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This thesis comprises the initial chapters of a novel in progress, entitled *Drift Pretty*. Framed as a young-adult novel told from the point of view of Barbie, a teenager who has been uprooted from her home to live for the summer in a new city, the narrative explores the themes of alienation and aimlessness (drifting) in the lives of teenagers at the turn of the new century. Technology, suburbia, and mass culture form the environment in which these teenagers, and Barbie in particular, explore young adulthood.

Drifting, a form of street racing that involves forcing cars into controlled skidding, forms the core metaphor of the novel, creating an intersection of various teenage rebellions, including sex, drugs, and the general rejection of adult authority.

DRIFT PRETTY

by

Justin Colussy-Estes

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

To my wife, Kate, and my daughter, Nora

## APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of  
The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

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## PART I

*If you want to know how to drift, the first thing you've got to know is drifting is not about power. Going sideways in a car around a turn relying only on brute power is not what I aim for. You'll lose it that way, flip right over. Drifting is about style and skill.*

*Look at me. When I drift, I drift pretty. Others, and adults, wouldn't think it when they look at me. No one can picture me behind a wheel, or think of me caring about rear-wheel drive versus front.*

*I tell it this way, I say, "Yeah, I'm a girl. Yeah, I look short, dumpy, and Asian—yes I'm only sixteen, but put me behind the wheel. Hand me your keys and I'll show you. Watch me drift. I'm grace. I'm car ballet." I love the cars. I dream about them when I'm sitting with my family at breakfast in front of the TV, I dream about them at my crummy summer job, I dream about them when I'm eating lunch with Dawn and Erin and that crowd. When I brush my hair, I'm thinking coilovers and all the colors they come in. Or I'm obsessing over import three-piece wheels, nine inches wide and eighteen inches tall. Tension rods and sway bars and traction rods. But that's just equipment lust, car fetish. Really it's about the drifting.*

*When I drift, I'm elsewhere. I'm in a world of my own, nothing holding me down. Gravity doesn't even exist. I float past mirrored windows of office buildings, the other kids waiting to drift, wanting to drift just like me. I float past and my mind is quiet and clear. All I am is the body kit of the car, gliding on smoking wheels, as it shudders and urges me to stop. But I'm on top of it; I control the*

*careening, the swerving, the disorientation of slipping sideways in a car. As I pull out of a drift, even a long drift sliding around the curve, it all goes so quickly. For a moment I feel like I'm touched by fire, my adrenaline is pounding my ears. But I stop and the smoke from my tires, so thick and overpowering at first, just slips over the car and fades away. For a moment I don't have to worry about who Barbie Jackson is, because I know; I'm the girl in the car and I don't have to be anyone else but me.*

## 1. Is It Really So Strange?

If I could blame somebody, it would be Walt. From the moment I met him my life became trouble. Not just cars, I always liked cars. I fell in love with cars the first day I rode in a convertible, Uncle Dee's white eighty-five Mustang. But that was Uncle Dee, and that was Texas. In Kentucky, I discovered girls aren't supposed to like cars. I mean real cars, not cute little machines like the Volkswagen Beetle. Candy cars, I call those. Back in Boerne, Texas, where I came from—a town outside San Antonio—everybody knew cars.

I had car dreams, but Walt made them real. Like drifting. If it weren't for Walt, I never would have known drifting. Before him, maybe I wanted to race. Seniors and the others from U of L or Bellermine race. We drift. They try to beat each other with speed and power. That's all racers have, speed and power. Drifters want nothing but balance and control. We out-style by sliding the car, power gliding, slipping the car around turns. There's nothing more beautiful than the perfect drift: the car slides a hundred-and-eighty degrees around a turn, the rear wheels spinning like mad, eating themselves alive laying rubber all over the road.

When I met Walt just over a year ago, the two of us must have seemed like perfect kids to parents and other kinds of grown-ups. He was smart, clean cut, and a solid member of FCA—the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Sang baritone in the choir and was active in the church youth group. I wasn't as outgoing, but I did give off a squeaky-clean vibe: I framed my “virgin pledge” and had it hanging on the wall over my bed. I dorked out the first time I saw friends smoke and actually called 911. I didn't get far, but it earned me points for earnestness. I don't think

either one of us could have guessed what kind of drama we would push each other into.

Walt made trouble, but he had baggage just like me, just like every teenager, so I have to forgive I guess. I think that's all anybody ever wants, really. Otherwise, you run out of people, right? And places to go? That's how we got here. My mother didn't like how things were turning out in Texas, after it fell apart. My friend Laura got into real trouble. The kind that frightens parents and teachers and scared me too. So Mom moved us to Louisville, where she's from. "To be closer to your uncle Ray," she said, "on account of your father's work." Dad has to work overseas a lot, and now he was gone for over a year. Mom wanted to live near family while he's away. But I knew she talked static; it was about me and what Laura did.

So did my brother Mike. He blamed me for the move, thought I took away his friends. He locked himself in his room for the summer, and he came out only when he needed to use the computer. We had only one, and it sat in the hallway to the breakfast room at our new house here in Louisville. That was my fault too, according to Mike. But he told Dad about Laura, and that set the whole thing in motion, so you do the math.

After moving to Louisville, Mike decided that he would separate from the family unit. His words, "family unit." Mike called himself a futurist, and continually wanted us to know how obsolete we were. Maybe not so much me. He once laid out his theory during a commercial for laptops. We were sitting on the couch and he was eating a bowl of cereal for supper. He wanted to prove to me that technology separates us from Mom and Dad as much as they are separated from the middle ages.

"Barbie," he said, and I remember this because I had to stare at his mouth

just to understand what he was saying, he had crammed so much cereal in there, “you and I are younger than microchips, as young as the internet and cell phones. Do you realize our parents didn’t even have digital watches growing up? Our brains are T3’s, Barbie, big fat pipelines of information, always on and processing multiples at crazy speeds. Our parents are dial up, and they’ll never access half the things we do or say. They physically can’t. Their brains aren’t wired like ours, and that’s a fact.”

“Huh. Not that I care, Mike, but Uncle Ray runs a business off the internet.” It’s a game we played where we would prove how wrong the other one was. “He seems to understand technology just fine.” That did not shut him up, though. He just withdrew more into his internet world of message boards and IMing his old friends from Texas. He would even do this with us. Mom and I got an email that said, “family suppers are out. except sundays. also fridays.” We knew he was serious, because of the email. He never emailed, except occasionally with strangers and for official requests. Mike said, “Email is for elders. It takes too long and seems too formal.” Broken down, of course, the email pronouncement about family suppers meant he wanted to eat out after church and the Friday thing because on those days we go to the movies. Sometimes.

Between the two of us, Mike is the smart one. He knows all about computers, plays math games for fun. He’s also the holy roller. He likes church more than me, and all his friends were youth group back in Texas. Not that I don’t like church or youth group, but that’s the difference between us. Faith is about the only thing around that tells me how to be without having to buy something, but I’m not “down with G.O.D.” or gussied up in *Passionwear*. That feels a little icky. Mike loves the stuff.

We’re close in age. I’m older by seven months. Mom and Dad act as if

we're almost the same, so we exaggerate the differences: Mike is the smart one, the faithful one, and I'm the adopted oddball. Kind of my only option on account of I'm nothing special except Asian—Vietnamese—and Mom and Dad and Mike are all white. Don't expect me to know kung fu, or be really good in math though, because that stuff didn't come with the package. Oddball also because of my name, Barbie. Who would name their kid that? I got named before I was adopted. My birth mother thought it was very American; she knew the doll.

Strange then that Mike would be the one hiding from the world and I'd get caught up with youth group after we moved. But that's what happened. Mom pushed me to "get involved." So I did, and so I met Walt. Everything got screwed up anyway.

It was early in the summer, not long after we moved. Mom and I came back from buying groceries and finding me a job. A pretty easy thing, there's a zillion strips and malls out here, and every one has a yogurt shop or some kind of retail. I ended up getting my summer job at an American Eagle knock-off. I could tell the manager wanted some ethnicity, and I seemed safe. Mom let me drive the van—a little exciting—but I was distracted because Kentucky was still new, and very different from Texas. Plus vans aren't real driving, they're just boats on wheels. I feel like I'm in a movie theater on traveling stilts, and not the cool Imax kind.

Back then, when Louisville seemed so strange and all the green made me angry, I would say to myself, under the music or Mom talking or just the sound of the car on the road: "Landscape is the same here, it just looks different." I hoped to ignore the greens of the trees, the bushes, and the grass—grass so green I swear it looked blue, a cornflower color when you pass it on the road—ignore the high rolling hills, and the horizon that always hid behind something, hills or buildings.

I hated that the trees grow so tall, and I hated that I couldn't see through woods from all the green wet and clinging things, like moss and magnolias and kudzu. I hated the sticky heat. The buildings weren't so bad though. San Antonio had malls and strips and highways and office complexes just the same.

Anyway, Mom and I came in, and Mike had left a note, saying Julie needed to pick me up early for youth group. Way early, like two hours. I wondered what was up, but Mom was just happy I was going. She thought I was better off active, especially with a church. Youth group would give me structure, she said. I was going along to get off her radar. God's important, yeah, but sometimes you just don't want to talk about what you believe.

Julie was my ride to youth group and other stuff. Nice enough, she was sweet, but chatty. Blonde, cute, Julie had perfect skin and dimples, for God's sake. She would have been my basic nightmare, like a neon sign pointing out my weight and acne, except she didn't get all that. I don't think she knew how perfect-perky she was. Instead, she was that weird cat that doesn't act like a cat, the one that rubs on you and just wants attention, a moment of your time. Julie was the kind of girl who instantly decides that you are her best friend, or enemy, or whatever. Right away without any judgments or basis. Early in the summer the church had a sleepover for girls looking to get involved in the high school youth group. Julie and I met in one of those dumb pairing-off activities that group leaders make you do. You know, "pick somebody you don't know and tell them three secrets of your childhood." Like "trust falls," the kind of games and commotion that only work when no one's had any sleep and you're far away from school or malls or cable tv.

I told Julie about the secret language Mike and I had when we were little, back before it mattered if you were a boy or a girl. We used to be that close, as

if we were twins. But then one day Mom and Dad asked if I felt different, or if people treated me different. I made the mistake of asking what they meant. Mom said, “Honey, because of your skin.” I had thought I was like everyone else, but there it was. And now I do feel different. None of that went into what I told Julie, only the parts about the secret language. I didn’t have anything else to share, so I made up the other two things: I said I took tap lessons when I was three but had to quit because of a broken toe and that in my dreams I still speak Vietnamese.

Julie laughed. I didn’t know it was funny. Then she reached over and took my hands, smiled and said, “You’re just the kind of friend I need! A real blessing, you know?” I nodded and smiled. I wasn’t bitch enough to reject that. The whole moment was uncomfortable as all, part because of her weird intensity, and part because my legs aren’t long and the plastic chair was cutting into my thighs.

“I’ve never told anybody here this,” Julie continued, “but when I was five or so I used to think I saw the Virgin Mary. My family was Catholic then—not very much though.” Her eyes went wide for a second. She didn’t want me to get the wrong impression. “All kinds of Mary stuff surrounds you when you’re Catholic, but most of all I was obsessed with Michelangelo’s Pieta. Have you ever seen a picture of it? Amazing. The detail makes me cry, even now.” She got a little hazy look in her eye, and a grin that, even to this day, may be the only time her smile didn’t seem low cal. I was a little afraid I’d been stuck with a nut-job. She kept on jabbering, though. “There are veins on the hand. This marble statue has veins, Barbie! I carried around a little picture of it and I liked to take it out and whisper little stories to the Holy Mother.” Her smile gave a little fade before she went on. “I thought one day I heard it whisper back. Nothing big, nothing I could even understand. In my memory, her voice seemed magic. It’s a silly thing though, right? Little kids make up the funniest things.”

Later I found out it was shortly after this happened that Julie's mother got into an argument with the priest bad enough to declare the entire family "ex-Catholic." That's when Julie's family started going to Rock Spring Christian, and that's how she ended up in the youth group. I ended up there because Mom said she'd heard "good things" about the church. I think everybody on the planet must attend because the sanctuary is as big as a basketball arena.

So when she came to pick me up two hours early that day, I hoped to get a reason why. Before I could get a word in, though, she started talking. Practically before we left the house. She chatted down the steps and into her Corolla without pause or thought, blah blah blah, driving all the way down Brownsboro Road.

"Saturday I flirted with a boy I don't like very much. He had this silver chain on his wrist and he said it was from Italy. I played with it, took it off his wrist, put it on my own. I made it jingle like a charm bracelet under the lights in the MagicMart. We ran into each other getting gas. Or I was getting gas; he was buying Twinkies and Captain's Wafers. He said it was his lunch but he offered me one. A little awkward because of the fat and carbs, but sweet. Ha ha, a pun, sorry—I made him let me wear the bracelet, see? I've been pretending he's a secret admirer and that he's in love with me. I wonder if we'll see each other again?"

The chain was heavy, despite feeling cheap. Thick silver links held together by a simple clasp. It looked like a wallet chain conversion, but I didn't say anything. I started to ask where we were going, but she was already on the next topic. "I ruined a friend, a girl she's like my sister. I stood in front of a dim room scattered with people and announced 'I hate her!' I said her name, I said where she lived and some of the mean things she's done, and by the time I was finished, everyone else hated her too." She slowed the car down, and turned to

look at me. Her face was scrunched up with worry. Julie wanted my attention, but I couldn't take my eyes off the road. Cars were honking and passing. "Barbie—" her voice was flat and grave—"I'm the worst friend ever. I wish I could move away from my own body."

Julie turned back to the road and picked back up her speed. "I wonder if she'll accept my apology."

"Is that where we're going? To offer an apology?" What else was there to say?

## 2. Barbie Take a Bow

In the summer, the Rock Spring Christian youth groups met weekdays for Bible study at the houses of various adults, a rotating group of persons with nothing better to do than help herd a bunch of teenagers. They're all younger than our parents, but old enough not to have a clue. Even the youngest ones, Anne and Bernie, this couple in their late twenties—he manages retail and she does real estate—they live in another world, some grown-up world that has nothing to do with us. Definitely nothing to do with me.

They live in a wilderness of older homes, suburbs from the sixties that sit between where most of us kids live and downtown Louisville. These mazes of stucco and brick houses, bungalows or ranch homes, sit nestled among older areas of boutique shops and two-story Victorian homes converted into office space and apartments. Strange little neighborhoods of unincorporated townships, right in the city, with their own dinky rent-a-cops. I know this because it was important to the first game. The game we played before drift. Walt's game, the game called Stuff. That's where Julie was taking me. They figured I was okay, that I wouldn't tell, and it was time to introduce me to Stuff.

We gathered, two hours or so early before Bible study. Parked around the neighborhood on nearby streets, those who could drive brought those who couldn't. We accumulated in twos and threes, trying to appear nonchalant. Some stood around whispering and giggling. Gossip and weekend tales spread from set to set. It was viral. To me, not knowing anybody, the sets of teens peppering that block looked ominous, like a conspiracy. They sat on the steps at the end of walks

that lead to the stucco or brick fronts. They ambled up and down the sidewalks, or leaned against telephone poles. A vague sense of a crowd that probably would look normal on a city street. Here they reminded me of zombie movies. After a dozen, maybe fifteen of us showed, a girl, junior or senior by the look of it, started to get everyone's attention. She began waving a piece of paper high in the air, and Julie whispered under her breath. "The list," she hissed, and her eyes never left the paper. Like all the others across the block, we headed toward the girl with the list. Julie told me her name was Erin.

Erin was different, the best dressed and accessorized like a doll. She wore a lime green t-shirt and socks, with matching appliquéd stitching in her jeans. If I were mean, I would have thought she didn't dress herself. She never meant to intimidate, I don't think. She's just one of those girls who's so nice it feels cruel.

When the first ones got close, she dropped the paper, let it fall to the ground. Erin had the list on her PDA. She pulled it out and a few of the others, the older and together ones, gathered to begin studying it, looking around the various faces and smiling or sucking in air like they had ideas. Everyone else shifted on their feet and glanced back and forth, nervous and anticipating what came next. One guy stood apart, also anticipating but without acknowledging any of it. Later I found out this was Walt standing off a little aloof and taking it all in. I describe it as if we were dogs waiting to be tossed scraps, and maybe that's true, but the whole of us tried to stay inconspicuous.

The list part went quickly, and was hard to follow. I had no idea what the list was, or what we were supposed to be doing. I asked Julie questions, trying to keep up. She hushed me without looking. I think my confusion and impatience bugged her. My looking around and not knowing any of the rituals stood out like a big sign pointing my way. She turned and leaned in close to my ear.

“I’ll tell you later. Right now, stop moving so much. Don’t draw attention.” I didn’t know if she meant the attention of grown-ups in their houses and cars or the other teens gathered around Erin. A car or two passed and we disbursed like a flock of birds. I tried to follow what the others were doing. It was a dance I didn’t know the steps to. No one looked at me, but I felt humiliated. Then like elastic they all came back together. Julie and I stood close to Erin, and when everyone closed in, it seemed as if they were closing in on me, to pass judgment or to hide me.

They got peculiar, and Julie whispered that the game was about to begin. The juniors and seniors settled the list and the rest of us, lumped around the list at the center, gathered in a circle, earnest and expectant.

Erin spoke in a singsong voice as one of the others handed her objects from a backpack. “You have come to this place to play the game called Stuff,” she whispered. A couple of us giggled, some were jittery or bouncing with nervous energy. Erin passed around a jug of water that she said was special water. I remember it was slightly blue and luminous and cold on my lips. Once the jug got back to Erin, she handed it off to be returned to the backpack. Then she stepped to the center of our ring and held out a small canvas bag with “STUFF” stenciled on it in block military lettering. She flashed Walt a grin of excitement.

“Whose turn is it to die?” she whispered.

Walt stepped forward. He reached into the bag. He shuffled his arm around and pulled out a piece of paper with a name. He held the paper up to read, then eyed us all. We chewed our lips, held our breath. Someone stifled a snicker.

“Janette Moore,” Walt announced.

Erin checked her PDA then spoke, looking at a girl crouching on her haunches, low to the ground. This girl’s eyes were blue but flat, like there were

no surprises ever again. “Janette, you are first. We want a brick,” and here Erin looked back to her PDA, emphasizing the rest of the wording: “of unusual size, color, or shape.” Janette stood and swatted her butt a couple of times. I guess she worried some dirt might have leapt off the ground to stick to her ass. The rest of us just glanced around at one another. I didn’t know what was going on. It felt like somebody forgot a line in a play, but then a smaller guy leaned forward into the circle with his arms crossed.

“I’ll monitor,” he said, a little sluggish. He revealed a camera from under his crossed arms.

This, then, was the game. The kings and queens of the youth group would pick the names from the bag and match them to an object—something to be found here in the neighborhood, found and brought to the others without it being missed. Garden tools and lawn ornaments, pottery or wind chimes. Everyday objects made cool by action, stuff people possessed but had forgotten, remade by our taking it. The other key to this game was the observer. No one acted alone. You were partnered for proof of the object, as if to say, “Yes it is taken and no we were not seen.” Observers came to the game packing heat: digital cameras or video phones or, in one kitsch-cool episode, a tape recorder. The seniors had a library of recordings, and the library passed like secret knowledge one year to the next. I didn’t find out any of that until later. At that moment, I felt like I didn’t know the language.

The pairings and assignments continued: Tate Askew had to find any kind of book left out in the rain from the day before. Dawn was along for the ride. Margaret was set to find a Big Wheel, “preferably abandoned,” with Kathleen in tow. Then Walt put down the bag and Erin turned to me. “New girl. Barbie, right? Surprise us.” New members of the youth group were sized up for several

weeks before they were invited, and they always began with the same directive—surprise us. I was afraid of what their sizing me up might have entailed. Other than Julie, none of them had met my family. It was obvious how different I was, but how much more different did I seem?

“I’ll escort.” It was Walt. He strode past me and out of the circle. I was lost, stuck in place and not knowing what was expected of me. He turned to look back my way. His face was stern, but his eyes were bright and mischievous. “Come on,” he said. When I got close, he spoke, his voice private and low. “I’ll explain on the way.”

Later I would find out what the rest did, the ones not playing. They regrouped nearby, at a playground or McDonalds, and talked about earlier games. What was taken, close scrapes with neighbors, dogs, and rent-a-cops. An hour later, they returned to see what you got.

### 3. Shoplifters of the World Unite

Everyone knows someone like Walt. He was the kind of senior that's always where it's going on, whatever the *it* of the moment is. Later, when I asked Julie or one of the other girls about him, they talked as if he wasn't around, as if he'd left youth group for college or another school. None of the girls really knew him, but each had a story. They talked like he was legend.

"The party where the Kahdy sisters got drunk and pounded on that turd Clay Hubbard," or "the football game where Dean Mitchell's parents had their big fight in the parking lot the week before their divorce"—name any gossip, whispered event and Walt seemed to be there. Never involved, they just said he was around, "but don't ask him about it, because he doesn't talk about things." His mere presence seemed to lend something sinister or mysterious to any goings on. The adults around adored him, but everyone else stayed wary of Walt, even, to some extent, his friends—if that's what they were. No one could tell me why, if I asked. Never bullying, never mean or cruel or any of those things, as far as I could tell. If you asked, no one could say why he seemed sinister. Walt spoke in a slow, laid-back sort of way. His voice, intimate, silky like mist, never quite left the back of his throat.

Walt Thrash was a teenager who never appeared awkward, never unsure, always casual. He was generous with his eyes and lips when he smiled, like a cat bored with its meal. He was a type, the same type that got my friend Laura in trouble and exiled me from Texas. The one thing these types seemed drawn to is innocence. Especially when it is cut loose, sacrificed on a slow boil. They only

date freshmen. They like them on the baby fat side, cute and unaware of their bodies, girls who giggle at the naughtiness of lingering around boys addicted to swearing. That's how these types tantalize girls; they have the appearance of knowing very filthy things without ever speaking.

The type in Texas collected freshmen like birds in cages. His name was Ben and he toyed with his birds by feeding them candy, encouraging them to steal little gifts from his pocket and enjoying the development of vices in these girls. Ben buzzed watching each one discover how bad she could be. Eventually my friend Laura went at him with burning cheeks and hair akimbo. She insulted him, mauled him, slobbered obscenities at him, all in public. It was after a movie we saw, right there in the lobby. I don't know what Ben said to set her off. After she went off on him, he sat down on a bench underneath some ridiculous coming attractions sign for that Christmas movie last year, his eyes half-lidded and drowsy, a slight, patient twist of a smile resting on his face, hands raised to suggest an apology.

"It's ok to hate me. I forgive you," he said.

If there hadn't already been a crowd of people watching because of Laura's fight, I would have slapped him myself.

But Walt isn't Ben. Like I said before, Walt has his own baggage.

After we left the group circle, Walt sped up a bit and left me behind. He turned the corner, getting out of sight of the rest of the group as soon as he could. As I rounded the corner yard, he stood waiting halfway down the block, leaning against a truck parked on the street. I assumed that if the truck wasn't his, it belonged to one of the rest of us.

"Having fun yet?" His voice sounded flat. I couldn't tell if he was mocking me or not.

“I have no idea what we’re doing.”

“Simple, look for something cool to bring back. The crazier the better.”

“You mean steal something? Like from these peoples’ yards?”

“It doesn’t have to be from a yard. Anyplace really, although I wouldn’t recommend going into houses. Even though this isn’t Glenview Pointe, lots of these folks have alarms.” He was grinning and it wasn’t until he realized I wouldn’t stop glaring at him that he switched to earnest. “It’s not stealing. Really. You’re supposed to stick with things that won’t be missed. And in most cases, we return whatever it is at the end.” He grabbed my hand and headed up the nearest driveway. “Look, we better get going if you want to nab anything good.” He moved quickly and glanced here and there as we stepped up to their garage. “Although most newbies keep their first time stuff.”

I was paranoid and started to pull away. “What are you doing? We’re going to get caught!” My voice was a high whine. It sounds funny now but at the time it was terrible. I don’t think I could have been more girly if I tried.

“Look around you. No cars in the driveway or on the street, and the outside light is on by the back door. Probably left on for when they get home. Plus, look at the mud by the garage door. No treads, so you know they don’t use the garage for their cars.” I stared at him, a little shocked. He smirked. “We’ve played the game a lot. Now, if I’m guessing right...” We were standing at the side door to the garage. Walt had his hand on the knob. He turned it, and the door swung open. We looked at each other and both gave an “aha!” Some small drama. The pangs of fear in my stomach now had competition. Looking into the garage through that open doorway, I felt a flush from my chest to my throat. Inside I couldn’t see much, but that upped the mystery. I was staring into a barrier, a threshold between someplace safe and given and another place, somewhere

unknown and magnetic.

I stepped in first. I was trying to redeem my girly self. I got five steps in and banged my knee into something hard, something painful. Walt flipped on the light. “It helps if you can see.”

I wished the lights would go out again. My face was hot and I felt stupid. Walt isn’t my type but he’s cute. I wanted to rattle him because he kept catching me off guard. I couldn’t be who I wanted around him.

We looked around the garage and pestered each other with questions. Walt would hold up something, some stuff for the game, and I would turn it down flat. I couldn’t concentrate; my heart pounded hard enough I felt it in my fingers. Everything he picked seemed ordinary and not worth sneaking around and spying on people’s lives.

It was about then my phone buzzed. “Ohmygosh!” I said, or something equally stupid, and rattled like a jolt. It surprised me and I spasmed with a startled lashing out. I knocked over a near empty can of soda that sat nearby. As that went clanging to the floor, it seemed like all the world was in alarm over us, sneaks in a garage, looking to snag some stupid stuff.

Walt yelled in a loud whisper, “What? What happened?”

I stood back, leaning away from my cell, slung around my neck in a pouch because I don’t carry a purse. I didn’t want it touching me, as if whoever was calling could tell I was up to no good, just by the feel of it. It could only be one person, my mom. No one else cared enough about where I was or what I may be doing.

“My cell—it’s my mom calling.” I looked at Walt, panic plastered on my face. “What do I do?”

“Don’t answer it, that’s for sure.”

I answered the call. I couldn't help myself. "Hello?"

"Barbie? I'm just checking in." My mother's radar must have kicked in. Even when she doesn't know what I'm up to, she can sense it anyway.

"Oh. Well, everything's fine here."

"Why are you whispering?" I didn't want to tell her it was because we were breaking and entering, trespassing, all those good things. I felt my voice would echo crazy if I so much as peeped too loud.

"Um, no reason. We're just—" I was stumped, and about to hyperventilate. I couldn't think of anything fast enough. That's when Walt jumped in.

"Hey Barbie, we're just about to start the movie." He half covered his mouth with his cupped hands, to muffle his voice and make it sound like maybe he was in another room.

"They're calling me, Mom. We're watching a movie, and they're all waiting on me." Guilt rippled through my fear. I was surely going to hell for this one. Nothing like using a Bible study as an excuse to get off the phone with your mom so you can get back to finding things to steal from stranger's houses.

"Oh, great then!" Mom's voice went from concern to honeyed and pleased. "I don't want to interrupt, I just was making sure everything was going okay."

"Yes, Mom. Everything's fine. I need to go."

"Barbie."

"Yes, Mom?"

"I'm glad you've made some friends." Now she was just gloating. I could tell from the tone. What she really meant by that was, "See? I was right; if you get involved with the youth group you'll make lots of friend and you won't feel so lonely or miss Laura and your other friends so much." It was her way of telling

me I'd moved on and that I was over her and Dad yanking me from Texas.

"Mom, I've got to go. I don't know how late the movie runs, so I'll have to call you at the end." I hung up. I felt like God and my grandparents and little baby Jesus were hovering in the corner of that garage, staring at me and thinking what a disappointment I was. On the other hand, between the guilt over lying and the anger at Mom's smugness, I had practically forgotten my fear. It was only a dull roar now, sitting behind all the other rushing feelings kicking my butt there in the garage.

I think I lucked out. Mom could be pretty suspicious, but her huge desire for me to get along and find some friends seemed to blind her to any doubtful stuff I was up to. That and the fact that I normally did nothing wrong might have kept her from suspecting anything.

Walt seemed calm, but flustered by what the call may have done to my resolve. He picked up a bike chain.

"We don't have to stick around. This is good enough if you want."

"Get real. That's a complete who cares," I said, and hoped I didn't sound panicky. I didn't want him to think Mom had any bearing on me. I was starting to wonder why this game wasn't dumb in an all-the-risk-nothing-to-show kind of way. "How'd you guys get started playing this?" I started opening drawers in an old dining buffet the owners had slathered and sealed with an ugly blue paint. I wanted to look nonchalant. It also gave me something to do with my shaky hands. There were pencils and pens, some twine, a pair of scissors—exactly what you'd expect.

"We needed something new." Walt's tone said leave it alone. He stared off into space. I tried to shut the drawer quietly and he snapped to, looking at me with a slight smile. "Where'd you learn to talk like that?"

“Like what?” I wasn’t sure what he was asking, if I should be offended or not.

“Where’d you get that accent?”

“Texas.” I still wasn’t sure if this had to do with my skin. “I grew up outside San Antonio. We moved here because my dad’s overseas for a year or so. He’s in India—he works with computers.” I said this as an explanation because that was all that had been offered me. I tended to repeat it to cut off people with more questions. “Where’s your accent?” Most of the kids here had some kind of southern accent, different from Texas, but an accent. Not Walt. His voice sounded like television.

“Oh, I don’t know. Both my parents are from the south, but I grew up over in New Albany.” New Albany was just across the river from Louisville in Indiana. “Maybe that’s why I don’t sound like I’m from anywhere.”

By now we had given up looking for stuff. I sat on the blue buffet while Walt leaned against a set of shelves with his arms crossed. I just glanced around listlessly, not knowing what to do next.

Walt stood up. “We don’t have to take something from here. There’s lots more places in the neighborhood.”

“Cool,” I said, and we left. Part of me was happy just to get out of there. Walt left the garage and struck out from the house, cutting through the back toward the next yard. He had long legs, so I struggled to match his stride. He glanced down at me once I caught up.

“What do you want this to be?” His face took a serious shade. It caught me off guard and again I didn’t know what he was talking about. My blank face prompted him further. “You seem to know what kind of stuff you want for the game. If you tell me, it will be easier to help you find it.”

That's easy, I thought. Something to put me in the picture. Something to let them know who I am, other than Asian-skin Barbie. All that plus I didn't want to get caught. My equation of "cool+safe" didn't seem realistic.

"I couldn't tell you." I said. I squinted at him, shielding my eyes with my hand. His face was hard to see with the sun behind his head. "But I'll know it when I see it."

"Ok, I think I get it. Follow me. And keep your eyes peeled."

"For security?"

"No, for what you want." He took off, faster than before. I was almost running to keep up with his speed walk. We covered five homes one right after another, not stopping for any more questions, except between stops. Walt asked me about Texas. I could tell he was thinking of westerns and all that crap.

"What do you mean, what's it about?"

"Well, did you have friends?"

I almost snapped. In my head I was furious. I wanted to scream at him, of course I had friends, you dope. I had Laura, my best friend, only a jerk like you got her all screwed in the head until she did very stupid things and now I can't deal with her. Now I'm stuck here with you playing a game whose ultimate goal seems to be making me feel like a dork.

Instead, I opted to answer vague. "Uh, yeah, I had friends."

He kept at it. "A boyfriend?"

This threw me. I didn't want to talk about that part of Texas. Not because it was creepy or anything. More because it was humiliating and lame. I had dated one guy all of ninth grade. Nothing much happened between us, and he hadn't kept in touch after moving.

"I dated, if that's what you're asking." Walt got the idea. If he wouldn't

talk about how his game started, then I wouldn't talk about mine.

We lingered around front and back doors, glanced through garbage, recycling, and random belongings left on back decks and porches. I started getting into the game, searching like I was looking for that rare good CD in the used bins at the music store in the mall. Very methodical, but fast: you give everything a cursory glance and unless something jumps out at you, something that lets you know this thing is different, then move on. Rifling through people's stuff was strange. It all seemed very dinky, nothing special, like these people lived the same boring life we all did.

"You might want to pick something soon. It's getting so we'll have to head back." His tone mixed a smidge of judgment in with the friendly instruction and newbie sympathy. But everything he'd suggested seemed small and insignificant. In addition to the bike chain, Walt pointed out a Hello Kitty garden spade half buried in mulch, a homemade fort built out of cardboard cases of wine (when I said it was special and would be missed, he quipped it would get rained on tonight so the whole construction was doomed anyway), a flag with the image of the sun and the moon stitched on and stuck in a large potted plant. Lots of oddities, sure, but nothing to counter the bad impression—make that no impression at all—I felt like they were already getting of me. About the most interesting thing was a hollow, rusted, cast-iron hedgehog figure you could hold in one hand, meant to hide a key.

We cut across the street, headed back the several blocks where, in half an hour or so, everyone would gather with their finds. I was feeling a little despondent. Walt seemed to feel the same. I think he was hoping I would turn out different or exciting to be around. I had hoped the same thing too. We stopped in the middle of the road to let a man in a tan Toyota Celica pass us and turn

into a driveway. Walt kept going, but I turned back, watching the driver as he stopped his car and got out. The man gathered an armload of papers and a small sack before disappearing into his house. Spending an hour and a half with Walt, I had picked up a few things. This is what I noticed: The car was short enough it couldn't be seen well from the windows that looked out onto the driveway. Hedges on the neighbor's side hid the car from any view from that direction. The man was rushing, I assume he had to pee. The doors weren't locked.

I noticed an opportunity, and I took it.

"Where are you going?" Walt asked. He panicked a little because we were wandering around in the middle of the road. A road, I will note, without lane markers, in the middle of the afternoon, and blocks from any major traffic. Walt's hesitation had me thinking I could take the lead.

"Follow me." I ran up the driveway to the car and slid into the driver's seat. Walt was right behind me, cruising ahead to get to the passenger side door. It was locked. I let him stew a second before unlocking the doors. He jumped in beside me.

"Are you nuts?"

"Maybe. Don't you think there's more interesting stuff in a person's car than in their garage?" I looked him in the eyes. I could tell I was verging on that big thing I wanted.

"I don't know, but we'll see, won't we?" We both started looking, excited and rushed. Walt opened the glove compartment and found it crammed with papers. The driver's side door had a pocket jammed with CDs and maps, one of Kentucky, another of Arizona. The CDs were all bands from twenty years ago. Music I'd heard or heard of, but I don't really listen to oldies. I started to think this was a bust. But that didn't matter to me. My heart thumped hard again, but

in a good way. My fingers and toes tingled and my face felt hot and full. The excitement of where we were, sitting in some stranger's car, and any moment we could be caught, electrified me. Then Walt gave a yelp.

"Holy crap. Look at this." Under the emergency brake were the guy's keys. The owner must have left them there when he gathered up his stuff before racing into his house. Walt picked them up slowly, grinning big the whole time. "Look at this!" He held the keys up in front of my face like he had found lost jewelry.

"Ok Texas, is this what you were looking for?"

#### 4. Sweet and Tender Hooligan

In one of my dreams of the future, I'm riding on the back of a zippy little motorcycle, holding on to the waist of a cute but irrelevant boy. We're on a two-lane highway that's flat, with Texas-sized shoulders, a wide and easy extra lane to the right. Trucks and old people in front of us drive the Texas way, pulling off onto the shoulder to let us pass at sixty, seventy, eighty miles an hour. Cute boy turns his head just enough that I can read his lips. "We're almost there," he mouths. That's when he peels off the road, plunging the bike into the field of rocks and low, flat trees that stretches from the side of the road.

In Texas, trees grow ten feet, then stop and spread their branches wide. Underbrush recedes, leaving soft, clear ground. The sun filters through like a stained glass window. The low and graceful live oaks and scrub pines could be crooked pillars in a ranch house cathedral, where deer and armadillo and a dreaming, future Barbie come for some peace and quiet.

But not now. Now my cute boy chauffeur dashes by tree trunks, the motorcycle cuts a loud, obnoxious whine through the copse of trees, and small creatures are scattering. I laugh and hang on. The day is glorious. I'm hanging onto my cowboy hat and I'm glorious. Cute boy is taking me to an event, something special, maybe a dinner or a reception, and all the people I love will be there: Mom and Dad and Uncle Ray, even Mike, and friends from Texas and friends from Louisville. And Laura is there, especially Laura. Some people I like will be there, and they'll like me back. When cute boy pulls up he'll cut a quick stop and I'll jump off before they gather around, to smile and hug and say, "You

are loved, you are loved, you are really, really loved.”

I dreamed this dream as I sat in the car, staring at the keys in Walt’s hand. He read rejection in my silence and tried to save the moment.

“Can you drive, because if you can’t I can drive it for you. Or do you want to keep looking?” He seemed afraid he’d somehow crossed a line.

“I can drive. Watch me drive. I only have a learner’s permit, but I can drive the heck out of this thing.” The Celica didn’t have a sunroof or even a CD player, but I felt like something raw and powerful would burst out of my chest any second just thinking about this. “Can we get it back before he misses it?”

“Oh, we won’t risk that.” Walt peered about, checking the street behind. “We’ll just dump it on this street or the next. That way we won’t get caught.” Walt still held the keys in front of me and I still watched them. We sat like that a second longer, just breathing heavy. The idea of escaping with the car made suns in my head explode. Do it—without thinking, just go, I thought. I grabbed the keys and jammed them into the starter.

“Hold your breath,” and I turned the key in the ignition. It started quick, like every car I’ve ever seen. “Keep a lookout,” and I shifted into reverse. Lucky me, the car was automatic. I switched into gameboy mode, as if the world wasn’t so much real and you exaggerate everything you do. When I pressed the gas, I jammed my foot down too hard and the car gave a jerk before flying down the driveway backward. Walt looked wide-eyed—surprised and frightened—which felt good. I probably was both of those, too. The whole thing startled me and I braked so as to not shoot out into the street. The car started to skid, maybe because I had panicked, maybe because the man’s driveway was slick, and the front of the car lost its hold on the road and continued into the turn. The vehicle slid right out into the road and ended up in the right hand lane facing down the

street in perfect alignment with how you would expect. A complete accident of my inexperience with the car, but Walt read it as an act of total will. He thought I intended every moment of it. Thankfully, he was so shocked by what happened that he didn't notice how freaked out I was, how incapable and paralyzed I was until that Toyota came to a complete stop.

“Holy crap! That was amazing!”

I turned to look at him, heaving just to manage some breaths. “Yeah, it was, wasn’t it?” I started to fade under the sheer, improbable glory of that random bit of cool. Walt woke up from his daze enough to kick me out of my reverie.

“Go!” he yelled. “Go go go go go!” We were both overexcited. The adrenaline surge made us giggly.

I smirked and paused for effect before I shifted the automatic into drive. I was going to jam my foot on the gas, but Dad was always talking about how much that wastes fuel. I ended up just tapping enough to get the car going. Every block in that neighborhood had a different, unachievable low speed limit, the kind too low for your car to register: twelve, nine, even five miles an hour. I drove as slowly as I could. We didn’t need the attention, but I still felt like a dork. It was the slowest getaway ever.

Walt could not let my driveway stunt go. “Can you do that again? It was ten times more exciting than anything else people are lifting for Stuff.”

“Maybe.” I didn’t want Walt to realize everything he found cool about me was an accident. “Not now though. Not here.” I felt uncomfortable riding around in the borrowed car. Driving out in the open in the middle of the day, I couldn’t help looking around for any sign of trouble. The initial adrenaline rush began to turn. I felt agitated and jumpy; I just knew somebody would spot us and come running out into the street yelling, “Thief! thief!” I tried to say something about it

to Walt.

“Do you know the neighborhood well enough? Where can we hide this thing?”

“Stop worrying, Texas! Can’t you tell this is as cool as it gets?” Walt leaned the passenger seat back, pressed the button to roll down the window, and closed his eyes. He looked so happy, even peaceful. His whole attitude irritated me. I gripped the wheel with both hands as hard as I could. My eyes locked into staring ahead of us. We rolled along so slowly I felt like I was stalking the neighborhood.

“Don’t move the seat, the guy will know.” Walt chuckled. Lying back, half-relaxed, hands at his side, he flipped his head to look at me. It struck me how this single move made him stiff. He looked like a robot.

“Texas, I think the owner’s going to notice his car isn’t in his driveway. That’s what I think he’ll notice.” He turned his head away and played with the side mirror to get a look at pavement as we rolled by.

“Why do you call me Texas?” I wanted him to know I didn’t like it. Without hesitating, he shot back.

“I don’t think you like the name Barbie too much.” He didn’t even look my way.

“We should head to back to the group.” My face felt hot again, but now I just wanted him out of the car. I didn’t like what he thought he knew about me.

Finding my way back to the original place where we were to meet was a little more difficult than I had imagined. It didn’t compare with trying to find an address in our new neighborhood, the Glenview Springs complex, where most of the houses have the same design, and you end up asking yourself if the house you’re looking for has a porch with a swing like this one. No, this neighborhood

had some texture to it. But none of that mattered here. When you pick a location because it won't gather attention and has no memorable qualities, it becomes hard to tell one corner yard from the next. That I had lost the original directions added to the confusion.

I felt like I was driving around in circles until some of the other kids popped up here and there, headed like us to the finish line. I had pulled the car over to the side of the road under an oak tree so we would appear parked. Sitting there made me anxious, but once most of the others had gathered I started to shift the car into drive. I figured I would pull up and say, "This is what I got," in some simple way. But Walt watched the various kids cross the street and yards, and put his hand on my wrist. He didn't want me to go yet. The touch of his hand on my wrist made me uncomfortable. I was suddenly aware of Walt and me in this stranger's car together, not at ease but exposed by all the windows. I didn't know this guy at all and somehow we had stolen a car together. A part of me felt sick. But then Walt looked my way and flashed his rogue smile for a second.

"Don't you think we should wait? For maximum impact, I mean."

I had no idea what he meant. In my head I thought maybe he wanted me to skid like I'd done before, only this time sliding right up to where the other kids were gathering. Something to scare them, something very ninja that I had no hope of accomplishing, no hope of doing anything but smearing the entire youth group across the pavement.

"How about I stay in the car and you go tell them. Just point to me and I'll flash the headlights or something." I was nervous and skittish. Worry lurched in my stomach. Walt must have read this in the way I was acting. For the first time he looked me in the eye, really looked at me. He smiled.

"Barbie, I'm telling you, this is so better than any run anybody has ever

made. No one has lifted anything like this. This is the greatest.” Big words, but they only made me more nervous.

He agreed to go tell them, while I watched from behind the steering wheel. He slid out of the car and shut the door softly behind him. As I watched him cross the street to the crowd of teens, I felt isolated. The car felt like a cage at the zoo. Any moment they would all wonder at Walt standing there by himself.

“Did you ditch her?” they might ask. Or, “What happened to the newbie?” Or even, “Where’s that girl from? Does she think she’s white?” Would any of them feel one way or the other? Would they remember I was even there?

Walt circled around behind the group to avoid giving away where he was coming from. Julie saw him coming, and immediately crossed through the crowded bunch to question him. He held his finger to his lips to ward her off, and they both turned to the crowd. I’m guessing the others were showing what they found. They shuffled about, talking to one another and laughing. Some of the guys roughhoused a bit. I got anxious and turned on the radio. I couldn’t find any music I liked so I turned it off.

When I looked back at the group, Walt was talking. In my head, my dream started playing again, the one where I go to the dinner and everyone there loves me. All my friends gather around and hug me and shake my hand. Walt was pointing my way, but the others seemed all wrong. They looked tense and no one was laughing. Some of the seniors started yelling at Walt. Several of the kids on the outside glanced my way. Their faces were flat and emotionless with a violent vibe. I hesitated, thinking to roll down the window so I could hear the argument. They dropped their voices and the group split in to cells of threes and fours. Erin and a senior guy were having it out with Walt, arguing with him and forcing him into the street in my direction. From this distance, the whole scene looked like

some crazy crowd simulator on the computer, everyone on autopilot except the few at the center.

Walt broke away and crossed the street with fierce strides. His head was down, but I could tell he was steamed. When he got to the car, he opened my door and leaned in to speak.

“Meet Julie at her car. She’s taking you home.” He gave a quick look over his shoulder back to the now dispersing group. “I’ll take care of this. You just go home.”

I didn’t even think to ask what happened. I knew what happened. My dream was all wrong and there was no one waiting for me when I showed up on the back of the motorcycle with the cute boy chauffeur.

## Section II

*Everything reminds me of something else. The other day, on my way out the door, I saw an enormous green moth clinging to the small pin oak tree in our front yard. It was as big as my hand and still as glass. I had to look twice before I realized the moth was not plastic. I stared at it for a long time, kneeling down and leaning in close to get a good look. It never moved. The soft green wings glowed from underneath, and the moth's four black spots sucked in light. I remember thinking it was a fairy, that it wasn't even an insect, and for some reason it reminded me of my Mom.*

*Three hours later, I returned to find that it still hung there, motionless. Mom stood at the front door ready for drama. "Where were you? You just up and left while I was in the shower?" As we stood in the doorway, Mom grilling me on the details of where had I been, who had I been seeing, what had I been doing, I turned my face away and stared out over the front yard, then to the street and back to the pin oak. The tree was bare, no moth in sight. Mom's mouth raged, but her green eyes, glowy and large, sat still in her face. I had no idea what to say to her, and could only think of her eyes and that moth. "What if your eyes fly away, Mom?" I asked myself. "Fly away and leave your face empty?"*

*Cars are that way. Every car means something other than itself. Civics are race; speed and face, especially the tricked-out ones. Muscle cars, even the expensive new ones are all about class. You won't find one of those outside Shelbyville or the West End. You could map Louisville according to makes and models of cars. Louisville is filled with little cars like Volkswagen Jetta. My*

*boyfriend from San Antonio was a junior with a little Volkswagen. At the time he thought a VW Bug would be cool, but that is a toy car, and San Antonio gives no respect to toys. Even I knew back then, your car is your drama. A guy with a candy car is a boy trying to be a man.*

*San Antonio was a car town. Everybody was into cars, and not just the in town kids or the latinos or, like Louisville, the kids from tobacco or Ford plant families. In Texas, muscle cars were a precious commodity, traded around and tricked out. Or newer cars like '90s Hondas and Toyotas. Especially the Civic. That was the car to have.*

*Louisville has some old cars—I want that green Triumph that sits in the Kinko's parking lot in St. Matthew's that I pray to God for every time we pass. And it's got some very old cars—Uncle Ray took me by a '68 Volvo the other day. That machine has a hand clutch it's so old. But at night I see the new cars, the crisp cars rolled out this millennium, the ones with hybrid engines and satellite hookups and computer brains. They frighten me a little to think about—you can't just open the hood and know what's there. The engines are magic or the matrix. Dad talks about cars like they are tools, but I know different. My car is a struggle to stay on top of things, to make sure the world won't eat me alive.*

## 5. Half a Person

After I slunk out of the Toyota and made my way to Julie's car, I felt less like myself and more like a brief moment in somebody else's drama.

Last year in Texas, some poor kid was caught in class with half a dozen ephedrine. He bought it legal but they acted like it was crack, or ex, or every bad drug—guns and sex, too—acted as if this kid was the source of every bad thing they feared. Later that day I passed by the office and saw him sitting, hiding behind the hood of his jacket, his hands jammed in the pockets. The chair where he sat was large with a cushion that dwarfed the kid. His whole attitude was, “I’m not changed, I’m still cool,” despite his sitting there like a kindergartener at the grown-up table, defensive and waiting for his mother to take him home.

I thought about that kid while I stood waiting for Julie to get back to her gray Volkswagen Jetta that sat around the corner from the youth group. I felt obvious and pathetic, shuffling by shoes and curling my fists into the hem of my t-shirt. “And now here I am,” I thought, “I’m that kid who made everyone afraid. I’m the kid waiting for his Mom to come and snatch him out again.” I watched as Julie wandered toward me, toward her car. She looked around, every direction but mine, like she couldn’t find what she searched for. After a second, I caught Julie’s eye. She startled at first, but then said, “hang on a moment. I forgot something.” She held up her index finger, high in the air like I was far away and she was hard to see. “I’ll be right back,” she yelled, loud and perky and fake.

It only made things worse. “This won’t last the ride home,” I told myself. “I won’t have to feel like I did something wrong forever, and hopefully the

inevitable lecture about the ‘reject Barbie party’ going on around the corner won’t last long.” I’d felt like this just one other time in my life, back in Texas before the move, when everything came out about Laura and that jerk, Ben, she dated.

Mom and Dad had called me in to their room. This was back in the previous spring, before exams, on some weekday or other. We were having a “family meeting,” they said. Their blank stares and stiff attitudes were humiliating. I had no idea what was going on, I just knew they were acting serious.

The two of them sat on their bed facing the door, awaiting my entrance like a tribunal. Mom’s face filled with worry, and Dad looked like he was suppressing full-on rage. Mike sat on a stool in front of Mom and Dad, just to the right and off center. He kept his face pointed at his shoes and he never looked up for the entire argument that was to follow, except for a moment or two when he glanced my direction.

Mom sat on the edge of the bed. She had a red rubber band that she wrapped around her thumb, cutting off circulation and releasing it, like a distracted, grown-up version of my friends who would use tacks to prick their fingers because, they would tell you, they wanted to feel something. I could tell she didn’t know what to say.

Dad sat back with his shoulders straight; the edge of the mattress hit him dead-on at the back of the knee. He reached over to Mom and placed his hand on hers—I think he wanted to stop what she was doing with that rubber band. “Barbie, I’m concerned about what you do with your friend Laura. What do you know about these?” Dad leaned forward to hand me two plain sheets of paper with photos printed on them. He must have used our old inkjet printer in the house because the images were hard to make out and the sweat on my fingers smeared

the pictures just a little bit.

“I have no idea,” was my first thought, but upon inspecting the images I came to a different conclusion. The pages reprinted something from the web; two screenshots presented here with no additional text from my parents. In fact, all language about the pictures had been either struck through or blanked out using a magic marker.

I was a little disgusted because they looked like small porno pictures lined up on the page. The pictures were the same girl in different poses. They seemed to chart her getting undressed. Maybe they weren’t dirty because she never really showed anything, only came close, getting totally naked but with her back to the camera, or covering herself with her hands and crossing her legs. I remember thinking the girl was someone to be jealous of because of her beautiful skin and carefree face. Tall I’d guess, and pretty and innocent. All of this I took in almost immediately. Mom and Dad waited, just staring at me while I took a closer look.

The girl was Laura. My best friend Laura had naked pictures of herself floating around the internet. I didn’t know what to do or to say, just “Oh my God,” when I realized who it was. This freaked me out, my whole family watching me look at this. “Daddy—Mom, I don’t know anything about these. I don’t know where they came from, or who’s taking them. I don’t know if she even knows they’re on the web.”

I started to give back the pages, but couldn’t stop staring at the pictures. This was Laura, and it was hard to recognize her. I had never seen this Laura before. The Laura here did not seem afraid of the world like she did at school. Laura made good grades and her parents expected a lot from her. Even as a ninth grader they would pressure her about college. She always seemed to carry that weight whenever I saw her or we hung out. Not in the pictures in front of me.

What I saw was someone who didn't care what others thought, who was bold and happy. She scared me, this new Laura. In eighth grade we couldn't talk about boys without giggling. Now she was glaring out of these pictures, daring me or whoever not to think she was sexy. I was frightened and disgusted and ashamed and I could not believe she looked like a model.

Dad asked all the questions while Mom just stared, sometimes at her hands and sometimes at me. They seemed angry and it felt like I was the one in the photos, not Laura. "Barbie, tell us the truth. What is going on here?"

"Dad, I can't even believe what I'm looking at. I don't know anything about this; Mom, you've got to believe me." They said they did, but they kept on. It felt as if Dad was going in circles, asking the same who-what-where-why questions that I had no answers for. I told them about Laura's boyfriend Ben. He was older, nineteen and in college, but they had been dating for two months and she'd never said anything about pictures or even that they'd done anything.

It was a mistake to bring up sex, although it seemed impossible not to consider what they were asking me about. Mom went all crazy, begging and pleading like I'd said I was doing drugs or jumping into bed with every boy I'd met.

The whole time, Mike didn't say anything and Mom and Dad didn't even look his way. Later I found out it was Mike who discovered the pictures on the internet, but I never heard my parents grill him about what he was doing.

Anyway, Mom and Dad went to Laura's parents and the whole thing exploded. I think Laura's parents resented my family a little. As if it were somehow my parents' fault, just a little, that the whole thing happened. Maybe I felt a little that way too.

I've never gotten to talk to Laura about this. I've made up stories as to

how it happened. She couldn't have known they were for the internet. But I saw her in those pictures; she knew there was a camera. She was posing, showing something she never showed before. Maybe she knew that the camera was the only thing that could see that part of her, some happy side of her she was desperate to get out. In the end, I still have no idea, just like I told Dad when I first saw the pictures. All I know is it scares me and I wish I could have talked to Laura before she left. Her parents sent her away to some military school.

All that stuff weighed on me while I waited by Julie's Jetta. It seemed so strange; every time teenagers get together there are all kinds of rules about what's ok to do, what's cool and what's not. But nobody knows the rules until somebody breaks them. I waited a few more minutes, and I didn't want anybody to see me so I sat on the sidewalk leaning my back against the passenger side front door. I stretched my legs out and let the dread just seep into my lungs.

"Hey." Julie's voice was quiet, and it startled me. As I got up, she reached over me and unlocked the door. I shuffled for a bit, finding ways to stall like straightening my clothes so our eyes would not meet again.

We got into the car without speaking. She paused as if she might say something before she put the key in the ignition. Instead she rushed through the rest of the motions of starting the car. Once the car was running, she revved the engine a few times, put the car in gear, and looked over her shoulder to watch for oncoming traffic. She pulled out into the road and for a brief moment our eyes met in her rear view mirror.

"You probably want some supper, right? I can take you to Wendy's or something before I drop you back home." Julie tried not to look at me by focusing on the road and not looking to the right side of the vehicle.

"Thanks," I said, but it felt weird. I didn't know if I could ask what

happened. The whole afternoon seemed rushed and I had spent the entire time struggling not to drown. How did I become the big party buster? "If you don't mind you could just take me home." I said.

"Really, let me get you supper. Some of the others felt bad. They gave me a little money to buy you supper. It's not a whole lot, only like ten dollars. You know, enough to get what you want." Ten dollars was more than enough for fast food, but not enough to get Julie into a booth someplace and grill her.

Screw it, I thought, and asked. "So am I banned for life or something?"

Julie leaned hard on the steering wheel and locked her head forward. "What do you mean?" was all she asked.

"Julie, I'm a leper. You saw it happen. What did they say when Walt pointed out the car?"

Julie sighed and relaxed her shoulders. She finally looked at me for a moment. "No, Barbie, I don't think you're banned, if that's what you're asking. Why you got booted, I do not know." She paused, looked off into traffic and sucked her lip in. Julie had a nervous habit of chewing on her upper lip when she stressed. It made me think she was lying, but what did I know? She couldn't handle confrontations and this situation had her at a limit. "Look, I wish I could tell you what happened, but I'm not really sure myself. Walt came up and gathered the seniors around. He started off whispering, I guess about the car, but when they began yelling, the others crowded in to find out what the whole thing was about. My height pretty much meant I wasn't going to hear what they said."

Julie was a couple of inches over five feet, but if she wanted something, she usually got it. I had no idea where that put me as far as the situation went. Did she not want people to associate the two of us, or was she just out of the loop? The two of us were friends, but three-week friends, not longtime pals.

She was quiet while we took a few small shortcuts to the highway, which startled me. We didn't normally take the highway. Although, to be fair, we didn't normally leave the Hurstborne—Brownsboro Road corridor. Most of the time, Julie drove slow. That day she was heavy with her foot. The left-turn light changed to green, and I was shoved against my door as she took to the on-ramp hard. She jockeyed for a moment to get over into a lane, then relaxed. "Sorry for the swerving," she said. I just nodded. We never shifted out of the quiet. I watched all the green fly by my window, and random cars each with a driver intent on her own world. I saw a silver Focus zip by, cutting off a big black SUV. The Ford driver sang along with a CD or the radio, oblivious to the SUV. The woman in the SUV seemed enraged by the whole encounter. She gripped her steering wheel tightly and ranted while she drove. Everyone acts out her own drama, I guess—especially when she's sheltered in her own four-door world. I decided then that I would get my driver's license as soon as I was able, and that I would drive another car even sooner. We continued like that, each of us thinking our separate thoughts, waiting out the deep, noisy quiet of the car: no radio or CDs, no talking, just the white noise of the car on pavement, the loudest noise of all. The Jetta cut into our silence by whining at random moments. Finally I butted in again on her silence, asking what she overheard Walt and the others say during the fight.

"You have to understand, about the only thing everybody takes serious when it comes to the game is the rule that you can't take stuff somebody's going to miss. Everybody but Walt, that is. He's always pranking people, trying to get them to do stupid things or snag something dangerous. I don't think anybody has ever taken him up on his challenges to do those crazy ideas."

"Until now," I interrupted.

"Well, who would have thought you'd be the one?"

I was insulted, and tried to show it on my face.

“Seriously, Barbie, you don’t exactly look like little miss rebel.”

“So that was it? Walt kept assuring me this was good. It was a sure thing. No one would ever know.” There had to be more. We drove on in silence until we got off at an exit some distance from my house, closer to town. I decided on patience. When we stopped at the light at the bottom of the ramp, Julie spoke up again.

“Barbie, I don’t know what to tell you. It really is the seniors’ game. They run the whole show. I got the sense from Erin that they’re really pissed. She argued with Walt the most, and she was the one who convinced everybody else. But the way the two of them talked—Barbie, I wouldn’t take it personally.”

We were quiet then for several miles. We rode down Frankfort with the windows down; that was how Julie liked it. She said she had no air conditioning. I decided I was hungry. When I told her, Julie said she was too, but in a drama way. “I’m way past hungry,” is what she said. I suggested the Thai place near us. Julie decided Mexican.

“When I get my license, I’ll never sit in the passenger seat again,” I thought.

“You know what I really want is some Aztec Kitchen,” Julie said.

“I think they’re closed.” Aztec Kitchen closed every year for the entire month of June. I knew it and I’d only lived here a month. Julie didn’t say anything but kept on driving. She discovered I was right when we pulled into the parking lot. On the other side of the restaurant door hung a magic-markered sign that read: “Gone for June. Back on July 5.” Julie put the car in park but left the car running. She rested her head on the wheel and sat that way for almost a minute. I looked at Julie with what I hoped was a kind look. A look of concern, and not anger.

“I just need to think,” Julie said, muffled by the steering wheel.

“If I were driving, we would be so gone by now.” I remember hoping Julie couldn’t read that thought on my face. Out loud I said, “El Caporale never closes. They’re not too far. You know, just down Bardstown Road.”

“No, not there.” Julie gave a small nod on the steering wheel.

I looked back out the window. “One more year and I’m never not driving again.” This time I said it aloud, quiet and to my reflection.

“I need another option,” Julie said into her arms. “A new plan.”

Eventually we ate. We ended up at a Taco Bell way in town by the movies and the Steak & Shake on Bardstown Road. We sat outside, chomping on burritos, not really talking.

I thought about Stuff and the car and how much it felt like the others had stolen my triumph. I wondered what was happening now—if the guy would find his car ever again. In my head I saw the man from the Celica come out to get his keys or to go somewhere in his car, only it wasn’t where he had left it. He panics, freaks out. What does he think when he sees his car? I giggled at the thought. Julie asked what in the world I was laughing at. I think she was defensive because we hadn’t spoken for awhile.

“Nothing. I was just thinking of the guy I took the car from. Do you wonder if he figures it out? Or does he blame it on himself, like he forgot he parked his car in front of his house, or wherever Walt leaves it?”

Julie tried not to laugh, but did anyway.

“I can see him,” I say. “He’s coming out to go on a date and there’s no car. So he calls the police and when they come—”

Julie interrupted, wiping taco sauce from her grin. “No no—he decides to go on the date anyway, so he doesn’t call the cops because he doesn’t want to

cancel the date. Only he has to call her and tell her his car's gone, and can she come get him. So when she shows up, she's all like: 'Did you know your car is parked in front of your house?' And he feels like the biggest fricking idiot on the planet!"

We laughed our asses off. I almost had tears rolling down my face, I was laughing so hard. Somewhere in there, I caught Julie sort of staring at me, her eyes glossy and a little sad.

"So, everybody was angry for no reason after all." I laid it out there. I wanted it out of the way. Somebody was going to tell me why they all hated me and it might as well have been now.

"No, they had their reason." Julie stared straight ahead and stalled by taking a big bite out of her burrito. I got anxious and a little afraid waiting for her to tell me. I stared with her, and we watched the cars fly by up and down the road.

"Look," she said, "it doesn't have to do with you, not really."

"Whenever anybody says that I assume they're lying."

"Well, here's the thing. On top of it all was the rule about getting found out. Nobody ever took anything big and didn't get found out."

"So they were afraid?" I asked. "What happened before?"

"Walt's best friend, Art, tried to snag a motorcycle once, for Stuff."

Julie stopped there. It seemed incomplete, like a sentence cut in half, but she just fidgeted with her ear, swallowing her bite, and kept her eyes on the road.

"So he got caught?" I asked. The sun broke through the clouds at that moment, and Julie reached up to pull her sunglasses over her eyes. I looked at her, squinting a bit to keep from blinking.

"Only sort of. The owner saw them rolling it down his driveway. They didn't have the advantage of keys, like you must've. Art had pushed the kickstand

closed and tried to roll it to the meeting place. When the owner saw them, he came running out of his house yelling like a nutjob. This was last fall, a cold November day. The guy had on jeans with his belt unbuckled and his shirt was open with a wife beater underneath. I guess he'd been in the middle of dressing. The rest of us were around—across the street or in other yards. We saw the whole thing.

“Art threw down the motorcycle right there in the driveway. He let the whole thing fall to the ground and everybody took off across the street and through people’s back yards.”

“So did you get in trouble?”

“Nothing official. Somebody suspected. We don’t have Bible study in that neighborhood anymore. They blamed it on Art after his accident.” Julie dropped that last sentence like I wasn’t supposed to notice. But it was major; I could tell in her voice how much she tried to hide it.

“What accident?”

“Art was into racing cars. Not official anything, but anytime the seniors were going somewhere together. He’d rev his engine and peel out. He liked dodging in and out of traffic like a movie or tv show. This was a couple of years ago, I guess. So, back when they were our age, but you get the idea. They started the Stuff game because he raced some kid from Male high school and the guy leapt some train tracks and got his car smacked by the train. This was down Frankfort Ave. Nobody was really hurt, and the kid’s parents sued the railroad, so everything was ok. They say they tried to convince Art not to race and that it was too dangerous. The parents were watching too close; dangerous like everybody’d be caught.

“Erin told me once they came up with Stuff hoping it would get Art off

racing for awhile, long enough for things to cool off. But he loved that racing. A lot of the boys were really into cars. Shortly after the motorcycle thing, Art was racing somebody to Bible study and wrapped his car around a telephone pole. Now he's half brain dead and spends all his time at home."

I was quiet awhile. Maybe they did have their reasons for hating me. I'd liked to think I wasn't that stupid. Who knows? Julie and I both sat silent until we finished our food, and then I picked up her trash and threw it away. She thanked me and we headed back to her car.

"Did you know Art?"

"No," she said. She busied herself by fiddling with things like you do when you first get in a car—adjusting the seat and the mirror and such. She avoided looking at me.

"How do you know all this?" I asked. I didn't want to sound like a bitch, but it all seemed so weird to me.

"There's a Stuff blog. Somebody wrote a memoriam to Art awhile back, but it's gone now. You might be able to find it through a Google cache if you're lucky."

## 6. London, Kentucky

I went to two more Bible Studies, showing up on time and ignoring the afternoon temporary thieving romps. Everyone was nice enough, but none of the others would even meet my eye. None, that is, except Walt, when he was there. His face remained expressionless and unreadable, so I had no idea what happened or how he felt about me. One day, in the middle of everybody talking, my phone buzzed with a message. When I checked, it was from Walt. He sat across the room, eyes locked on whoever might be talking. But under the table, the whole time, he IMed something fierce, thumbs flying.

All his questions were as inscrutable as he was:

“how old RU, Tx?”

“do U like to drive?” and

“RU going to London?”

No one invited me to any events. The upcoming retreat was to London, Kentucky. There was a small church there in need of repair after a recent flood, and the first big retreat of the summer would involve us going to London and rebuilding this church. We were told it would be like we were missionaries. Even though the idea of taking a week out from a summer vacation to volunteer with a hammer might be a little bit sucky, I still thought it would be kind of fun to go after all. But I missed the signup sheet and caught one girl, Dawn, frowning hard at me when I asked that week’s thirty-year old youth Bible Study Fellowship leader about the trip. Dawn thought I wasn’t looking.

I decided not to go. I IMed Walt back with my answer, but I couldn’t tell

what he thought about it. This time he stood in the corner. After a second, he pulled his phone somewhat out of his pocket and leaned his head slightly to the side. Just enough to read his phone. From the slight motions in his pocket, he was working the phone. After a few thumb-punches, Walt gave a quick squint to the display, glanced up at the goings on in Bible study. After that, he seemed to ignore the whole thing. He never looked my way.

A week after the message-exchange with Walt, I got an email from him. Out of the blue, and with a big attachment. Some sort of media file, named “Drifting ’04.” In the email, Walt only wrote, “Check out this video. I think that’s you. Tell me now you don’t want to go to London.” It didn’t make sense to me, so I clicked on the video. Mike yelled at me for taking up so much time online, but I couldn’t help it; dial-up is slow.

When the file opened, the media player came up on the screen. A movie started playing, some home-footage that began with a black Nissan. The car sat in the middle of a vast, empty parking lot on a gray day, slightly cool by the looks of things. In the distant background a Super WalMart stood like a distant onlooker. The driver of the car was a narrow-faced Asian kid with large mirror-shades on and a light turtleneck. Standing next to the vehicle, two doofus-y white guys and a good-looking black kid leaned toward the window to make sure they were in the picture. They flashed a random mix of hand signals and mugged the camera. The driver leaned his head way out of the car window and flipped his tongue out at me. A voice over screamed “Derek’s taking it over the top!” Awareness of my surroundings—me in the hall, Mike watching TV not far away—had me turning the sound almost completely down. The three guys outside the car backed off and out of view. Meanwhile, the driver ducked back into the car, crouching over the wheel with an intense and focused look on his face. Clumsy camera work zoomed

in on the driver. He squinted, paused, then looked up and grinned at the camera before turning back to the wheel and really hunkering down.

Smoke started to obscure the car and the boy in the car. The camera pulled out again, and now the car burned up rubber like I've never seen before. The wheels spun in place, practically, and the car slid a little like it was on glass or ice instead of concrete. The screen held this image for several beats, enough that an abrupt cut to all three of the guys close in on the screen—and obviously bragging by their gestures and physical bravado—startled me for a second. I reached to turn up the sound, but missed whatever the guys were saying. Instead, another cut and I heard the beginnings of an intro. I couldn't understand a word the announcer was saying because the whole thing was in Japanese. A subtitle in English briefly flashed on the screen: "Pretty Drifting Girl Rumiko Matsudo." Inwardly I groaned. This weird, spazzy-Japanese syntax was exactly what I didn't want people associating with me.

Spooky, retro-electronica cut my thought in half. A slow groove backbeat underlay a woman's voice, singing, "I was always thinking, games that you were playing..." I panicked and cut the sound again on the computer. The words on the screen faded, replaced by a slightly elevated view of the turn on a track. Another Nissan, this one painted ice-blue with dual white stripes down the center of the hood, the roof, and the trunk, came barreling into the turn. When the car hit the initial curve, the backside spun out, drifting around the turn to keep the front of the car facing the inside track all the way through. Dirt and smoke from the tires sprayed out behind the car. With the sound turned down, the video gave the impression the car almost floated around the track, gliding like the driver knew what they were doing rather than spinning out of control like I assumed was the case. But then another clip of the same car drifting followed the first, and then

another. The last clip ended with the car sliding around the turn so far it spun off into the grass at the center of the track. The car halted quickly, the dirt and smoke overtook the vehicle and drifted like a cloud right on past and into the sky. The driver's door opened and out stepped a small, curvy figure—definitely a woman—who removed her helmet and waved past the camera. The camera caught the big eyes and big smile on this conventionally attractive Asian woman's face. It then left her face to pan around and catch a view of the stands. The crowd was up on its feet, waving and jumping up and down. In my head I heard a deafening roar, my imagination filled in what the eliminated sound can't provide. Something about the second half of the movie file captivated me. I saved it to a personal file and watched it when no one else was around. There was something almost mystical about the silent film, such that as I watched I became entranced. "I want to be able to do this," I thought to myself. "It's gorgeous. I want to drift pretty like that."

I decided I would be on my own that summer until school started up again and I could find a new crowd. The others in the youth group all went to different schools so I hoped I wouldn't have to see them again for the most part. Instead, I remember thinking, "I will spend more time with my family, I will spend more time with God..."

I confess I am an awful person at prayer. I try to pray how I think everyone else does, how I think I should, but it comes out all wrong. My father has one prayer. He uses it for every occasion, but mostly at meals. I'm guessing Grandpap used it and on back like that. Dad recites like somebody flipped a switch and not like he hears the words he's saying. This is his prayer:

"Father, we thank thee for the bounty of this table, and all your many gifts.  
Please bless this family and all we endeavor to do in Your name. In Jesus Christ,

Amen.” Just that. If it wasn’t a meal, Dad would drop the bounty part. And he can fly through it, too, especially if we’re hungry.

Mom prays very differently. Her prayers are impressive, always thought out, always different. She has us hold hands when we pray, and she lowers her voice but at the same time you can hear her crystal clear. I guess Dad has us hold hands too, but it seems different, less like a big sign held up to say “aren’t we proper,” and “look at us, how serious we can be.” I’m unfair, maybe. She got it from Pawpaw. That’s Mom’s father; he preached. So did many folks on Mom’s side. Uncle Ray is the first in a long time on that side of the family not to go to seminary. But Mom, she’s Jesus all the way.

Like I said, I can really botch a prayer. Once I sat in the Stinsons’ living room where they were hosting the Bible study that week, cross-legged, head bowed, listening to Erin Porter’s prayer get longer and longer. “Lord God, I just want...” and “Lord Father, please only hear me this once...” and seventeen other ways to ask for one thing after another. Meanwhile, I was thinking “God, I know I’ll never be rich, but Jesus said that stuff about rich men and camels and the eye of a needle. It is ok that I want to be rich, someday? A little bit?” I start off meaning well with my prayers, but by the end, I’ve sunk into this ridiculous list of negotiations with the Supreme Being. Like “Is it ok if I still think about Joey Mitchell’s butt in his great new jeans while I ask for forgiveness of my lustful thoughts?”

Uncle Ray laughs at me about these things. He says I lead a good life, what do I have to worry about? Uncle Ray has great prayers. He’s as well read as Mom, but not as self-righteous. He talks about Grace a lot. His favorite prayer he calls “the serenity prayer,” although to me it sounds more like the kind of prayer Dad says.

Uncle Ray helped Mike and me with our driving. We both were turning sixteen soon. There was a particular day, shortly after what happened to me with the Rock Spring Christian youth group and their afternoon game, when Ray decided we needed out of the house. I had been sitting on the couch reading magazines while Mike sat at the computer playing spades online with challengers from three different time zones. I remember it now only because in retrospect how it seems connected. Uncle Ray came in from the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal and dressed in pajamas and a t-shirt. It was lunchtime.

Ray is normally cool. He's much younger than Mom, by ten or eleven years, and sometimes more of a kid than a grown-up. He works at the UPS hub in Louisville late at night shifting packages, and doesn't get up until lunchtime anyway. He only shaves every three days or so, and he's very tall, six-foot-seven. Dark woolly hair, dark eyes and bushy eyebrows make him kind of scary to others, but to us he's always just a ginormous teddy bear. That day he looked at the two of us sitting around and declared it "get-off-your-ass-and-out-of-the-house day."

After Uncle Ray got dressed, we took his '94 Chevy Cavalier to a middle school nearby, to practice driving in their parking lot. The place was always empty in the summer. Uncle Ray got out of the car to watch us drive, waving his arms to give directions and yelling suggestions when he thought we needed it. Mike and I sat in the car together, switching places depending on whose turn was up. At first we tried to help by telling each other what to do. After a little bit of this, Mike and I decided we'd just pretend the other wasn't in the car. We'd focus on Uncle Ray and the parking lot instead.

Mike and I hadn't spoken very much since we moved. In Texas he would talk to anybody and everybody who would listen. Blonde, with a head full of curls

and hazel eyes, Mike was always the happy, chatty one of the two of us. I saw that as an extension of his looks—maybe he felt comfortable in his skin. How could he not, looking like that? Since we moved to Kentucky, though, he had turned sullen and dark. Now he sat silent next to me in the passenger seat, his Ipod inserting a wall of sound between the two of us. I was driving, and gripped the steering wheel with one hand at “two o’clock” and the other at “ten.” Normally I ignore the stupid things but if I have adults watching what I’m doing, I tend to take on all those rules as if they mean something to me. They’re a secret defense when you’re interacting with adult world. Finally, Mike looked up at me. He plucked the wires from his ears and scowled. “What is your deal? You gonna continue this bad mood for two more weeks or what?”

I tried to smile but just ended up scrunching my face up more. The truth was, I didn’t want him to know he was right. Everything with the youth group—how Walt egged me on to craziness and it turned around and bit me on the butt—just had me low. I laid out for Mike as much of what had happened as I could figure, given what little I knew. Somewhere in the middle of my explanation, we had to stop and switch drivers on the Cavalier. As far as talking went, it made it easier to keep everything in order when I sat on the passenger side. Not so much because I got distracted from the goings on, but because driving is so strange and electric it takes me away. We were supposed to drive in simple circles around the parking lot, but I had tried to sneak in a donut and some other car moves, despite Ray standing a hundred feet away, watching all my moves. Over all though I don’t think I had been too sneaky. I had swung a tight turn around a lamp pole in the lot and got some action; I hit the brakes hard enough, played the wheel just right and there was a little “ert!” It’s a struggle between you and the car. Who has control?

In the passenger seat I finished up telling Mike about Walt and the others,

how Walt had me thinking they would love me, and how wrong he really was. Mike lit into me. Evidently he'd been waiting to vent. "Barbie, you gotta blow them off." He was talking about the Youth Group folks. "I'm not too worried about having pals or getting involved in church or anything here, to be honest," he said. He was sort of sneering as he spoke, like only a girl would want those things. My brother is an arrogant jackass at times. "Look, I'm not interested in making new friends or finding a group or whatever you want to call it. I've got my tribe, and I'll stick to them." He glanced my way for a brief moment. Usually this means Mike has an idea he wants to talk about. He can wedge this into conversations any old way, but he enjoys it most if he's invited—he wants to be asked and he'll even hold up a hand, like to be called on, if he thinks he can get away with it. Not in class or anything, just in regular conversation. I guessed from his excitement there was a new idea he wanted to rant about. I gave it to him. It doesn't take much. "What?" I asked.

"Barbie, between email, instant messaging, and text messaging on my cell, I have three ways of keeping in touch with my friends back in Boerne. That's like three computers working to keep me in the loop. Three computers that didn't even exist twenty years ago. Distance means less and less, don't you see? Half my friends aren't even back there. I can talk or email with people in California and Ohio and all over. I know you think home is Texas, but for me, that may be where I'm from but my home is the ether, the internet and all that. I live in digital space more than anywhere else. So when Mom thinks I should get involved with new people, for me it's like monkeys insisting their zoo keepers eat nothing but bananas to keep healthy."

"Mike, I don't even know what that means."

Mike grinned and looked at Uncle Ray, a hundred yards away and down at

the other end of the parking lot, waving us back again. Mike put the car in neutral and revved the engine just to look cool. He failed miserably; Uncle Ray's Cavalier is an automatic. I laughed out loud and now Mike wasn't master of the universe any more. "Shut up," he said, and shifted, overshooting and hitting D2 then D1, settling finally into drive and coasting at a careful 5MPH down the lot to Uncle Ray. It was awkward and I couldn't laugh. I really fought it.

Uncle Ray had us stop driving. He didn't want us driving together. Instead, he would be in the car with one of us driving. He wanted to coach, be a little more hands on, I guess. Mike came to a stop, put the car in park, turned the keys and began unbuckling his seatbelt. All the regular motions. Uncle Ray opened the Mike's door, poked his head in and looked right at me.

"Mike, you hop on out. I want to see if Barbie can calm down long enough to just drive without hot-dogging the hell out of my car."

Mike did hop out, but not before flashing me a wicked grin. I couldn't look at Uncle Ray. I felt sheepish and caught. He headed around the back to get in the passenger side, so I climbed over the brake to get in the driver's seat. When he got in, I imagined he was some anonymous instructor, the kind you take lessons from a couple of times to get better insurance. Somebody I could let down and wasn't close to who I am.

"Barbie, just turn on the car and don't mess around. Seriously, you're going to screw up something, or get in an accident." Uncle Ray was looking directly at me, but I stared straight ahead, just as uncomfortable as I could be. He put his hand on my shoulder, which was sort of funny. He's so big he took up more than half the room, and had to shift awkwardly just to reach. "Barbie, you're a much better driver than Mike, you don't need to prove anything." Uncle Ray didn't get it. I wasn't out to prove anything to anybody. Driving was the only time

I wasn't looking to beat Mike, be better than Mike. I wasn't sure what I wanted, or how to explain it. Cars jolt me, make me feel that if I can cut loose I can finally be something raw and pure and absolutely me.

Ray had me do all kinds of kiddy practices, like starting and stopping, starting and stopping, over and over again. In between he would jabber on about how I had it all wrong. He kept pushing for me to go slow and make everything smooth. He had no clue. I wanted a smooth ride like I wanted to drown. I was tired of the whole world feeling like a smooth ride, something held down and sedated. But I nodded and said "uh-huh," meanwhile fidgeting and shifting in my seat. I played with the radio knobs, the vents, the hazard lights. Uncle Ray told me to stop, that I was too distracted.

"What's this?" I opened a small drawer and discovered the ashtray. Not the ashtray that Uncle Ray used for change, but used as an actual, bona fide place to ash a cigarette. In the middle of an otherwise clean space a small, perfectly formed cigarette ash sat in the ashtray. At that moment I felt like I'd discovered something dirty about my uncle. PawPaw and Grandma both died of lung cancer. They smoked like chimneys and Mom always used their deaths as the reason not to start smoking. She would say, "Your uncle and I will never smoke, your daddy will never smoke. You know why? Because we know first hand, those things KILL!" She would say it like that, too. All hushed until she got to the last word and then, boom, she would punch her voice up and stab her finger out to point right at you. "Don't let me ever catch you smoking. Do you understand me?" It was a death threat to smoke in Mom's family.

Uncle Ray and I stared at the little ash and didn't move or speak at first. I still had my foot on the brake and we sat, the car idling halfway across the parking lot from Mike. I shifted the car into park. Then I looked at him, and he turned to

look back, eye to eye. His face was softer now, not in a guilty way, but filled with forgiveness.

“Barbie, I’m only saying these things because I don’t want you to get hurt. I don’t want you doing the kinds of stupid things I did.” He removed the ashtray, picked up a small plastic bag from the floor and dumped out the little ash into the bag. As he tied the handles of the bag together, he said, “It’s a whole lot easier if you don’t get started on a stupid thing. I want you to know that. Letting go of bad habits is much more difficult than never starting them.” He finished tying up the bag, sealing it tight, but made no other moves to do anything. He sat and stared at his hands, holding the two plastic handles, frozen in their last action. I stared at them too, not knowing what to say. After a moment, he glanced my way. I watched his face, as he gave a small nod before looking me in the eye. We smiled at each other, and he broke the moment. “Now, gentle as pie, I want you to drive to your brother. Mike needs the help more than you.”

After Mike and I traded places and I stood there in the parking lot, shading my eyes against the sun, I tried to sort out what I was feeling. Talking to Uncle Ray was good. He gave me the sense that everything might turn out okay. Maybe it was the opposite of what he said, but I couldn’t help but feel that, even if I ended up doing something wrong, it wouldn’t be unforgivable. This thing, plus now he and I shared a secret. Mom would kill Uncle Ray if she knew he smoked.

My thoughts were interrupted by my cell phone’s buzz. Normally I’m not geezy, but here’s something I agree with Mom and Dad about: I hate all the rings everybody’s got. I used to argue this with Laura; she had downloaded a character’s voice from her favorite anime off the internet. Every time her phone rang, there was Minmei or whoever, giggling out the ringtone. Laura argued that, when anything can be your ringtone, how can it not be a personal thing, just like

clothes or jewelry? A perfect expression of who you are. I just feel, no matter what you pick, somebody's going to already have it; also, maybe it's nobody's business what my favorite singer and/or line from a movie is. So I just keep my phone on vibrate. My attitude is, people's calls are a little secret I don't share with anyone else.

When I flipped open my phone, I expected it to be Mom wondering where we were. Instead, I saw a number I didn't recognize. For a second I thought it might be Laura trying to call me from wherever she was these days. I'd gotten in the habit of thinking any number I didn't know was Laura. I never answered because I couldn't talk to her, not since we moved to Louisville. Of course, I was always disappointed when there wasn't a message, or it ended up a wrong number. Anything but her. This time, though, I realized it was a local number, somebody from Louisville. I took a chance. "Hello?"

"Hey Texas. How'd you like to go on a little trip?"

It was Walt. I didn't know what to say. Instead I blurted out, "Where did you get my number?"

"Listen, I owe you an apology. And I think I have a way to make things up to you. I know you're not going on the retreat, but if I had a way to get you there, and to get you in everybody's good graces—back so people are talking to you—would you forgive me?"

"Walt, you're a jerk." Or that's what I'd planned to say the next time I got a chance. Instead I mumbled something about how I wasn't able to go on the trip because of my parents. Something vague and, to me at least, without a solution. Evidently, not so unworkable to Walt.

"I know," he said, "that you're angry at me. The others told me I was wrong to get you to take the car, and they want me to apologize. But I won't,

because I think it was amazing. What you did was amazing. I'd be lying to say anything else.”

Mike and Uncle Ray pulled up next to me. The Cavalier was idling and they were switching places. Mike stepped up next to me and put his hand on my shoulder. He looked at me, sort of questioning. I nodded, indicating I was okay. I held up my forefinger, asking for another moment, and then started biting my nails.

“Texas, you got me. You seem honest, and the others don’t. I’m calling to say I’m sorry they bagged on you, but I’m not sorry we took our little ride. That’s the coolest thing going in a long while, and I think you liked it too.” He ran out of steam, and his breathless chatter died down while he took a breath. “Barbie, you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.” Uncle Ray sat half in the driver’s seat, half out; one foot was on the brake, the other on the ground outside the car. He gestured for me to get in the car.

“Will you come with me to the retreat? It won’t even be for the whole time. I’m just going down for a day.”

In the back seat Mike sat, his Ipod cranked and his headphones on, oblivious to the world.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll be there.”

## 7. Don't Panic

Walt has power. You can tell by looking at him. He stands medium height but seems bigger. He has dark hair and a wide jaw and dimples when he smiles. His smiles come easy, like they don't cost him anything. Like laughs have no worth. His skin is dusky, slightly tanned or caramel in color. I don't think he's anything but white. Only his tone gives him a Benetton feel. He has either enough money or enough ego never to have to worry about anything. Your basic nightmare. The only reason I decided to go with him to London, Kentucky was the faint hint of a beg in his voice. For whatever reason, I think he wanted me with him. Maybe he only wanted what he couldn't get.

We were back in the car for a little while, headed back home, when Mike popped one of the earphones out to ask a question. "Who called? Mom?"

"No, somebody from the church youth group. I'm going on the retreat."

Mike looked worried. "I thought they were filled up." He was staring at me like I needed reminding of our conversation from earlier. The one where he told me to tell everybody else to screw off, basically. I pretended I didn't notice.

"Turns out not so much. It's only for a day, anyway." I tried to make it sound blah and unimportant. "Mom will be glad. She wants me to go, I think."

This whole time, Uncle Ray drove his car in silence. Once, I looked up and saw Ray watching me in the rearview mirror. He studied me—I could feel it after I'd caught him watching a few times. He always frowned when he watched, as if I were a huge disappointment. Maybe I was misreading him, but I didn't

care. Sometimes when I try to achieve something, a goal or a score or something, I think “what would Uncle Ray do?” It spurs me on. Right then, though, I chose to ignore him. I would do this thing with Walt, because I wanted to and it was exciting, and who cared what all the others thought or planned. I only felt guilty for wanting their approval in the first place. Most of the others in the youth group seemed kind of boring. Walt seemed different, but predictable, and Julie of course. Her quirkiness made her ten times better than all those virtual guys and gals. Overall, from what I could tell they lacked imagination.

I hold serious judgment for those who lack imagination. I once overheard my Aunt Claire, Dad’s sister, compare me to my cousins.

“Jane and Michael never get upset like Barbie,” she said. “They just aren’t plagued by imagination the way she is.” This enraged me. I was ten at the time, and I’d just lost a game of Scrabble to my cousins. It was mostly due to my hoarding of J’s and B’s for fancy words I wasn’t quite sure how to spell—I had all the letters in “jaundice,” for instance, except the “C,” the “U,” and the “I”— while Michael and Jane plodded to victory expelling two and three letter words like gas. In protest, I wailed and hid under the desk in the hall, where I remained until the moment Aunt Claire made curiosity and dreams equal to disease.

I remember that moment. I was overcome with such a fierce, hot rage that I darted from under the desk, aimed at my aunt’s ankle. I think I wanted to bite her. At the last moment I diverted to the chair where Aunt Claire sat instead. She and Mom shrieked at once. Mom sent me to my room for the rest of the evening.

“Thank you mother,” I whispered from behind my door in my room, “because Aunty Boring has declared war on me, and I don’t want to have to hurt her. I hear it’s a sin.” At that age, I really jazzed on drama. I like to think I’m better now.

Some time passed before I heard from Walt again. I started to think the whole thing had been some elaborate prank organized to mock me. Instead, he called a week or so before the retreat to find out what I was going to wear.

“What?” The question didn’t seem right. I was having a hard time processing Walt asking about clothes. Why would he care what I thought? For the most part, he wore the same things all the time. He dressed preppy, solid and tidy but not fussy. “Are you asking me what I’m wearing to this retreat? Just work clothes kinds of things. T-shirts and jeans, mostly.”

“Just kidding. I’m actually calling to see if you are allergic to dogs.”

Ha ha, I thought. “No, I’m not. Why, are you bringing a dog?”

“My dog.” Walt’s voice bent stern and fierce. “I’m bringing my dog and it better not be a problem.”

“No problem; I love dogs.” It’s possible I pushed my enthusiasm too far. “Really, no problem at all.” There was an awkward silence for a few moments. I needed to fill it; quiet drives me nutty. “What kind of dog?”

“Springer spaniel.” He started to say more, but cut himself off. “No, I’m not doing this. I don’t want to get into the whole ‘girls-love-the-dog’ thing. All you need to know is: I’m bringing my dog. Her name is Heather. Love her or I’ll leave you by the side of the road.” Walt’s voice shot up an octave and I held back a giggle. We never had pets because we moved so much growing up. Half the time we lived in apartments. Dad’s work has him traveling lots, and working different offices. Mom said we were lucky Dad could keep us along most of the time. They drew the line at pets, though.

We did have a puppy once. Mike and I were about seven or eight and we were living in Atlanta, Georgia. We didn’t live there long. Mom and Dad went out on a Saturday, in June or July I remember. They wanted to play a few rounds

of golf. Dad loves golf but Mom hates clubs and associations of any kind. She thinks people can know too much about her by what social group she belongs to. So Mom and Dad were playing on the public course. A couple of girls, they said, came up to them with a puppy in a shredded plastic bag. The girls were upset, and told my parents they found the puppy in the garbage can. “Can you give it a good home?” they asked.

One or the other agreed. When they brought it home, Mike and I didn’t really know what to do. If we were prepared, or had been asking for a dog at that time, I think the puppy would have meant more. He was small and almost naked, shivering in the basket Mom and Dad had him in. I could see huge expectation in their eyes, especially Dad’s. I guess he thought if he was going to break down and get us a pet, he wanted some noise made about it. He said, “So, you guys should hurry up and name the puppy.”

I think he was hoping to get us involved.

Instead, Mike and I fought over the name. The only way to keep it fair was to establish rules, which we did for everything. Sibling rules are important. They tell you how to make your way with other people. Julie, for instance, has a way she and her sister split food. If there’s cake, or, say, one last slice of pizza, one of them cuts it into two parts and the other gets to pick. That way, the cutter tries to make it even so the one who picks doesn’t get too much. I wish Mike and I did that. Instead we just use a basic dibs rule; whoever’s first gets to pick. The rules for picking a puppy name were simple. We both had to like it. This was the hardest rule we ever made up. We spent two days doing nothing more than shooting names at each other.

“Smooch?”

“No. How about Buddy?”

“No. Are you retarded? How about Jack?”

“Boring. Batman?”

Yeah, we’re going to name a dog ‘Batman.’ Get real, Mike. Maybe Duke?”

“Where are you getting these names, Barbie?”

And on like that. On the second day, Mike and I were both eating cereal—probably rice crispies because that’s all we liked that summer—yelling out names from what we were reading. He was listing the ingredients on the cereal box and I was naming random objects sitting around the room. We had just eliminated “Riboflavin” and “Post It” when Mom came in the kitchen with a miserable look on her face and told us that the puppy had died.

“I’m sorry. Mike, I didn’t say anything but he wasn’t healthy. It’s better off this way, now he isn’t suffering.” Mike took it harder than me. He was crying and yelling. Later he told me he felt like the puppy was stolen from us. “It was something very, very special Barbie. And our parents offered it to us and then took it away just as suddenly. I feel like that puppy is the excuse they’ll use to never get us another dog. Or any kind of pet.” He told me this recently. I was always more weird with the whole puppy event. I never knew what to do with what happened those days. It was like we had something, something great and special, and it was taken away because we couldn’t pick a name. You know what I took from that? Name everything before it goes away.

I thought about the puppy that week before the retreat. I never knew what kind of dog he was. Not that I know much about breeds. When I asked Walt about his dog, it just seemed the right question. Like when somebody tells you they got a car, one of the first things you ask them is: what’s the color? Color doesn’t mean anything, really, but you want to know anyway.

I looked up springer spaniels on the internet. They seem like happy dogs. Not the kind of dog Walt would have, if you'd ask me. I would have thought yellow lab. When I talked to Julie about it later, she said that Walt always had Heather with him. "Love me, love my dog," was his constant refrain. They finally convinced him to stop bringing her to the Bible studies. "Too many of the adults had issues," she told me.

Meanwhile, I got ready to meet up with the others on retreat. I wasn't silly; I knew Walt and I couldn't just drop in and expect to be included in everything. Walt's plan was to catch up with them halfway through the week. We'd go down, bring food and stuff to win them over, hang out for a night and come back the next day. I told Mom where I was going, but not all the details. It felt safer that way; who knows what she would think if I told her the whole story?

## 8. Girl Unafraid

When Walt showed up for the trip I was surprised. His car didn't really fit him, just like his dog. He pulled up in a Mazda 3 five-door, slate gray, a cute bubble of a car with nice curves and sporty in spite of the echoes of hatchback. The engine ran smooth, and I could hear Heather's barking from inside. The Mazda 3 had its sporty moments, but was too dainty and cute for Walt. I figured him for one of those thick, blunt ended autos, like all the American cars trying to look like small Cadillacs. Later he even made a comment, an apology for his car. He explained, "I got it for Heather. She likes the back to lay down." Now I love the car, but this was before drifting.

Walt killed the engine, and hopped out to help me with my stuff.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah, I've just got some luggage." I pointed to my purse, bag, and jacket pile. Gone for one day and I was taking a whole duffel bag worth of clothes and stuff. When he threw it in the front seat, I could see the handful of things Walt was bringing. A wad of clothes and a toothbrush were wrapped up in a beach towel. I started to climb in, but Heather got excited and tried to jump into the front seat where I would sit.

"Heather, sit!" Walt frowned at his dog and she backed into place behind the driver's seat. He looked up at me and asked, "Don't you need to tell anybody you're going?"

"Nah." Mom and Uncle Ray were at work. Mike was inside, on the computer most likely.

“Let me get some water then.” Walt made for the front door.

“What about Heather?” I asked.

He looked at me kind of funny, so I stood back to let him head into the house.

“The kitchen is on the left.”

“What, you’re not going to show me?” Walt was giving off a strange vibe. He looked intense, and didn’t seem as rascally as he did that day wandering around suburbs.

“I don’t care.” I plunged past him. I didn’t know what I was doing. Maybe his weirdness put me in a weird place, or maybe we had reached a moment where we both were making a decision—to cut ourselves out of a safe place and head for the unknown—and it was too hard to do that as ourselves.

We headed for the kitchen, and passed Mike browsing the internet on the computer in the hall. He didn’t notice us; he had headphones on that were hooked into the computer. Walt looked down at what Mike was surfing on the web. What caught his attention was what I took to be a small flash animation.

Walt looked my way for eye contact, and raised an eyebrow. I pointed toward the kitchen. We were both quiet as we made our way through, the opposite of how we came in: loud and crashing through. Mom had insisted on setting the computer up in the hall so the whole thing would be more public. Instead, Mike would sit at the computer in the middle of everything and now I felt guilty every time I walked through. Like I intruded.

I pulled out a glass and poured Walt water. He leaned in close and whispered, “What’s going on there?”

When I handed him the water, I shut myself up. “You’ll have to ask him. He’s weird.” As annoying and bizarre as Mike was, I didn’t want Walt to mock

him. Maybe that's why I cut off any discussion.

Walt drank his water. He took his time, it seemed to me, and I tried to find something to do other than watch him sip away at his glass. I wiped down the stove and rearranged the dirty dishes in the dishwasher. He walked around the kitchen, opening drawers and looking in the pantry. I ignored him. I wasn't about to tell him how he was annoying me.

We putzed like that for a few more moments until Walt shook it off and said, "Well, you ready to go?" It was abrupt, but what was needed. I don't know what we were anxious about, if anything. When Heather saw us at the front door, she went a little nuts, jumping and barking in the back seat. Walt put his face on the rear windshield. Heather got real quiet and pressed her own face to the other side, a light, soft growl held in her throat. He pulled a dog biscuit out of his pocket and ran around to his door with it held up for her to see. She went back to the barking and jumping.

While Walt calmed Heather, I got in the car and adjusted the seat. After, he stared at me, sitting back with this half-smile on his face. I don't know what he meant by it, but it annoyed me anyway.

"I figure I better get comfortable. I'm sitting in this seat awhile," I said. I had the seat set how I like it: shifted up toward the dash with the back kind of reclined.

"You don't have to sit there the whole time, you know." I didn't. Walt shifted into gear and headed out toward the highway. He glanced my way when next he checked for other traffic. "You don't mind if we go into the city for a quick errand, do you? I've got a box in the trunk I need to drop off."

"No, go ahead."

Those were the last words either of us spoke for awhile. Walt wound his

way through the suburbs where we lived, passing every combination of the three-bedroom, two-bath theme I could imagine. Walt pulled onto the highway in a direction I never took; he headed downtown, toward the actual city of Louisville.

As we neared the city, everything turned strange. The buildings shifted from the clean, fresh-looking homes and strips of stores I was familiar with, to buildings of all decades and design. Catholic churches sprang up above the homes and businesses. Parking garages, dry cleaners, liquor stores, and local food chains like Moby Dick looked strung together by junky telephone poles, dingy sidewalks and haphazard concrete blocks.

Walt pulled the car onto an off-ramp at a numbered avenue. We coasted down to street level right in front of the river. Above and behind us was a railroad bridge without connections on either side. I asked Walt about it.

“I have no idea. That’s been there as long as I can remember. That bridge just sits there. Nobody looks at it, even.” He was distracted, trying to find the place to take the box.

“But what does it mean?” I said. Walt shrugged. Near this end of the bridge, halfway up one of the support struts stood out some graffiti spray painted in white. It said “I am the 77” with the last bit indecipherable. I stared at it until the light turned green and Walt drove up the hill and into downtown. When we turned a corner I lost track of the freak bridge.

“My mom likes to give stuff to this church down here. I don’t know why she can’t do that through Rock Spring, but she just says she likes to do this herself. Which I guess means have me do it for her, right?”

I turned to Walt and started to say something, but Heather stuck her head forward and started to pant in my ear. “She’s getting antsy,” he said. “Heather, sit!”

After a few turns that seemed to double back on themselves, we arrived at a small church. I waited in the car with the blinkers on while Walt ran in with a large box of clothes and other discardables sticking out the top. People walked by the car on their way wherever. Downtown made me want a map, but not just of streets and buildings but also what different clothes stood for, how to understand the ways cars parked and downtown people walked, things like that.

Walt returned, starting up the car and gingerly pulling out into traffic. “Sorry about that,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like we have to be there at any particular time.” We had barely spoken since I got in the car. Even Heather seemed muted. I felt as if I were sitting outside the car looking in, or outside this moment and watching it happen.

“I’ve never been in the city before,” I said. “It doesn’t seem quite real to me, like movies or crime shows.”

“I don’t think I would have either, if it weren’t for these trips to the mission.” He hummed a moment before going on. “There’s nothing really down here, you know? It just seems like lots of buildings and people. I guess it’s the kind of place where you go to work but your job is generic. You don’t work in a restaurant or a store, so what do you do?”

“Who knows?” I shrugged. I asked him about his parents: what they did, what they were like.

“My mother sells real estate when she’s not running my brothers around,” he said. “Dad is some important man in his marketing firm. It’s all stupid, really. They’re cool as long as they don’t get too much into my stuff. How about your parents?”

I flinched a tiny bit. This was not an easy thing. I told him about my dad

working overseas for a while, and how Mom decided to move us back to her hometown to live with my uncle. I didn't tell him what Dad did, or Mom for that matter. Instead I told him about Uncle Ray's programming job.

By this time we were out of the city, headed east, on a different interstate. The farmland wasn't much better than downtown had been. Off the side of the highway I saw large stretches of grass bound by heavy rows of trees, little patches of forest hiding between farmland and towns. Somewhere in the middle of these grassy patches was the inevitable lone house, sometimes a barn. Real old school stuff. I wondered like Walt had. What did these people do everyday of their lives? They had satellite dishes on their roofs. They couldn't be that different, could they? Did any of them have farming blogs, or stuff listed on Ebay? Did they shop at malls or go out to eat?

### Section III

*After we really got into the drifting, I remember I could be anywhere, sit at home watching TV or at my job or even riding in the car, and I could feel the drift. I didn't even have to close my eyes. It was a vibe, a buzz at the back of my neck. The world around me would shake loose from whatever holds it all in place. My sense of all objects around me locked in their place was suddenly gone.*

*At these moments, anything could happen. Gravity could give out, time might stop working. I could at once grow larger than the house or shrink to the size of a peanut. Even though none of these things happened—I'm not crazy, don't think that—it was as if somebody threw a switch, and killed all the certainty in the world. Maybe Mom didn't float off into the kitchen ceiling, but all at once, there was nothing saying she never would. I only knew I wasn't dreaming by looking at small fixed objects—the best were small lights like clocks or faraway lampposts—and watching them dance a little like my balance was off.*

*I could feel the drift, even when I seemed still or at rest. At night, I would lie in my bed and fall back into the spinning. My bed seemed to careen off on one side, sliding around curves and never letting go. At those times—without sounds, without smells, without even the adrenaline of the drift, nothing but the feeling of it—my head felt as if it burst open, and my consciousness lifted out of my body, and I could finally look down at myself and see me whole.*

## 9. Bazooka Joe's Sister

At first I was excited about the road trip—I'd felt I'd thrown off the shackles of everything gone wrong since we moved, even if it was for only a little while. But sitting in the car watching cows and farms and all that green got boring before too long. The interstate part was over quickly, and after that it was state highway the rest of the way. All two lane roads, sometimes three. Walt and I got quiet, focusing on our separate thoughts. Outside got smaller, closed in, and we closed in with it.

Overcast clouds smeared across the sky. Breaks in the cover revealed a stark blue sky above, and there were enough of these breaks that the land was lit in broad patches that gave the ground a glow against the dark horizon. We passed little towns here and there. It felt alien, like a vague threat, and everywhere I looked it felt a little grimy, really old and suspended there. I saw how there are places much older than me, here in these woods or downtown Louisville even. It pained me.

I distracted myself from these thoughts by playing some lame game on my cell. Walt saw me and chuckled. He fished his own out of his pocket and handed it to me. "I've got better on mine." So I messed with his phone for awhile. That ate up time and miles.

Later, after I'd finally broken past my first-time lucky great-score, a sudden burst of music from my lap made me jump. I can only plead automatic reflex for why I answered the damned thing.

"Hello?"

“He’s got you answering his phone now, huh?” a female with a thick drawl asked.

I think I was still too game-groggy to realize what I was doing. “Hello?” again, my only defense.

“It’s okay, Barbie. I called to speak to you.”

Now I felt in real trouble. A stranger on a strange phone asking for me gave a weird sense of dislocation. As if I’d fallen off the map and into another world, one without my Mom, my family, or any of my past worries or fears.

“Huh,” I think I uttered. Maybe an “Okay.” Heather woke and nudged my elbow with her wet nose. It shocked me, and I snapped out of my grog with a squeal. “Heather!”

“You get to meet Heather? I’m so jealous,” the drawl continued, joined by the smack-smack of gum-chewing.

“Who is this?” I managed to ask.

“Evie—Walt’s girlfriend.”

I gave a glimpse at Walt, but didn’t say anything. I didn’t know what to say. He was driving, and glanced my way with a smile. “Is that Evie?” he asked.

“Walt driving?” she asked. They spoke at the same time.

“Yes,” I said into the phone, and nodded so he knew I meant him, too.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m not checking up on you or anything. I’m just bored at my job.” Her voice faded for a second and I heard a crack. She must have pulled the phone away to pop a bubble with her gum.

“What’s your job?” I asked. I hadn’t intended to speak, really. There are times when, despite my intentions, a person can make a statement that pulls a question out of me. I just end up creating a conversation no matter what.

“I work at a funeral home. Filing and stuff—pretty boring.” Evie

interrupted herself to chaw a bit on the gum. “I know it sounds creepy cool, but it’s just a dumb summer job my cousin got me at the place he worked. Only he got fired for huffing some of the chemicals and now I’m stuck here, awkward as hell.”

Like this conversation, I thought. “What funeral home?” I asked, like I would know. I assumed it was in Louisville, but I really had no idea.

“No place you’d know. I live in Anne Arbor, Michigan. Walt says you lived in Texas?”

I wondered about her twang. It slowed her down a bit, and fought with the staccato of the gum chewing. “Yeah, my family just moved to Kentucky.”

“We moved here from Dalton, Georgia this past spring. People around here say the winter will be awful, but anything has to be better than Dalton.”

“Why, what’s in Dalton?”

“Absolutely nothing, sister. A big goddamn zero.” There was a pause. I didn’t know if she expected me to speak. I was still looking at Walt. He flashed me a grin, as if to say, “Isn’t she cool?” but what did he know. For all he heard, Evie could have been calling him out right on the phone.

She went on. “So, are you into church and Jesus and all that?”

“Yes,” I said. It was automatic. Guilt got hold of me, pretty strong some times. Not like I was afraid for my soul, or the afterlife, or any of that. It was guilt over what Walt, or my mother, or whoever might say if they knew I said or did the wrong thing.

“Huh,” Evie said. “I’m a Jew.”

At once my perspective shifted. Evie went from some girl I was afraid would be angry at me for riding with her boyfriend, to an object of sympathy. A southern belle Jew stuck in a funeral home in Michigan. I wondered if she felt as out of place as I did all the time. I decided to bite.

“I’m adopted,” I said.

“Do me a favor,” she asked.

“What’s that?”

“Not right now, but wait till I’m off the phone. Like tonight, say. Call him Wally. He hates it.”

I laughed, despite myself. “Is that why you called?”

“No,” Evie said, and paused a bit. This time she just sucked on the gum.

Outside the windows of Walt’s car, the world looked different from the broad, open-faced interstate we left Louisville on. Instead, this two-lane state highway felt small and country, the tall oaks on either side of the road closed in, making the outside world as intimate as this little car. In the driver’s seat, staring at the road, Walt might as well have been already in London. Meanwhile, Evie in my ear was my only companion. “I kind of called to caution you.” Evie’s voice half-kicked my thoughts away, half-sustained them. “Has he asked you about the drifting thing? The cars?”

“Uh, no.” I remembered the email, and the cars gliding across my computer screen. That illicit thrill and the current one, this clandestine conversation with Walt’s girlfriend, combined to give me a little buzz at the base of my neck. “What about it?”

“Well, Walt’s got this crazy idea. I don’t know where it comes from. He seems to think you want to race. Not race, like really race, but drift. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“I’ve seen it. Here and there.” I glanced at Walt. He watched at me for a moment with a puzzled look, as if to ask what the conversation might be. I rolled my eyes and made a jabbering motion with my hand. For once, I had the upper hand on Walt; he bought my excuse with a stifled chuckle and turned back to

driving. “What about it?” I asked, hoping to prompt some explanation.

“Yeah, so—drifting? Instead of racing, see. He thinks it’s safer. And you’d be like his new Art, his new car buddy. I don’t know why he picked you, Barbie, but he’s serious. And I think it’s trouble.” There was a long pause on the other line. If this had been a ground phone I might have heard more, but you can’t hear the little things on a cell, like breathing or swallowing. Just loud talking and gum smacking. There’s no nuance, so it’s harder to pick up emotion. Evie’s pause stretched and stretched. Maybe she wanted me to ask about Art, but I wasn’t about to let on what I knew. Not with Walt right there. Maybe I was a bitch and a fake, but there has to be a place for bitches and fakes in this world.

“Yes?” I asked.

“That’s it, I guess. Just watch out for trouble, okay? And watch out for him. He doesn’t get that he’s drama, you know?” I looked over at Walt. His face was cast in reflective shadow, and he grinned away, watching the road. He hummed to himself. I could tell he was happy, because I could see in him the same kind love of driving I felt behind the wheel. Driving meant control, meant freedom, meant everything was possible. If it came down to it, if Evie was asking me to blow him off, I didn’t know if I could take that away.

“Okay, Evie. I think I get it.” Immediately I knew my response was too curt. Maybe she thought I wanted to cut her off, which would explain the abrupt change of topics. She popped another bubble and sucked back in the gum. It sounded like a vacuum over the phone.

“So, you dating?” she asked.

“No.” I was tired of this line of questioning. I got it from everybody, even my mother. Nobody ever asked Mike why he was alone, and I don’t think that just has to do with him being such a dork.

“Too many bad relationships? Or maybe one really bad one?” Evie’s questions began to feel less like a grilling and more like she was bored and didn’t want to stop talking.

“Nothing like that. I’m just not in the mood.” It was true. My last boyfriend was a soggy personality. I got together with him because I felt like it was the expected thing to do.

After a moment, I said to Evie, “I just don’t want to put up with anybody’s drama.” I hoped that she heard me echo her words about Walt. I figured this line of questioning was about any small fears of me lingering in her head, and I didn’t want any of her focus on me. “You want to talk to Walt?”

“Yeah, put him on.” And like that, my first meeting with Evie was done.

I handed the phone to Walt and told him Evie wanted to talk. He grinned and they babbled on for a bit about what I don’t know—I don’t like listening in on other’s conversations. Instead I watched the landscape roll by. Now it seemed so up close, right outside my window, in fact. The trees loomed large and seemed to hide a lot in the late afternoon shadow. The only buildings or homes were log cabins, practically. Small wooden structures that looked like they could blow over with a small puff or a loud shout. They lacked everything that made my world feel real and solid: asphalt, concrete, and steel—neon lights or any other markers telling you where to go and what to do.

## 10. Walter, It Was Really Nothing

We planned to hit London after sunset, which here in the summertime meant late, like nine or ten o'clock. When we got close, Walt had me grab the yellow pages out of an old roadside phone booth sitting in front of a closed bait shop. I got the name of a local pizza place and called to order. It was our peace offering. After we picked up pizzas, we headed to the hotel where the youth group was staying. Walt called ahead to the rooms to scope out what they were up to. To formulate a plan. Most of the group was stuck in their rooms. Their doors opened up onto a hallway where the chaperones on the trip were taking turns watching to make sure everyone stayed indoors.

"It's a pisser, alright, but we can get around it," Walt said. He seemed revved up. Excited by the prospect of finding some way around authority.

I thought about Evie and how Walt seemed excited to take grown-ups on, when all I wanted was to avoid them. Staying off their radar screens seemed ideal to me. But maybe that's why Walt was the kind of guy who was popular and I was the girl no one would hang with.

Walt coughed and interrupted my thoughts. I looked at him, a little startled.

"You're not saying much. Which are you, the girl who steals cars or the girl who sits staring out the window?"

I wanted to tell him I'm not a car thief. Instead I blurted out, "Walt, why did you ask me to come?" Some part of me felt like there was a vibe between us, but mostly I didn't want to feel like I might be a part of something, only to find

out later I didn't belong.

"You came across different. Not like anybody else."

"Different how? Exotic? Asian, but somebody you could talk to?" All things said to me before, I kid you not. I hadn't gone along with that one for awhile. I got tired of people getting disappointed when they found out I didn't know enough about anime, or kung fu, or Buddhism, or whatever.

"Different like real. Not fake or hiding."

Maybe it was a compliment. "Really? Because I really want secrets. I think they are a tremendous source of power." Sometime in fifth grade I discovered sarcasm. Good sarcasm can be a great shield at times. He laughed and just like that, like a light switch, this became fun. No longer did I feel like I was breaking rules. The world around Walt differed from my own. We had a free pass to act how we wanted, to be silly and crazy and cool.

"So, what's the deal with you and cars?" Walt asked. A direct question that made me want to squirm. I sucked on my nails a second to buy some time. Walt grinned like he saw right through. "Texas, I saw the way you looked at my car when we pulled up. And I don't think we jumped into that guy's Celica by accident."

"I don't know. Just a Texas thing I guess." At that point, I still considered myself a good girl. I didn't feel comfortable talking about my desire. It seemed shameful and trashy, like breaking a commandment. Instead I put it on him. "How about you?

"You don't want to hear. It's kind of messed up, a little weird and a little boring."

"I'll hear it. It can't be more boring than this." I pointed out the window at the wall of box retail we were passing. The only thing to see for this stretch was

store, gas station, fast food, store. Talk about anything, I thought, so I could avoid talking about the palm sweat I was getting in anticipation of what we were about to do—break out a bunch of teenagers from a church retreat so they might think I was cool. That and the subject of me and cars. I don't know I could have put it into words even if I had wanted. But when Walt spoke, I didn't feel as if it were a secret thing anymore, something to hide and pretend wasn't there. Instead it became good, maybe even important.

"Well, you know how we're stuck between 'am I a kid' and 'am I grown-up?' Like, who doesn't have a cell phone and a credit card and a computer? And yet there's all these rules." He glanced at me to see if I was with him. I stared in his direction, nodding, as if my life were like that. But Dad would have killed us if we had credit cards, and Mom's just as bad. I tried to process what he was saying, but watched the street out his window instead.

"And what do cars have to do with this?"

"I'm getting there," he said, a little snappish. He needed me agreeing with him if he wasn't going to end up in nerdville. "Remember that phone call from your mom when we were playing Stuff? Classic. Your mom thought you were in her world, but you weren't, you were in ours. The real world where teens live."

"Ok, I got what you're saying, but I still don't see what this has to do with cars."

"Cars are the ultimate tool of escape. Right? Cars are the only way to stay ahead of that, Texas. They're the only way to keep from being left behind."

I thought back to what I told Mom and Dad after they confronted me about Laura and the pictures. We were in Dad's Cherokee on the way to San Antonio. We were going to Sea World. Later I would realize they had already decided on the move. The park was their way of softening the blow, as if Mike and I were

still in third grade. At one point, trying to reassure them, trying to avoid the move out of Texas, I had said to them that what Laura did was stupid. True enough, but saying it aloud made me feel like I'd completely betrayed my friend.

Mom said, "Good, as long as we agree on that. I just don't understand how that sweet girl ended so screwed up. The world's so screwed up. I feel like I can't let you out of the house anymore."

I had to come to Laura's defense. "You can't keep me in a box forever, Mom." They didn't react well. That may have been what sealed the deal. They would move us to Kentucky, and nothing could stop it. But I didn't want to dwell on my parents. For now I was happy if they would fade away.

Walt and I didn't say much else for a few minutes. I watched as we passed what looked like a really big mall, only like a fortress, with no windows and surrounded by a barbed wire fence. As we came around the corner, I saw a sign out front that said the place was a prison.

Walt cleared his throat in a small, quiet way, then spoke. "It kind of has to do with you," he said. "You're the first person since—well in a while to do anything real fun."

We were at a stoplight headed into town. There weren't any cars but us at the intersection. He put his hand on my knee, looked away from the road and right at me for a second. He said, "They are afraid to do anything real. Do you know what I mean, Barbie?"

"You've got a green light." I pointed toward the stoplight, and Walt turned back to the wheel and continued toward the hotel. I thought about Mom moving us from Texas to Louisville, and all because of some stupid thing my best friend did. Guilt by association meant I might as well make my own mistakes if I was going to pay for other people's screw-ups no matter what. Maybe Walt was right,

but I felt uncomfortable.

“You’re not hooking up with me, Walt,” I said. I was kind of joking.

“Screw that, Texas.” I think he caught my meaning. Walt relaxed his shoulders and asked, “What kind of candy do you want?”

I looked at him. After a beat, he dropped his right hand back to scratch Heather’s brow while he drove with his left. It was a moment that seemed terribly real. The moon and streetlights shone through the window off his side and gave him a little glow. The whole picture looked like a movie moment or a scene from the opening credits of a TV show. I probably said something dumb, like “huh?”

“We’re stopping for gas.” He pointed at the gas station on the corner. “I’m asking: what kind of candy do you want? I’m buying.”

Walt smiled like he knew he was clever, but I gave him a look to say, “You’re a dork.”

“I have to see,” I said. “I want something different. Is there any Kentucky candy, something from around here? I want the Big Red soda of candy bars.” Big Red was a soda they made nearby, a Kentucky thing. It tasted like carbonated red Jell-O syrup, a crazy something no one would ever want. Walt pretended not to hear me and focused on turning. He parked the car by the pump. While he put gas in the car, I went inside. I was still staring at the candy selection when he came in.

“Haven’t you picked a candy yet?” He reached past me as he spoke and grabbed the nearest chocolate bar.

“Where’s Heather?”

“We walked around a bit. She’s waiting in the car.”

I sucked my thumbnail while I stared at the assorted chocolates. I had narrowed my choices down to just those. He pointed to the obvious brand. “What’s wrong with that?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said, “but I already know what it means. I want something I’ve never had.”

He looked at me as if I were speaking in tongues. “What the hell do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Well, this candy gives me a break, and this one really satisfies.” I had been pointing to various kinds of chocolate bars. “But if I wanted crackers or something like that, I know this,” and here I pointed to a small bag of fish cheddar chips, “is a snack that smiles back.” I looked at him and grinned. I wanted to bug him just to see how far I could push, I guess. He went along.

“How about this?” Walt picked up a generic peanut bar, nothing but the nuts held together by caramel, like glue. “When I was a kid, my Dad used to get these on trips. All the gas stations were crappy little one-off garages with greasy cash register areas that had gum and a few kinds of candy on their counters. He would buy these things, no matter how dusty they were.” He smiled. “Man, I used to stare at that. I wanted something so bad but I didn’t want to spend my own money on anything that might be as disgusting or stale as everything looked. Instead, I just stood there hoping Dad would offer to buy me something.” Walt seemed off inside his head.

“Did he?”

“Are you kidding? I swear I think he knew what I wanted and just let me twist.” He shoved the peanut bar back on the rack. “There was no way I was going to ask Dad for that candy bar. I just couldn’t. He wouldn’t stand for it, I think.”

“I think I’ll try it,” I said, and picked up the peanut bar.

“Really? Because I’m telling you, it looks blah as hell.” Walt took it from me and we headed for the counter.

“Maybe, but I know what it means.” I leaned against the counter when we got there and watched his face while he paid.

“And what’s that, girl genius?” He was pulling bills out of his wallet.

“You’re a grown up when you pick your own candy.” I reached over and grabbed the keys from the counter where he’d set them down to figure out the money. “Now come on.” I jogged backwards a little bit, trying to be all cool, but of course I ran into some big truck-driver grossness, who said “scuse me, little lady,” and gave me this disgusting grin. I blushed, said sorry, and dashed out the door to the car. Walt was right behind me, laughing.

We got to the car and I went straight to the driver’s side, opened the door, and plopped behind the wheel. Heather started barking, bouncing back and forth in the back. Walt got in the passenger side and calmed Heather down. He really was going to let me drive. I slid in, adjusted the seat to fit me, and put my hands on the wheel. Then I turned to face him. “I’ll drive to the hotel.”

Walt held up his candy bar and the Coke he bought with it. “Fine by me, I’m having a snack.”

“Ok,” I said, and turned back toward the steering wheel. “Enjoy your snack.” Keys in the ignition, turn, and we were off. I backed out of the pump space, slammed on the brake before I hit an incoming minivan, then gunned it so we squealed onto the road headed back in the direction of the hotel. The car jerked back and forth, and bumped when we hit the road from the station’s driveway. Somehow, in all that, Walt’s Coke never spilled. I had hoped to shake him up.

I glanced at him. He gave me a side-glance and a grin, like he knew I wanted to scare him a little.

It didn’t take us long to find the hotel. As we got close, Walt called the others to make a plan. We were busting them out, helping them escape. After

pulling in to the parking lot, Walt had me drive around back, face the car at the building, and flash the lights.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now we wait.” Walt opened his door as soft as he could muster, as if there were parents right outside in the parking lot.

## 11. Have You Earned It Yet, Barbie?

We sat there in the parking lot for what seemed like thirty minutes, but was more like five. It was not very dark—lights from the hotel kept us out of the really dark places, back by the trees and bushes between the hotel lot and the farm or forest or whatever lay back there in the blackness. I got all awkward and silent in the waiting. It was like something was shifting or about to begin. Walt just played with Heather around the car, wrestling with her and keeping her occupied while we waited.

At one point he offered me a piece of gum, and I said no. A minute or so later I was hating myself for not taking it. At least chewing gum would give me something to do, and blot out the sounds of the woods and the road. For some reason they started to freak me out, maybe because I was suddenly feeling so alone. No computer, no TV, no lights—it was as if we were sitting in some ancient time, years before we were born.

A small burst of giggles from the direction of the hotel broke my thoughts. Walt and I looked at each other for a second before looking back. Halfway down the side of the building, on the second floor, a narrow window cracked open and a screen rattled for a moment before falling onto the pavement below. Heather barked.

“Shhh! Quiet!” The yell echoed across the parking lot and back again. Walt and I started laughing. Someone tossed a long line of knotted bedsheets out the small window, and then a figure, small against the large expanse of three-story building, forced its way through the opening. Whoever it was seemed stuck

for a moment, but then, with a very loud crack, the window swung wide and the person pushing suddenly had nothing to resist. The guy—we could tell it was a guy now—slipped off the windowsill and crashed against the side of the wall, just above another lit window.

“Oh crap,” Walt said, and turned away, like he couldn’t watch anymore.

I gave a sharp gasp. I think we both thought he was going to fall.

The kid lowered himself to a few feet above the ground and dropped the rest of the way. He motioned to the open window, where I now saw there were a bunch of heads, some girls and some boys, sticking out. After a lot of discussion, only three others came down the bedsheets. That was fine with me. I was getting antsy, afraid somebody or something would happen and it would all be over.

In the end it was two older girls, Erin and Dawn, and two boys, Tate Askew and Spaulding something-or-other, a kid my age who never spoke up but hung around the older guys like he was clinging to celebrity. When they got close, I saw the boys in front walking fast and the girls whispering behind. Erin and Dawn stopped giggling when they got close, and I heard Dawn say, “Oh, it’s just you.”

I wanted to shrink up inside my shirt. This was my basic nightmare. Erin was perfect as always. Tiny, like size zero, dressed in dark blue jeans with a slight fade on the thighs and a pink tank top with some hip logo right in the center of her chest. She reminded me of a porcelain doll with vicious dimples, like a manga-superdeformed version of that actress who plays some spy or superhero or teen comedy role. Dawn, on the other hand, was a giant woman, a few inches under six feet tall. I never saw her eat, but she had an athletic, slightly tanned look—all big boobs and glowing skin. She wore yellow denim shorts that left her thighs bare and some kind of workout top with a windbreaker over. Her belly button

was pierced. Guys naturally stared at the two of them. How did I not hate myself around that?

“Just us? Don’t you mean just you guys?” Walt stood up from leaning against his car. “Where is everybody?”

“Nobody else wanted to risk it.” Erin broke away from Dawn, walking faster so she passed the guys to close in on us at the car.

“Dude, they were all total chickens.” Spaulding couldn’t open his mouth without me wanting him to shut it. He always spoke a little too loud and a little too fast. He pupped for attention all the time, and I just wanted to smack him for it. This time, Tate did it for me, shoving Spaulding’s head to move him out of the way.

“Whatever, dude.” Tate rolled his eyes and gave us a grin, more to Walt than me. “What do you care? More pizza for us, right?” Tate was one of those athletic guys who’s always eating. The tall and wiry kind, you see him wandering school halls or malls or wherever, a liter of Dr. Pepper in one hand and a burger in the other. Or laughing and punching some smaller kid in the shoulder, like it’s funny. I didn’t know him, I just guessed him a mean type, maybe.

He walked past Walt and me to the car, where we had the pizzas sitting on the roof. Before he stuffed his face with the first slice, Tate gave me a look I couldn’t read. Half a smile, but like there was some plan cooking in the back of his head. “I thought you were too good for us. Didn’t you decide we weren’t good enough for you?”

Maybe it was only Dawn who had an evil grin. But at the time, looking from one face to another, the girls and boys seemed all sharp angled and leering. I almost tried to stammer out some explanation.

“Feh. You made the right choice. It’s so boring back there, anything’s

better. Even if it's cold pizza in a parking lot." Erin said. I was surprised at the save.

Walt jumped in, got up real close to Erin's face. He had a smile on, but underneath he was fierce with energy. "Oh, tonight's not just pizza. Hot pizza, I might add." He looked up at the rest of us. "No, I didn't come all the way down here to—where the hell are we? Buttville, Kentucky?"

Spaulding piped in with "It's London, Kentucky, dude." Dawn elbowed him in the back to shut him up.

Walt went on. "Why is it every Kentucky town smaller than my ass has to have some big city name? London, Paris, Cairo, Versailles. Hell, by the time we're grown up there'll be a Tokyo, Kentucky, too!" We all laughed, until Spaulding looked at me and stopped.

"Sorry," he said. He acted guilty, like I'd caught him whispering "chink" or "jap" or "slant-eyes."

Everybody glared at him. I wanted to say something snappy back, but Spaulding was such a twerp, I decided not to bother. Besides, he was like the rest: thin, white, attractive. It's hard to find something to attack in that package.

Dawn broke the silence. "You really are an idiot," she said to him.

Tate looked to Walt. "You never did finish your thought. What are we going to do in this town?"

"How about a movie? Anybody seen a theater in this town?" Erin asked.

"I doubt it," Tate snorted. "Besides, there's nothing good out now anyways."

"What about that horror thing? The trailer to that looks awesome," Walt said.

"Of course it's awesome, it's a trailer." Tate went off. "Trailers are movies

boiled down. They perfect the movie before it's even released." The girls closed in on Walt and Tate. Spaulding and I were left outside the circle of the conversation.

Dawn interrupted, "Don't get him started on movie trailers. He's obsessed. Loves them more than seeing a whole movie." She was sneering at Tate, but had her arm around him all the same. They were dating.

"Don't listen to her. Trailers rock." Tate was gesturing with his hands in focused chopping motions, and looking at the ground not far from his feet, like he was trying to remember an exact sequence of events. "Trailers calculate movies." Erin giggled, but Tate kept going. "I'm serious! The perfect movie trailer is an equation, using emotions instead of numbers."

"What does that even mean?" Walt asked.

"It means they have no room for crap. No bad acting, no boring parts, just pure..." Tate looked up, his eyes wide and unfocused, "Pure awesomeness." Everybody burst out laughing. Me too, a little. But I looked around at this circle of people, each one casual and confident. I thought, "what am I doing here?" Dawn leaning into Tate, Walt and Erin smiling so easy—the whole thing reminded me of a commercial for beer or an ad for cigarettes. Spaulding laughed a little too hard, and he didn't stop in time. I could see what was coming, and it made me wince.

"It's not that funny." Dawn broke the circle, glaring at Spaulding. The others wouldn't look his way, but smiled to themselves. Walt leaned against the car, drinking his Coke and rubbing Heather's ears.

Spaulding closed the gap on the circle. "So, what are we doing? Or did you guys just want to deliver pizza?" He looked back and forth between me and Walt, trying to ignore the goading of the others.

Walt stood straight for a moment, raised his Coke to his lips, and said,

“Ask Barbie, she knows,” before taking a sip. I had no idea what he was talking about and I couldn’t tell if Walt had turned on me, brought me all the way to London, Kentucky, so they could take turns laughing at the new girl.

“Oh really?” Tate said, self-assured and giving me a glance, like I was a joke. “What are we up to, Barbie doll?”

That’s all it took for me to kick the shy and quiet to the curb. My hands were in my pockets, where I curled them into fists. The fingers on my right clenched Walt’s keys. I still had them from when he let me drive. I pulled them out and dangled them in front of everybody. “What else? We’re going for a ride.” Heather started barking.