestyle is impressive. Tyler begins his journey completely submerged in the arrogance of youth, hopeful and certain that his choices are the best choices, and that

he knows about the finer things in life better than anyone around him. He has traveled to France, he has dreams of a successful corporate job, and he will leave his dying town with no guilt. This almost feels like a novel written backwards, that the happy ending is in the beginning of the story, and in the end we can have hope that Tyler will be successful, but with less of the arrogant confidence that we felt before. Coupland handles the responsibility of being a voice to a generation outstandingly, giving the reader fully realized, meaningful characters who may have eccentricities but are still highly relatable.

Michael Cunningham's stream-of-consciousness novel *The Hours* mesmerized me and kept me turning the pages until I read the entire work in one sitting. Each character lives so deeply within her mind that the events of the day seem almost dream-like as they take place. The overall tone of the novel sends the reader into a near-trance, moving seamlessly from one decade to another. Cunningham gives nothing away until the very end, when the reader is surprised at the character's relationships to each other. His writing is so smooth, so effortless, that Richard's suicide and the later revelation that Laura Brown is, in fact, Richard's mother, caught me so much by surprise I gasped aloud and turned back several pages just to make sure I had read them correctly. His talent gave me the goal for my writing to demonstrate such a finely executed game plan.

If any novel became the bar on which I judge my own writing, it has to be *She's Come Undone*, by Wally Lamb. Dolores Price is one of the most fully realized characters I have ever encountered. Dolores is at once courageous and fearful, sharp-tongued yet naïve, intelligent but isolated from the world. Spanning nearly four decades, Dolores suffers tragedies and victories alike, which Lamb covers honestly but

gracefully, in a manner which almost seems gentle, as though he doesn't want to make Dolores suffer from telling her story. Dolores, as a result of being victimized at such a young age, often plays the victim when something goes wrong in her life. She seldom wants to take ownership of her downfalls, blaming the events around her instead. She is suspicious of anyone who wants to love her, but does eventually find love with a man she meets in community college. While Dolores may get her happy ending, her life remains far from perfect, but the reader knows that Dolores is a fighter, and if she is knocked down again she will keep getting up. Lamb showed me how deeply a writer can fall in love with his character, as Lamb so obviously cares for Dolores. You can feel in his writing that he respects her and wants her to succeed, even when she falls down.

When I was young and dreaming of being a writer, I thought I would become the voice of my generation, a cliché that makes me laugh now. The ignorance of youth didn't know about marrying, having a child, getting divorced, holding down a full time job and being a single mother. Like everyone, my life is full of victories and defeats, huge moments that changed the course of my life in one second, and many series of small moments that slowly added up to big changes. Some occasions in my life were micro-managed to the point of absurdity, while others were so far out of my control they left me crying in the shower. There were times when my books were the only companions I had to get through the loneliest afternoons and the longest sleepless nights of my life. Through it all, I continued to write. I kept journals to help me cope, and also experimented with fiction and poetry. I never could quite settle into myself as I mimicked the writers who had the greatest influence over me, but as time went on, the events of my life began to shape my voice as a writer.

When my husband left, I decided to see the divorce as an opportunity to start over and try to achieve my dreams of writing. With a child to provide for and a career to maintain, enrolling full time in school for an MFA degree was impossible, but the MALS program was a perfect fit. I could tailor my education to courses that would meet my needs and would challenge my skills as a writer. My fellow students were a joy, refreshingly worldly with a mature outlook on life. Discussions in class were enriched by everyone's experiences and their willingness to learn from each other. I was terrified that my time away from college would put me at a disadvantage, but I found that my life experiences were also valid and worth sharing and using towards my work.

With time and practice, I came to understand that honesty is more important than anything else. A character must have flaws but must also have good qualities. Sometimes terrible things happen, but sometimes life is wonderful and you can't help but laugh. Allowing a character to be multi-faceted makes the character real to the reader, someone the reader can love or hate, as long as they are feeling something. In this regard, I think tragicomedy is the genre in which my writing best fits. I remember hearing the statement, "comedy is tragedy plus time," and thinking there was no better way to describe daily life. What defines us is our ability to keep moving, keep breathing, keep living in the face of complete despair, then find a way to laugh about it.

The month of March in Sussex County, Delaware is often wet and cold; warmer afternoon temperatures mean the fields are blanketed in thick white fog when the sun goes down. Farmers begin turning the land and bringing in piles of fertilizer so the air is heavy with the smell of dirt and manure. The trees are still gray and

leafless, but bright yellow daffodils can be spotted along every back road and in empty lots where farmhouses once stood, long since demolished or burned down. A Sussex County defector, I moved north after my freshman year of college, opting to complete my education and put down roots “upstate,” only 88 miles from home but a completely different world for someone who was used to family farm dynasties and bloodlines older than the Declaration of Independence.

I have always known, even when I lived “downstate,” that my novels would take place there. The story of Ryan and Karen Godwin has teased me for years, tantalizing me with their bizarre yet recognizable family dynamic; a family trying desperately to cling to itself even when time is causing irreparable erosion and disintegration. This is a story that will ring true to so many from my hometown, as farm kids earn higher degrees and move away to find jobs beyond farming and blue collar labor. Some folks are happy to keep up the family business, content that they are able to provide for their families and eager to maintain the traditions which define their daily lives while others stay, uneducated and locked down in the family trade, bitter towards their schoolmates for leaving them and angry at the world for their circumstances.

Ryan Godwin doesn’t know quite where he fits in this world. Clearly intelligent but unmotivated to use his intelligence, he is earning his living as unskilled labor in a job which offers him no challenges and allows him to stay physically busy so he doesn’t have to think about his life. Narcissism dominates his personality, as he considers himself to be “above” and better than his peers, despite no evidence to prove this. Complacent in his career, marriage, and interpersonal relationships, Ryan

imagines he could be successful at anything. As long as he doesn't try to improve himself, he cannot be a failure.

His parents' sudden death in a car accident is a game-changer for Ryan, as he becomes the sole caregiver to his damaged, mentally ill younger sister. Complacency is no longer an option and Ryan must rise to meet the challenge or lose his sister to her disease. Ryan's wife is pregnant, and he must begin to understand what it will mean to become a father and to try to be a more committed husband. Coping with the challenges of grief, sudden responsibility, and his sister's inevitable declining health leads Ryan to make poor choices, including relapsing into drug use and having an affair with his sister's social worker.

What Ryan wants more than anything is to leave, to be as far away from anything that challenges his mind and completely cemented world view. He dreams of being alone, living a small life in a quiet town. Most of Ryan's frustrations stem from the fact that he never really understood how to build that life for himself, and he never felt he had the freedom to try. He has always felt trapped by his sister's failing health, his best friend's addiction and eventual overdose, and now his wife's pregnancy. He feels martyred by his choices to stay and dislikes himself for it. His repeated attempts to sabotage his life often end with him feeling further self-loathing and confusion. The reader should dislike Ryan and his attitude, but should also feel some sympathy for him, as they see the world without his filter. The reader can understand what is actually happening, while Ryan is misled by his own assumptions and misunderstandings. What the reader should want most is for Ryan to wake up, get it together, and appreciate the good things in life.

So, how do I answer the big question, What Happens To Him? Does Ryan have a scrap of goodness in him and what does goodness mean to each of these characters? For Ryan's sister, Karen, goodness means Ryan will attend her therapy sessions, take her to the doctor on time, and provide any support she may need so she can continue to live in her own apartment without having to move into an adult home. Ryan's wife, Sheila, needs him to reciprocate the love and care she provides to him. Her needs are simple. She doesn't care about possessions or money, but she does need Ryan to want to be there, to actively participate in their marriage and the life of their new child. For Ryan, these needs are overwhelming because they require him to think about something greater than himself, and also require him to reflect on how his selfish actions have hurt others in the past. He responds to these demands by withdrawing further, spending time with old acquaintances and using heavier drugs.

After a night of partying, he decides to drive to the grave of his best friend, Terry. He is high and exhausted and in his disoriented state he loses control of his truck, crashing into a mailbox and driving into a ditch. Immediately before impact, he thinks he sees a little girl in a sundress standing next to the mailbox. He panics, thinking he has killed the child, and pulls over, getting out and running to the front yard. An old man comes out of the front door, yelling at him for his carelessness. Ryan drives away in a panic, going back to the home of his drug-abusing friends. He hides there for four days, watching the news and checking police reports on the internet. During this time he makes a new commitment to caring for his family and staying clean if he can only get out of this mess. Once it becomes clear he has not committed a crime, he returns home to his frantic wife and sister. His wife will

ultimately divorce him for his neglect, as he cannot tell her what really happened, but his sister remains his friend, and he continues to provide her care the best he can.

Chapter 1

WHEN I WOKE UP

They don't tell you when you're a kid that life is suffering and pain. They let you wander around, high on life, thinking about homework and allowances and if you're going to get the new Star Wars set for a Christmas present.

When I was 12 years old my dad got a job teaching at the junior high school in the next town over. He had worked as a substitute teacher for a few years while getting his teaching certificate and the boost in money let us move from our small rental trailer to a bigger house. It had a yard, was close to the school, and had enough space that my sister and I could finally have our own rooms. We stayed with Aunt Carole for a week while Mom and Dad moved the furniture and got the house ready. I remember my uncle taking us to the park to walk trails and swim in the pond, and my aunt cooking hot dogs on the grill every single night while the Grateful Dead or Crosby, Stills, and Nash ("and sometimes Young, but only when I'm feeling generous!" Uncle Mike would joke) played on records in the living room. There were four brothers living next door who always wanted to play Home Run Derby or kick around a soccer ball. I spent most of my days hanging out with Terry, who, at twelve years old, was the oldest brother, while Karen and the three younger ones ran wild in the fields. It was more fun than any camp could have been, even though they didn't have air conditioning or a tv and I had to sleep on a recliner in the living room. We'd stay up really late, chasing fireflies or peering into the night sky for fireworks on the

horizon while my aunt and uncle smoked pot on the back porch with Terry's mom and dad.

Aunt Carole and Uncle Mike lived close to the beach, near the inlet bridge, and the night before we had to go home, they took me, Karen, and the two older boys from next door to the boardwalk. There was live music playing at the bandstand, and we stood there listening to it for a long time. The band was great; Uncle Mike kept nodding his head to the rhythm and nudging Aunt Carole with his elbow saying, "I can really dig this sound! Can't you dig it, kids?" Karen could, in fact, dig it, and she started dancing and twirling while the rest of the audience clapped and cheered. We all just stood there with these huge grins on our faces while Karen soaked up the attention. The pale pink sundress she was wearing made her tan skin seem even darker, and Aunt Carole had tied her brown hair into two pigtails with pretty pink ribbons. Even strangers couldn't help but notice her, that's how perfect she looked, like a kid in a magazine ad trying to get city people to come to the beach for a week. When the band finished, Karen's face was bright red and her hair was slicked back with sweat.

"Come on, kids, let's go get a cold drink and a snack," Aunt Carole held Karen's hand and led the way from the crowd down the boards. Walking away from the tightly-packed group of people, I could suddenly feel the cool ocean air blowing on my face, making me realize how hot and thirsty I had gotten. My skin felt weird, sweaty and sticky from the salt air. The sunburn I had gotten from a week of playing outdoors felt tight and hot. The sun was setting, and the sky was hot pink and orange over the darkening ocean. The buildings on the boardwalk made long shadows on the sand below. The first star was already starting to shine.

We all settled down on the sand on bedsheets Aunt Carole had brought along while Uncle Mike made trip after trip to the boards for sodas, fries, and ice cream. After we had eaten, Karen and Paul stayed on the beach with the grownups while Terry and I pulled the other sheet under the boardwalk and laid back, watching the feet above us and listening to the waves crash. I could see the silhouettes of my aunt and uncle lounging on their elbows, and the sharp movements of Karen and Paul chasing a wave into the ocean, then running away from the next one as it came rushing onto the sand. The noise from the boardwalk was a mix of people talking, music playing, the clanking of rides, and the bells ringing for the carnival-style games. For the first time I noticed how everything moved together, how all the different sounds made one sound, how all the people made one person. It was awesome.

Terry was lying close to me, so our shoulders were touching.

“I feel really happy tonight, Ryan.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“I don’t want you to go back to your parents’ house. Why can’t you stay with Mike and Carole?” My aunt and uncle insisted that everyone, even kids, call them by their first name. All my friends called my dad Mr. Godwin. “Seriously, you’re the only person I can talk to. All my younger brothers are just kids.” Terry sighed, and rolled over to look at me. He reached his hand out and grabbed mine. He leaned over and kissed me on the lips. His mouth felt dry and chapped from the ocean salt, and he smelled like caramel popcorn. Over as quickly as it started, he rolled to his back and let go of my hand. We were silent for a minute, then I took his hand and held it until the fireworks started and we joined the rest of the family on the beach.

When we hugged goodbye on Friday afternoon, my aunt promised that we would do this again every single summer for the rest of our lives. I gripped my duffel bag to my chest as Dad drove us away; feeling the hot summer air coming in the station wagon window and believing it would happen; planning all the great things Terry and I would do when the next glorious summer rolled around. Maybe we could stay for two weeks! Karen, 8 years old, was more interested in the new house, drilling Dad with questions about it the whole ride home.

“Is there food at the new house?”

“What a question! Of course there’s food at the new house! Mommy’s cooking dinner right now.”

“Are we the only people living there?”

“Who else would live there, Karen?” *Shrugs.*

“How far is it from the old house?”

“Only a few miles.”

“Can we move back to the old house if this house isn’t right?”

“No. We are not moving back to the old house. Now let Daddy pay attention to the road. You’ll see that everything is just perfect when we get there.”

Mom was sitting on the porch in a rocking chair when we pulled up. Dad had bought her the chair the night he got the new job. He told her, “Now you’ll have a front porch to sit and rock and watch the kids play.” Mom must have cried for 15 minutes, her head on the dining room table, while my dad poured glasses of wine for him and Mom and mugs of milk for us kids. He opened the real estate section in the newspaper and read descriptions of all the houses for sale. It was fucking beautiful. I think about that night whenever I’ve done something horrible to make Sheila walk

away from me in anger, giving me the silent treatment for days. I was a kid, I had no idea how my mom must have felt, living in that rundown trailer park, trying to keep things nice, trying to keep us kids from hearing the neighbors fight or party or God knows what else in the middle of the night. I didn't understand the pressure my parents felt to get us out of there until the night Mom broke down. Now when I pull up to the trailer Sheila and I rent I think about Mom and Dad raising kids in a place like this and being desperate to get out, to give us more.

Walking in the new house for the first time, I smelled fresh paint and bacon. "I figured we'd have BLT's for dinner, Ryan, what do you think? Your favorite!" Mom put her hand on my shoulder. "I missed you two! It's boring with only Daddy to keep me company!"

I grabbed her hard around the waist, suddenly realizing I had been missing her the whole week long. It felt good to smell her, to feel her solid in my arms, a reality and not just a memory while my aunt and uncle kept me distracted.

"What a softie!" She laughs, holding my face in her hands. "Now go check out your new room while I set the table. Daddy worked on it for a whole day to make it just right."

Karen and I looked at each other and raced down the hallway to our rooms. I didn't even glance inside her room; I was so excited to see what mine looked like. I had never, ever had a room all to myself. It had dark blue carpet, and dad painted my walls light blue, so light you might think they were white if you didn't look hard enough. The new bunk bed was made of light wood, with a desk and dresser underneath the mattress. Mom had set up my desk with a lamp and a whole pile of school supplies. The best, though, were the posters on the walls. Dad found me a

poster of the Phillies baseball field, the picture taken from a helicopter or something, so you can see everything, including the parking lot. Next to that was a poster of Mike Schmidt and on the back of my door was a poster of Pete Rose. A model airplane hung from the ceiling in front of the window, and a huge toy car racetrack took up the floor. All my clothes were folded and put away, and my shoes were lined up perfect in the closet. I made a silent promise to myself that in this room I would never forget to put my dirty clothes in the hamper and I would always line my shoes up in the closet instead of kicking them under the bed. I started playing with my cars right away, not caring that I was 12 years old, too old for racecars, feeling the soft new carpet on my thighs and my belly where my t-shirt hiked up.

The first racecar hadn't made one lap around the track when I heard screaming, bloodcurdling screaming like I had never heard in my life. I ran to Karen's room, where Mom was cradling her and pinning her arms to her sides at the same time. Karen was screaming and crying, thrashing around trying to break free of Mom's grasp. A poster of a potful of daisies with a kitten sleeping next to it had a long, shredded, tear down the middle. Clothes were thrown everywhere, with dresser drawers lying randomly on the floor.

"It's all wrong! It's all wrong!" Karen kept screaming and weeping, until she sat up and took a long breath, then promptly vomited all over Mom and the new peach carpet.

"What's wrong, baby?" Dad looked terrified, his face was pale and Mom looked like she would start crying any minute. I looked around the bedroom. I thought it looked pretty neat, she had a white wooden bed with fluffy peach and yellow pillows and bedspread. She had posters on her walls, like me, with kittens and

ponies and all kinds of girly crap that would be right up her alley. Her dresser matched her bed, and our old baby bassinette had a new coat of white paint and held all her dolls and stuffed animals.

“It’s crooked! I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!” There was no calming her down. Finally, desperate, Dad picked her up and left the house, and walked to the school where he would start teaching in just a couple weeks. I felt a sharp pain between my eyes, and my legs were shaking. I was covered in sweat, even though it was cool on the early summer evening. I followed them for a few minutes, but when it looked like all they were going to do was walk around and around the track that circled the football field, I went home to Mom.

I found her in Karen’s room, trying to put the dresser drawers back into place. I picked up a sundress and put it on a hanger and handed it to her to hang in the closet. We worked quietly for about ten minutes, matching up shoes and balling socks until the room was almost perfect. We both looked at the poster with the tear down the center. The way it sagged open made the kitten look like a heartless bastard had ripped its little ear clean off. Mom started to weep.

“It is crooked. Look at it, Ryan. She was right. The poster is crooked.”

There was nothing left to say. I pulled the poster off the wall, balled it up, and took it outside to the big trash can so no one would ever have to look at it again. Dad and Karen came home about five minutes later, laughing and relaxed. We ate our BLT sandwiches like nothing had ever happened.

“Our parents had me sterilized when I was 15,” Karen looks at me; she timed her statement for the exact moment I put my first bite of ham in my mouth. I force myself to chew the meat, swallow, and put another piece in my mouth, letting her

know I am unaffected by her lies, despite the sour taste of puke that's swirling behind my molars.

“Shut the fuck up. Why do you have to say shit like that? Why do you need to talk like that at the table?” I snap, temper rising fast.

My wife takes a more delicate approach. “Why would you think that, Karen? Do you think that really happened?”

“Don't even go there, Sheila! Don't get her started! Mom and Dad never did anything like that, even though they probably should have. We all know what this is about.”

Silence. I've said too much, now Karen cries noiselessly into her mashed potatoes and Shelia pokes her green beans around her plate. I'm the only one eating, and I shove food in my mouth frantically, taking second servings of potatoes and beans, coating my refrigerator biscuit extra thick, even though I hate margarine and Sheila refuses to spend the extra money on real butter. Minutes pass, agony, while Sheila starts pecking at her dinner, hungry from a long work day despite the argument, and Karen starts moving food around her plate, separating invisible flecks of potato off the beans until every bite and drip of food is fully separated from the other. It's an old trick, one she would do in restaurants to make herself look busy, even though she couldn't bring herself to eat the food that came from any kitchen other than home.

I can tell she's not done by the way she keeps looking at my face, waiting for the moment I start to relax and enjoy my night. I do my best not to let my guard down, but once my plate is clean I let out a huge sigh, more out of habit than anything else. Sheila loves it when I make like she is the best cook in the whole world. I'll lean back and sigh, then undo my belt and unsnap my work pants, like her dinner just

filled me up for the rest of my life, like instant potatoes served out of an old Cool Whip tub and a can of beans microwaved in a leftover margarine bowl is just the damned nectar of the gods. It sends her over the moon; she fucking glows while she clears the dirty dishes off the card table set up in the cramped kitchen. With all the shit she puts up with from me it's the least I can do.

I sigh, trying to make Sheila smile again, and Karen pounces. "They took me to a hospital, Sheila. They checked me in and left me for 3 days. I was put under anesthesia while they did the surgery. They took out my uterus and ovaries and fed them raw to the attack dogs. Total hysterectomy. The sheets were dirty; my roommate would piss on the floor and laugh about it." Karen giggles, like she's remembering a particularly great weekend at a posh summer camp. Her cheeks are flushed; her eyes shiny. She reaches across the table and cuts a piece of cherry pie; her appetite suddenly returning. She eats greedily, and then looks in the freezer for the ice cream sandwiches which she knows are always tucked behind the ice trays.

I jump up and grab her wrist. "That's it, get your coat and hat, I'm taking you home," I storm into the living room and get her coat off the recliner. Karen grabs the ice cream sandwich, kisses Sheila on the cheek, then puts on her coat and hat like a docile toddler. She eats the sandwich in the truck on the way home, dropping the wrapper on the floor, not even caring that I obviously just vacuumed the interior. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she rubbed ice cream drips in the seat on purpose.

"I don't know why I say the things I say, Ryan, but it feels so good to say them. Now I feel sad. I ruined your night. You're never having me over for dinner ever again, I just know it!" She starts to weep, rubbing her drippy nose with her mitten, looking like one of those starved dogs from the tv commercials; pathetic, wet

eyes and straggling fur matted with mud and God knows what else. I would do anything to get those animals off my tv screen and forget they even exist. I feel the same way about my sister right now as we pull up to her apartment.

“Get the hell out of my truck, Karen.”

I pull away from the apartment, but slow down and look in my mirror to make sure she gets safely inside. I drive home slow, looking at the patches of fog settling in the empty fields. Some fields already have piles of manure ready to be spread, the rank smell drifting through the 2 inch crack in my window, just enough to flick out my cigarette ash. I take a back road, one I used to drive when I was 16 and looking for places to make it with whatever girl would agree to go for a ride with me. I pull behind a falling down farmhouse. The old folks that lived here died 15 years ago, and all their kids live outside the state. They can't move the property and they don't care about the house, so it sits and rots. I turn off the headlights and turn on my radio, nice and quiet. I take a few minutes to look out at the stars, shockingly bright against the black night, then take out my pipe from underneath my seat and take a draw. I'm not going to do a lot, just enough.

I'm home an hour later, pulling up with a 12 pack of cheap beer, already putting one down so Sheila will only smell beer and cigarettes, nothing else.

“Took you long enough. Did you have trouble getting her settled?”

“I don't know if she's settled or not. I know she went inside and I left. I don't want to see her face for a long time. No more Thursday night dinners. No more fake fucking traditions. I'm done! Are you listening, Sheila? I'm fucking done!”

Sheila sets her face in a way that makes me nervous, though I don't know why. “You can be done all you want, badass, but she's still your sister and she's still the

closest thing I'll ever get to one so you just remember that." She walks down the hallway. I hear her turn on the shower.

I drink the rest of the beers, fast, two swallows per can, making it my job, my mission in life to be sure there are no beers left in that fridge before I get in bed. I smoke a couple cigarettes and watch a few minutes of the college basketball games on tv. The guys at work will talk about it all day tomorrow, talking about brackets and upsets and Cinderellas, so I try to watch a little to keep up, even though I don't really care about sports in general. I climb in bed with Sheila, who's laying wide awake in the dark. I always know when she's awake, because she does this creepy little grabbing thing with her right hand when she's sleeping, like she's reaching for a dolly or teddy bear that was given to the Salvation Army 20 years ago. Anyway, she's lying perfectly still, so I know she's still upset about the night and upset with me. She wonders if I'm using again, but can't bring herself to ask, so she talks about Karen instead.

"What really happened, Ryan? Where would she get that idea?"

I take a breath, smelling her shampoo and deodorant in the darkness. "Her appendix came out when she was 15. It had to be done, the doctor said it was about to burst, so Mom and Dad rushed her to the hospital. She did have to stay 3 days. Mom and Dad visited every day. No one pissed on the floor. When she got home, she was convinced that the doctor had taken more than the appendix. She believed Mom and Dad had given the hospital permission to perform a hysterectomy. There was no way to tell her otherwise. We had all known for a while that she wasn't right, but that was when we really saw how damaged she was. She took Mom's sewing scissors and stood naked in the kitchen screaming that she was going to cut open her stitches and

look inside herself to see what else was missing. She had to be committed for a week. Someone probably pissed on the floor there.”

I never told that story to any of my girlfriends, even the ones that had met Karen. It was still so real, I could still hear her wailing as the ambulance strapped her to the gurney to take her away. It started the endless stream of meds and hospitalization that is Karen’s reality.

“She said it because you told her the news, didn’t she? You told her when you were driving her over, didn’t you? I thought we agreed we would tell her later, when we could do it together.” Sheila sounds equal parts disappointed and relieved that the news is out, and she won’t have to worry about finding that perfect impossible moment.

“She needed to know, and I felt better being the one to tell. Besides, maybe I need someone to talk to. I want her to be the first one I tell that I’m going to be a dad.”

Chapter 2

WHEN I LOST MY TEMPER

Sheila told me 2 weeks ago that we were going to have a baby. I knew it was bound to happen sooner or later; she stopped taking her pills a couple months ago and said she wanted a family, we aren't getting any younger, and why do I want to deny her the one thing that would bring her joy? I didn't feel that way, I got no problem with babies, I just hoped it would be later rather than sooner while I worked some shit out. I mean, 24 months clean is great and all, but it doesn't really count if you're not actually clean. I tried, honest to God, but it just didn't work out that way. She called me before lunch time. I answered my cell because she never called while she was working and I got all scared that something was wrong.

“Ryan, when are you coming home tonight?”

“Dunno. I have to go help Dennis move some furniture.”

“Well, get home as soon as you can! I can't tell you why, just get home!”

I knew then what it was all about. I felt strange, not excited, not sad, just strange. I ran to the bathroom and threw up all my breakfast, leaning against the dirty wall and gasping for breath. My t-shirt under my work shirt was soaked with cold sweat, and I made a beeline for the locker room to change. Troy, who starts at 10, had just gotten in the shop and was changing into his uniform.

“Whoa, man! You look like hell! Have a few too many last night watching the game?” he laughed and slapped me on the back.

Troy's a nice guy; he has two ex-wives and 4 kids, the poor bastard. He comes in at 10 because the later you work after dinner the more money you make towing cars off the highway. Guess I'll have to ask him if he wants a late-night partner.

"Yeah, man. That game was a real heart-breaker, huh?" Most of the time I listen to the sports report on the news so I can keep up with the guys. The guys like anyone who can talk sports and spit tobacco, and I can do both, even though I'm not interested in either. I change my shirt fast, wanting to get out into the fresh air and out of the muggy stink of a locker room used by six or seven mechanics at any given time. A call comes over the speaker, and I rush to the front office to get the work order. I don't care what the job is, I just know I need to get out of the shop, roll down the highway and try not to think about everything.

The job was an easy one, just a tire change, so even though I took the tow truck I didn't need it. I drove back to the shop slow, taking back roads and looking at the flat, empty fields. I thought about my grandfather, a farmer, spending his whole life taking care of his farmland and his family. It was a small life, but a good one. When he died the whole town showed up to his funeral. The whole fucking town lined up on Main Street and waited 3 hours to walk past a dead man and shake his wife's hand. I sat in the family waiting room off to the side of the viewing area watching people stream past, smelling my uncles' cigarette smoke and taking nips from the flask that the men were passing around when they weren't paying attention. I thought a lot about him while driving through the fields. What would he say if he knew what my life was now? Poor, no education, no future, just a drug addicted mechanic with a baby on the way who I didn't even know for sure I wanted.

I worked my ass off that day, as if taking more jobs and not slowing down would fix the pit I felt in my gut. Jeff, my boss, joked about it at the end of the day, making a comment that I should work hungover more often. I went to Dennis' house, but he had already gotten his brother to help move the furniture, so I knew it was time to go home. I picked up some burgers and fries, and on a whim stopped at the gas station and bought one of those red roses wrapped in plastic. I had gotten Sheila one of those on our first date. She dried it and framed it and now it hangs over our bed. Dried out gas station roses on wood grain paneling. Classy.

“You’re home! And you brought dinner! Thank you!” Sheila, still in her scrubs from her nursing home job, gave me a huge hug and kissed me for a full minute, more kissing than we’d done in weeks. She lit candles all over the house, and I could smell cake. I picked her up and spun her around. When Sheila is excited and laughing you can’t help but be happy. When we first dated, I loved that about her. No matter how shitty I was feeling, she could smile and laugh at a stupid commercial on tv and I would forget to feel bad. She’s one of those people that will make you laugh even when you don’t know the joke. You can hear her all the way across Walmart when she really gets going, and you can see people smile when they hear that laugh drift across the store. I set her down, and decided to play dumb.

“What’s the special occasion? You scared the shit outta me calling me at work like that.” I sat down heavily on the couch and started spreading dinner out on the coffee table.

“I’m sorry, really I am, I just wanted to hear your voice. I wanted you to be home as soon as you could. I almost left work and drove to the shop!”

“Well, it’s just as well you didn’t. I didn’t even get lunch today, we were so busy. That’s alright though, it’s all money in the bank,” I handed her a Dr. Pepper and grabbed ketchup from the fridge.

We ate for a few minutes in silence. I was suddenly starving from my long day, and ate one hamburger in 4 bites, then reached for another. Sheila grabbed my hand before I could grab it.

“You’ll never believe my good news, Ryan. You’ll just never believe it. You know how I said we should start trying for a family? Well, this morning I woke up and felt lousy, really sick, then I had some toast and felt better. So I remember my cousin telling me that’s what happened to her when she was pregnant with Riley, so I drove straight to the drug store on my way to work....”

I stopped listening. I used my left hand to grab another burger, and chewed and swallowed while I watched her talk on and on about pissing on a stick and how she wanted so bad to tell the girls at work but was worried about bad luck so no one should know until she was at least 3 months along and did I like Greg for a boy’s name?

“Ryan? Baby?”

I shook my head, suddenly realizing she had stopped talking. “Sorry, babe, I’m just so exhausted. I’m listening. Did you make a doctor’s appointment yet? I mean, do you know for sure that you really are?”

Shelia stood up fast, gathering up all the burger and fry wrappers and shoving them in the paper bag. Her face had turned white with bright red spots on her cheeks. Wordlessly, she walked down the hallway and slammed the bedroom door. At first I’d blamed her temper on pregnancy hormones, but I really knew I’d fucked up when I

tried to go to bed and she had locked me out. I jiggled the handle, called her name quietly, thinking maybe she had locked the door accidentally.

“Sheila? The door’s locked, honey. I need to come in and change my clothes.” No response.

“Sheila? Sheila?” I heard her moving around, heard her hairbrush on the dresser top, and heard the bed squeak as she sat down. I knocked on the door, softly at first, then harder. I started banging on the door with the side of my fist, feeling heat rise up to my ears. “Sheila! Open the fucking door! Let me in the fucking room!”

“Go away, don’t talk to me!” She was crying, heartbreaking little gasps for air. I felt my hands getting shaky and my throat getting tight. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to fix what I’d done. I walked away and paced in the tight trailer hallway. I tried one more time.

“Please let me in. I’m sorry. I really am.” Silence.

“Fuck you, then! I hope you rot in there.” I kicked the door hard with my work boot and stomped to the truck. I drove to my mom and dad’s house, parking in the street in front of the For Sale sign. I used my old key to go in the back door. The house was dark but I felt my way through the kitchen and into my parents’ room. I stretched out on their stripped down bed and thought about babies. The last thought I had before I blacked out was an image of me, holding a baby boy, maybe 9 or ten months old, reaching for my face while I tied a rubber tube around my arm.

When I woke up the next morning, I had to stare at the ceiling for a few minutes to get my bearings. I had this crazy thought that maybe I was a kid again and just spent the night in mom and dad’s room. I waited to hear the news on the tv in the living room, and to smell coffee brewing, but the house was silent and smelled like

carpet freshener and I remembered the fight, the baby, my dead parents, and I cried. I lay there, sniffing like a baby for twenty minutes, until the sound of keys in the front door made me jump to my feet. I looked around guiltily, wondered if I could just climb through the window, then squared my shoulders and walked out to say hello to Rebecca, the realtor.

Rebecca is everything you expect a realtor to be. She's not quite as young as her hair and makeup would lead you to believe, but she's got a kick-ass body under that too tight Sears business suit. I never did understand women wearing high heels all day, but Rebecca's just take the cake. Those things are so tall I don't know how she even walks in them, mincing around each house during showings, while women think about paint colors and men think about tossing her down on the bed covered with about 2 dozen decorative pillows. Her voice is tight and nasal, which I think works well in her line of business, but must be hell on whoever has to live with her and hear it every single day.

"Ryan? What are you doing here, hon?" She prances over to me and puts her hand on my chest. She's been tanning already this morning; I can smell the suntan lotion under her perfume. She looks perfect. She probably has a membership to that 24 hour gym that just opened. I bet she works out every day.

"Nothing. Just feeling sentimental, I guess. Sheila's pregnant," I blurt out like a man being offered a plea deal for information.

"What! Oh my GAWD!" Rebecca's whine turns into a full blown squeal and now I know Sheila will never, ever forgive me.

"You can't say anything, Rebecca. Swear to God you won't say anything. I don't even know why I just said that. It's still really early and Sheila would kill me if

anyone knew before we had time to go to the doctor,” I’m practically on my knees begging this woman to keep her damn mouth shut.

“Sure, hon! Your secret’s safe with me!” She winks like we are suddenly best buddies and she’s not some real estate shark trying to turn a buck on my parents’ sudden absence from my life. She glances at her pink watch and her face turns to a mask. “You need to leave. I’m about to show this house and I still need to get the coffee on. You and that truck need to go.” And just like that, I’m thrown out of the only house I’ve ever felt like myself in.

I drive back to the trailer slow, wondering how I am ever going to get back on Sheila’s good side. I stop at the donut shop and pick up 6 donuts and a couple coffees. I turn left where I should turn right and suddenly I know where I’m going. I pull up to the brick apartments and knock on my sister’s door. There’s no answer, so after a minute or two I knock again. I know she’s home because I’m the only one who can drive her anywhere now that mom and dad are gone. I know she gets up at 530 every morning and brushes her hair and washes her face. I know by 6 she is dressed with a hot tea and the news turned on. It’s been the same routine every day since she was 14 and had to leave public high school because the stress of being in a building full of kids made her pull out her hair until she had a 3 inch bald spot over her left ear.

The door slowly opens and she peeks one eye out to see who’s at her front door at 7 on a Saturday. She stares at me for a few seconds like she’s trying to decide if I am real or a figment of her imagination and I wonder if she’s been having hallucinations. I make a mental note to work that into our conversation.

“Hey, sis. I brought coffee and donuts,” I hold up the bag like an offering.

“You know I don’t drink coffee,” she mutters, but she swings the door open and I walk into the apartment.

The sliding door is open to the morning air, and the news is on the tv, just as I expected. We don’t bother to get her cable since she’ll turn the tv off as soon as the news is over. No computer, no tv, no radio, just Karen and her thoughts all day and all night. She never could stand a lot of noise, and to her anything on the tv that isn’t the news is just noise. When I told her we were getting a computer she said we were crazy because that was how they were going to be able to spy on everyone, through the computer screens. I didn’t even bother to ask who they were. One thing she will do is read. We go to the library every Tuesday night after I get out of work so she can check out more books. She takes out about 6 or 7 books every week and reads every single one of them before we have to go back, on top of the magazines she gets in the mail every month. Sometimes I rent a movie or a video game, but never a book. I start to wonder what I would read if I had time.

“What do you want?” Karen eyes me warily, as if she is trying to figure out what trick I might be about to play on her.

“Nothing, relax. I got into it with Sheila last night and spent the night at the old house. I don’t think I can go back to the trailer yet,” I sit down on the couch and start to eat a donut, catching the crumbs with my hand. Karen freaks if you get crumbs on her carpet.

She sits on the edge of her chair, clearly nervous about her asshole brother getting donut all over the place. She’s dressed in a light brown cotton sweater and modern looking jeans with slip on leather moccasins. Her blond-streaked hair is brushed and pulled into a simple knot at the base of her head. It looks like she put on

some chap stick against the cool spring air coming in the open door and kitchen window. You could drop her right in the middle of the mall and she would look for all the world like any other woman out shopping for some new clothes. You'd never know that she used tweezers to dig a centimeter of flesh from her shoulder last month because she could feel something growing in it, and that increasing her medication made her drool and made her left eyelid drop until her eye was almost closed.

“What did you fight about?” She looks at me with that strange intense curiosity that makes people nervous.

“I can't tell you,” I reach for my coffee.

She smiles then, and crosses her ankles. “Of course you can tell me. I'm your sister,” Karen takes a drink of her tea, and then sets it on the table. I catch a tremor in her hand.

“Not this. I can't tell anyone about this,” I turn my attention to the news, and we watch tv in silence for the rest of the morning.

Around 10 I work up the nerve to go home, but when I pull in the driveway I see that Sheila's already left. I try to remember if she told me about taking an extra shift at the nursing home, but I don't think our conversation got that far last night. I unlock the door and walk in, smelling the coffee that was brewed when she got up. The trash can is full, so I grab the plastic bag and mash the garbage down with my hand before tying a knot in it. I felt something sharp nick my palm and I snatch my hand back quickly. Sheila must have seen the rose I brought in last night and pitched it in the trash, and a random thorn caught my hand. Damn it. She's still pissed.

Chapter 3

WHEN I STARTED SCHOOL

A couple weeks after we had moved into our new house, it was time to start school. I was going to start seventh grade at the same junior high school Dad was teaching at, and Karen was going into third grade at the elementary school on the other side of town. Mom took us to the shopping center for our school clothes and supplies. I got new jeans and chinos, and Karen got corduroy and denim skirts. We both got new sneakers, oxfords, and jackets, plus socks and underwear. When we were done at the clothing store, we walked up the sidewalk to the discount department store to get pencils, paper, and the other supplies we would need. I was supposed to have a three-ring binder for each of my classes, so while Mom and Karen looked at crayons I wandered to the next aisle to pick out what I needed.

“Hey, Ryan!” Terry came rushing over from the other end of the aisle, where Terry’s mom looked very scattered with the other three boys running around and yelling at each other. They noticed me and waved, then went back to throwing piles of supplies in the shopping cart.

“Hey, Terry!” I was happy to see a familiar face. “Are you going to the same school as me?”

“Yeah, isn’t that cool? We’ll be in the same grade and everything. Maybe we’ll have some of the same classes!”

I was very relieved to hear that. I had been worried for weeks about starting that new school and not knowing a single person except my dad. We took our time

wandering through the store, piling our supplies up in our arms, getting matching binders and NFL football pencils, talking about what sports we might play and wondering if pre-algebra would be hard. When we got to the front of the store, our moms had found each other and were talking about the upcoming year while Karen and the other kids ran around on the sidewalk outside. I glanced in Terry's mom's cart and noticed four pairs of knock-off brand canvas tennis shoes, and value bags of striped tube socks. I felt embarrassed about the pile of new clothes in our station wagon. Terry saw me looking, and flushed red. I darted my eyes away, staring at the candy machines at the front of the store.

"Let's go get some candy. I've got change," I nudged Terry's arm with my elbow and shrugged my eyebrows so he would know I was still his friend even if he did wear those awful tennis shoes. We ran over to the machines and got handfuls of M&M's and SweetTarts, and the awkward moment was forgotten. We made plans for his mom to drop him off at my house on the first day and we would walk to school together.

School started the Wednesday after Memorial Day. We all went over to Aunt Carole and Uncle Mike's for a barbeque and a last chance to spend the day in the sun, chasing each other in a rowdy game of tag, and drinking gallons of tea and lemonade from the jugs Aunt Carole had sitting on the picnic table. Terry and I walked around the field behind the two houses, talking about the new school. He had been going to this district since kindergarten, so he knew all the kids and teachers.

"Most of the kids are pretty nice, but you just have to stay away from Principal Howell. Like, don't try to get on his good side. He doesn't have one," he advised.

I made a mental note to fly low to the ground, but felt sure that I would own this principal that no one could get along with. I would have the highest grades and perfect attendance. My sneakers would always be tied and I would never forget to spit out my gum before going into class. I pictured myself and a faceless man wearing corduroys and a sports coat, like my dad, shaking hands at the end of the year, telling me that of all the students he's ever taught, I was the most diligent, the most committed to higher learning. I was going to be a star.

Mom called us over for dinner, and we all crowded around the picnic table, filling our paper plates with burgers, pasta salad, baked beans and chips. Mom, Aunt Carole, and Terry's mom all had chicken, and Dad and Uncle Mike had steaks. As the sun started to slide below the treeline in the distance, things seemed so crystal clear. I saw Uncle Mike's garden, started to wilt as the summer harvest was depleting. I saw the chipped paint on the picnic table and a gnat in my lemonade. I saw, for the first time, the sorry state of Terry's house, how the back steps were slanted and almost falling over, how the window screens had rips in them clumsily mended with black twine. It occurred to me that I had never met Terry's dad. No one ever mentioned him or set out an extra plate. There was no car pulling into the driveway at the end of a long day at work. Uncle Mike had gone over to the house a couple times in the week I stayed there to fix a faucet and rig up a clothesline. I knew kids whose parents were divorced, but they got to go to their dad's house all the time to visit. It was like this man, who must have existed, just didn't exist in their world.

School started two days later, and we fell into a comfortable routine. Terry and his brothers would come to our house in the morning. Sometimes the younger boys would ride with Mom and Karen to school, and sometimes Karen would ride

with the boys. Terry and I would hang out in the living room for a little while because junior high started 25 minutes later than the elementary school. We'd compare homework or watch a cartoon, then walk two blocks to school. When it rained, we would all pile into the station wagon, and Mom would drop us off last, giving us time to hang out in the gym and visit with the other kids who got dropped off early. My teachers were nice and the schoolwork was easy compared to my last school, and all the kids wanted to get to know me because I was new and my dad was a new teacher.

One night, just before bed, Karen said she didn't want to go to school the next day. She just sat on the couch and calmly announced her plan to stay home for the rest of her life. Everyone kind of smiled and laughed it off and a flight of fantasy from a schoolkid, but when the next morning rolled around, she didn't get out of bed to get dressed.

"Come on, Karen, enough of this. It's time to get up," Mom was clearly frustrated after trying to get her out of bed for 45 minutes. The doorbell rang, and Terry and his brothers came piling into the house.

"What's up, buddy?" Terry collapsed on the couch next to me and stole a piece of toast off my breakfast plate.

"Karen won't get out of bed," I responded, staring at the TV.

"That's me every morning. My mom practically has to throw cold water on me to get me moving," Terry shrugged and changed the channel from news to cartoons.

Mom came bolting down the hallway just in time to flag down Terry's mom. As she pulled back into the driveway, she turned to the other kids and told them that

Karen wasn't going to school today and they would have to go with their mom to school.

Chapter 4

WHEN I FAKED IT

The next few nights were complete misery. Sheila had definitely decided to make things as hard on me as possible, eating dinner over at her cousin's house and coming home and going straight to bed. I worked extra hours and cooked tv dinners every night, cleaned the kitchen and even pulled the weeds out of our stone driveway, but nothing seemed to get me back on her good side. Monday night I even spray painted the picnic table and benches, like she had asked me to do last summer but I never got around to doing. Nothing. She got in bed that night and fell asleep without even looking at me. I didn't know what to do. I knew this was all my fault, but I just couldn't figure out how to fix it. What did she expect me to do? I kept turning it over in my head but just couldn't come to a solution. I never was any good at figuring women out.

Tuesday morning meant taking Karen to therapy, another weekly routine I adopted from my parents, but could never bring myself to enjoy. I got to her apartment at 8:15 to see her standing on the front steps of the unit, wrapped in a heavy blanket-style coat and furry boots. Looking normal. Looking pissed.

"You're late," she spat as she climbed into the truck.

"Fifteen minutes. You'll still get there on time. We're always a half hour early when we do it your way."

"I like half hour early. Half hour early gives me time to get used to the place," she replied.

I never thought of that. It never once occurred to me that it must have been just as hard for her to go to therapy as it was for me to take her. I sped up, driving as fast as I could, running yellow lights. We got there 25 minutes ahead of time. She kissed me on the cheek when I pulled into the parking spot.

The waiting area was full of the usual, stacks of magazines, uncomfortable chairs, and a depressed housewife or two. I sat on the couch while Karen signed herself in. She came over and sat next to me.

“Why do they have couches in these waiting rooms?” I whispered. “Who wants to sit next to a perfect stranger on a couch? Especially at the shrink’s,” I tried to joke, but Karen cut me a look that told me I wasn’t funny at all.

“Shut up, Ryan,” she said, and then started staring at a poster about normal development in babies. I started to look at it but quickly picked up a National Geographic. Pictures of some war-torn country overseas were better than where my mind was taking me with that poster.

“Karen?” Dr. Fincher poked his head into the waiting room. “Hey there, lady. Come on in. Ryan, I want you to attend the first half today, please.”

Fucking fantastic. Of all weeks, this is the one when Fincher wants me to participate. I reluctantly stand, tossing my magazine on the table as aggressively as I can, hoping he gets the idea that this is not something I am happy about.

“How’s everyone doing?” Fincher sits on his black leather office chair, flipping through pages in Karen’s manila folder. I sit on the brown recliner; Karen sits on the small tan love seat next to Fincher’s desk. The office is cluttered with stacks of books, a dozen Rubik’s cubes in various stages of completion, and half-empty water bottles. I can’t stand it. I want to grab a trash bag and start at the pile of shit that he

calls a desk. I don't know how Karen manages to sit here for an hour every week without blowing some sort of gasket, but she refuses to talk to anyone else, so he must be doing something right.

"Fine," I say, crossing my hands over my chest. I know I'm being rude, I just figure Karen's the one in therapy, I'm not getting into my shitty problems when she's the one who's lost her mind.

"Just fine?" Fincher glances over his wire-rimmed glasses and cuts me a look. He's changed his hair; trimmed it closer on the sides and grown it longer on the top, like the guys in the fitness magazines are all doing. I wonder if he does cross-fit or eats Paleo or some shit like that.

"He's not going to talk to you," Karen jumps in. "He doesn't trust you because you're a faggot."

"Oh, Christ. Here we go. Look, this is the last place I feel like being right now. You know she makes this stuff up to make me feel bad. I don't care what you do outside this office," I lean forward, trying to look earnest. The last thing we need is for Karen to lose the only therapist she'll work with.

Fincher just leans back in his chair and looks at both of us. "How's the eating?" He looks for a long time at Karen, who still hasn't taken off her massive coat.

"Fine."

"Ryan, how is Karen eating?"

"Fine, I guess."

“Fine, I guess is not acceptable. Ryan, you need to monitor her eating more closely. If things aren’t ok, you need to call me. We cannot fix what we don’t know to be broken.”

I feel ten years old. We talk for a few more minutes about getting to group therapy on time and being prepared for visits from social services, and then I am dismissed to the waiting room so Karen and Fincher can have their private chit chat. I am pretty sure that chit chat includes what a lousy job I am doing taking care of my only sister.

“What did he say?” I ask once we are in the truck and heading out on the highway. I try to sound casual, but it’s impossible.

“He’s worried you don’t spend enough time with me. He won’t say it, but he keeps asking when we go out, how often you come over, if we eat dinner together. He’s going to send over social services, I just know it,” she stares down at her hands, her face is blank.

“Oh, that’s just great, Karen. I thought we were doing ok here, I thought you were doing ok,” I pull into a gas station and put the truck in park. “I don’t want anything to happen to you, that’s all. I want you to stay in your apartment. What if they make you go into a home?” I know I shouldn’t say these things to her, but I can’t stop talking. It’s like all the mess I’ve been dealing with for the past week has started to come ripping out of me. I can’t take a deep breath.

“I’m not going into a home, Ryan. Everything is fine. They have to come out to make sure, that’s all. You do things different than Mom and Dad, and they have to make sure that works for me,” she closes her eyes and leans her head back on the headrest.

It feels weird, having my crazy kid sister talk me off a ledge, so I get out of the truck and light a cigarette. I start to walk to the shop, then turn around and ask Karen if she wants anything. She shakes her head, no, and why would I even ask? She hasn't eaten away from home in years, and that's not going to change today. I fix a coffee and come back out to the truck. Karen's on my cell phone, talking to someone.

"It's Sheila," she mouths to me, and I reach for the phone, but she ducks out of the way. "Yeah, he just got back. No, the session was fine. Sure, Thursday dinner would be awesome," she hands the phone to me, but the line's already dead.

"I'm coming over for dinner on Thursday," she says with a smile. "You're supposed to pick me up after work and come straight home."

I nod, thinking this must be a good thing, like maybe Sheila's finally going to start talking to me again, but when I get home from work, she's still silent. She's sitting at the kitchen table, looking at catalogs full of baby furniture and maternity clothes, and she shrugs her shoulders when I try to rub them.

"Goddamn it, Sheila, enough! I don't know what to do. What do you want me to do?" I sit next to her at the table and pop a beer. She looks at me curiously, as if she's not sure who just sat down at the table next to her.

"Ryan, do you even want a baby?"

"Fuck. Yes, of course I want a baby. I want us to be happy. I want a baby," I reach over and grab her hand, but she pulls it back.

"I need to know if you're all in on this. I can do this alone, but I can't have you half in and half out of my life. If you don't want to do this, you need to leave. Tonight." She makes a note on the cheap steno book next to her. *Mattress set - \$50.*

My head is spinning. She's kicking me out. She's kicking me out of my own house if I don't start singing praises about nursery sets and baby bottles. Shit. I feel trapped in a corner, like a cat. I don't know what to say.

"I don't want to do this, Ryan, but I'm not going to live with you or raise a baby with you and the way you've been acting," *Maternity scrubs* - \$35

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying here with you, and the baby," I grab a catalog. "Don't forget a first aid kit. Those are only \$10 at Wal-Mart."

Sheila writes it down on the list. I reach over and grab her hand, and this time she squeezes back. I flip through page after page of smiling moms and laughing babies. No one's cross, or tired, or cleaning baby puke off their new sweater. None of the babies are screaming while being strapped into their car seat. Everything looks like a wonderland, and all I wonder is where are all the dad's and how did they manage to get away?

Chapter 5

WHEN I MET THE INTERLOPER

Karen had been coming over to the trailer for about a month before we had our big blow-up at dinner. I knew that night when I picked her up that things were going to be shitty with a capital S. Sheila had started wearing maternity scrubs to work and had a bump that just couldn't be hidden with baggy t-shirts any more. Her legs were a little puffy, and she was starting to walk slower than usual. I couldn't decide if it was more for show than anything else, but I decided to leave it alone. We had finally stopped fighting about every little thing, and I didn't feel like stirring up trouble just over a waddle. Her friends at work and her cousin were going freaking nuts over the baby, bringing over bags of used baby clothes and blankets, and telling all their hospital stories. I had heard about her cousin's C-section so many times I was starting to develop a gag reflex just seeing her car pull up the street. I was happy that Sheila was getting so much attention, but I couldn't sit in that house any longer than I had to. My work hours were really piling up, and my boss mentioned a couple times that he hoped my wife got knocked up more often.

As I was getting changed that Thursday afternoon, my boss came into the locker room.

"Hey, man, I want to talk to you. Come by my office when you get dressed," he said, and walked away, his face without expression.

I got dressed fast, scared to death that this was it, we don't have enough business, you're doing a crap job, we don't need another tow-truck driver right now,

basically, and you're fired. I walked into his office with my hands stuck in my jeans pockets so he couldn't see how bad I was shaking. Part of me was terrified to get fired, but there was another side that was thrilled. I could see myself getting into my truck, taking all my cash out of the bank, and just driving until it ran out. I was dreaming about how far I could make it, and maybe I could find some no-name desert town that needed a mechanic. I could put together an apartment over the shop, just a tv, a bed, and a little fridge. It would be almost identical to the dorm room I had that one semester I went away to college. Heaven.

"Ryan?" I jump as Jeff's voice snaps me back to reality. I'm just me again, sitting on an uncomfortable folding chair with grease caught under my fingernails.

"Hey Jeff. You wanted to see me?" I always feel like Jeff's one bad truck repair from completely going over the edge. He always brags about cutting his own hair and how much money he saves, but all he does is shave it all the same length, giving him a crazy, neo-nazi look, which combined with his see-through blue eyes make him look like some wires just didn't get hooked up right when he was born.

"Yeah, man, come on in," he opens the door to his office, a room that is smaller than the bathroom, just a cheap dented metal desk and a three drawer filing cabinet. He sits down on his office chair, and with a tired sigh, he starts spinning back and forth, tapping his hands on his desk. I start to get very worried, and very excited, thinking about my new life.

"So how many weeks is Sheila pregnant?"

"About 10. She's showing. We have a crib," I start blabbing, I have no idea why I'm talking in this weird voice that doesn't even belong to me.

“That’s just great, man. Just awesome. Kids are a real gift, you know?” He gestures at his family picture hanging on the wall next to his mechanic certifications. His wife is fat, I mean huge, and his three kids stare at the camera like they have no idea where they even are. I’ve met his family before at cookouts and those kids are part of the reason I never really wanted any. I watched them for four solid hours alternate between eating hot dogs, punching each other, and staring off into space. Jeff talked about them like they were the best thing that ever happened to him, but all I could see were a bunch of brainless brats.

I nod, and say what I’m supposed to say about other people’s families.

“So anyway, I want to make sure you’re good. I know you’ve been working a ton, and I just want you to know you’re doing a great job. You work as many hours as you need, but make sure you spend time at home, too. This is an important time, you know, the last time you and Sheila will ever be alone again, if you know what I mean,” he nudges me and winks, and I feel sick. I try to imagine my apartment, but now all I can see is Jeff and his fat wife enjoying “alone time.” I stand up fast.

“Okay, well thanks. I could really use the hours, so as long as things are good, then I guess I’ll get out of here,” I start to turn to the door.

“Oh yeah, things are good. I’m here if you need anything,” Jeff smiles and I see that his gums around his teeth are starting to turn black. I practically run out of the shop.

When I picked up Karen, she could tell I was still upset.

“What’s going on?” She asked, clearly worried.

“My boss had to talk to me this afternoon. I guess I’m still thinking about it,” I say, trying to shrug and act like it’s nothing, but Karen’s sharper than that.

“Are you getting fired?”

“No, nothing like that. I’ve been working a lot and he wanted to tell me that I could work more if I wanted to. That’s all.”

“Oh. Well, why are you working so much?”

Here we go, I think, then take a deep breath. “Sheila’s pregnant, Karen. About ten weeks now. I’ve been working to get the extra money and to stay the hell out of the house.”

I see the wheels spinning as she processes the information I just told her. She’s silent for the rest of the drive to the trailer, and I just know she’s conserving all her energy to make me pay for the news I just shared. Of course I’m right, and the night ends with me using and dreaming about a small place out in the middle of nowhere, with no pregnant wife, no crazy sister, no white supremacist boss making me feel like I’ve gotten as far in life as I’m ever going to get.

Monday after the fight, I pick Karen up for her therapy appointment as usual. She’s silent getting into the truck, and doesn’t look at me for the whole ride. I sit on the couch, flipping through magazines as she signs herself in, and she sits down on a wooden chair next to the front door, clearly a strategic move to make sure I know she’s still upset. When Fincher calls her into the office, I go outside to have a cigarette, wondering how bad I’m supposed to feel about this recent development. It bothers me, but maybe not as much as it should. I wonder how normal people deal with this sort of thing. I watch the cars drive by, wondering if those people would feel really bad about their crazy sister being ticked off at them. I check my watch and light another cigarette. It’s only 915 and all I want is a beer, or something stronger. The front door swings open and Fincher sticks his head out.

“Ryan? I need you in here.”

He looks really concerned, just like he’s paid to. I know what this is about, and feel like a kid being sent to the principal’s office. I sit on the chair next to his desk, as Karen watches me with big eyes, like she’s waiting for me to lose my temper again. I sigh and rub my eyes with the backs of my hands.

“Ryan, Karen tells me you’re going to have a baby,” Fincher looks at me, like that statement on its own is supposed to illicit some sort of reaction from me. I sit there, not sure how to respond. “She also tells me there was a family disagreement last week,” he glances between Karen and me, waiting for one of us to say something, but we both just sit there staring at him. If I were watching the three of us on tv, I would be cracking up at how absurd the whole scenario was, but it wasn’t on tv, it was real and I had to explain my bad behavior. I spoke up.

“Did she tell you what she did? About all the stuff she was saying at the table?” I feel like a loser for pointing my finger at Karen, but I need to make sure Fincher knows the whole deal before he even starts in on me.

“I told him, Ryan. I don’t feel the need to tell lies,” Karen looks at me from the corner of her eye.

“Oh, of course, let’s all talk about how my waiting to tell her about the baby is some sort of lie. How I would never want my sister to have a part in the baby’s life, so why even bother bringing it up?”

Fincher is writing furiously in his little book. He glances up. “Do you want your sister to be part of the baby’s life?”

“Sure I do. It’s the right thing to do, isn’t it? I just don’t know why she has to act like that when I finally tell her something important about my life,” I lean back in

my chair. This is over. I'm done talking about it. I suddenly lean forward, with my arms resting on my knees, using my intimidating stare to let them both know that I was through getting my head shrunk.

"Ryan. Karen," Fincher picks up some papers from his desk, and starts to shuffle through them. "I've been watching for a few months now. I think you're doing the best you can, Ryan, but I'm recommending increased social worker visitation. We have to make sure that your arguments aren't keeping Karen from receiving the best care you can give her," He hands me a packet of paper, with a social worker's name and contact information on it. A handwritten note states the first visit is a family interview, that everyone has to be there, even Sheila, at 10am on Friday. I shake my head, slap the pile of papers on my thigh, and stand up.

"Fine. Whatever. Karen, are you done bitching about me? I have to get to work," I walk out the door, out of the building, light a smoke and lean against my truck until she comes out.

Later that night, after dinner, Sheila and I look through the papers. "Well, I'll have to ask off work, but that's ok. Whatever you need me to do," she grabs my hand and kisses my temple as she stands up to get some iced tea.

"LaDonna LaFleur. What the hell kind of name is that? Honest to Christ, LaDonna LaFleur. What do we call her? Miss LaFleur, please don't fuck with the routine this family has, we're really all we have," I sink to my knees in front of Sheila, acting like a poor orphan from a Dickens novel. Sheila laughs and grabs my ear, making me go back to the table and read more from the pile of papers Fincher gave us.

"Sheila, Karen doesn't seem even interested about this. The drive home we talked about soup. She thinks the soup I buy her is contaminated and she wants a

different brand. Like our meeting with Fincher had never happened. I dropped her off and she was practically skipping to the apartment. I don't know what to think about it."

Sheila sat down at the table heavily, and started to rub her belly. I stopped looking at her and started staring at the pile of papers instead. We were quiet for a few minutes while she drank her tea. I opened the kitchen window and lit a cigarette.

"You know, Ryan, this may be her only way of telling you that something's wrong. She may need that social worker to speak for her. Maybe it's something she doesn't feel like she can tell you. Maybe she's worried that you're too busy with me and the baby."

The baby, always the baby. Sheila wishes I was more involved with her and the baby. I mean, she's not even in her second trimester and already talking about having baby brain, and not being able to get around as well as before. I'm so sick of hearing about the baby that I could scream, but I bite my tongue instead of saying what I'm thinking, *Oh, she's upset about the baby, is she? Somehow we find a way to make it all about you again, huh?* I hate myself for a minute, then crush out my cigarette and grab a beer.

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know. You pretty sure you can get off work Friday?"

"Sure. My boss said to do whatever I need to do. They're all being so great to me," she starts cleaning up the kitchen, rinsing out my thermos and filing the papers in a big box she's marked Karen's Papers. I never would have thought to keep all that in one place. Quick as a switch, I go from being exhausted by Sheila to being incredibly in love, and I grab her into a massive bear hug.

“I love you. I really do,” I murmur into her neck, smelling her shampoo and laundry detergent.

She laughed her laugh, then turned and walked down the hall to the bedroom.

On Friday, Sheila and I got ready to meet the social worker. I wore Dockers and a collared shirt, and Sheila wore a red maternity jumper with a white turtleneck that her cousin Heather gave her. I made sure to shave and wear some cologne, and Sheila hugged me for an extra minute before we got into the truck.

“I love that smell, even after these years,” she says, smiling from the corner of her eye. “Won’t be long, and we’ll have to take the car everywhere. I could barely step up into the truck just now.”

I nod, and pull down the driveway, turning the wrong way at the end of the street. Swearing, I back into a neighbor’s driveway to turn around. Sheila watches me, like she’s not sure if she can joke about my screw-up or if she should just keep her mouth shut. I don’t look at her, figuring her indecisiveness may buy me a few minutes of quiet. When we get to the apartment, I can see Karen looking out her bedroom window. The drapes swish shut violently when she sees us getting out of the truck.

I take a minute to help Sheila out of the cab, then hold her hand as we walk up the sidewalk to enter the building. She squeezed my hand, and I realize she is just as scared as I am, maybe more. It occurs to me that she’s never had to do this before, I’ve always gone alone to the therapist visits, stood in line in the social security office, filled out pages and pages of medical information to qualify for benefits. Mom and Dad did it before me, and I always kept Sheila out of it. Why make her worried about something that’s all mine? Mine to work on, mine to fix, mine to lose sleep over. I kiss her cheek and knock on the door.

Karen answers with her cup of tea in hand. The tv is off, so she must have seen all she wanted of the news. She wouldn't need to check the weather, because she wouldn't be leaving the house at all today. Without a word, she walks over to her chair and sits down. I go to the kitchen and pour a glass of water. Sheila sips the coffee she brought in a thermos mug. We all stare at each other like we've never met before a day in our lives. Karen's wearing a navy blue fleece pullover with the local school's emblem stitched in it, a gift from Mom a few Christmases ago, with tan cropped pants and dark brown leather loafers. She looked like she was getting ready to go to band boosters. Everytime I see my sister looking like a normal soccer mom, my heart screams. She'll never go to band boosters, never take brownies to the church youth picnic, never take pictures of a daughter's first dance recital. How can she look so normal?

We sit in silence for about 5 minutes when there's a tapping at the door. LaDonna LaFleur knocks in a rhythm, shave and a haircut...I wait for the last two taps, but there's only silence. Karen jumps up and answers the door.

"Hi Karen. I'm LaDonna LaFleur, I've been assigned your case through the State of Delaware and Dr. Gary Fincher. How are you?" She extends her hand, and after staring at it briefly, Karen takes it and shakes, one, two, limper than spaghetti.

I stand up, wiping my palms on my pants, leaving streaks on my thighs. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. LaFleur, I'm Ryan Godwin, Karen's older brother. This is my wife, Sheila." I nod in Sheila's direction, but am too dazzled by this social worker to pay my wife much attention.

LaDonna LaFleur. Her perfume came into the room before she did, and I couldn't stop staring at the alarming amount of makeup she had managed to cake on

her face. Her hair was black and big, like the psychic Sheila's always watching on tv. She wore earrings, a necklace, and bracelets that rattled while she shook my hand. I look for a wedding ring, but she's wearing so many rings I can't tell if one of them is a band or just another decoration. I shake my head, trying to understand why I even cared if she had on a wedding ring, and reclaim my seat.

"Look at you, mama!" LaDonna gushes over Sheila like she's known her all her life, and I can see Karen and Sheila both visibly relax in their seats, while I grab an extra chair from the kitchen. "Listen, gang, I know these kinds of visits can be a little nerve-wracking. We don't want that! I have a job to do, I'm gonna do it the best I can, and we'll all get along fine." She started her speech with a big smile on her face, but quickly shifted gears to look concerned and serious. When she was done talking, she put her big smile back on and looked at all three of us.

I don't think any of us knew exactly how to take this woman. Karen was sipping her tea calmly, but I knew she could put on a poker face with the best of them. I watched for any tell-tale signs, like a shaky hand or a tapping foot, but there were none. Sheila looked dazzled, taking in this woman from the tip to the bottom, staring at her shiny high heels and expensive purse laying on the floor. We were all quiet for so long, I felt like someone should break the ice.

"None of us understand what is going on here. We have a set routine that Dr. Fincher approves of, we never miss sessions, I keep all the checklists and medicine counts like they tell me to do. What do you need from us?"

LaDonna LaFleur just nods as I go through my questions, as if she knew exactly what I was going to say. She looked right into my eyes and grinned. She

made me feel like I was the only person in the room, then she looked around to Karen and Sheila.

“You do, Ryan, you really do. I’ve looked at all the records and the notes from the other visits we made to Karen, and you’re doing just great. Gary was worried. Call it jumping the gun, but with Karen’s history, and since you are pretty new to providing care to her, we just need to make sure this new transition is going to be as smooth as possible.” Her voice is so calm.

“Sheila, Ryan, since the argument you guys had at dinner, Dr. Fincher has noticed some small, minute changes. Karen’s losing weight. She isn’t reading her books. These are things that you may not notice, and that’s alright. That’s why we have sessions and visits. We have to make sure the stress isn’t too much.”

I look at Karen, wondering how it must feel to have all these people talking about you like you’re a child, or not even in the room, but she’s just nodding her head like she’s the one running this meeting, not LaDonna LaFleur. Sheila’s taking notes in a cheat memo pad she bought at the drugstore like she’s going to have to take an exam after, and I can’t figure out what she could possibly need to take notes on. I feel my skin getting warm, and I know my face is turning red. I know my ears must be practically glowing. I know I need to get myself together or I’m going to start yelling and having a fit right here in my sister’s apartment, which will set Karen off, make Sheila cry, and probably get my sister’s care taken away from me completely. I take a deep breath.

“There’s only so much I can do here,” I start to plead my case. “I mean, what am I supposed to do if I don’t find out about all this shit until you show up?”

Damn it, that came out wrong, but I can’t back down now.

“No one expects you to see everything,” she replies. “That’s why we’re here. It’s a whole new world for people like Karen. She can have more freedom than ever before. She could have a job in a couple years, if that’s what she wants! There was a time that people were sent away and forgotten. It’s not like that anymore.”

I can’t decide if this is comforting or not. LaDonna LaFleur looks at me like a salesperson wondering if I’m going to buy the big screen tv I’ve been staring at. I start deep breathing again, lean back, and let the planning begin.

Chapter 6

WHEN I HATED EVERYTHING

After a few weeks, things start to settle into a routine. I'm working the night shift with Troy, leaving my mornings free to take care of Karen and get the trailer ready for the baby. The damp early spring is drying up and getting warmer, so Sheila had a yard sale and emptied out the second bedroom to make it into a nursery space. The night shift has me bringing in more money, so that's one less thing to worry about, as Sheila starts accumulating hand-me-downs from Heather and picking up newer stuff from Wal-Mart. The room's decorated with pictures of bears having picnics and riding tricycles. I glance around, appreciating what she's been able to do with so little cash. It's almost exciting. I imagine looking into the room and seeing them in the rocker, her singing a song while the baby drinks a bottle, everything dark with only the light coming from the balloon nightlight, kind of like the formula ads in all the baby magazines she's been bringing home. The thought actually makes me smile for a minute. I'm trying to put together the crib when the call comes in.

"Sheila! Grab my phone! I'm ass deep in a Spanish instruction book!" I laugh, thinking it would just figure that the one crib we pick up wouldn't have the instructions in English. I'm trying to hold A to B and use the allen wrench to lock them in place when Sheila comes to the doorway.

"Ryan, it's Dr. Fincher. There's a problem," she hands me the phone and grabs the half-assembled crib, resting it gently against the wall.

I feel dizzy. I sit down on the floor, hard. The room feels too small now, and I can feel a hundred teddy bear eyes staring at me as I take the phone from her with a shaking hand.

“Hey, doc. It’s Saturday, don’t you ever take a day off?” I joke.

Silence on the other end of the line. Dr. Fincher isn’t laughing.

“Ryan, you need to come to the hospital. Karen’s been admitted, and I need you here to take care of the papers and get her settled. How fast can you get here?”

“What the fuck happened? I was just there yesterday! She was fine! What’s going on?” I start yelling into the phone, and my free hand makes a fist on its own.

“Just get down here. We’ll talk in a few,” Dr. Fincher hangs up the phone, leaving me staring into a blank screen.

I sit there for a second, just staring at the phone. I consider, just for a second, staying here, putting the crib together, drinking a beer, watching a movie later, forgetting that I even have a sister. Sheila breaks my thoughts.

“What’s happening?” she asks, quietly, but with rising panic in her voice.

I’m suddenly furious, pissed off that I have to leave, that I have to drive to a hospital and go up three flights to that ward that I have become too familiar with in the past few years. I hate that Sheila’s scared, I hate that she’s resting a hand on that growing bump, as if there’s something happening that could hurt the baby. I feel this raw, hard anger rise up as I jump to my feet.

“Goddamn it!” I throw my phone at Sheila’s head, lashing out at the only person in the room, immediately wincing as I see her cringe out of the way, the phone bouncing harmlessly on the mattress waiting in the hall. I storm out of the room, looking for my sneakers, as she follows me down the hall.

“Do you need me to come with you?” She asks, as I sit on the recliner and start tying my laces. I cannot even begin to understand how she can still want to help me after that outburst, but she does, she still wants to do what she can to make things easier for her monster of a husband. I hate that. I wish she would lock herself in our room again, hating me and my temper. I wish she would have a bag packed for me when I get back, waiting on the front porch, but I know I can’t get out that easy. I ignore her question and walk out.

The hospital stinks like disinfectant when I walk in. I know which floor to go to, know which hall to walk down, and see Dr. Fincher and LaDonna LaFleur waiting outside a room with a closed door. This cannot be good. They haven’t seen me yet, they’re still looking through stacks of folders and murmuring quietly to each other. I have half a second to decide if I should keep walking or turn around, go back to the trailer, pack my own damn bag and be done with all of it. The smell of the floor cleaner is making me feel sick to my stomach. I glance around for the men’s room, and I hear that voice call my name. I hear her dress sandals on the tile as she quickly marches over to me. I brace myself for whatever she plans to say about how terrible I am, rail me for whatever sign of trouble I missed yesterday when I was visiting, but she’s quiet as she wraps her arms around me. Her perfume engulfs me and makes me forget the smell of cleaners and sick people. I hug back, not even registering what I am doing.

“Oh, you poor man! I know this must be just the worst feeling in the world,” she says into my chest. I nod, and she squeezes me one more time before stepping back. Dr. Fincher, meanwhile, has walked up silently, waiting for the moment to pass. I feel dazed, but less out of control, less guilty. I can’t remember the last time I didn’t

feel guilty. It's like that time I got food poisoning and couldn't get out of bed for 5 days. When I was better, I had lost 15 pounds, and my feet and legs didn't know how to walk with that weight suddenly missing from my body. I plant my feet and take a minute to register this new lightness.

"The upstairs neighbor had a leak," Dr. Fincher says quietly, putting his hand on my elbow and guiding me to the row of chairs where all the file folders are stacked. I allow myself to be led, confused, until I realize he's talking about Karen's neighbors, the small, quiet Indian family that lives above my sister. I met them once, in the hallway. They all just nodded at me as they went into their apartment, the little boy staring at me the whole time. When I go there now, he always stares at me from the upstairs window until I go inside, then I hear his feet running into the living room.

"Sometime in the night, the HVAC unit in their utility closet started leaking," Fincher continues. "When they woke up this morning, there was water all over the kitchen and closet floors. They called maintenance. When the worker showed up, he fixed the leak, but needed to check Karen's apartment to make sure nothing had drained downstairs. She wouldn't let him in. He told her if she didn't let him in, he would come back with the manager. She was waiting for both of them with a kitchen knife. They called the police, who called us, and here we are."

Here we are. Shit.

"The apartments are supposed to call me when they have to come into her place, Doc," I say weakly. "They know all about us. Mom and Dad made sure they would handle things a certain way when they got her that place." I put my head in my hands. What if the apartments won't take her back? Where would she live? With me? With a brand new baby? I start to shake my head, answering my own questions

silently, when LaDonna puts her hand on my knee. The touch snaps me back to reality, from the spiraling mess I feel myself becoming.

“The worker and the manager aren’t going to pursue any charges,” she says softly, almost whispering in my ear, and I wonder if she’s psychic or has just been doing this job a long time. Her breath on my neck is soothing, almost sexy. “They actually apologized to us for not following directions. They didn’t plan on being in there for more than five minutes, and I guess they just didn’t think it would be a big deal to her.”

I nod, and sit up straighter, ready to do whatever they need from me. I start looking around for the clear clipboard that’s always waiting, searching for a pen to start filling out the papers, wondering how long she’ll be staying this time.

“Do you want to see her?” Fincher asks me, and I nod, feeling the weight of guilt on my shoulders and in my gut again. I had been here all this time thinking only about me, how was this going to keep turning my life upside-down, and my kid sister was alone in a hospital room after another breakdown. He opens the door and lets me walk in alone, silently closing the door behind me.

“Hey, Karen, how are you feeling?” I can tell she’s been drugged, more than usual, by the way her eyes look just above me, like she can’t get them to settle on one spot. She’s sitting up, dressed in a hospital gown, just looking around like she just woke up and can’t remember how she got here. She probably can’t. She looks tired and sad, but her face terrifies me. Her skin is almost grey, with black circles under her eyes. She suddenly has a deep wrinkle on her forehead. Jowls hang from her cheeks and chin. Her hair is uncombed, with chunks of cowlick sticking up from matted tangles. She looks sixty years old.

“They were coming to get me, Ryan,” she mumbles, almost incoherently. The meds must be pretty strong this time. “They made up some story about a leak, but I know they wanted to come get me. They were going to take me somewhere. I couldn’t let them in. They know they’re not allowed in!” Her voice rises, panicked, and she starts to gasp for air.

“I know,” I say, sitting on the bed next to her. I reach my hand to touch her shoulder, but she pulls away from me. She turns her head to look out the window. She mumbles, and I can’t understand what she’s trying to say. Tears start to roll down her face. “What, honey? What is it? I can’t hear you,” I speak softly, trying to imitate the way Mom used to speak, hoping she could hear the concern in my voice.

“You sent them,” she says, looking at me again. “You sent them to get me. They’re supposed to call you first, and you told them to come get me.”

I stand up, not knowing what to say. I take a couple steps back and look at her again, and I don’t know the person I’m looking at.

“How could you?” she gasps for air, pointing a finger at me. “How could you do this to me? You’re happy I’m here! You wanted this!” Suddenly, she grabs the Styrofoam cup of ice water and hurls it at me, missing and spilling all over the floor. She sobs. I just turn and walk out, leaving her in her bed.

I sit in a chair and grab the paperwork as Dr. Fincher goes in the room. He comes back out after a couple minutes and lets an orderly know that we need a mop and bucket, while I try with shaking hands to fill out what they need from me this time. It takes me less than 10 minutes; I memorized all this information a long time ago, except for the insurance numbers, and the hospital already has those on file. Fincher’s talking to me, telling me what to expect and how long she’ll be staying, but I

can't hear him. All I can hear is the blood pounding in my ears. I shove the clipboard into his lap and stand up sharply.

"Get someone to brush her fucking hair," I spit out, and walk away, in the direction of the elevators.

"Ryan," I head LaDonna's sandals clacking behind me, her breath a little short from rushing, but I just keep walking. I don't want to feel better right now, I don't want to be told that I'm experiencing a natural human reaction. I just want to be gone. She manages to catch up to me while I wait for the elevator, and grabs my hand. I stare at the aluminum doors. There are kid-sized handprints on them. I try not to think about what that means.

"Ryan, take a minute," she pleads. "I know you want to leave. It's fine. She'll be taken care of. But she's going to be here a few days. Someone needs to bring some clothes so she doesn't have to be in those gowns the whole time."

Wordlessly I step into the open elevator doors. She gets in with me, and the doors swish shut. The tiny space is full of the scent of her. She rides with me, silent, and when we reach the lobby she takes my hand.

"Let me get my purse. I'll go to the apartment with you."

I give a short nod, then walk out to my truck, lighting a cigarette right next to the No Smoking sign. I stand in the parking lot smoking and waiting with a thousand thoughts chasing around in my head. As I crush out my smoke, I decide to get in the truck and leave, when I see her come out the front doors. Like a dog with a bone, I think, shaking my head, as she struggles to climb into the cab with her skirt and high-heeled sandals. We drive to the apartment, her making small talk about the daffodils starting to pop up, I just stare straight ahead.

Chapter 7

WHEN I STARTED CHEATING

“It’s too easy for you to get laid,” Terry told me once. We were lying on his bed watching tv, I was hiding out from the endless phone calls from my most recent ex-girlfriend, Jess. She was furious, calling over and over, just to start screaming at me on the phone anytime I answered. She called last night at midnight, and dad told me if I didn’t fix what I had broken he would. Jess and I were seeing each other for about 6 weeks, and we had been sleeping together for about 10. She was dating this kid named Todd when we hooked up at a party, and we just kept hooking up until she broke it off with Todd and wanted to just see me. I told her that was cool, so I took her out to the movies and couple times and to a few parties. Then she started calling at night, getting mad if I told her I wanted to go to bed. She would be all pissed every morning when I would ride to school with Terry and we wouldn’t stop to pick her up. I tried to tell her that we were always running late, but she kept giving me dirty looks and refusing to sit with me at lunch. I guess it made her even more mad that I just gave her space to do her thing, but with Karen all over the place I learned that sometimes the best thing you can give someone is room to breathe. Boy, did I misread that signal.

“Ryan, why don’t you ever invite me to your house?” she asked one night, while we were at her mom’s watching some awful made for tv movie.

Not very many people know what was going on with Karen, since she only went to our school for a few months in ninth grade before she got pulled out. The only

people I could ever talk to was Uncle Mike and Terry, because they had known Karen forever and knew we weren't some weirdo family. I hadn't ever thought about bringing a girl home, honestly. Home was such a private place, and Karen's problems were so private, that I never considered I could have an outside life that combined with my family life. I didn't know what to say, so I cracked a joke about how my dad never ran the heater and my mom didn't allow cable and that she would be miserable if she ever even tried to come over. That settled her down for a couple of days, but soon she was asking to come over for dinner.

"It just makes sense that a couple should be able to meet each other's parents," she pleaded, holding onto my elbow and looking right into my eyes. Her eyes were so clear and sparkling, they were so beautiful I almost said yes, come over right now, I don't fucking care that I have a crazy sister and that she will probably start screaming at you the minute you look at her funny, but I hesitated.

"Not tonight. There's a lot of stuff going on and my dad is really stressed out. I'll take you over as soon as things calm down."

She seemed ok with that answer as she rested her head on my chest and we both just listened to the song on the radio. I left about an hour later and went straight to Terry's.

Terry considered my problem. "You've got two choices," he said, leaning his head back like some wise Buddha, exhaling pot smoke up into his ceiling fan. "You can break up with her, or you can take her to the fucking shit show going on in your house right now. But you can't keep stringing her along. It's not right. It's not fair."

He handed me the bong, and I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes and laying back on his pillows. I didn't want to break up with Jess, she was funny and nice and

freaking awesome in bed, which for us usually meant the backseat of my dad's station wagon, but whatever. I had made more friends through her circle than I had made in the first two years of high school combined, and now when I walked through the halls people would speak to me, like we were buddies or something. Not that Jess was some kind of cool kid, she wasn't, she was just friendly and knew everyone's name, so they all knew hers.

The next night, she called me at home, but I told mom to say I was working on a paper for school. I laid on my bed and tried to figure out what to say to her. I didn't feel like I could tell her why she couldn't come to my house, and I knew that she was going to keep pushing me about it. I didn't know how to break up with her. I didn't want to make her mad at me or sad. I fell asleep that night with no idea how to take care of the situation, but ultimately the situation took care of itself.

The very next day, I was standing in the lunch line when this girl named Tina started talking to me. She seemed funny and cute, so I joked around a little, then met Jess at our lunch table. She looked at me darkly, then went back to eating her sandwich.

"What, Jess? What is it this time?" I asked, even though I knew what she was upset about.

"You don't have a paper due, Ryan. I know what your assignments are for the next week," she said. "Were you avoiding me? Why wouldn't you just tell me you didn't feel like talking?"

"Because you'd give me an even harder time about that, Jess. Every time I try to tell you something that doesn't go the way you want it to go, you get all upset and

take it out on me. Well, I just didn't want to talk last night. Is that good enough for you?"

She slammed her sandwich down, then grabbed her bag as she stood up. Her face was puckered like she had just tasted a lemon as she stomped off, dumping the rest of her food in the trash can. I stirred at my mac and cheese but didn't have any appetite at all. I jumped when I felt someone tap me on the shoulder.

"Oh my God, sorry! I didn't know you were that deep in thought," said a laughing voice.

And there she was. Tina. We started having sex almost immediately, that very weekend. I told mom and dad I would be spending the weekend over at Terry's, whose mom was working 2nd shift. She'd get home every night after midnight, pound a glass of wine, maybe smoke a joint with us, then go straight to bed. She never really noticed or cared if we had friends over, as long as she was able to sleep and the other kids weren't too disturbed. By then the younger kids were pretty obsessed with the video games Uncle Mike and Aunt Carole had gotten them, so they just stayed out in the living room until finally passing out in their beds. I invited Tina over Saturday. We drank some beer and sat outside at the picnic table smoking cigarettes. Tina smoked these long, skinny menthol cigarettes which I hated, but I kept smoking them just so she would stay. We talked about school, teachers we liked and hated, which boy was dating which girl, and music. She said her favorite band was Jethro Tull. I mean, who says that? What teenage girl living in a town in the middle of nowhere says Jethro Tull is her favorite band? I told her my Uncle Mike had Jethro Tull albums that he made me listen to sometimes when I would go to visit.

“Old hippie?” she asked, shooting me the kind of knowing look most people don’t get until their in their thirties, and we both laughed, and I knew my problem with Jess was just going to get bigger.

I took the last cigarette and asked if she wanted me to drive to the gas station up the street and get more. She shook her head.

“I’ve got another pack out in my car. Walk out front with me.”

We walked around the trailer, through thick grass grown up along the sides, and to her small Pontiac. She unlocked the driver’s door, but turned around before she opened it.

“I hope I’m not mixing this up, but I feel like we really like each other,” she said, looking up at me. I did the only thing I really knew how to do back then. I tilted her chin up and kissed her. She kissed me back, then climbed in to the back of the car.

Three days later, I’m back at Terry’s pondering the ultimatum my dad gave me. I guess Tina told a friend, who told a friend, who told Jess, who completely flipped the fuck out.

“I told you, it’s too easy for you to get laid,” Terry repeated. “How do you do it? Every kid at school would love to know the answer to that one.”

I thought about it. I had no idea why it always seemed to work so great in the first couple weeks then turn to shit. It just did. Later that night, after a few hits and a couple beers, I called Jess from Terry’s house phone. She screamed for five minutes, not even letting me say one thing. I almost hung up on her when she finally lost her steam and just started crying. I didn’t know how to explain anything, so I just kept telling her sorry, sorry I made you cry, sorry I was mean, sorry you felt so embarrassed, sorry for everything, just please stop calling the house and getting my

mom and dad so worked up. I didn't add the part where Karen had yanked the whole kitchen phone off the wall and how dad had to drive to the discount department store to buy a new one. After it was all over I felt exhausted and shaky, like I had just run the fastest sprint of my life. I felt better that it was all over, but this part inside me felt empty from all the things I couldn't ever explain to anyone.

I laid down on Terry's bed facing the window, looking out at the road, waiting for a car to drive by. Terry got in bed next to me and put an arm around me. I know that would make a lot of guys in our town pretty freaked out, they'd start getting real mean and mad and maybe punch a guy in the face if he did that to them, but with Terry it was just different. He was my best friend; we had been sleeping in each other's beds for years now, long before he ever admitted to anyone he was gay. It seemed like my whole life had always included him, every memory I had about growing up had him in it. I relaxed back and let myself start breathing again.

Chapter 8

WHEN I FELL DOWN HARD

Sheila was a virgin until she was 21 years old. I know, because she told me one night after we had swallowed down about 7 vodka shots and sliced through a whole lemon. She told me that she hated sex, and her favorite thing about me was that I didn't care if she wanted to have sex or not. It's true that I had never pressured her or given her a hard time about getting physical, but that was mostly because I was still sleeping with the waitress I had broken up with the same night I met Sheila. We were laying on a blanket on the sand by the river, both of us too drunk to keep up with our friends who had started to wander down the shore, looking for a boat pier to dive off. I put my arm out and she laid her head on it, a little breathless from how dizzy the booze had made her. She started to kiss me, and I kissed her back, thinking about the girl I had been out with for lunch and an afternoon fling.

"I love that I can kiss you and it never goes anywhere unless I decide it will," she said after we had laid our heads back to watch the clouds blow in front of the moon.

I don't know why I kept seeing that waitress. I could tell myself that I felt shitty about it, and decide I would never sleep with anyone except the girl I was dating, but then a couple hours later I'd get a phone call and I'd be off again. My dad had always said I was a big fish in a little pond, that most girls in our town didn't have anyone to compare me to, so they were attracted to me. I never really understood if this was a compliment or not until I went away to college and realized the girls

weren't going out of their way to meet me. When I moved back home after that first semester, the house phone was ringing off the hook once everyone found out I was back home, and I knew I never wanted to move away again. I got a job at the garage the next town over and started going out every night.

That was the summer I met Sheila. A guy from work invited me over to his house for a barbecue and to meet his wife. When I got there I saw at least a half dozen people I knew from school, who all wanted to sit around me and find out what I had been up to. No one even mentioned Karen's name, which was great because she had just been committed again a couple days before. I loved it when I could get out of that house and pretend that part of my life just didn't exist. I went in the house to take a leak and started to wander around. Steve's wife didn't make the bed, and there were clothes hanging out of the hamper. I made a disgusted noise in the back of my throat, then walked to the bathroom at the end of the hall. The tub was dirty, the kind of black grime mechanics bring home. My mom complained about it all the time and made me scrub my own bathtub on weekends. The rug in front of the toilet stunk. I took care of business and practically ran out of there, running into this pretty girl who was on her way in.

"Oh, damn! I'm sorry! I guess I just wasn't paying attention," she looked up at me and laughed, and I was long gone.

We spent the rest of the barbecue talking to each other, late in the night, even after everyone else had gone home and Steve and his wife went inside to clean up. We just sat at that picnic table like there was no one else in the whole world. I learned she was an only child whose mom had died when she was 12. She lived with her grandmother who helped raise her, and was going to school to be a CAN. She wanted

to work with elderly or babies. It was hard work but she loved it, even though she always had to study harder than any of the other girls, especially the chemistry part of it. Her grandmother would sit up late with her and give her quizzes to make sure she could pass every test. Even in the night, her eyes sparkled talking about school. I told her how I tried to go to college but had to move back after failing 4 of my five classes. I left out the part about staying in my room and watching tv when I was supposed to go to class, or how I slept straight through two of my final exams.

The whole time, she just nodded like she totally understood all of it, like I wasn't a complete loser who was only good for working on cars and living at home. When I told her about my job she got really excited.

"I don't understand a thing about cars!" she exclaimed. "How do you know where everything goes? How do you know what's wrong with it just by looking at it! You must be really smart to be able to figure that stuff out!"

I couldn't decide if she was really impressed or just trying to make me feel important, but I didn't care. It made me feel good, and I hadn't felt good about myself in a long time. I was telling her about getting my driver's license upgraded to be able to drive the tow truck when Steve came outside in his sweatpants.

"Hey, you guys need to use the bathroom or anything? I'm gonna lock up the house and go to bed. You can stay as long as you want, man, just make sure the fire's out when you leave," he said.

"Oh, my purse!" Sheila ran inside and I walked up to Steve.

"What do you know about this girl?" I asked.

“Sheila? She goes to nursing school with Melissa. She’s sweet, and her looks make up for her smarts, thank God,” he laughed, and I wanted to punch him in the face.

“She seems smart enough to me,” I muttered, and he looked at me funny.

“You like her? Well, she’s not seeing anyone if you’re interested,” he said, slapping me on the back and walking back inside, turning off the porch light and leaving me in the glow of the fire pit.

When Sheila came back out after a couple minutes, she said she didn’t know it was almost midnight and she had to go home or her grandmother would get worried. Besides that, she didn’t like leaving her home alone for too long. We walked slowly back to our cars after I dumped a bucket of sand on the fire pit. I asked if I could call her and she nodded, then wrote her number down on an old receipt she pulled from her purse. We hugged, and she got in her car, fast, and drove away leaving me standing alone in the middle of the driveway.

The next day at work, she was all I could think about. While I was working on cars I was actually proud of myself thinking how impressed she had been the night before about what I did for a living. I hadn’t thought being a mechanic was anything to be proud of, but I imagined she was standing next to me, with her head under the hood, looking in bewilderment as I installed a new set of spark plugs. I imagined telling her all about how to gap the plugs, how setting them wrong would mess up the whole car. As soon as I was done my shift I asked my boss if I could use the office phone. An old lady picked up the phone, and I asked if I could speak to Sheila. She asked me for my name, then put the phone down. I sat there wondering how many guys were calling if this old lady had to ask for my name, then I read the receipt she

had written her phone number on. It was from a grocery store, and she had bought bananas, bread, milk, a whole bunch of different food, plus deodorant and condoms. I could feel myself getting pissed. She was going to be my girlfriend, and the idea of another person being with her was starting to get me worked up. She looked up to me. She was impressed by me. No one else.

When she finally answered the phone, I was so startled I dropped the receiver. “Hello? Hey, Sheila! It’s Ryan, from last night?”

“Yeah, hey Ryan! How’s it going?”

“Good, good, I didn’t know if you had any plans for tonight. Want to drive down to the beach?” I held my breath.

“Sure, I can go out for a couple hours. Come pick me up at 7,” she gave me her address and hung up the phone, and I rushed home to scrub the grease from my fingernails.

She was wearing a black summer dress that looked like a slip and a pair of slip on black leather sandals when I picked her up that night. I couldn’t tell if she was wearing a bra or not from the porch, but when she climbed into my truck I could tell she wasn’t. It was hot and made me furious at the same time, thinking about whoever it was she was using those condoms with. She smelled like shampoo and had her hair pulled up in a knot at the back of her neck. I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, which made her blush and laugh as she pulled on her seat belt.

“Watch yourself, mister,” she said, giving me a feather-light slap on my hand.

I was confused. I figured she would be all over that kind of attention, but it seemed to embarrass her more than anything else. I put the truck in reverse, and couldn’t think of a thing to say while we headed down the highway to the boardwalk.

The setting sun was coming through the passenger's window, and she started squinting, trying to rotate the sun visor. I leaned over and opened the glove box, handing her the sunglasses my mom had forgotten a couple days ago.

“Wow, thanks!” She slipped them on her face, then turned to me and smiled, leaning her head to the side and trying to look like a movie star. “What do you think?”

“Gorgeous,” I replied, and she turned back to the windshield with a tiny grin on her face. I smiled, too, just feeling good about making her happy. I wondered if the other guy could make her smile like that. Probably not, I thought. He can't be that great or she wouldn't be going out with me tonight. She didn't say anything for the whole ride, and I couldn't think of anything interesting to say. It was like we talked ourselves out the night before, and I started to feel a little less confident. I told her about some of the work I did at the garage that day, and she smiled and said, that's interesting, every once in a while and I knew she wasn't actually impressed with my job, she had just been messing with me the night before. I saw my imaginary Sheila pull her head out from under the car hood, walking away, uninterested. I felt nervous, which was something I never felt around girls. I always knew what to say, how to smile, where to put my hand that would keep them focused only on me, nothing else. Sheila was different, and I didn't know what to do about that.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. New York, NY: Dutton, 1992.

Bastard Out of Carolina is a semi-autobiographical novel narrated in first-person by the protagonist Ruth Anne Boatwright, known as “Bone” to her family. Bone is born out of wedlock, and her mother Anney tries repeatedly to have the word “illegitimate” removed from her birth certificate. Anney has another daughter with a different man, who dies shortly after their marriage and the birth of their daughter, Reese. After his death, Anney meets and marries Glen, becoming pregnant to a son, who she miscarries. Bone is first assaulted by Glen while her mother is miscarrying, and after Glen continues to lose work he begins a cycle of molestation and physical abuse. Anney leaves Glen after discovering the abuse, but returns to him after a short time. After Bone’s uncles discover the abuse, they confront and physically assault Glen, and Bone tells Anney she will never return home as long as Glen is there. Angered, Glen finds Bone and assaults her, breaking her arm in the process. At the hospital, Bone’s aunt Raylene takes custody of her. Bone sees her mother again only once, at Raylene’s house, where she gives Bone a copy of her birth certificate with the word “illegitimate” removed. She asks Bone to forgive her, and leaves.

Conroy, Pat. *The Prince of Tides*. Boston: Houghton, 1986. ISBN 0-395-35300-9

The Prince of Tides uses first-person narrative along with flashbacks to follow the story of the Wingo family of South Carolina. Tom Wingo must travel to New York after his sister attempts suicide and is in a mental hospital. He works with her psychiatrist to uncover family secrets which may play a role in her illness. Tom confronts his father’s physical abuse and his mother’s emotional distance. The story of a home invasion and physical assault of Tom, his sister, and their mother breaks down any barriers Tom may have built against the doctor, and he shares the story of his brother’s death and his failed marriage. He has a romantic relationship with the doctor but decides in the end to return home to his wife and daughters and try to reconnect with his father and recovering sister.

Coupland, Douglas. *Shampoo Planet*. New York: Pocket Books, 1992.

Shampoo Planet explores a nuclear family for the 1990's, told in first-person by protagonist Tyler spanning the course of approximately one year. Setting the tone of the novel, Tyler is introduced standing in a sleek modern hotel, looking out to an airport, dreaming of a future which will involve a successful corporate job and all the possessions a modern world has to offer. Once home, Tyler is sent back to reality when his step-father divorces his hippie mother, Jasmine. His wealthy grandparents gather the family together to celebrate their new business venture, gourmet cat food. His summer fling visits him from France. His grandparents lose their wealth through bad investments. Tyler comforts himself through these trials with specialty hair care products and a thoroughly modern bedroom, complete with fridge and microwave. In an effort to jumpstart his life, Tyler leaves his hometown for Los Angeles with Stephanie, where he gets a menial job at a fast food restaurant until Stephanie leaves him. He manages to raise enough money to return home, where he begins to focus on rebuilding his relationships with his family and ex-girlfriend, and pursuing his career aspirations.

Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998.

The Hours is written mirroring Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness writing technique. Cunningham details a single day in the lives of three separate women from three different time periods; Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown, and Clarissa Vaughan. As is typical for stream-of-consciousness novels, the internal thoughts and struggles of the characters carry far more weight than the daily activities being carried out. Each character is trying to understand their place in the world at large, as well as their roles within their family units.

Shared between the three is the feeling of being trapped within their station, which creates a thread of discontent and desperation in everything they do throughout each of their days. Suicide carries a common thread as well, as Virginia (who will eventually commit suicide herself) considers which character will commit suicide in the novel that will become *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Laura Brown must decide if she will kill herself or abandon her family, as the idea of staying has become too much to bear. Clarissa Vaughan's dearest friend, increasingly sick from AIDS-related illnesses, leaps from his apartment window just before a party honoring a writing award he has just received. At the end of the day there is no conclusion, no great revelation, but the sense of completion is there with each character.

Fitch, Janet. *White Oleander*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1999.

White Oleander uses first-person narrative to tell the story of Astrid Magnussen and her journey from childhood to adulthood in a series of foster homes after her mother Ingrid is convicted of murdering her ex-boyfriend. Astrid first lives with an ex-stripper named Starr. She begins a romantic relationship with Starr's boyfriend, prompting Starr to relapse and shoot Astrid. She is then moved to the Turlock's, a conservative couple who use Astrid as a free babysitter to their two children. Astrid must leave after she gets drunk and sleeps over at the neighbor's house, a prostitute. Amelia Ramos takes in Astrid, along with other girls, but they are starved by her to the point of abuse. Astrid's new caseworker places her with a loving but emotionally disturbed actress, Claire. After Claire's suicide, Astrid is sent to a children's home, where she meets Paul Trout. She is given a choice of which foster home to be placed in, and she chooses Rena, a Russian immigrant who allows Astrid to live freely in her home as long as she contributes to the workload. Astrid is contacted by her mother's attorney, who thinks Ingrid could be released if Astrid lies in court and creates a false alibi for Ingrid. As Astrid struggles to decide what to do, her mother's attorney tells her that Ingrid has chosen not to call Astrid to court. Astrid and Paul move to Germany, where they both live as artists. Astrid learns her mother has been released from prison, but chooses to stay with Paul, where she knows she will be content and loved.

Hornby, Nick. *About a Boy*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1999.

About a Boy is a coming of age novel featuring two protagonists as they navigate the waters of growing from boys into men. Will, chronologically an adult, lives in a state of perpetual adolescence as his affluent family money allows him to survive without a job or adult responsibilities. Marcus, a chronological adolescent, must manage his clinically depressed mother and her attempted suicide, a distant father figure, and bullying classmates. When Marcus and Will find each other through Will's poorly planned scheme of pretending to be a single father to attract single mothers, they do not immediately become friends, but through Marcus' dogged insistence they form a bond. They help each other navigate growing up, as Marcus begins to rely on Will to help him navigate meeting girls, dressing well, and cutting the apron strings of his well-meaning but socially clueless mother. Will originally uses Marcus as a ploy to meet women, but ultimately appreciates him as an individual, growing to care for the boy's well-being. A final crisis which finds Marcus and his girlfriend in a police station for destruction of property pulls all the characters together and shows each one's personal growth since the start of the novel.

Hornby, Nick. *High Fidelity*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.

High Fidelity explores a record shop owner's past girlfriends in a series of flashbacks as he considers his most recent failed relationship. Rob Fleming tells his story beginning with his girlfriend Laura leaving, and follows him as he navigates being single in his thirties. He arranges meetings with five of his previous girlfriends to understand the events which led up to his current situation. He also visits his parents and his friends in his journey of self-exploration. Rob must come to terms with his failings, and make sense of events which were out of his control. When his ex-girlfriend's father dies, he faces mortality, his own and others. Rob chooses to move forward with his career as a deejay and commit to his relationship with Laura.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York, NY: Viking Press, 1957.

On the Road, a first-person narrative written in the style of a diary, tells of Sal Paradise's travels across the United States with his best friend, Dean Moriarty. On a seemingly endless search for a greater understanding of life, Sal is part existentialist, part fatalist. In their travels, Sal and Dean meet and party with other like-minded artists and laborers. Dean goes through a series of women, conceiving three children in the course of three years. Sal, frequently overwhelmed by Dean's energy, tries to find peace and joy, but often finds himself at odds with his companion and disenchanted with their ever-moving lifestyle. The novel ends on a bittersweet note, with Sal choosing to stay in New York with his girlfriend Laura, while Dean tries to hitch a ride to a concert before returning to San Francisco. Sal never sees his friend again, but admits to thinking of him often.

Lamb, Wally. *She's Come Undone*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

She's Come Undone tells the story of Dolores Price from childhood to early middle age. The novel traces her external struggles with physical appearance and sexuality, as well as her internal struggles including her strained relationship with her mother and her inability to find and establish healthy intimate relationships. After her parents' divorce, Dolores lives with her mother and grandmother in a subdivided home in Rhode Island. As a child, Dolores is raped by her grandmother's renter, and becomes withdrawn and overweight. After her mother's tragic death following a car accident, Dolores makes a failed attempt at college, has an intimate experience with the cleaning lady of her college dorm. These events lead up to Dolores attempting to drown herself in the Atlantic Ocean. After spending several years in a mental health facility, Dolores leaves to rent an apartment in the same building as her college obsession. They meet, date, and eventually marry, but the relationship fails after Dolores feels pressured into an abortion and discovers her husband's infidelity. Moving back to her grandmother's home, Dolores creates a new family in the friends she finds there, going on to have a romantic relationship with a man she meets at community college. They try to have a child, but after several failed attempts Dolores must accept that she will remain childless. The novel concludes with Dolores standing alone on a whale-watching boat, witnessing a whale breach and baptizing her in the ocean spray.

Smith, Betty. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. New York: Harper, 1942.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn tells the story of an impoverished family struggling to survive in early 20th century Brooklyn. Told through the experiences of the adolescent protagonist, Francie Nolan, the novel explores classism, immigration, education reform, traditions, and religion. In a series of five books, the novel introduces us to Francie, her brother Neeley, and her mother and father, Katie and Johnny. The reader is introduced to these characters through the course of a slow summer Saturday as Francie visits neighbors, cashes in metal with the junk man, goes to the candy store, spends time with her mother and aunt, then goes to church. The evening closes when Johnny comes home from a singing job with treats for the family to enjoy. The rest of the novel tells the story of the family starting when Katie first met Johnny. Each family member's story is told at length, with significant care taken to every minute detail of their lives, including their clothes, food, and homes. The family lives in almost desperate poverty, yet finds ways to live as joyfully as they can. After the death of her father, Francie completes school and goes to work, eventually passing her entrance exams to attend university. Katie prepares to marry her second husband and move away from the Brooklyn apartment they called home for so many years.