Down the street the dogs are barking

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by Virginia Reeves

A Memoir
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Introduction

Ultimately, I am honest. My writing is of my life. I write of yesterday, or the day before, of my mother and my father and my sister. I write of my sister’s ex-husband and his hands that I know much too well for my role in his life. I write of tragedy, because from it, we learn.

This is a story of men—it is the depiction of a girlhood molded, corrupted, beaten, and loved by them. It is what girls face growing up in a heterosexual society; it is their definition, their greatest joy, their worst, all-encompassing sorrow. This is how I, and so many other girls, grew to be women.

*Down the streets the dogs are barking* traces my life from about the age five to the age sixteen, give or take a couple days. But it isn’t about one girl. No. It’s a story told through the mouths of several girls—myself now, twenty-year-old college student, stable, we could say, content, telling from here through my sixteen-year-old twin whose telling about her fifteen-year-old look-alike whose telling about…and on and on. As Sandra Cisneros claims, “the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one.” Each of those years gains its own interpretation of its predecessors and itself and never truly passes with the celebration of the next.

I chose memoir as my genre because I need to tell—all my selves rising up in me, screaming for their chapter, their side-note, their tears and laughter. They are not idle companions. They resurface when I least need them and disappear when I want them most. I chose memoir because I owe myself these pages and they owe themselves to me and we owe them to all eyes wise enough to recognize what they’re saying.

Kathryn Rhett says, “Memoir is, literally, the story of the mind.” I agree. But I add an amendment: and the heart. Memoir traces emotion, it traces pain. We write of our trials, digested by heart, registered by mind, translated to hand, then spilled onto the page.

Memoir is a confrontation—a confrontation of all those things we choose to forget, or overlook, or keep quiet. To write of one’s life is a courageous struggle. For we don’t know what we’ll recall along the way. Alan Shapiro writes, “I lived, we all lived, with a doubled, dreamlike consciousness of what we all were going through, bewildered
most by what remained familiar, like anthropologists discovering that the never before encountered culture they’re observing is their own.”

We dig up our degrading, vicious stories, our blood and sex and deceit, and find in them resemblances of all surrounding us. We find in them glimmers of even that which we know as good, just as we find the original bones buried in this exact spot exactly four year ago, and we remember, again, what they felt like in our hands.

Personal battles are not the only wars fought in writing memoir, here, in the late twentieth century, as a young person, as a woman. The genre is easily attacked as shoddy melodrama, lumped into the category of talk-shows in this face-your-past pop-culture movement of today. With people of all walks and ages glued to their television screens, awaiting the arrival of “mothers who prostitute their own daughters” with the follow up on “she’s my best friend and now she’s sleeping with my lover,” it seems natural to become sickened by our own desire to share our failures and their twisted paths with the world.

However, the writer of memoir is not an instrument of exposure and grievance (we hope). She or he is a vehicle of detection—a scout, a discoverer. She speaks and writes the truth and most often shies from the popular role of victim. In response to sentiments of pity for Jane Bernstein, she thinks, “Good days, and bad days, same as for you.” We are not claiming glory; we’re not standing on chairs (or throwing them); we’re not waving our arms, nor are we screaming. We are sitting at desks, under trees, on the bus, in bed—we’re sitting, and we’re writing.

The memoir adheres to the standards of good writing. Form, accuracy, structure, integrity—everything we apply in our judgments of fiction is present here as well. We add the element of truth. “The crisis memoir reflects the truth that there is no ending,” says Rhett. The memoir comes to an end but the story does not—we know that our stories go on. There are mountains and parties and milestones that stand out, rolling along at the same speed as the trivial days—owing themselves to the trivial days—and falling in their place. I respect the craft of memoir as it not only demands the skill of good writing, it demands the impossibility of honesty.

Mine is a survival story. It is an evolution. Rhett writes, “To survive means ‘to live on,’ beyond someone else, beyond any familiar idea of oneself and one’s fate.” I sit
here changed. I write of a girl, many girls, I once knew. I write of the world and specifically, the men that changed her. I write of hurt and sadness. In the opening page of his memoir, *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt writes, “When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is not worth your while.” And this is what we feel, what I feel as a writer. On sunny days, fresh wind blowing through me, contentment shimmering at my feet, I do not crawl to my keyboard. And upon the storms, I do not write of sun. We are interested and intrigued by what breaks us. This is why we write our memoirs and why others read them.

Here we come to the aspect of letting go, though few see it as such. The critics say we’re holding on, we’re reveling, we’re rolling in our tragedy, like dogs in shit, until we’re covered, that all who cross our paths will know, will both see and smell our loss. We wear it on our backs. But I say no. I say, in writing it down, we’re putting it away. We’re chaining it; we’re containing it. Annie Dillard has written, “If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid—eschew—writing a memoir.” In writing we limit our subject; it becomes a fixed image, a fixed story—a photograph, a flash in time, framed and mounted. At the end, I will repeatedly change, add, alter my words. I will pry open my mind and spit it out. Asking, have I been true? And inevitably, all said and done, bound away on a shelf, I will remember more and it will not be in those pages, and I will mourn its death, for the story has been written.

In these pages, I hope to uncover something in someone, in anyone. I want her or him to say, “Okay. So this is what it’s like,” or, “I know. Damn. I know.” I want to place, on a royal crimson carpet, for all to see, a shred of honesty, and walk away knowing there’s one less thing lied about, one less thing forgotten.

For I believe in truth—anyone can lie, but to be honest, my god, to be truly honest—there is nothing more noble.
5 See 2.
6 See 2.
7 Frank McCourt, Angela’s Ashes (New York: Scribner, 1996) 11.
Awake when they find her.

  Eyes shifting back and forth behind their lids, seeing through her ears.
  Why, Ginny. Why? How could you do this to us? Why did you do this to us?

Why, oh, why....

  Feeling the pressure on her wrists, Roxanne breathing into the phone.
  No, I don't know... what? David! David! Check the cupboards.... What? No, she's just lying here. I don't know—there's blood everywhere, how am I supposed to know?

  Okay, okay. Yeah. No, my daughter found her....

  But no one knows. Until the ambulance—kid named Jason looking into her eyes, the state of her pupils—a trainee diagnosing, unprepared, confused.

  All I can see is the whites. You guys, all I can see is the whites of her eyes.

  Talk to us, kiddo. We just want to help. Tell us why you did this.


Kid. Tell us.

  He was Jamie's wrestling coach—remember, Jim? Your pride and joy, captain of the team, so good, golden boy, hoisted so high on the town's shoulders—remember?

  We're losing her, get her talking boys.

  She just closes her eyes, falls asleep. No talking. No. Trainees, wrestling coaches, ambulance ride, clothes cut off, gone, naked beneath this scratchy blanket. No, she just closes her eyes, moves away.
John and Debbie Reeves had two children, two and a half years apart. They were girls, sisters.

Before she started school, the youngest, Virginia Therese, rode a horse named Sonny, in the late afternoon, with her mother. Debbie taught her daughter folk songs. The ones she had sung to her as a baby. Ones she already knew. They sang, oh the cruel war is raging and Johnny has to fight all my bags are packed ready to go both sides now don't know love at all lemon tree so pretty. They sang Montana, Montana, my home.

Virginia sat in front of her mother, gripping the saddlehorn, Sonny’s brown, rough mane threaded through her fingers.

Sometimes she got to hold the reins.

If you want him to go left—you know left, kiddo; hold up your hands; stick your thumbs out—see that one makes an L—L for left. If you want him to go that way, lay the right rein against the side of his neck and pull on the left rein. Just a little. There.

And Virginia cried when it was time to attend kindergarten. In a basement, in that small town. Though the tears subsided when she discovered she got her own piece of carpet to sit on, any color, blue she chose. A nametag to match, taped to the top, her name in the teacher’s scripty scrawl. Ginny. And twelve other kids with pieces of carpet with their nametags taped to the tops, sitting in a circle to start whatever it was they were starting.

There were toys and lessons and glue and popsicle sticks. So she settled in and replaced the times on Sonny, singing in front of Mom, with these times of school, in the basement of her teacher’s house. And she did not miss the times before.

Nathaniel was tall and raggedy-haired, dishwater blond or some such color. A little pudgy, on his second go-round with kindergarten, probably six, maybe even seven years old. Virginia Therese was glad that his carpet square was not near hers. He was disgusting, gross Nathaniel. Even his name rang wrong, fell off the tongue in stumbles.

Nathaniel has asthma, her teacher would explain. That's why he sucks on that
thing after we play outside. It's called an inhaler and it helps him to breathe. Asthma makes it hard to breathe, understand? Nathaniel needs help. That's all.

No one played with Nathaniel when they went outside. No one chose him to help make popsicle stick people. He wheezed all the time and coughed. Virginia Therese did not care nor notice when he cried. And she laughed with the other kids when he’d gulp down the spray from that inhaler, as though it would save him. And she’d laugh when he tripped on his always-untied-shoelaces, and when he’d fall, and when he’d forget the number after nine.

Virginia flourished in kindergarten. Debbie was a teacher, having taught her daughters to read and count and write at a young age. Virginia read the basic books quickly, outloud, in front of everyone. She smiled when she was done. And the teacher would give her new books, advanced books—first grade readers and even some second grade ones.

Virginia Therese rolled her little eyes when Nathaniel had a turn. Clumsy, big Nathaniel—he hadn’t even learned the easiest of words, couldn’t get the sounds.

Ttttt, hhhuu, ehhh; tt-ha? tt-he?

No, it’s the—the th sound is a little different than in other words, Nathaniel, almost like an l—llllaa. Remember how we talked about this one last time? Try again.

The class would giggle. Everyone knew the. So common.

Dummy.

Virginia was happy in kindergarten, smart, praised by the teacher, adjusting well they said, such a good girl, so good.

She was old then, like her sister, Anne Catherine, a second-grader at Laurel Elementary School. And Nathaniels did not matter.

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Three.

Then they moved. Halfway through that year, promising an even better kindergarten. Will it be in my teacher’s basement? Virginia asked. No, her mother said, there it is part of the school system. So I’ll go to same school as Annie? Yes, you’ll attend the same
school as your sister. She'd be old then, she was sure. Old like Annie.

They moved to a town called Ocean Shores, in a whole different state. Washington, where it rained.

The girls rid the back of their Bronco II, playing games and fighting and sleeping. The Bronco overgrown with plants and dogs, drugged cats in their carriers. John and Debbie holding hands in the front, a new start, they said, can't wait, they said, smiling, laughing, scolding the girls when they got too out of hand.

Be nice to your sister.

Unable to understand when their girls would laugh, like the fights were only games, silly adults for buying in, laugh and hug and hold hands, and say, a new school, new friends, the ocean, tickling and screaming and kicking their parents' seats.

The house was gray and two-storied, on one of the many canals, seeping about the town. It was only temporary, a renter, until they found something to buy.

One day, Virginia Therese walked around the neighborhood, picking all the pussy-willows she could find, picking the single ones up off the ground, stealing whole branches. She arranged them all in her sister's room, on her dresser, her bed, her desk, a present, a gift. But Anne Catherine turned out to be allergic and she coughed and sneezed and sniffed until Virginia took them all away and threw them outside, tears running down her cheeks, snot streaming from her nose, hating her sister, hating the fuzzy little buds, so soft. Sitting on the back porch, surrounded by her discarded gifts, absent-mindedly rubbing one in her right hand, so comforting between her fingers, crying, until Anne came and sat beside her, sniffing and coughing, hugging the smaller girl, saying, it was a sweet gift, little Gin, so sweet, I'm sorry I'm allergic, so sweet, so sweet, until her sister stopped crying and hugged her back. It's okay, Annie, you can't help it; it's the pussy-willows' fault, being so strong and soft and smelly. It's okay.

The kindergarten room smelled weird and had yellow walls. Two big carpets for games and story-time, but none with her name. But there were miniature monkey bars to swing on before school started and new faces and cute boys.

Lyle and Adam and Adam. She kissed them all, one by one, throughout that half year, silly, giggling, outside on the playground, scared classmates looking on, scared but
intrigued, oh, so intrigued, asking her afterward, what was it like, was it gross, will you do it again? Girls and boys not seen in that light in that year, the sexes so different and gross, but Virginia Therese had always played with boys, back in her other town, at their baby-sitter's house when Annie and her were there together, older boys and younger boys, cheering when they'd break the rules and go to the basement and put on the boxing gloves that were supposed to be thrown out, and fight until one bled. Scream and yell. Get him, Billy! Then so interested, following on the heels of the bloody boy, listening to Mary Lou, scolding the whole time she bandaged, why do you boys do this, where did you find those gloves, I told my boys to throw them out, oh boys. You boys. Virginia, go play. He'll be fine, just a little scratch.

No other girls kissed so they hated and loved her, played with her because she put herself apart, but resented her also. And even more as they grew, her with her boyfriends. Who did she think she was?

But she'd just laugh, so early in the game, come let's swing, play tag—freeze tag, have to crawl through my legs to unfreeze me, come on....

Ocean Shores was new, a fresh little beach town, immature, trying to stand. They grew together. All of them.

Huge vacant stretches of land separated the houses and no sidewalks intruded upon the shoulders, all the roads were country roads, save for the Boulevard, and even it was still budding. Neighborhoods strung out lazily and they had to try a little to meet their neighbors, though soon enough everyone met in the grocery store—Dick's grocery store, where once stood a barn, back in earlier times, friends' parents would tell.

The Boulevard was just dirt and the Gates weren't there and a few dingy shops squatted here and there, but nothing more and we had to go to Hoquium or Aberdeen for everything. Seems like it turned into this overnight.

No bumper cars and go-carts? Virginia would inquire.

Nope, none of those toys. We rode horses.

I've ridden a horse, Virginia would return.

Yeah, they'd say, and change topics.

There was an island, near their house, created by canals, a huge circle of road,
paved even, but no houses, no electricity, so they'd ride their bikes down there and race around—it's a race track, Annie, like for cars on TV and we're cars, really, don't you think, we can race like them. On your marks....

And later, when Anne Catherine began truly loving automobiles like her father, and he got her a remote-controlled car for Christmas, a big dune-buggy kind of car, that reached miles up to thirty-five an hour and got himself one as well, they'd go to the island and race down the long straight stretches, down so far until they feared they'd lose control of their vehicles and turn them and race them back. Sometimes Virginia would accompany them, but it was always their time, her presence shadowing the background.

John and Debbie spoke of buying the gray, two-storied house, but something kept them. I don't like that garden at the foot of the stairs, all rock, and the tree is dead and I know the cats piss in there, honey, I smell it every time I come inside. And Debbie just laughing a little, smiling at her husband, saying What kind of reasoning is that, dear, we could fill in the garden, take the rocks out—it's not a permanent feature. There's too much work to do to the downstairs. There's work to do in every house. Then just smiling. We'll know if another one comes along.

And one did. Not too far away—just up a street and over, but the streets were long, a mile probably separating the residences. The house was on Cakasota Street, right at the very end, where the road just stopped at its intersection with a canal. People were always driving right up to the end and using their drive way to turn around, because there was no where else, so they finally got a Dead End sign put up, but it didn't really deter anyone.

But it was nice anyway, little maroon house that looked downright tiny from the front but big enough inside, large in fact, in comparison to the other houses they'd occupied. A living-room, play/work room, family-room, three bedrooms. Quite nice, though Virginia's room was a little cramped and all that fit was her daybed, and even it interfered with opening the closet so the doors just had to stay open all the time and the closet was messy because she was young and a girl and had all kinds of stuff.

They moved all their belongings in the big blue Ford truck, bit by bit, little at a time, till the new house was filled with boxes and furniture and disassembled articles and animals and humans trying to settle.
Virginia Therese glued popsicle sticks together into all sorts of odd devices in the work/play room and Anne Catherine built airplane models, because she would fly, in adulthood, one of those huge planes that race across the sky, she was sure. A pilot, she'd say, I'm gonna fly, Gin, way up in the sky, all around the world. Will you take me, her little sister inquired. Of course, kiddo, who else would I fly with? Virginia vowed to buy Anne Catherine a plane some day.

She would be a veterinarian, she swore, would surround herself with animals and play with puppies and bandage hurt paws. And none would ever die. So one Christmas John and Debbie got her a vet-kit, complete with syringes (no needles, of course), a stethoscope, bandages, gauze, tape, stitches, splints, so much, so much.

Thereafter, Virginia's animals were consistently afflicted. Noodles, the spotted dinosaur broke his neck, petunia the weiner dog cut his paw, Draggy the dragon hurt a wing. You'll be a great vet, her parents affirmed and she agreed, of course I will, with all this practice, and her compassion, they said, so strong, such a kind girl. Virginia did not think about Nathaniel when they spoke. Yes, she was kind, so nice, so willing to help.

Four.

John Reeves was a professional golfer. Had golfed since he was young, all through high school, going to the practice range in his spare time, watching his girlfriend watch him hit balls.

There, in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he'd grown up, he met a girl, from another high school and they dated for a while. But she had a neighbor, named Deborah Jones. And the first girl couldn't hold him, once he met Deborah, god no, Deborah Jones with those huge blue eyes that couldn't be real but were and that dark, thick brown hair, almost black, falling down her back, so long, parted in the middle, those high cheekbones and perfectly cut face, slender body. Deborah Jones and John Reeves.

Deborah was fourteen, a girl, when she met Johnny, all of fifteen and proud, yes, quite proud, ruffled hair, her neighbor's boyfriend, so handsome in his lopsided, cocky, I'll-take-you-anywhere kind of way. Golf tees in his pockets, mingling with his change.
Making her laugh before they were introduced, eyes making her catch them, hold them, shaking hands and smiling, oh so nice to meet you.

She was not surprised when he called.

He took her out for her fifteenth birthday, gave her a golden pennant, held her hand, told her he loved her, so different from the other girls, what he'd been looking for, the one that stood out. I love you too, she said.

They broke up a few times, worried about flirting, going to the different schools, out of sight, out of mind. But came back. Deborah having such a tough time, parents splitting up, bouncing back and forth, her father remarrying and remarrying, horrid stepmothers, and finally taking her little sister to their grandparents' house, where they would stay. Needing Johnny, a stability, her love.

When he graduated, John went to Texas for college, on a golf scholarship. Spent his time smoking cigarettes and playing cards with the boys. Hating Texas, he finished the semester and went home.

Deborah graduated from high school. They were married in December. 'Til death do us part, forever and always, I do.

And were married for seven years before Anne Catherine entered their lives. Deborah with her dealings, her little manipulations, convincing this man that a child would be such a wonderful addition, this man who never wanted kids, this man who would be such a father.

They moved about, different houses, Johnny moving his way up on golf courses, Deborah finishing school, education, she wanted to teach.

Anne Catherine was born in Bozeman, Montana, where Deborah got her degree in education, John and her working odd jobs to sustain them between the next break.

They moved to Prineville, Oregon, where John could run a golf course. Their house attached to the pro shop, their little girl running about. A small, nice town, knew their neighbors, knew their customers, a much loved addition.

There, they had a second girl and named her Virginia Therese, after Deborah's mother, who had died a year earlier. I wish you could've met my mom, Deborah would tell her youngest, you would've loved her and she you. Carry her name; it is so beautiful.

They moved again to Laurel, following Johnny's career and from there to Ocean
Shores, the best opportunity he'd been offered, leasing a municipal golf course from the city, owning it practically, in a growing resort town. What could be better? He, with his beautiful wife and wonderful girls.

The girls grew up on golf courses, toted off to various tournaments every summer. Moving along with their mother, between the shady patches, hushed when a golfer stepped to his ball, motioned to move along, once he was done. They watched their father, fearing a bad shot, a missed putt, his anger. Their parents would buy them lemonades when the refreshment cart came around and her father always let Virginia wash his golf ball in the little machine next to the tees.

The other golfers loved to see them. So good to see the whole family out, John, your little girls following you around and Debbie looking so good.

Anne was the shy one, but Virginia, no. She met everyone, introduced herself. Weasled her way into rides on people's carts, received ample candies due entirely to her sweetness.

She talked and talked, hushed again and again by her mother. Shhh, Ginny, They need complete silence, need to concentrate, can't you be quiet for one minute—look at your sister. And Anne would smile at her in such a way that said, ha, see, all your talking gets you nowhere. I'm the good one. See.

John put the girls to work in Ocean Shores, when they were older, washing carts, raking bunkers, changing the cups with him, in the evening once everyone had gone home. They loved it, riding around with their dad, those times, a little sad when it was the other's turn to go. Out on the Cushman maintenance vehicle, grumbling from green to green, dad plucking out a cylinder of land, in a new place, while one of the girls took the flag and pulled the white cup from its existing hole, switching them, new chunk into the old. Will it heal, dad, Virginia asked. Will it take that dirt and grass back, will there be a scar? Nope, John would say, it sucks back together like it'd been that way forever. And Virginia would smile. Good, she'd say. We don't want scarred greens. And they'd move on to the next.

They liked washing carts. For a time only Annie got to drive them, because she
was older and more capable than her younger sister, of course. But she did not rub it in, soon enough, she'd tell Virginia, I bet they let you drive them next year.

Sometimes they'd get rowdy and drive them around the building a couple times at high speeds just taunting their parents until one came out and screamed.

Girls, knock it off, wash the darn thing, don't play with it. If you keep it up, you won't have this job.

And they'd stop, but they'd do it again, giggling madly, because they knew they'd have that job. Parents can't fire their kids.

About every other Sunday, one of the parents would take the girls upstairs, in the clubhouse, to The Misfit, where everyone knew them, this restaurant with its views of their golf course. Virginia would always order a filet, wrapped in bacon, medium rare, please and a coke, and her mother or father would always say, no a milk, you don't need pop, and Virginia would just laugh a little and say, yeah, right. A milk, please, sir. Huge smile on her face, batting eyes.

Anne would always change, not stuck in a routine like her sister, more daring with food. She'd get the seafood special and Virginia would pinch her nose when it arrived.

Annie it stinks. Why do you order that gross stuff? What's it taste like?
Taste it, you tell me.
No, I don't want to; it looks slimy.
Anne just laughing, Eat your filet, kiddo. I'll eat mine, okay? You're nothing but a carnivore.

What's a carnivore?
A meat-eater.
That's right, Annie-o. I sure am. Umm. Meat, she'd say, shoving down a huge bite, dripping a little blood.

Then they'd laugh and fall back to their dinners with their mother smiling over them, shaking her head, eyes saying, you girls. Silly girls.
Five.

Lyle.

Lyle had been one of Virginia’s kindergarten romances, there on the playground. She had kissed him after Adam and Adam. Virginia had liked Lyle the best mainly because he had not moved away the next year. But she started to like him more and more as they went through first grade.

They would be married. When each turned eighteen, wherever they were, for surely they’d be separated, they would wear nametags, and eventually, down the road, cross on a busy sidewalk, notice the tags, and fall into each other’s arms. Lyle and Virginia Beach. She could not wait.

Lyle and Virginia’s parents knew each other so they got to play together nearly every day. Virginia loved Lyle’s older sister, Juliet, because she was Annie’s age and Annie’s friend. And Annie and Juliet would play grownup games. Virginia would often leave Lyle to his silly little boy Lincoln logs, Legos, G.I. Joe, you play him and I’ll be him and we’re at war and this is the bunker and this is a cannon. To seek the older girls. Finding Annie and Juliet putting makeup on each other in Juliet’s bedroom, dressing up in old nightgowns of her mother’s—imagining they were of the finest foreign materials, made especially for Princesses. Virginia wanted to wear the hot pink sweatshirt with the baby pink slip and the big silver belt because they were the best. And the crown. She always wanted the crown. The older girls would let her, though they’d tease her for being so picky and whiny, tease and tease her, ’til she’d rip the crown from her fine delicate hair and throw it on the ground, saying, take your stupid crown; I don’t need it.

The girls would feel so bad. They’d beg her to put it back on because it made her outfit just perfect and her conceding, thinking, yep, perfect.

Modeling for the parents and Lyle in the living room, Virginia would bow and dip and glide. Princess Virginia Therese.

You have to bow, Lyle.

Little Lyle refusing to bow, gripping his action figures, forced to play both sides since his playmate was parading in front of him, draped in girlie frill, stupid girlie frill.
He played both sides through clenched teeth, changing the pitch of his voice to signify the different soldiers.

I told you never to mess with me, Joe.
Then higher, Yeah, well, I told you to stay away from my gun.
Then lower, Yeah well who's got the cannon?
Then higher, saying, Well, I guess you do.
Then normal voice, real slow, eyes straight on Virginia, Yep, that's right, I'm the one with the cannon.
But Virginia would just laugh and float around him saying, are you going to shoot me with a Lincoln log, Lyle, huh?
And run. Sprint down the hall, pink slip flying behind her. She'd bow once more, just for Lyle to see, at the door of Juliet's room, then disappear.
Later she overheard Lyle with Juliet, saying, she's my girlfriend, Juliet. She has to play with me when she comes over because we are going out. So don't let her play when she asks.
She can play with whoever she wants, Lyle. We like her to play with us, but if you really, really want me to, I'll try to make her play with you more, okay? Okay?
Fine. Just remember that she's my girlfriend.
When Juliet suggested that Virginia play with Lyle the next day, Virginia just laughed and said, He made you say that.
Juliet was satisfied with the answer and never brought it up again.
But Virginia began playing with Lyle more on her own. The older girls becoming too girlie and into their big third-grade talk and sometimes whispering things that Virginia could not hear and refusing to tell her when she asked what they said. Lyle never kept secrets from her and he was fun to kiss.
When they went to Virginia's house, they would wind their way through the trails along the canals back and forth and under the town 'til they found a perfect place empty and quiet where they would sit in the wet grass and kiss and kiss and rip off pussy-willow branches and have sword fights and pop the yellow flowers off of dandelions and smear them on each other's arms and faces, giggling, you've got pee on your face.
One day in the summer before second grade, Lyle said, let's take off our shirts.

Virginia's was hanging in a tree as soon as the thought was voiced, goofy smile on her face saying now what, now what.

Small hands touching each other's milky soft skin, so new and fresh out of its wrapping. Identical upper bodies, exciting only because Virginia's was forbidden. Virginia Therese giggling when Lyle said, they're just like mine.

Replying, of course they are, silly. They have to grow still. Mom says it's happening right now, but I can't tell.

Then whenever they were alone, Virginia would lift her shirt above her head and say, can you tell? Are they bigger?

And Lyle would say, Jeez, Ginny, I don't know. They look just the same.

Angrily, Virginia would pull her shirt down and glare at Lyle and not even kiss him when he tried. So he learned to say, Yep, they look much bigger. Wow. To which she'd smile and sometimes take her shirt off all together and laugh and kiss as much as he wanted.

In gymnastics, every Tuesday and Thursday at the Lions Club, in the bathroom changing into leotards, Virginia would tell her friends, Lyle and I take off our shirts and touch each other. And we kiss and kiss and kiss.

Her girlfriends would stand around her and ask what is it like, oh, god, Virginia, why do you do it. Aren't you afraid?

Of what? she'd say and run out to the tumbling mats all cartwheels and handsprings, knowing they were jealous just like when she won the king-sized snickers for being the first to do the splits. And she'd play more with the boys the next day than the girls.

Running through the cavernous pussy-willow bushes the following spring, chasing and catching and pushing and running, Lyle caught Virginia and said why don't we take off all our clothes?

Virginia smiled like she'd been waiting for him to ask, all this time. Kicking off her shoes and pulling off her shirt at the same time, she unzipped her little corduroy
pants. Staring fixed on Lyle’s little penis so different than her father’s, which she had spied one day walking past the bathroom just as he got out of the shower. Lyle’s so tiny-tiny, bald and vulnerable.

Virginia laid down on their clothes with Lyle’s warm body on top of her and his little penis between her legs.

Are you going to put it in?
No, Ginny. Gosh. That’s only for making babies.
Oh.
So they laid and kissed and got up and dressed, giggling madly.

The next Tuesday Virginia pulled her best friend Nikki aside and said, I have a secret.
You tell all your secrets.
Nope. This one’s serious. You can’t tell anyone.
What?
Lyle and I did it.
What?
You know.
And walked off, leaving poor Nikki standing there, scared and shocked and confused and she must have been just a little jealous because she swore up and down and right and left that she would never do it with a boy but wondered, all the same, what it would be like. And if she was behind or if Virginia Therese was just too far ahead. She watched Virginia patted on the back for doing five cartwheels in a row without falling, and had to think, for one second, I hate her.

Virginia and Lyle didn’t do it again. When they reached the third grade, Lyle tried to teach Virginia how to French kiss his teddy bear. With stale fuzz in her mouth she lunged for him. And sitting up, seconds later, lower halves of their faces dripping with saliva, they promised each other they’d never try it again.

They built forts and played tag and kissed a lot and held hands everywhere they went. The adults would smile and smile, saying, how cute, little sweethearts; they’ve been sweethearts for two years now, isn’t that right, Debbie?
Yep, Debbie would say, little lovebirds since kindergarten—they’re actually going on three years. It’ll probably be the longest relationship that girl of mine ever has.

Virginia asked her mother later what she meant.

Oh, nothing, poo, we were just chatting—what were you doing listening anyway?

I thought you were off playing with Lyle.

I was, but I had come back when you were saying that. Lyle and I are going to get married, Mom. Of course he’ll be my longest relationship.

That’s sweet, honey.

I’m serious Mom.

I know, Gin-o. Why don’t you just wait and see?

You think Lyle and I don’t love each other?

And Debbie, leaving the paper she had been idly reading while speaking to her daughter knelt in front of the girl and said, I think that you love each other as much as you know how and that’s all that counts, okay?

Virginia did not look at her mother when she said, you just wait. Lyle and I already have a secret, Mom. You just wait.

Debbie did not try to stop Virginia Therese when she turned and ran to her bedroom, slamming the door. Debbie smiled even, thinking, that little girl thinks she’s hiding something, stealing kisses when she thinks we aren’t looking. Laughing at the gall of her daughter, silly little thing.

In her room, Virginia said over and over into her pillow, they don’t know, they don’t know our secret. They’d never even guess our secret.

Lyle got angry the next day at Virginia’s tale of the spat with her mother, saying, you told her we have a secret? Why did you do that? Now she’s going to ask my mom about it and they’re gonna start asking us questions and they’re gonna find out.

No they aren’t.

Yes, they are. Jeez, Ginny. You shouldn’t have done that. It’s our secret.

And right then Virginia realized that she loved the secret more than she loved Lyle.

Two days later Virginia Therese quit holding Lyle’s hand. And the next she didn’t kiss
him when she was playing and the next she passed him a note that said she didn’t want to be his girlfriend anymore.

Lyle just stared at her then put his head down and when Mrs. Anderson asked if he was okay, he said he didn’t feel well and thought he should maybe go home.

Virginia Therese looked straight ahead when he passed.
And Lyle never forgave her.

Six.

In fourth grade, Debbie took a job teaching kindergarten at Ocean Shores Elementary and Virginia Therese fell in love again.

She told herself that Lyle was just a fling, puppy love, following her around, love-sick little dog. But this one—this one was real—what she’d been waiting for all her life.
And Debbie just laughed at first. *Little heart-breaker.*

He was one of the Adams that she had kissed in kindergarten, and had he not left for three years, shipped to school in the city, Lyle’s place would have been his in a second, no questions asked. Virginia was not expecting him, beautiful Adam, second desk from the end in the third row, first day of fourth grade. Beautiful Adam. They would kiss many more times that year.

Adam was officially Virginia’s boyfriend about three times in the fourth grade. He instigated every breakup and she cried desperately every time. Oh, she loved him so, this heartbreaker, this man; she would never love another, she was quite sure.

Many questioned her infatuation—such a sweet girl, a little brash, but sweet, nonetheless, smart, like her sister, and good, throwing such a fit over this troublemaker, this psycho, really, everyone thought it, and without much hesitation passed it on, Did you hear...? And on and on. Plus, she was so young, didn’t her parents have any kind of rein on her? Running off to the community club with a boy, laying on the couch all wrapped in each other’s arms, kissing in the dark up there in the TV room, where anyone walking by could look in and see. Wasn’t a good path to be heading down at such a young age—what was she, nine, maybe ten? Not a good start at all, everyone knows how girls
like that turn out, if they aren't corrected. Everyone knows.

But when confronted, Virginia gave no signs of alarm.

The women who work at the club are complaining, kiddo—they say that all you
do when you go down there is lay on the couch with Adam. Is that true?

Yes, Mom, but we're not doing anything. Adam is my boyfriend, anyway; it's
okay if we lay together.

No it isn't.

Yes it is.

And away she'd go, to her room, thinking, how silly these adults were, to be so
cconcerned with a little kissing, some hugging, when she'd already done so much more.

Come fourth grade Virginia had begun to think that what Lyle and her did was
simply kid stuff, little kids playing around, experimenting with each other. No real
feelings, not like with Adam.

Adam's love did not reveal itself; save for in words, whispered I love you's in the
TV room, as his hands sought other places. Virginia always intercepted the subtle fingers
when they reached her fly. No, she'd say, you can't go there. But I love you. No. So his
hands would return to her small breasts, still free from bras.

Adam's attitude at school did not support his after-school activities, whispers so
soon forgotten. At school, they were near-enemies. Adam the king of the boys rivaling
Virginia the queen of the girls, establishing her as the leading victim of their pre-
pubescent rage.

There were many battles.

After school once, waiting for her mother to get done in her classroom, Virginia stood
outside on the sidewalk that ran all the way around the building. She was near the end,
close to a grassy, remote area of the playground. She was talking to two of her
girlfriends, talking about a sleepover for the upcoming weekend, popcorn and soda and
videos and talk of boys, how fun, how fun. Adam and Mason, one of his cohorts, were
standing at the other end of the sidewalk, also talking. Virginia watched them between
her words, eyes meeting theirs every so often.

She let the gaze fall for a minute, in its absence meeting Mason, halfway down
the sidewalk, sprinting toward them. For three seconds she was scared. Then it was simply another game, an attack on the queen, everyone run! Laughing, she turned, rounded the corner of the building, ready to enter another door, hide inside, await her mother. But there was Adam, oh Adam, her enemy/lover, sprinting toward her, having just rounded his own corner. Ah, her laughing more, skipping almost, so silly, these boys, she breaks from the building running into the open grass, a warm day it was, sun coating them. There in the field. And of course they caught her, she knew that end at least, wondering what it would mean, stealing her backpack and hiding it somewhere, a little jeering, some taunting, name calling? So silly, she thought, as they approached.

So wrong in her guesses. No silliness about it. These boys, devouring her, the slow, lame antelope, lost of her agility, bringing her to the ground, pawing her, hands touching everything. Adam saying, won't let me go down your pants, huh? Won't let me…. And Mason grabbing her small breasts so hard, unlike Adam's soft touch, pinching them, and her ass until they were sore. Sore for days after. Her yelling, screaming, this isn't a game, boys! This isn't funny. Yet it climbing—Mason holding her, as Adam felt, hands everywhere, her screaming, crying, please, oh, please, remembering, always, how they smiled over her, their own little game, bringing down the queen.

Until finally the two girls she had been standing with, chatting so playfully, came to her rescue, so confused when they came upon the scene, saying stop, stop, Adam, Mason, leave her alone.

Pulling her to her feet, grass in her hair, clothing rumpled, out of breath, heaving body. Hugging her, not knowing what else to do, but take her inside, locked between them.

Then the principal and her mother. Mason escaping on his bike and Adam behind to take the blame. Virginia sitting on her mother's lap, face still red and streaked from crying, nose running.

What did you think you were doing, young man? And Adam with no answer just tears of his own and such a sad look, Virginia almost felt sorry for him. He received two whacks while Virginia and her mother waited outside, Debbie cooing softly to the young girl, so perplexed, gently rubbing her back, saying it's all okay, okay, we'll be okay. Then Adam appeared, sobbing, heaving, smearing snot and tears across his face with the back
of his hand, beautiful blond hair in his face, blue eyes red and puffy. Came to the lunch table where they sat and began banging his head against the hard surface again and again, until Debbie, such a mother, torn between her sympathy and loathing, placed the rage aside and gathered the young boy up, in her arms, on her lap, petting him, cooing in his ear, shh, Adam, it's okay. With Virginia looking on in wonder, thinking, god damn it, he's going to pay, thinking, why the hell should my mother be comforting him when my ass is still sore, thinking, not even up my shirt anymore, I'm not even going to let him go up my shirt.

She was angry with her mother, didn't talk to her for days, but Adam—Adam she forgave the next morning, dear Adam, so beautiful, he meant no harm, no, of course not. They resumed that afternoon, his cool hands on her bruised breasts, whispering, oh I love you so.

Then a new battle, during recess—people everywhere, but looking somewhere else. All the girls perched on top of the monkey bars, singing some songs, kicking their legs. Virginia in the middle, laughing.

Adam swung up on the other end, scooting toward them, crazy look on his face, licking the air, tongue waggling back and forth. The girls fled, bailing off the sides, all gone save for Virginia and an ally, right behind her. Adam and Virginia—so we meet again. Her smiling a little, what are you going to do, Adam, here on the playground, everyone's watching everyone's around. His head dropped to her pants, tongue licking her private place, hands grabbing her butt. The ally abandoned her then, and though the whole yard seemed to be watching, no one really saw.

Virginia grabbed his hair, finally, confused, once again, with her true love's actions. Up with his head, yanking so hard on his hair, til his eyes were level with hers, where she smiled, just for a moment, for only him to see. She pulled his head to the left, then, his hands sputtering, unable to stop her, making him capsize, fall to the cedar chips below, laying on his side, unmoving. She on the monkey bars, triumph warm in her hands, a few stray blond hairs between her fingers and all her friends so impressed. Adam, there on the ground, humbled for a moment, couldn't tell on her, couldn't touch her.
Adam broke up with her. The breakups lasted as long as the relationships. On and off. He gave up on her for the rest of fourth grade though—took a turn at the fifth graders, arch rivals of Virginia’s. Adam made a point to hold their hands in front of her, to steal kisses at school in front of her. She just looked away, saving her tears for home, telling herself it didn’t matter, deep down he loved her, had to love her, always.

Seven.

A year gone one day, filing toward the lunchroom, single file, all the fifth graders, the rustle of paper bags. Something new jumping out. The line halted, circled, pointed. The teacher yelled. Virginia, toward the back, curious, rushed forward.

I Love Adam, written in dark pencil on the sky blue wall of the building. Plain as day.

Incriminating eyes looking toward Virginia—Adam was her love, no?

The teacher gained order, the line resumed, filed into the lunchroom, talked of the writing. Who did it?

Virginia wondered as well.

Then the next day, a good couple inches after the first words, one stood, new, darker, it seemed. Simple.

GINNY.

All the eyes not sure of her guilt were convinced then. No doubt. Ginny. She loves Adam. Everyone knew. He broke up with her not long ago. Going out with a sixth grader. Making her jealous. Of course she would vandalize the school like that. To prove her love. Ginny. Loves Adam. Plain as day.

Virginia and her best friend, Desiree, stole away to the tainted part of the building during the next recess. Carried with them a pencil with a large fat eraser on one end and no point on the other, brand-new and never sharpened. They hovered and Desiree tried furtively to erase. They only in smeared the Ginny.
Ginny, they need you to go meet with the principal, out front, where that writing is. Mr. Barbero said in front of everyone. Snickering in the back.

Ginny loves Adam. Gettin' in trouble....

There, in front of the sixth grade classroom, where all her rivals crowded the windows to see. The secretary, the principal, and the awful sixth grade teacher with pull, power, everything she shouldn't have, yelling at Virginia, this circle of adults, around such a small girl, firm, repeating.

I didn't do it.

But we know you did it, Ginny. We just want you to admit it and clean it up. We just want you to stop lying to us.

I said I'm not lying. I did not write that.

Why is your name after it then?

Do you really think that if I were to write on the damn building, I'd be stupid enough to sign my name to it?

Watch your mouth, said the principal.

Of course you're not stupid, Ginny, said the sixth grade teacher. See you're so smart that you'd think that by signing your name, we'd think you didn't do it for that exact reason. Smug, smug face. Top that.

I did not write that!

Then why did Mrs. Wilme see you out here with a pencil yesterday, huh? How can you explain that?

Oh my god, that was after it was written and Desiree and I were trying to erase my name.

Why would you want to do that?

Would you want your name after something like that? Would you like it to say Mrs. Scolrude?

It would never say Mrs. Scolrude because I did not write it.

Well neither did I.

But your name is after it.

You already said that and I already defended myself.

Why would you have to defend yourself?
Because you’re accusing me of something I did not do, Virginia screamed, tears finally breaking, an avalanche, You’re blaming me for something that was done to hurt me—this already hurts enough, she choked, motioning toward the writing, This is dumb. It’s embarrassing to have my name written on the side of the building, plain as day, for everyone to see and now you’re out here embarrassing me more.

This isn’t going to get you anywhere, Ginny. All this pity talk and tears. Just admit what you did. Sometimes it’s harder to tell the truth than to lie. We just want you to be strong, to tell the truth even though it hurts.

Fuck you.

What did you say?

You will mind your mouth when speaking to teachers, young lady, chimed the principal.

But she just stared at them, tears on her face, sniffing and wiping her nose with the back of her arm, just stared, not speaking, eyes saying, yes. Yes, I said what you heard me say and I will not apologize and I will not concede so go fuck yourselves. Yes. Fuck. You.

Then appeared Debbie, called from her classroom. Pulling up to the standoff, screaming, How dare you pull my daughter out here to humiliate her in front of your whole damn class, Kathy? You’re a child yourself leaving your classroom to come here and degrade a little girl—motioning toward the window packed with faces—you think this a professional setting, with your whole class free to crowd the window and watch. Are you trying for the most humiliation possible? You sure as hell succeeded.

And pulling her daughter to her, hugging her, Debbie continued, My daughter is not a liar. If she told you that she didn’t write those stupid words, than she didn’t write those stupid words. She is not dumb. You have no right to keep her here from her class. What are you trying to accomplish? With your power trip and loaded questions. And further, what right do you have to pull me from my own classroom for this little stint? What are we doing here? This is not my idea of teaching, Mrs. Skolrude, and I will be sure my daughter never sets foot in your classroom.

At which Debbie squeezed Virginia, bent down, kissed her and whispered, They’re not important, Gin. Nothing they say is important. You are important, only you.
They don’t matter. I love you, kiddo. We’ll get through this.

She straightened up, turned Virginia toward her class, said, I’ll see you after school, honey. Then both Reeves girls left.

And Virginia was never confronted with it again, though everyone still thought she did it, whispered behind her back every time they filed past that stretch of wall. Sing-song voices, Ginny loves Adam, Ginny loves Adam, Ginny loves...

Anne Catherine, a seventh grader, began dating Joel, an eighth grader. He was handsome and fun and golfed, like their father.

And the Reeves family took him in, pleased with him, treating their eldest daughter so well, their youngest like a kid sister. Liked him so much that they overlooked his only sibling, forgot, in fact, that they shared the same last name. They could not be the same, after all, individuals that they were, the youngest somehow going astray. So much did they like him that Joel’s brother was never even mentioned. Save for when Virginia could speak. Then, she spoke of Adam, with his older brother, when her parents were far from hearing and they could, at least, be honest.

_________________________________________________

Eight.

Anne and Joel, Anne and Joel. Annie and Jo-el sittin’ in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G, first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Annie with a baby carriage.

Shut up, Gin.

Oh, don’t tell me to shut up, Annie-o, I’m just kidding with you. I know you love him. You know you love him.

Anne would just smile. Yeah, she’d think, I suppose.

Going golfing with the boy, as her mother had with her father, watching his serious attachment to the game. He was so wonderful.

Her little sister would come along, joking with Joel, the two teasing and laughing. Annie smiling along, watching as his eyes followed Virginia, followed her away, ran up her little body, then back down. Anne watched it all.
As he’d swim over to her in the Lockey Park swimming pool, cling to the side, and flirt, watch her diving, eyes never straying every time she climbed out. Telling Anne once, your sister has beautiful legs.

She’s ten, you know, Anne would reply.

What’s that got to do with anything, Joel would answer, as he’d swim away. And Virginia thought Joel the most beautiful man, an older version of his brother, but she did not notice his eyes on her body, or his mind.

Did you know that Joel and Adam’s mom died in childbirth? Anne asked once. You mean she died when she was having Adam?

Yeah. Joel’s always blamed him. He told me that when they fight—Adam and him—that he always falls back on the line, At least I didn’t kill our mother.

Poor Adam, Virginia said. Poor, poor Adam, her beautiful Adam. Fuck Joel.

Then later, talking directly to Joel, him telling of their stepmom. Crazy lady, he said. Real nutcase. Works in the city at the Planned Parenthood clinic—completely obsessed with sex; keeps a bowl of condoms on our kitchen counter, next to a poster of a man, wearing only a rubber rain coat, rubber boots, with the inscription, Good boys wear their rubbers.

In the kitchen? Virginia asked.

In the kitchen, he replied.

No wonder, Virginia said.

No wonder, what? Joel asked.

But Virginia just walked away, swinging her little head, swaying her little body.

No wonder.

She loved Adam more.

One night Virginia found Anne crying in her bedroom, late. She’d heard the muffled sobs.

Annie?

Oh, Gin. I’m sorry. Did I wake you up?

Yeah, but that’s okay.

No, it’s not. I shouldn’t be crying.
It’s alright, Annie. I cry all the time.
But I’m not you, kiddo.

Virginia sat on the edge of Anne’s bed, alone in their section of the house, parents upstairs in a whole other wing. Their closet doors mirrored and Virginia could see her reflection. She thought she looked old.

What’s wrong, Annie-o?

Hands on her sister’s back, scratching, thinking how often Annie bribed her for such favors. Never tiring of the feeling. Virginia scratching until she was sure the skin would burst open, Anne’s whole back gushing blood all at once.

She scratched softly that night, in tiny circles.

Joel’s cheating on me. He doesn’t love me, Gin. He’s never loved me. He probably likes you more than he ever liked me.

That’s silly, Annie. I’m a kid-sister to him.

And Annie just smiling at her sister’s innocence, eyes howling, No. You’re. Not. Are you going to break up?

Yes, Gin. I’m sure we will. It’s never been good, you know.

Yeah, it has, Annie. We had fun, all of us. Remember going swimming and golfing together? I remember laughing and laughing. I really like Joel—are you sure you’re gonna break up? I mean, you’ve been together over a year. I thought you two were going to get married someday. Are you sure he’s cheating on you?

Annie just turned her head away, into her pillow, sighed long and long, lungs wavering in her chest.

Oh, Gin. My little Gin. Why don’t you go back to sleep, kiddo. I’m okay.

You sure, sister-pie? Virginia asked, petting Annie’s smooth brown hair, so like mother’s.

Yeah, I’m sure.

Okay. I’ll see you in the morning.

Rising, Virginia whispering gently in Annie’s ear, Good night, love.

Not looking at her sister, Anne whispered, Good night.

Virginia Therese missed Joel. Missed him more than she missed Adam between their
many breakups. If she ever brought him up, Anne would hush her with a look, glazed eyes of hate at the name.

Don’t talk about him, Gin.
But—
Don’t ever talk about him, Gin.
Okay.

Anne never explained. Never said what had happened, just that one night in the dark and her weak voice and nothing more. No Joel except at a distance, at the golf course some days, but Virginia was always with her sister and forbidden to call out his name, or to run to him for the hug he’d always given as greeting. She tried to smile in his direction, but even that was met with scorn.

He’s a bad man, Gin.
Oh, jeez, Annie. He’s not all that bad.
Trust me, kid. Just this once and never again if you want. He’s not worth missing.
But Virginia missed him. Every day. And knew Annie did too.

Nine.

Desiree Kennedy. For two years, Virginia Therese would love no one more. The friend she’d been looking for, searching, praying to her mattress for.

The two inseparable and so different. Desiree so bad, misbehaved, and scantily dressed. Accused of seduction, little tank-tops and short shorts.

Desiree’s parents managed a hotel on the beach. They would grant the girls their own room when Virginia spent the night, order them pizza, take them to the movie store, the grocery store for endless candy, soda, and R-rated videos.

Virginia spent the night at Desiree’s as often as she could.

Until her parents started to say she smelled bad when she came home. Started to say she smelled like severely fried food and cigarettes as Virginia would look away and chew furiously at her gum.

John and Debbie let her roam longer though.
The two would venture to Desiree’s sister’s house. Robin. With a seven-month-old baby and only seventeen years under her belt, the last person Virginia’s parents would concede to as a role model. They never knew though. Never.

Robin would leave the girls a pack of cigarettes in exchange for a couple hours of watching Justin, her son. Virginia was afraid of lighters so she always lit hers with the toaster and she never inhaled. Not once.

Holding the smoke in her mouth, cigarette in her hand, she felt so old, not the eleven-year-old sixth-grader people saw, with good grades and good manners and smart and pretty and perfect. Old and independent and fuck anyone who tried to tell her different, including her parents.

Fuck them, she’d say.

And Desiree would reply, That’s right, Ginny. We can do whatever we want.

They laughed and snickered in class and were separated permanently by the middle of the year. When reseating took place, everyone would randomly draw a seat out a hat, save for Virginia and Desiree. They were placed on opposite sides of the room and everyone filled in around them. They still laughed and snickered.

Mrs. Duer was strict. If notes were passed and viewed by her eyes, they would be read out loud, no matter what the content. Virginia and Desiree passed notes that said, *Mason’s real dumb and Jack smells like total dog crap and That’s a great notebook*, passed them in plain view from person to person, so they’d be read out loud.

Mrs. Duer finally snapped. Screamed at the girls in front of the class that they were awful and would stay in for all the recesses that day until they learned how to grow up a little. They still snickered, but they stopped passing notes. Held off.

Julianne, lingering on the outskirts of their social group, not quite accepted but not shunned, began to confide in them at recess. Speaking to all the girls, about five of them, close friends, but none like Virginia and Desiree. None as close as them.

Julianne would tell of her sadness. How fat she was and how ugly. Her huge nose, god, wasn’t it awful, disgusting, no boy would ever want to be her boyfriend.

The girls yawning and disguising their disinterest with races to the swings or around the building to watch the boys illegally wrestle. They couldn’t tell her enough that
she wasn’t that bad. Jeez, Julianne, they’d say. Quit being so down. You’re fine. Plenty of boys would like to go out with you. Come on. Let’s play.

One morning she came to school and told the girls that she’d almost killed herself the night before. That she’d gotten out a mixing bowl of her mother’s and a huge kitchen knife and sat at the counter with a note written and no one home and all the time in the world.

Why the mixing bowl? someone asked.

So I wouldn’t make a mess, she replied.

And none of them knew what to say. Virginia looked at Desiree and Desiree looked at Virginia and they both took a couple steps backward and a couple more and more, until they were gone.

God, she’s so weird, Virginia would say on the other side of the building.

Yeah, Desiree would say.

Then, they’d both smile and then they’d laugh uncontrollably, not knowing why and not thinking they were at all cruel. God, no. Not cruel at all.

Nathaniels and Juliannes didn’t matter.

Julianne passed Desiree a note weeks later, passed it over the back of her head to drop on Desiree’s desk unnoticed, but it fell blatantly to the floor. Mrs. Duer made Julianne personally bring the note to the front of the classroom to be read out loud.

Virginia hearing Julianne whisper to Mrs. Duer, Please don’t read it, Mrs. Duer. It’ll kill me if you read it.

Sorry, Julianne, Mrs. Duer said, you shouldn’t write something down if it’d kill you to have people know. Go sit down.

Mrs. Duer calmly opened the paper, read it a moment, flickered a smile, and said, Quote: Desiree, I really like Mason. End quote. All right, class, back to math.

Julianne hunkered down in her seat, face flaming, brilliant red. She cried until the next recess and didn’t come to school for a couple days.

Everyone worried about the mixing bowl and kitchen knife until she returned. Quieter and sadder, she moved through class like a slug, no eye contact, no exchange.
A week or so later, one of the girls whispered to Virginia and Desiree, I know this sounds real mean, but I’m kind of glad that note got read. I mean, at least she doesn’t talk to us anymore.

Virginia and Desiree glanced at the sullen girl hunkered on the sidewalk near the building before they looked back to their friend and nodded. Heads shaking up and down, same exact opinion.

Yeah, we’re glad too.

__Ten.__

They moved after Virginia’s sixth grade year. Out to the country. They’d been planning on building a huge house in Hogan’s Corner, a rather wealthy little community a mile out of the city limits. Still included in Ocean Shores, though. Still a part.

But John and Debbie found their dream house, way out of town. Past the poor-low-class beach towns that most of the Shores kids looked down on. Elitists that they were.

Virginia Therese was irate.

It takes over half an hour to get there, Mom. How am I supposed to see my friends? You can’t move us so far. You can’t.

Oh, but they did. To a beautiful log home on twenty-two acres right across from the Humptulips River. Blue mysterious water sliding past outcroppings of rock ledges, where the girls would sunbathe. A rope swing where they’d go with boys and fly into the water, still fearless of possibilities. Bends where gill-nets stretched across the yawning path and signs that read, _this isn’t equality._

Two horses came with the property. Debbie so glad to finally teach her daughters to ride again. The girls riding bareback all summer, tanned and sun-freckled atop their mares.

The pasture stretched back to marsh, home to thousands of ducks. A huge dead pine, roots shriveling back from the earth, slowly being swallowed by water every time it rained. Where Virginia would sit and pick dandelions and sometimes write.
The girls had enormous bedrooms upstairs. Virginia talked Anne into letting her have the master suite, complete with bathroom and deck, walk-in closet. The ceilings were sloped, ended in cubby-holes that spanned the upstairs. The girls would creep through the musty spaces into the other’s room—secret entrances.

Anne’s bedroom window emptied on the garage roof, where the girls would sit and chat and watch evening come and hide from their parents. On that roof Virginia Therese first saw God, saying, if you’re there, just do something, anything, just a little something, please.

So a star appeared and Virginia went to church for a year. But only a year, because she realized that she believed in stars more than any god those preachers spoke of. Because God is brick buildings built by dead men, like a poem she’d read once and even her baptism wasn’t anything because she didn’t believe in the water. Or the father or his son or their ghost.

Desiree helped Virginia move into her new room, sad to have her so far away. Twenty minutes out of town and how were they going to see each other and what was she to do without her best friend so near? And what if Virginia bent to her parents’ wishes and attended Hoquiam Middle School the next year? What if she left Ocean Shores all together and only returned to help her parents at the golf course?

Virginia Therese hushed her, saying, nothing will change, nothing at all. It’ll be fun out here. You’ll see. And I’ll never go to Hoquiam. Never.

And she did not lie.

That fall she rode with Anne in their father’s old Dogde to the bus stop a couple miles away. The bus stop at Copalis Crossing. Where all the other beach kids Virginia had shunned in grade school met her face to face on the way to shared ground.

The North Beach school district ran away up the coast. Covering the beach towns with populations of under 100, and the two bigger towns—Ocean Shores and Pacific Beach.

Originally, the high school was located in Quinalt, farther away than Pacific Beach, almost an hour drive from Ocean Shores. Too far. And an old building, falling down, unsafe. So they built a new one. In Ocean Shores, where the money was.
The North Beach Junior/Senior High School looked more like a prison than anything else, all cinder block, horribly designed. Dark and wasteful of space.

High school upstairs, middle down. No mingling of the ages, or so they intended.

Anne Catherine started up at the new high school as a freshman. And Virginia Therese there in seventh, struggling with boys and older girls and the harshness of getting a little older, learning new cruelties.

Leon, an eighth-grader, harassed her, a rival comparable to Adam. He did it because he liked her, of course, but she did not see it as such. He teased her about her incoming reputation.

Little whore. Adam told me he went down your pants at the community club.

Shut up Leon. He did not.

Standing her ground but wanting to run. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.

And Annie coming down from the high school wing, little Annie, five-foot Annie, 100-pound Annie, grabbing Leon, six-foot Leon, shoving him against the wall, shoving him there with strength and him going, banging against the wall, head bouncing off the cinder blocks.

Leave her alone.

Hey, Annie, it’s not your fault your little sister’s easy. Can’t help what the family turns out—you know—there’s a bad apple in every bunch.

And then a fist in his stomach and her saying, I said, leave her alone, Leon.

Doubled over Leon, shorter, dumber then, weaker, susceptible.

What are you teasing her about anyway? Adam? Everyone knows you’re jealous—jealous that Gin would give him the time of day, when she wouldn’t cast a glance in your pathetic direction. Misproportioned ugly freak that you are.

And everyone laughing. Laughing at Leon, laughing and laughing.

Arm around her little sister, Annie moving away, squeezing the girl.

You’re better than him, kiddo. You know that, don’t you? He’s just stupid and insecure. You’re so much better.

A hug and gone.
Virginia Therese so huge in her glory. *That is my sister and you can’t touch me.*

*Can’t touch me ever again.*

Virginia received bomb threats in her locker, slipped through the slots, falling to the bottom on top of her books. They were from her friend Chris. Funny and silly, chuckling as she read that her life had but seconds left if she didn’t run, quickly, fast, away.

She quit reading them after awhile, letting them accumulate in the bottom of her locker, piling up until they became a pain, then taking them home to read all at once, on her bed, laughing.

One letter was from Mason. The Mason who’d attacked her with Adam on the playground back when they were all so much younger and dumber. So much more grown now. Mason had become a friend.

*Dear Ginny,*

*This is pretty hard for me to write, but I have to tell you how I feel. Well, the other day, when you were sick and I called you at home and you told me about that sunset—remember? The sunset out by the river. You told me how beautiful it was. Well, I’m sure it wasn’t half as beautiful as you are.*

*I want you to go out with me. I’ve liked you forever. You’re so pretty and smart and funny. If you haven’t answered me in two days, I’ll know that you don’t like me and I’ll leave you alone.*

*Love,*

*Mason*

Virginia had been sick two weeks before. It’d been at least a week since he’d slid that letter into her locker, over the two-day minimum. Realizing that Mason hadn’t talked to her for a while. That he’d kept his distance. She tucked the letter into her drawer of notes, wedged between the bomb threats and one’s from Desiree saying how much she liked Jim and Jack and Jason and weekend plans and what happened in second period. She tucked it away and never explained to Mason, just let it go. Let him start talking to her
again a month later, thinking it lucky that she'd missed the window when she would've had to tell him no.

Virginia met Charlie Hulet. A year older than her, friends with all her guy-friends. So innocent and cute and sweet, they became quick friends. Close friends. The best of friends. She told him everything and he her. He had the scoop on all of the boys Virginia liked and loved and they'd never quarrel over them. Because he was a boy too. Over to each other's houses as often as possible. Near inseparable and teased for being just friends.

Come on you guys, you spend more time together than you do with anyone else.

So.

So why don't you go out?

And Virginia would smile and say, Because we don't have to.

Charlie took Virginia to a Sonics game, got out of school early and rode to Seattle with Charlie's hippie aunt and uncle and two thousand kids. With country music blaring and kids singing along, they laughed, all of Charlie's guy friends ranting and raving back home about him taking a stupid girl to a basketball game. A stupid girl.

In Arby's they sat at their own table just a few over from the rest, leaned in close and talked. Virginia said she hated Leon and Charlie agreed. Charlie said he had a crush on Desiree and Virginia said she could put in a word for him, seeing as Des was her best girl friend. Over roastbeef sandwiches and curly fries they told everything.

So wrapped up in each other, they didn't notice when the rest left and were surprised when Charlie's aunt came in and said, Are you guys coming? Everyone else is already in the van.

The game was fun. The first half down near the floor and the second up in Zimbabwe. Kids running around the stands. They sat back, ate popcorn, drank Coke and watched the huge television screen.

On the way home Virginia fell asleep on Charlie's shoulder. So comfortable. So thankful for this boy that could just be her friend. Charlie.
A boy named Ethan. An eighth-grader and so cute, so cute. Virginia and her friends rating him and he topping out, oh so far above the rest. Wore Red Hot Chili Pepper T-shirts that said Sex on them. Ah.

Flirting, of course. She flirted with them all, Leon in the back, knowing his chance was blown, watching her with his friends, lean in close and walk to the Sand Castle after school to eat French fries and drink shakes and laugh and walk real close all the way back. *Tease.*

Ethan and Virginia just looking at each other every time they passed in the halls, heads twisting behind them, following, following, until the other was swallowed. Stomach churning, leaping. A stirring all over her body.

Virginia asked Charlie about him and he said he was okay. From the city and a real player, if she knew what he meant. Better guys out there, but he'd say something if she wanted.

No, not yet. I don't know if I even like him.

Then once, Virginia forgetting something in English, back at her locker retrieving, alone in the empty halls. So perfect at that time. No students, quiet. Drinking it, she turned.

And saw Ethan. Oh, god, Ethan. Alone with Ethan in the hall. No words. Just walked up to her, stood at her locker, by her side, and looked down. Grabbing her face, he kissed her. Kissed her hard and quick. Just there.

And never again.

**Eleven.**

The next year Anne Catherine started dating a boy named Jamie Newlun. She was a Sophomore and he a Senior. And captain of the football team and captain of the wrestling team and handsome and popular and loved by everyone in that school and community, save for the girls he'd already dated. They hated him.

Jamie Leo Newlun lived out by the Reeves family, about four miles toward the beach on Ocean Beach Road. So he started giving the girls rides to school in his dumpy
brown-white Datsun station-wagon. Virginia had about one-fourth of the backseat, so filled with stuff—stinking wrestling equipment, books, papers, clothes spilling over. And the front seat pushed back so far that her long legs ached when they arrived at school.

The two in front didn’t speak to her, just held hands and laughed and talked amongst themselves. Virginia stared out the window, focused on the cows, the trees, her breath on the window.

Jamie intimidated Virginia. He wasn’t like Joel, not at all. Not friendly with a lopsided grin and jokes upon jokes to make the girl laugh. Jamie was smug and old.

And he’d pick them up so early. Ten to seven, so that he and Annie could do whatever it was they did in his car for the forty-five minutes before school started. There in his car, in that same front space everyday, where all the kids off the buses walked by, couldn’t help but see, straining to see in the foggy windows.

Virginia Therese had weightlifting for seventh period in eighth grade. The weightlifting room was a loft overlooking the gymnasium. Two different high school P.E. classes were held in the gym during seventh period and Virginia and her friend, Teresa, watched the boys there. Watched them jump-roping, playing basketball, sit-ups and drills.

The two girls requested running for their workout every Friday and Mr. Shaeffer conceded, though he knew their reasons. All the high school track boys training for the upcoming season, wrestling boys running off their extra weight, covered in plastic bags, saturated, dripping. All outside on the track on Fridays.

I’ll come check on you two after a bit, so you better not be off sitting on one of the mats talking to the boys.

And they’d just smile because he liked them so much that he never did check.

So they had their time to flirt with the older boys. The beautiful older boys. Though the less-attractive older boys were usually the ones providing the most attention.

Mike Shriner was infatuated with Virginia. He was in Anne’s class, but older, seventeen, held back in elementary. He was a wrestler, wrestled with Jamie, ran around in garbage bags trying to sweat and sweat and sweat with Jamie. They even laughed sometimes, were said to be friends. But he was nothing the same.
Anne gave Mike Shriner strict instructions to stay far away from Virginia. Far. She would have no pervert corrupting her little sister.

And Mike Shriner was a pervert. Quite filthy. The only boy at North Beach Junior/Senior High able enough to suck his own penis. And because the achievement seemed impossible he had witnesses, boys testifying upon demand.

Mike’s was the but the third penis Virginia had seen in her life—her father’s the first and little Lyle’s the second, its image but a blip in her mind.

Virginia Therese was not prepared to meet Mike’s penis that afternoon on the long bus-ride home. No, she had been sitting with one of the older girls—a ninth grader—feeling old and important, in the last seat of the bus, on the left. Mike and a boy named Matt Grosse across from them. Virginia was on the aisle, trying to ignore the boys, their crude talk, their gestures. Sick boys. Keeping her face turned toward her companion, toward the window.

But she heard her name.

Ginny...

And had to look, must see what they mean by addressing her directly. There. Matt leaning back in the seat to give a clear shot at Mike. And Mike. Eyes bulging, wicked smile, body moving to a rhythm Virginia did not recognize until she looked away from his face. There. Mike’s hand coasting up and down his enormous penis. Larger than Virginia would have thought possible, especially for his slight figure. Eyes focused there, she thought, of course he can suck his own dick, my god, the reach isn’t that far.

She stared for a moment—longer than she should have. Then turned back to her companion, shocked, a little angry, quite confused. But she did not tell. As the boys had guessed. They knew she wouldn’t.

After that Mike started pursuing her openly.

And Virginia altogether quit her slight flirting. For she had led him along a bit—she would admit—stringing him along because she could, dragging him for the boost in esteem. For the tally sheet of admirers. But the open masturbation scene did away with the need for attention. From him at least. Though his pursuit would not be quieted so simply.
You’re too old for me, she’d say. Much too old. We have nothing in common. It wouldn’t work. So much older—much, much older.

No, I’m not. Only, what, four years? That’s nothing. My parents are seven years apart.

That’s different. It’s different when you’re older. I’m young, Mike. You’re too old.

And on and on. Everyday. Seventh period.

Soon enough Virginia Therese was diverted. Another Mike—Michael Baxter—started courting. Was welcomed warmly. A friend of Charlie’s. Close, those two were, lived real close together, always at each other’s houses. Charlie gave the okay.

Baxter was popular—lead scorer on the basketball team, award-winning track star, an elite sect of friends. Important factors, so important.

Baxter with but one or two large flaws. First, so direct, blunt, mercilessly vivid appearance. Poor boy. Acne in middle school, relentlessly holding on. His face severely disfigured. So severely. L-shaped scar standing out defiantly on his left cheek. A balanced mixture of new acne and old running over cheekbones, forehead, nose, chin, scalp. It covered his neck. His chest. His back down to his shorts, where it miraculously stopped in a near-perfect line.

His teeth were bucked—the two front, chipped and yellowed—standing out alone when he smiled. And two toes on each foot were webbed—the defect that most embarrassed him—made him feel the most absurd, a misplaced marsupial foolishly trying to pass for a human.

But Mike was well liked, judged little. He was a good friend, his friends would say, and funny, and personable. He’s great to talk to, girls would say, and funny, and personable. Good at sports and um, has a nice body—muscle-wise, you know.

Teachers found him more troublesome. Anyone with criminal records was not to be trusted. Any boy that had spent a semester in the juvenile delinquent center for stealing was to be watched. Eyed always. And kept away from good, innocent girls.

Like Virginia Therese.

The courting was not easy; though the flirting fun. Chatting during laps and sitting on the high-jump mats talking after school, laughing. ‘Til a teacher would come and say
isn’t it time to be going—don’t you have buses to catch or basketball to practice or parents to meet. Run along. Shaking heads, thinking, we must head this off. For her parents’ sake. Poor girl.

Then one day, alone in the gym, shuffling their feet and clumsily throwing out words, tidbits to be bitten, Mike says, Ginny...you want to go out with me?

And her, eyes big, thinking Mike Baxter, Mike Baxter, basketball and track star, shining beautiful star and a sophomore in high school and oh so popular and oh so nice and funny and personable.

Yes. Of course. I would love to go out with you.

The next day at school everyone knew. Anne Catherine eyeing her sister skeptically, saying, know what you’re doing, kiddo. He’s a lot older than you and a lot more experienced in all kinds of ways.

And Virginia just saying, yeah, I know what I’m doing. He’s good, Annie, you know. He’ll be so fun.

Mike Shriner watching them running in time outside, pacing around the track, smiling, breathing out so much feeling, air hanging around them, wet and heavy, drizzle, fine beads coating their skin, their clothes. Mike Shriner approaching, saying, what’s your excuse now, Ginny? You told me I was too old for you, but here you are with Mike. He’s my age, you know. What’s your excuse now?

Baxter calmly stopping, catching his breath a little, hand behind him to keep Virginia there, in his shadow, his protection. She’s with me now, Mike. She doesn’t need any excuses.

Virginia thinking, he’ll be so good, as Shriner walked off, angry but, leaving her alone.

And Mike grabbing her hand and squeezing it fiercely, a need in his force, saying, I must protect you, let me protect you, love you, hold your hand. In his perfect eyes, standing out so blue against his red and anguished face.

Virginia hugging him, holding his head on her shoulder, thinking, this. This will make me old.
Twelve.

Anne Catherine tied herself to Jamie Newlun. Always together. Everywhere together, dances and wrestling meets and the drive-in theatre. They smiled so much, so long and knowing, into each other. Virginia watching, catching it all. So envious, craving that, promising it with Mike. Of course she would have it with Mike. Her boyfriend.

Rides to school such routine. No speaking with the front seat, silence, lost in the music.

One morning Jamie drove past the school, leaned over his shoulder, said, Want to go get donuts with us, kid?

God, yes.

Annie and Jamie smiling at each other in the front.

They got donuts and went to the park by the bay. Played on the equipment. Jamie and Virginia teetertottering. Virginia slinking her coat down on her arms so that it would cover her butt, so her pants wouldn’t get dirty. Could not have dirty pants. Arms constricted, she could barely reach the little handle, let alone hold on real tight. But they went up and down slowly, smoothly, Jamie laughing, Virginia smiling.

Until he crashed down. So hard, jolting Virginia, bouncing the girl, so unarmed, she shot forward, smashed her collarbone on the main bar and plumped to the ground. Dirty. Filthy. Aching. She stood and tried to laugh, to smile, to win back the moment, but Jamie was already laughing. Laughing and laughing and pointing to her muddy pants, that she just walked away, climbed in her backseat and waited for the pair to return.

She could see Annie talking to him. Looking a little angry and he looking a little apologetic.

When they got in the car he saying, Hey kid, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shoot you off like that—okay?

Virginia looked at him thinking ass-hole.

Sure.

He smiled. Truce, okay?

Sure, she said and shook his outstretched hand. Sure.
Virginia saw Mike as much as she could. Watched him from the balcony of the weight-room, watched him make his baskets, watched him laugh, watched him watch her. Until Mr. Shaeffer would say, enough ogling, lift your weights, kid. Because he knew about this new romance and hated it, though he was one to favor Mike—just a troubled kid—but still not good enough for Virginia. One of his favorites, such a bright, quick girl. Far reaching and smart.

She still watched, back a little at one of the machines. She still saw him.

Their relationship tied to school for the first few weeks. Just as all the others. Seeing each other at the end of Mike’s lunch—the beginning of Virginia’s. In seventh period. A little after school before Virginia caught the bus.

But it moved faster. They needed to see each other more. Weekend plans and such.

Mike had Virginia to his house first. She went after school, taking Mike’s bus. His grandmother would be home, Virginia’s parents had been promised. They would pick her up at 5:00.

Mike lived in Copalis, second town up the beach from Ocean Shores. His house a block from the ocean. The ocean.

Holding hands on the back roads and not talking. They reached the dunes and began to run, trails already carved in the sand, pampas grass sticking their legs. Small red welts for the next day’s view.

Laughing like little kids, Virginia’s thoughts fleetingly returning to Lyle, little Lyle and the canal trails and the pussy-willows and their secret. And laughing harder, what a kid she’d been.

Stopping, breathing hard, sitting in the sand they began to talk. And Mike touched Virginia’s face, his body turned toward hers at the base of a dune. So easily he coaxed her back, kissing her cheeks, her forehead, her mouth. Leaning over her, one hand under her head upon the sand, the other on her stomach. Then on her breasts. And there it stayed. No pressure he said. None.

They kissed. Deep romantic movie kisses. And his hands moving back and forth between her breasts and the sand trickling into her jeans didn’t bother her.
Closer, they walked back to Mike's house, flushed and splotchy. Virginia's father was already waiting. Mike giving Virginia a simple kiss on the cheek as she climbed into John's old Dodge.

I thought you and mom were going to pick me up.

Yeah, well, she was cooking so I had to come alone. Is that okay?

Of course, Virginia said, reaching over to squeeze her father's hand, resting on his right knee. I always like to see you, Dad-o.

John squeezed her hand back.

So what did you guys do, kiddo?

Oh, nothing much. We walked to the beach—played in the dunes.

She smiled at her father.

My shoes are full of sand.

And her father smiled back.

Well that's what happens when you play in the dunes.

They rode in comfortable silence the fifteen minutes it took to get home, oldies playing on the radio. Johnny interrupting their quiet only to say, name the singer.

I don't know, Dad.

Bob Dylan. Jeez, Gin, even you should know that.

You know I'm into oldies, Dad.

Just listen to this one, kiddo. Listen to the words.

John turned up the radio. Bob sang, *Down the street the dogs are barking, and the day is getting dark, as the night comes gently calling, the dogs will lose their bark. You're right from your side; I'm right from mine. We're all just one too many mornings and a thousand miles behind.*

Virginia smiled.

You're right, Dad. They are good words.

And with spring so rapidly approaching the two excused themselves more and more to the outdoors.

We're just going to walk over to the river.

Why?
It's such a nice day out, Mom. Jeez. We just want to get some fresh air, sit on the riverbank. And leaning in to kiss her mother on the cheek, she'd say, Okay? More a statement than an answer, saying in her gestures, I'll go anyway, Mother, you see if I don't.

Fine, Debbie would say, be back before 5:00—we have to give Mike a ride home. With a sideways glance, long eyes, angry mouth. Fine.

Off they'd go. Smiles and laughter and something else in Mike, so nervous around Virginia's parents.

What's he afraid of? Debbie would ask her husband, thinking her daughter gone, scampered off to the river, but just beyond the doorway, waiting, listening.

Of us, lummy. He's the juvenile delinquent boyfriend who the smart beautiful girl brings home. Wouldn't you be scared?

I suppose. But don't you worry?

Of course I worry. But it's a line we're walking right now. Don't you see? This one's going to be real trying, love. She's going to fall in love with him—as much as her thirteen-year-old heart can and she's going to fight us with all she's got to keep him. And she'll choose him over us in every battle that arises.

But why him?

Because he's older, because he's popular, because he'll treat her like the most amazing jewel in his world—and she most likely is. Because he will return her undying love.

Undying love?

Virginia's face growing hotter and redder, hating and hating.

I just don't understand her, Johnny. She's so die-hard with the boys. Has been since she discovered them—earlier than any other girl in the world. That stint with Adam—christ.

Virginia hearing movement, the floor creaking. Slinking back a little in the hallway.

Deb, don't you think sometimes we set ourselves up?

What?

Well, I think about it this way: you and I met when you were fourteen; I was
fifteen and here we are—happily married still. I sometimes think that the girls feel that we’re the norm. I think little Gin is starting to get scared cause she only has a year left to meet the man of her dreams.

That’s absurd.

No it isn’t, lummy.

Well, let’s just tell her that we’re not the norm so she can save herself for greener pastures.

That wouldn’t work and you know it. She’d never consciously admit that there were any reasons behind her love for Mike save for his beauty and wonder.

What are we going to do?

Virginia just caught her father saying, We’ll wait it out, until it gets too bad, and then we’ll confront them and go from there. Okay?, as she slunk down the hall.

Then gone, slipping unnoticed from the backdoor, swearing that they’d pay for such talk. For thinking her so simple, so easily answered.

And when she returned, skin red around its edges, colored cheeks, and quick breath, she fed their earlier conversation, played it perfectly.

Her mother asking, Hey, kiddo, what exactly do you do with Mike when you go off?

Firing back, What kind of a question is that, Mom? Don’t you trust me?

Of course I trust you, darling—I just wonder what you guys do. I mean you’re gone for hours sometimes. And here you stand in front of me, winded and red. Do you just talk? If so, why can’t you just talk here, up in your room—no one goes up there except your sister; no one could hear you guys if you just wanted to talk.

Mom, we like to be alone. It’s the only time we get to be alone. Didn’t you want to be alone with Dad when you were dating in high school? Wasn’t it nice to be just the two of you?

Of course it was nice to be just the two of us, but we spent a lot of time with other people too. And plus, I was older when I was first dating your father.

Not much.

Well it was enough. I just think you guys could stick around the house once in awhile when you come here. Cause I have no idea what you do when you’re at his house.
What's that supposed to mean, Mom? You had such freedoms when you were my age. Shouldn't you apply the same standards?

I had freedom because there were no standards, Ginny. I did not choose the childhood I had.

Yeah, mother. Neither did I.

Ending the conversation there. So smugly. Running to her room, her telephone, dialing Mike's number. Listen to what my Mom said tonight...

And him on the other end, saying, Well, it wouldn't be that bad to stick around there sometimes, Ginny. We could stay up in your room—your folks never come upstairs anyway and they let you close the door. If we piss them off right now, they'll never let us do anything and we've only been together a month.

Yeah, I guess you're right. And we always have your house—your grandma doesn't even notice us when she's home, which is close to never.

Exactly.

Okay, well I'll see you tomorrow—after lunch, right, at the base of the stairs.

Yep.

And then in seventh period—I'll ask Sheaffer if I can run, even though it's Wednesday, since you're out running every day now.

Okay, I'll see you then. Um, Ginny?

Yeah?

I think I love you.

I love you, too.

See you tomorrow.

Okay.

Bye.

Bye.
Thirteen.

Anne Catherine was sick one morning, throwing up and couldn’t go to school, couldn’t get out of bed. Jamie waiting outside to pick them up. No them. Just the little sister, Virginia.

On the way out to the car, thinking, oh, god, oh, god, alone with Jamie, he won’t talk to me, this will be worse than usual, god, oh.

But Jamie smiling, saying, Hey, kid, how’s it going? What’s ailing your sister? She’s throwing up.

Oh. Well, I’ll come see her after school.

Then not talking for a ways, not ‘til the highway, where he turned up the stereo, looked over at Virginia, cowering in her seat, backpack gripped on her lap, he looked over and smiled, winked and began singing. Belting out song. Thunder only happens when it’s raining... Players only love you when they’re playing.

She smiled, his voice cracking so loudly and so off key.

She remembered the song forever.

Swimming at Charlie’s house that day, after school. A huge indoor pool as part of the house, so lucky. One of the only people Virginia took time away from Mike for. Just Charlie, Annie and Desiree. Just those.

Peel my back.

Gross, Charlie.

Come on. You always peel my back when I get sunburned, just like I peel yours.

Standing in the shallow end, about to their waists, Charlie’s back peeling in layers, fine, pale skin hanging. Virginia rolled it up between her fingers into long dead gray chunks. Wiped them on the edge and laughed. His back turning red and redder, losing its cover.

You shouldn’t stay in the sun so long.

Yeah, you’re one to talk.

Hey, I don’t get sunburned like this.
Yeah you do. Last summer. Red from head to toe and back. I even peeled your legs for you.

I know.

And Charlie turned, looked at the girl in front of him. At her smile. Said, Why couldn’t it work out between us? Why couldn’t we be more than friends? Why didn’t it work last summer?

Oh, Charlie.

I know I’ve asked you a million times, but you never answer. You just go out with other guys.

That isn’t fair.

How isn’t that fair? I mean, you took me completely off guard last summer that day on the phone, just talking as usual and getting off the phone saying, see you tomorrow and stuff and you throw in, I love you. You said it first. And of course I said it too because I do love you and did love you, and then you even went out with me, agreed to go out with me, didn’t talk to me for three days, then broke with me through Jim. It wasn’t fair. And I know we’re best friends and it’s worth more than anything and blah, blah, blah, but it’s not worth more than Mike, is it? Than Mike and you and all you have? I see the way you look at him, Ginny, I watch it and I really like Mike, he’s one of my best guy friends, but I hate him for having that, for holding you when I couldn’t.

Oh, Charlie. Come on. We’ve talked about last summer at least twelve times.

She moved farther down the pool, where it dropped off so she could hang on the side.

You heard those words wrong. I do love you, Charlie and I did love you when I said that. But I love you so differently than the way I love Mike and I’m sorry if it’s not the way you want me to love you, but I can’t control that. It comes and goes. Desiree read me this quote once that said something like, Friendship is much more deadly than love, it lasts longer. And it’s true, don’t you think? We’ll last. And down the road, who knows. Maybe we’ll be married and maybe we’ll never speak again, but it’ll remain.

She swam back to where he stood, head down, and pulling his head up said, We’re just kids, Charlie. We’ve got so far to go. Be happy with all we have right now. None of my girlfriends have a guy friend like you. It’s rare and we’re lucky and we
should enjoy it.

Then she splashed him and swam away, ducking under the water and resurfacing at the other end. He had to smile.

They sat up in his room, on his bed talking until Virginia’s mother arrived. They listened to music and ate Doritos and Virginia carved *Ginny loves Charlie* on his headboard amongst the multitude of other writing. She carved it bigger though, than everything else and it stood, leapt at the eye, smothered the *Mike Baxter kicks ass, motherfucker, cocksucker, Charlie’s a queer, Jim’s a queer and likes sheep, Desiree, Jack, Matt, Joe.* Made it all so small.

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**Fourteen.**

Virginia Therese and Michael Baxter were lovers. She thirteen, he sixteen. Months passed with their intimacy growing. Strolls to the beach taking longer, mother and father tightening their grip, wringing their hands, squeezing the two together even more, as though they’d ever concede and walk quietly away.

A beautiful warm April weekend day, Michael strolled over from the river—friends over there swimming in the icy currents—came to get Virginia. She was lying out on a blanket in the side yard, little shorts and a tank top, hair pulled back in a tight pony tail and sunglasses perched on her nose, reading a book.

He lay down beside her, propped himself up on an elbow.

Hey beautiful.

Hey baby.

A quick kiss.

Want to come over to the beach? A bunch of us are over there—Charlie’s with us.

Oh, wonderful. Yeah. Let me tell my parents.

Away she bounded.

John and Debbie were in the kitchen.

Mom, Dad, Mike just came over from the river—a bunch of our friends are over
there, so I'm going, okay?

Who's over there?

I don't know. Some of Mike's friends and Charlie.

What are you going to do?

Jesus, Mom, I'm going to go lie in the sun and maybe take a dip in the water.

Okay, kid, don't get upset, John chimed in. Go on over to the river, just be back in a couple hours, okay? We could have lunch together.

Okay, Dad-o. She kissed him on the cheek with a quick hug. Thank you, she whispered in his ear, kissed her seething mother and darted out.

All older kids crowded the river. All in Mike's class and over. Juniors and Seniors even, in high school. Virginia felt intimidated, sought out Charlie and pulled him away up stream.

Come on, I know a better place to swim, want to go up with me and float down here?

Won't Mike be mad?

No, he's too busy with his friends anyway. Come on.

They ran up the gravel River Road holding hands. Come on.

Virginia took off her shirt, surprising Charlie. It's just like a swimsuit, silly.

Covers the same.

I know, he said as he turned away.

The water was icy, sucking out their breath, freezing their blood. They pulled themselves out on a log half way down to the others to warm up. Pulled their legs to their bodies and sat shivering, fingers and toes a light shade of blue.

Okay, come on, let's get this over with.

Charlie, wait!

But he was already in the water, laughing, splashing her, Get back in. This was your stupid idea.

Fine.

Michael looking angry when they pulled themselves sopping from the water, laughing in front of all his friends, blue around the edges and oh so pleased. He pulled
Virginia aside and said, Why'd you go off with Charlie? I was the one who went and got you from your house, invited you over here.

Oh, Michael. You were busy with your friends, so I wanted to be busy with mine. I don’t know all these people, okay? Okay?

And he smiled, of course, because she was smiling and had taken his hand in hers and held it against her bare stomach, heaving still, chilly to touch.

Walk down and get my shirt and shoes with me.

Okay.

So she left again, pulling Mike upstream, waving good-bye to Charlie. Her feet aching on the gravel road and Michael heaving her onto his back, carrying her all the way to the trail down to their starting point, rock ledges and deep cutting currents.

She sat and pulled her shoes on, then threw her tank top over her shoulder and ran herself into Mike, hugging him so tight, he gripping back.

I love you, Gin.

Oh, I love you too.

Holding hands back on the road, surprised to see John coming in his truck.

Get in, kiddo, I’ll give you a ride home.

Okay. By Mike, I’ll call you tonight.

Pulling away, John said, Christ kid, you look blue. Why the hell did you go swimming? And put your goddamn shirt on.

Come on, Dad, I’m wearing a sports bra—it’s just like a swimsuit.

You shouldn’t be swimming in your bra in front of all those boys.

Oh, Dad.

Kid, I’m serious.

Fine, it’ll never happen again.

They said nothing else the few minutes it took to get home.

But on entering the house, everything exploded, crashing around, down, suffocatingly strong.

She went swimming in her bra, John remarked to Debbie.

And her mother swiveled her eyes to Virginia Therese, attacked her with a stare, Young lady, what the hell are you thinking? This is how you thank us for letting you do
things? I’m not going to let you see Mike alone any more. That’s it. You’re too damn young for such a relationship.

Jesus, Mom. I wasn’t even swimming with Mike! I went with Charlie, who happens to be my best friend. What is wrong with having a boyfriend? You guys don’t have a problem with Annie and Jamie.

Annie is much older than you.

No she isn’t—she’s two and a half years older than me—that’s not that much. I’m older than you think I am! And more mature.

Well, you’re certainly proving that! You’re acting like a baby now. This relationship with Michael is going to end.

No it isn’t, Mom.

Yes, it is. You’re going to do something you’ll regret all your life and I’m not going to stand idly by and let my youngest daughter go to hell in front of my eyes.

Oh, what am I going to do, Mom? Fuck him? Is that it?

Watch your mouth, kid, put in her father.

Oh, yeah, Dad, I’ll watch my fucking mouth, when you guys start watching yours. You think I’m going to fuck Mike? Well maybe I am. Maybe I already have. What do you think of that? What’s so important about fucking? Huh, Mom?

Calm down, Ginny. You’re getting nowhere screaming like this.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Everyone thinks I’m going to fuck Mike, well it’s not fucking important!

Yes it is! Goddamn it Ginny. It’s very important. You’re thirteen. You’re our daughter and you’re our responsibility. I’m not going to let you turn into a little whore.

Tears streaming down Virginia’s face, anger making it red, fists clenched, water still slipping down her legs, she screamed, I don’t give a shit about you! I love Mike and you’re not going to stop me from seeing him!

Turned and ran from the house, ran to Annie, who was running toward the house in response to the screaming, ran into her older sister and hunkered to the ground, pulling the older girl with her, burying her face in the folds of Anne’s T-shirt.

Shh, little Gin. You’re okay. What’s going on in there?

They’re not fair, Annie. They hate me; they want me to be miserable. They met
each other when they were young, the same age as me, they should understand.

Crying and crying, she repeated, They just aren’t fair.

Shh, kid, shh.

Anne petted the young girl’s hair, wet and stringy, loosened from its ponytail. Ran her hand down her back, soothed her. Shook her parents away with a look and a motion when they came to separate them. Forced them away with her will, saying, Leave us. You’ll lose her completely if you don’t.

She rocked the small thing, broken and sagging, in her arms in the coastal salty sun for hours, ‘til they were warm, ‘til Virginia stopped shuddering and raised her head and smiled, ran a strand of Anne’s dark hair behind her ear, touched her face and said, Oh, I love you, sister. So much.

Her Annie, the only one that could hold her. Her sister. They drove to the little store in Copalis Crossing and rented a movie, bought some candy, abandoned themselves upstairs, where parents could not go.

And when they came down for dinner, John and Debbie engulfed their smallest daughter, crushed her to them and promised to never do that again, that they would communicate and trust her if she trusted them and let her see Michael, of course, of course, held her and held her and said they were sorry. God, so, so sorry.

In early May Michael told Virginia about a dream.

We were at my house, and you were in some sort of see-through nighty up in my room and I was at the bottom of the stairs. You came down real slowly and we went into the bathroom and took a shower together, washing each other’s hair, backs, bodies. Then we went upstairs and made love. It was so wonderful.

So after track practice, they sought Mike’s house, empty, waiting. And laughed childishy as they stripped off their clothes in his bedroom, running down the stairs to the cover of water. Their first time seeing each other fully, just skin, take your fill. They stayed in the shower until the water ran cold, soaping again and again each other’s bodies, holding on to long embraces as though the suds would slide them away, down the drain, washed to sea.

Then up to his bedroom, the only room upstairs, vaulted ceilings—one could only
stand upright in the dead center, window toward the ocean and dunes whistling in their ears. Naked, they climbed into his bed and Virginia noticed for the first time that boys never use sheets. Between two comforters, he moved over her, parting her legs with his. Kissing her neck, her face, her breasts, his hands slid over her hips, her ass, her center, where they’d already been familiarized—downstairs once, the guest bedroom, running around, catching her and throwing her onto the bed. Kissing her lips then sliding her body down so her legs dangled off the end of the mattress, her pants discarded. Her hands gripped his hair and his neck, her back arching, her breathing erratic, and flushed more in pain than pleasure—there his hands returned, his body moving, his face against her neck.

I want to make love, she said.

And he, trying furtively to succeed, trying and trying, body moving against and against until her skin felt raw and sweat mottled her hair, stinging in her eyes and tears grew, mounted, and sprung, drenching her cheeks.

I can’t, he moaned as he rolled to her side. I just can’t.

Virginia Therese crying even more, pulled the comforter up to her chin, held it there, gripping her virginity like the aching boy at her side gripped her small body. Held it so tight. Like both could so easily slip away. Thinking, god, I’m not ready to lose it, god, not yet.

And Michael crying.

What if that was my only chance? What if I lost the one chance I had to make love to the woman I love? What if...

Shhh, love. There will be more times.

And she held his head against her shoulder, stricken by the yearning inside him, rocked him like a child. Like she was his mother and he her little boy. Saying over and over, there’ll be more times, more times.

But she was wrong. There were no more.
Fifteen.

They were moving. John and Debbie packing up their girls, selling the golf course, the house, dragging them to Montana—where they'd always felt at home.

Virginia took one day just for Charlie. She had a small package for him, wrapped in brown with the smallest bow.

Weeks earlier, Charlie over at her house, he pulled a tiny bracelet from his pocket, set it in Virginia's hand and said, This was my baby bracelet. See, it has my birthday on the back and my name on the front. I know it won't fit you, but I want you to have it, to remember me, to keep me close.

Oh, Charlie. I'll keep it forever.

And she put it in her box of sacred objects, kept on her night stand, amongst marbles and worry stones and coins and an old pendant that her father gave her mother for Debbie's fifteenth birthday.

What is it? Charlie asked holding the little box in his hand.

Open it.

A tiny ring. Wouldn't even fit a pinker, with one letter in a scripty scrawl: G

It was my baby ring—a little G. For you to remember me, Charlie, to keep me near.

They held each other, sitting on Charlie's bed, heads on each other's shoulders, breathing together, held and held.

The rest of her days were spent with Michael. So much time, but no more chances for lovemaking. No.

Mike requested a pair of panties to remember her. And fleetingly Virginia pictured her ring, put on a chain of Charlie's and tied around his neck. And panties for Michael. Of course.

The days went by faster and faster and school ended and the twentieth of June rolled around and the Ryder truck pulled away.

I'll come there. When I'm done with school—I only have two more years. When I
graduate, I’ll move to Montana and wait for you to finish school and then we’ll move somewhere together. This won’t stop us, Ginny.

I know.

And she kissed him hard and long in front of her parents, smiling at them, gripping his hand saying, I know this won’t keep us apart. It’s all just temporary. I will see you soon.

She rode with her father in his big red Chevy truck, that always smelled because Mel, the stray cat they took in a year earlier had snuck in to shit and piss all over the cab. Her father hated Mel, with his multitude of scars and lesions, abscesses needing treatment and enormous vet bills. Hated that he shit and pissed in his truck.

Cat piss never comes out. The smell just sticks.

And his girls just chuckled. Laughed behind their hands because they loved the cat and cried so savagely when he didn’t return that one day in spring.

You knew he was wild, always fighting and coming home ruined. You knew he wouldn’t come back some day, girls. You knew.

But Dad, we gave him such a good home. I thought he’d stay.

I thought he’d stay too, said Virginia. You’re probably glad he’s gone cause he won’t be pissing in your truck anymore. Aren’t you?

No, kid. I’m not glad.

And that was all he said. Just walked away, and Virginia thought, maybe her father missed Mel even more than she did.

Do you miss Mel, Dad? I mean, riding in here makes me think of him. Do you think of him when you drive?

John smiled.

Yeah, Gin-o. I think of him. I think, man I wish he wouldn’t have stunk up my truck and then I think, man I wish he had come back.

That’s exactly what I was thinking. In the same order even.

They laughed. Father and daughter. Laughed and laughed.

Virginia wore a T-shirt of Mike’s and boxer shorts of Mike’s. She snuggled her head into a sweatshirt of Mike’s when she fell asleep against the passenger side door. Her father
watched, shaking his head, so soon she’ll forget.

Hot that day, temperatures over a hundred. Anne and their mother in the moving truck, windows down, no air conditioning on the passes, conserving energy for the motor, going twenty-five up the mountain. Virginia and their father waiting in the truck at the top. Waiting and waiting, hours it seemed.

Then Virginia and Anne switching vehicles.

Why don’t you ride with your mom? There’s air-conditioning in the moving truck.

Okay.

So she struggled up the mountains slowly with her mother. Legs and hands hanging out the window. Mind on Mike, daydreams. A huge log house on a river in the woods, just the two of them where no one would say, Beauty and the Beast, no one would notice his scarred face, his bucked teeth. Just the two of them and this huge log house and money enough to spend the days horse back riding and swimming and running through the woods. Just the two of them.

What are you thinking?

Oh, nothing, Mom. Thinking about the new house, new place, you know.

Thinking about Mike?

A little.

Debbie smiled, a little. Ha.

Virginia forgot Michael Baxter in exactly seven days. Their new house so exciting, decorating her new room, and the Koelers to talk to and get to know.

The Koelers sold the Reeveses their house. A one-story, three bedroom log-sided home on Trout Creek in the community of York. Twenty miles out of Helena, in a valley trimmed by amazing mountains. The Big Belts. Five acres of this perfection, a barn and a shop and a fenced-in garden. Beautiful, though small, much smaller than the house on the river where Virginia first saw god.

Gary Koeler, the father, had built the house in the seventies, hence the gold and green color scheme, the leaf patterned counter, fake wood-covered cupboards. Though poorly decorated, it was amazingly built. John loved it the most.
The wood closet has a door on the outside and the inside, so you can load in wood outside and not track it all through the house; this wood stove heats the whole place; look at this fan; we can use all wood heat.

It was perfect.

Tara Koeler was Virginia’s age. They were best friends in days, riding horses, Tara teaching Virginia how to be a cowgirl, instructing on style, get rid of the levis, bring in the Wranglers. Come on, some western shirts—you don’t have anything! What about boots? Don’t you have a pair of boots?

No.

Damn. We’ll get you some then. You can’t keep riding in tennis shoes.

And Tara’s brother, Chad, a year older than Virginia and cute, oh so cute.

One week after the Reeves family moved in, Chad came knocking.

Um, Ginny… Would you like to go for a ride on my bike? I’ll take you to the most beautiful place in these mountains.

Of course.

Onto a dirt-bike, arms around Chad’s waist, the smell of dirt, hard work, cowboy. Climbing mountains, dirt roads, higher, Virginia’s grip tighter and tighter, Chad flinging history over his shoulder, Those trees burned in ‘88. Then stopping.

Look around.

Virginia climbed off and turned, her back to Chad, her ass against the bike, arms crossed, she smiled and burned and realized god was nothing more than this. Valley spreading before her, the city huddled on its mountains on the other side, crouching there on Mount Helena, spreading like a disease into the valley, seeping. All the lakes, Hauser, she was told and Canyon Ferry, and that one’s Lake Helena, and that’s the Reservoir. You can almost see Townsend way over there, see? Specks. Those mountains are the Elkhorns and these are the Big Belts, you know, and this specific one that we’re standing on is called Hedges.

Like bushes?

Yeah, but Hedges. There’s a metal marker pounded into a stone over there with the name and some date. It’s great, huh?

God, yes, she said, back still to him, arms still crossed. God yes.
Then his arms encircled her waist and his head came to her shoulder, lips on her neck and the last thread of Mike snapped off. Montana. Here. This boy. Nothing more.

They stood with wind and trees and sky, clouds so close to touch and each other’s heat for an hour. Climbed back on the bike and took a different way down. Chad revealed his great fear of water, a stagnant pond around a corner spurring recurrent nightmares, bike speeding, out of control, around the corner and off, falling, into the pond, water for breath and a sudden rush of air as he woke up gasping. Never swam. Never.

She tightened her grip, hands spread over his stomach. Ah. Hers.

They came down near the Koelers’ house and went into Chad’s bedroom, listened to country music with the lights off, hands entwined, bodies so close.

Two days later Virginia Therese wrote Michael a letter that said: *I can’t be with you anymore. We’re too far away and I have too much to worry about here. It was just wishful thinking to believe we’d make it so far apart. I’m real happy here. Best of luck. Sincerely, Virginia.*

She wrote Charlie a letter on the same day that said: *Oh, Charlie, I’ve met the neatest guy. His name is Chad and he’s a cowboy and he took me on his motorcycle to the most beautiful mountain, where you could see everything, lakes and the whole city and other mountains. He’s wonderful and I broke up with Mike—wrote him a letter. He never loved me anyway. I know he just used me for sex. He was always pressuring me to do it and was so upset when I wouldn’t before I left. I don’t know. I’m so happy, though. Say hello to everyone, will write again soon. I love you, Ginny.*

Telephone ringing in the kitchen, Virginia sliding to it, rushing from her bedroom, anxious for Chad, his voice, a proposition. Tasting his salty skin as she picked up the phone and wrapped her hand around the receiver. Tasting his smile and laugh and wind on Hedges.

Hello?

What do you mean I used you for sex?

What? Who is thi—

My voice hasn’t changed as quickly as you have, Ginny.
Ah, Michael.
What do you mean I used you for sex?
I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mike. You can’t just call me out of the blue and start winging accusations at me.

It’s not really out of the blue, for Christ’s sake. And I found the fucking letter you wrote to Charlie. He’s my best fucking friend, Ginny, of course I’ll be over at his house and of course I’ll be interested in letters you write to him, since I just got this goddamn letter from you that broke up with me for no goddamn reason.

Michael, I told you the goddamn reasons. We’re too far apart and it just wouldn’t work anyway. We’re not right for each other.

What the fuck does that mean? You sure thought we were right for each other when you were here. You really have changed that much in a couple weeks?

People change, Mike.

Oh, yeah right, of course, just like love, right? Love just changes one second, right? Just up and goes?

Mike, I don’t think we were really in love.

Well, you had no problem lying about it while you were here.

I wasn’t lying, Michael. I thought I loved you, and I was mistaken.

People don’t mistake those kinds of things, Ginny.

Yes they do, Mike. They mistake those kinds of things more than any other. I thought I loved my grade-school sweetheart, Lyle Beach. I thought I loved Adam. For a second I could’ve loved Ethan or even Leon. But I didn’t love any of them and I didn’t really love you.

That isn’t fair, Ginny, because I loved you more than anything.

No, Michael. You didn’t. You’ll see.

Fuck you for being so calm and telling me I’ll see and everything will be peachy because you’re off in Montana fucking around with cowboys who ride you up mountains on motorcycles. What the fuck is that anyway? Some cowboy up the road takes you for a ride and you decide I used you for sex. Is that how easy it was, Gin?

Yeah, Mike. It was just that easy.

And Michael Baxter couldn’t answer, couldn’t fight her back, swear her off, tell
her the damage, tally its price. Just breathing, scarred chest heaving, sweat on his hand slippery on the phone, her voice ringing away.

Quietly, she whispering, Mike?
Yeah, Ginny?
It’s easy to end something that was never real.
Click.
And Michael drifting away.

Sixteen.

Chad didn’t last long. Virginia Therese went to Spokane for three days, caddying for her father at Indian Canyon Golf Course, meeting all the golfers, being told she was beautiful. A tournament he’d participated in numerous times before, everyone knew him, John Reeves, a joker, funny and attractive. Walking past a cameraman from a local station, Hey what’s your name?

John Reeves, you know like Dan Reeves—he’s my uncle.
Really?
No.
With his arm around Virginia, he walked away chuckling, his group chuckling with him, yelling out various anecdotes, Hey John, aren’t you famous enough on your own?

Oh, yeah, Craig, known around the world for my superb golfing abilities.
You’re superb, Dad.
Thanks, kiddo.

But he wasn’t superb enough, telling Virginia once the reason why he didn’t really make it as a golfer, why he didn’t spend his life touring the world and country with his clubs, was simply because he was not good enough. Simple. Period.

Like your Aunt Terrie, a wonderful dancer, but just not good enough to make it her profession.
When Virginia returned from Spokane, she rode a horse up to the Koelers to see Chad. Not home, so she stayed and talked to Tara for a spell. Hours later Chad entered the house and passed her unnoticed, not even a word.

Two days later, playing cards over the green and gold leafed counter with Tara, the girl, laying down a spade, said in passing, Oh, yeah, Chad wanted me to tell you that he didn’t really want to see you like that anymore—that he’d never really meant to start anything with you in the first place. A mistake, you know. He wants to be friends though. You and I get along better anyway.

What?

You know. You’re my friend more than Chad’s. It’s weird having a close friend go out with your brother.

Oh.

Just oh. Huh. No real problem, a twinge of pain, ouch, a burn, contact with a wood stove, a coiled burner, a sudden jerk back with the realization. Virginia Therese shook it off, shuddered and healed. It didn’t make her think of Mike. It made her wonder who would be next.

So Ginny, you like Chad. Well, I hope he realizes what a great person you are and you guys stay together. I’m a little worried, today my sister and I got into a fight. She told me that you’d forget about me in about a month. I got really pissed and said some things I wish I didn’t but ya know what, the shit she was sayin made sense. You’re going to meet some incredible people up there once school starts and you’ll be so busy with them that you’ll stop writing and we’ll lose each other. I don’t know about you but I really don’t want that to happen. It will be hard keeping close but I’m really looking forward to coming and visiting you. So please don’t let us slip. Will you send me a picture of Chad please. I can’t wait to see you in August. I think we’ll have fun. I miss you a lot. I shaved my head: well not really just half of it it’s not a Faulkner cut, I guess it looks like Matt’s old hair. I like it though. I might go live in South Central California with my Aunty and Uncle Jean and Dallas. That would be cool. My sister is goin down there for college. I think I’ll either go there, Salt Lake City or just stay, it’s kinda hard deciding what to do. I talked to you tonight and when I said I missed you, you said “yeah.” What’s that mean?
I'm not trying to be rude or start a fight or anything, it's just making me think pretty hard. I really don't want us to grow apart. I haven't taken your ring off my neck yet. Three times only for basketball games. Well I'll talk to you later, ok? Love always, Charlie.

Dearest Charlie, Chad broke up with me, had Tara do it. Oh, well. He wasn't that important and school is starting soon so there'll be more guys to choose from.

I don't even remember saying "yeah" when you said "I miss you." I'm real sorry if I did. Of course I miss you too and I can't wait to see you again. We won't slip! You're my very best friend and I wouldn't know what to do without you.

Not much is really happening here. My parents bought me a horse and I have to train it myself. Ah. He's already broken, which means he'll let people ride him, but I have to teach him to run and turn and all that. What the hell. Tara's going to help me, so it won't be that hard.

I'm going to try out for the high school soccer team. It's cool that they have soccer as one of the school sports. I don't think I'll play basketball this year.

How are things at the beach? I miss you guys, even though I'm having fun here. Annie got an old International Scout and we go four-bying all the time. Almost everyday. We've explored so many of the old dirt roads in these mountains. I showed her the way up to Hedges, which was that beautiful mountain Chad (the jerk) took me to. Annie and I are getting along really well and I'm scared for when Jamie comes because I know he'll take all her time away from me. He's coming out in a couple weeks or something and he's going to go to college in Bozeman, but stay here for the rest of the summer. At least I'll get Annie to myself during the week.

Well, I should be going. I'll write again soon, say hello to everyone and take care of you. I love you, my friend! Always, Ginny.
Seventeen.

Jamie came. He took some of Anne’s time away from Virginia, but he gave a lot back. The three of them would go hiking, four-lying in the Scout, to movies.

Then gone. To Bozeman, to school, college, dorms. No idea what to study and no wrestling team there and the football team so far out of his league.

He came back every weekend. He went hunting with John, chatted with Debbie, danced and loved with Annie. Virginia, he teased and prodded. Virginia he made laugh.

James Leo Newlun was adopted, the parents’ son, Anne's lover, Virginia’s brother. Anne and Jamie would be married someday, all were sure, bound forever. Forever and ever.

Days before school started for the girls, Virginia Therese broke her arm. Trying to swing onto Buddy, her horse, mild in temperament, like a dog more than anything, she practiced daily, such a real cowgirl thing to be able to do, no stirrups, just grab the saddlehorn, the main and swing on.

Virginia finally succeeded. No reins, no saddle, bridle, halter. Just Buddy, standing in the pasture.

Perched on his back, so pleased with her accomplishment, Virginia screamed across the pasture to her father and Jamie, planting trees.

Dad, Jamie, I swung on!

Buddy realized it too and began to buck, run and buck, the mild beast so shocked. Virginia, so afraid, just let go, slid backwards and catapulted off his rear.

She caught her weight on her tailbone and her left wrist, flopped over on her stomach and began to wail.

Jamie and John were at her side in a moment. The girl wallowing about her back. Oh, her back was broken. She was sure, had definitely broken her back.

John took one look at the wrist flung out in front of her and said, Oh, that’s broken.

At the words, Virginia realized her wrist did hurt a little and on turning her head,
became conscious of the four-inch long section of her arm that no longer lined up with the rest. A shallow concave, a dip, smooth, from arm to hand.

My wrist! Oh, my god, my fucking wrist.

The boys hoisting her up and carrying her to a car. Debbie flew from the house to pilot, Jamie found a board to support the injured limb.

They drove to the hospital, went in the wrong door, lost, couldn’t find the emergency room, they staggered about. The halls were deserted; it was Sunday. No one around.

Virginia began to scream, My fucking wrist is broken! Does anyone work in this fucking hospital?

Shh, honey, we’ll find someone.

A woman rounded a corner, looking frantic, What can I do for you?

My wrist is broken, Virginia said, indicating the motionless arm, displayed on the board.

Oh, my. Follow me.

Upon x-rays, they were told that the wrist was shattered into twenty pieces. After morphine injections and attempts at repair, the girls were sent away, to return the next day, for surgery. Pins.

Three of them, long, exact, and a cast past her elbow. She would not play soccer for the Helena High soccer team, nor would she ever complete the training of Buddy. She bumped into more people in the hallways, clumsy limb protruding out, so awkward, her tiny half-sized locker on the bottom row so impossible to get to with the big red-haired girl digging in the one above her and people on all sides. Too many in number; she despised them all.

Tara was lost in the sea. And when found, surfaced with so many other friends that were not Virginia. Anne accompanied them to lunch that first day, the Reeves sisters sitting relatively apart, new, unknown. In every class everyone already knew each other, already sat with their friends. Virginia sat alone.

She sat on the outskirts of the gym during P.E., wearing Wranglers, a flannel shirt, tennis shoes, unable to participate, to even get dressed, a scary-looking girl approached, said she was sick and couldn’t get dressed either, which was great because
P.E. sucks anyway.

Virginia thought of weight-lifting with Mr. Shaeffer and running around the track with all the boys. For a second, she thought of Mike.

I like P.E. I'd rather be doing something than sitting here.

Yeah, right, said the girl. Everyone hates P.E.

Virginia didn't say anything.

Hey, do you smoke?

No, Virginia replied, offended, disgusted, god, no, she didn't smoke, such a gross image associated with it. Why?

Well, you look like you smoke, that's all.

What?

You know, the way you're dressed and all—you just look like you smoke.

Well, I don't, Virginia said and went to sit somewhere else, wondering why only the freaks would talk to her and not the pretty girls, who were the most like her.

Tara and Virginia growing quickly apart. Simply dissolved. Virginia tossed out all her Wranglers when she noticed that the entire school population did not wear them as Tara had promised, but only the hicks, a group that Virginia did not want to own. She went back to her old clothes and searched for her old kind of friends.

They were not to be found. Virginia looked into every group, such an array, the jocks, preps, stoners, alternative, blah. None fit completely and she bounced around that first year of high school without settling anywhere.

She lived for the weekends. Jamie coming back from Bozeman, the three of them holding onto each other. This semblance of her past, of Ocean Shores and friends—Annie and Jamie and no one else, just those two and Virginia swore she needed nothing else.

One weekend Anne was gone hunting with her father but Jamie came anyway, came to spend time with Virginia, little Virginia.

They trucked over to the Missouri River, Virginia watching Jamie fish, from sunwarmed boulders, legs pulled up to her chin.

Jamie would carry her across little inlets, on his back, with his waders on, keep
her safe and dry, threatening to dump her the entire time.

She talked to him about how much she hated school, how lonely she was, how much she missed Ocean Shores and he just cast out more line and said, You’ll make it kid. We all do. Fuck if Bozeman isn’t the worst place I’ve ever been.

And Virginia would smile, daydreaming of the world where Jamie would have a little brother exactly her age, who was exactly like him, except that he loved Virginia instead of Anne.

Then Anne Catherine got in a wreck. Totaled the faithful blue Dodge Spirit on the way home from the Overland Express, a restaurant where she’d started bussing tables. Or more, the way home from Tim’s house, some guy she worked with, went home with, got drunk with and drove away from.

Virginia waiting up, wanting a chat with her sister, so rarely seen since the new job started, home late and gone early. Their only communication for weeks being little notes taped to the mirror in the bathroom—Anne receiving one at night, on return from work and replacing it with one found by Virginia in the morning. They left each other quotes and poems and letters. Anecdotes to make the other smile. To think, to laugh, to quietly sigh.

*Annie, I found this book today by Kahlil Gibran, full of quotes. Listen:*

> “How stupid is he who would patch the hatred in his eyes with the smile on his lips.”

> “The difference between the richest man and the poorest is but a day of hunger and an hour of thirst.”

> “Only great sorrow or great joy can reveal your truth.

> If you would be revealed you must either dance naked in the sun, or carry your cross.”

> Lovely, yes? I’ll share more with you on other nights. Hope work went well. I miss you, love you.

*Always,*

~Gin
Dearest Gin,

As always, your quotes are perfect. Here’s one I read one in an English book of mine. It’s by Edward Abbey:

“I am not attributing human motives to my snake and bird acquaintances. I recognize that when and where they serve purposes of mine they do so for beautifully selfish reasons of their own. Which is exactly the way it should be. I suggest, however, that it’s a foolish, simple-minded rationalism which denies any form of emotion to all animals but man and his dog. This is no more justified than the Moslems are in denying souls to women. It seems to me possible, even probable that many of the non human undomesticated animals experience emotions unknown to us. What do the coyotes mean when they yodel at the moon? What are dolphins trying so patiently to tell us?”

Don’t you think, Gin? I know animals feel just as much, if not more than us. And they do it better.

I wrote a short piece earlier today in Mr. Cooper’s class that I want to show you. Work’s long and tiring and all. I miss you too! And love you so much. Thanks for the wonderful notes. We’ll see each other soon—let’s take some time this weekend, maybe. Just for us.

Much love, your sisterby,

~Annie

Virginia was waiting up to smile with her sister in person, to plan the weekend.

At one in the morning the phone rang, Jamie’s voice, saying, Get one of your parents on the phone, kid, come on, get one.

Listening to her father receive the call, Virginia put on her shoes, was holding the door open for John to run out of, to another car, to find the wrecked one, to find Annie.

It was imbedded in an irrigation ditch that ran perpendicular to the road, just past a turn that Anne had just kept turning from, turning and turning, off the road, off the shoulder, into the grass, then stopped suddenly with the collision, earth refusing to yield. The dodge sighed heavily, gasping for air.

Anne was across the road in a manufactured home, where she’d been brought, had
blanked on every number but Jamie’s and called him away in Bozeman with the news. She reeked of gin and held an icepack on a mound on her forehead, swollen and blue. All she said was sorry, I am so sorry.

The police arrived late and John took the blame, said he’d fallen asleep at the wheel. He was given a slight ticket and Anne was whisked away. No trouble with the law.

But John and Debbie punished her justly. They revoked her license for six months, forcing the girls to ride the school bus to town, an hour-long ride with elementary, middle and high school kids combined, all equally annoying. A terrible punishment that Virginia suffered as well.

Plus Anne would contribute funds to restore the dodge and to pay John’s ticket. And she would quit working at the Overland because she no longer had means of getting there and it was obviously a bad environment anyway. Conducive to excess drinking and irresponsibility—not the road for one of their daughters. God no.

And Virginia punishing her as well. She could not forgive, could not forgive the alcohol, as Virginia swore she would never drink, never do drugs. Labeling Anne an alcoholic and putting her away on a shelf of broken morsels, once quite beautiful, but damaged beyond repair. Virginia pursued other friendships, floating along with a few for a spell before flitting to new ones. They served simply to replace her time with Annie, to widen the gap, to prove its girth. To say, Ha! I’m living without you.

And Anne felt it all. She grew lonesome with Jamie her only ally, and he so far away.

About a month later, Virginia found an envelope taped to the bathroom mirror. Inside sat a letter.

Dear Ginny,

Things are kind of hard right now. I have lots of reasons to be depressed. Mom and Dad treat me like I’m a complete alcoholic and have a serious problem. I wish they understood that it means nothing to me, that I’m happy without alcohol and don’t even really think about it. I experimented with it, like a lot of kids (even you drank a little with Desiree), and made a mistake.
Also, I have no license. I can't go anywhere. If I want something after school, I just have to forget about it. If I wanted to go shopping, or to drive in on a Friday night to get a movie, or even to pick up a pizza—well I can't.

A lot of the money I was saving for fixing up and hot rodding the Pontiac and saving for my life after high school will be gone.

But what hurts me more than any of this is you. No matter how happy or depressed you were, I was your friend. I took time away from Jamie, from schoolwork, from my other friends, just to see how you were. It didn't matter if what I thought you were doing was stupid or wrong (Mike Baxter, some of your fights with Mom and Dad, etc.) I still loved you and you were still the same person I considered a friend. I included you with my other friends; you were part of me. I took you with me to movies, to eat, on drives in the Pontiac, 4x4ing, and just about anything I did for fun. The point is, I was and still am loyal to you. I always tried to consider your feelings.

Why have you forsaken me? I know people far worse than me that you treat far better. You are a stranger to me. You don't talk to me anymore. I don't know any of your hopes or fears. You don't look to me at all, or even respect any of my opinions; although I doubt if you know what any of them are. You seem as though you would rather spend time with anyone or everyone else before me. Yet, throughout your whole life, I doubt that you will have or have lost many friends truer than I. I am left out of your life, your activities, and your friends. There was always a place for you in these things in my life. You act as much better than me, as though you know so much more and are a much better person than I. I guess you've forgotten all I've helped you with in your life, and all I've done with mine.

Of all the things I could have lost, none compare to losing you. Maybe it was wrong of me to place you in such an important place in my life. Maybe I was even more wrong to think you felt the same about me. If I have to make a new life without you, I'll try to understand the reasons, but it will be much more lonely and less fulfilling.

I love you.

~Annie

Virginia would hate herself more only one other time in her life. She read and reread that
letter, cried and cried, sought out Annie and held her. Held her so tight and all she said was, sorry. I am so sorry.

Eighteen.

The year drudged on and summer came calling quickly. Anne faced her last year of high school, Virginia swallowed her first, and John and Debbie bought a restaurant.

RB Drive-In, a little place left over from the fifties, run-down and dirty, crumby lot and malfunctioning ordermatics, with a little hot-tub store tacked onto the west side of the building called The Tubbery, a combination that made no sense. It was the hot-tub store that attracted John and Debbie from the start, deal done, papers ready to sign, they were told that the restaurant was up for grabs as well, so they swept up the whole bundle. Having never run a hot-tub store nor a restaurant, the sale brought questioning glances and looks of worry from their two daughters. Neither of the new businesses offered the glamour of the previous golf course.

However, the two knew the business world and were becoming restless without employment, the sale of the golf course and houses in Ocean Shores only providing for so long, they figured it was time to begin anew. The restaurant and the Tubbery, new enough, yet with familiar strains.

The girls put to work with the pre-existing crew. Virginia so frightened. They were all in a stage of life she would never know, the late-teens to late-twenties where you stand still, treading stagnant water, refusing to float to the edge where it drops into a fresh clear pool fed by a rushing stream. Just hanging, mildewing, having kids before they’d left the stage themselves, drinking, smoking, driving awful cars, following the footsteps of parents that absented themselves far too early, or far too late. Virginia not knowing how to receive them, nor a method of communication. Staying in her area, away from the kitchen, in the front, where the carhops answered orders, made sodas and milkshakes and changed money. She did not make eye contact when food passed through the slot, nor acknowledge the slight jeering that accompanied any speech. Hey don’t you ever talk without your parents or your sister to hold your hand? Hey have a little coffee with your
sugar. Hey.

Warming to the women, though they shared the same lot as their men in the kitchen. Christy, little and pregnant with one child already in the wings, was in such a state due to Michael Paul Weldon (a man that would become a brother to Virginia, though she’d take long steps around him here). Michael was Jamie’s age, but older, it seemed, because he’d been out of the innocence of childhood for so long, yet clung to its immaturity like a badge. He would never grow up, this one, too young to claim fatherhood and too old to be nurtured. Christy looked at him with love and rubbed her bulging belly with love, but his eyes didn’t see it and Virginia disliked him more.

And Shauna, the wife of Jamie Hanson, the man responsible for managing the place when it came under the hands of John and Debbie. Shauna, too, was pregnant with another already racing around. Her first son, Cody, deaf and defiant. Virginia learning some sign language to be able to speak to him whenever he came near. But he wanted no part of the girl, producing signs that Virginia needed no book to translate, then running to the car or behind his mother, giggling in a tone that communicated more than his motions. Shauna would apologize and say he just didn’t socialize that well and Virginia would muddily say, fine, fine, yes of course, poor, poor boy, but think repulsive thoughts and wish for his unhappiness.

Shauna trying to pull Virginia out of the shell she cast around her, telling Virginia’s parents that she, herself had been a troubled youth, confused and sad as a girl, and could talk to Virginia any time the girl wanted, let her be sure to know, that Shauna’s door was always open. Always. But Virginia communicated only small talk at the restaurant and never sought Shauna’s always-open door. Never.

Her husband was smug, offensive, ugly and built like a weasel. Greasy little mustache and hair always matted with something, handsome in some twisted outsiders-fifties leather jackets and rolled up jeans kind of way. Running the Tubbery too and acting such a pal to John and Debbie, a real treat to have on the payroll, lucky blokes to have him at their disposal.

Virginia hating him from the start, lumping him with the rest of the tainted kitchen folk and maintaining as little contact as possible. Including LeAnne, the only woman on the cooking staff. Fat and sludgy, reflective of the greasy food she created,
LeAnne was scarier than the men. Blatantly crossing the line, she’d come into the front hop area to speak directly to Virginia about sunbathing in Crisco oil and lovelmaking and crank and all the other wonders of the world, oblivious to the look of complete abhorrence on the girl’s face. Virginia told her parents she would not work with the woman alone ever again. No, no, no. Never. She was ruining whatever amount of innocence Virginia had left.

Anne Catherine was different. She accepted the kitchen crew and the hops, different but non-intimidating. Anne would not be intimidated by anyone, unlike her little sister that toppled at a sideways look.

Anne talked cars with the kitchen boys, engines and oil and carburetors and headers and sleek bodies, I’ll bring my Pontiac in sometime for you guys to gaze at. Bought it when I was fifteen, before I had my license and I’ll have it forever, pale sunset yellow, two-door and god, so ballsy. I keep her under wraps out in my parents’ shop most of the time as not to spoil her.

The guys so impressed with her knowledge outdoing theirs (though they’d never admit such) welcomed her in, such a contrast to her quiet, snobby sister.

And Anne first snorted crank with LeAnne in the back room of RB one day. Testing out the merits of poorly constructed counterfeit cocaine. She tried anything once and sometimes twice and gained acceptance, slid right in, her social standing not so abrupt as her sister’s, not so vehemently remembered.

Come summer, the girls each working there at least 20 hours a week. Christy and Shauna retiring to bring their newest offspring into the world, LeAnne running away with one of her best friend’s boyfriends to Nevada or some such place and Jamie Hanson fired from both his managerial positions for stealing and overall immorality.

Michael Paul Weldon remained.

John learning the ins and outs of the Tubbery and Debbie trying to nurse the restaurant into a state of decency.

All settling into the newness of routine.
Nineteen.

Jamie had enough of college in Bozeman and moved to Helena at the start of summer, renting a little apartment in an old house on Broadway and going to work at RB as one of the cooks.

A boy named Scott Heinson came. Had played football with Jamie at North Beach. His name turned heads, popular and strong.

Scott moved into Jamie’s little apartment, sleeping on the floor in the living room. He got a job building trusses and worked 12-hour days. Anne and Virginia tip-toed over him, passed out on the floor, sleeping bag sometimes covering his naked but for boxer-shorts body, sometimes not.

He added another presence and odor. His feet rotting in their bags of skin, his shoes wafting through the whole building. After just a week, they could detect the smell at the bottom of the stairs and began hauling fans into the living room, directed at his sleeping figure, blowing the smell down the stairs, outside. It did not work.

Virginia’s first interaction with Scott was at her parents’ house, Annie, Jamie, and him all going into the mountains to play, stopping by to pick up some things. Virginia had burned herself with the sun earlier that day, savagely red from feet to hair, wearing wispy white cotton pajama bottoms and a small white tank-top, skin shimmering with aloe.

Scott rumpled her hair and said, How ya been, kid?

And that was all, five years her senior and old like Jamie, she had to be such a baby in his eyes. She glared at him there, thinking, Annie and Jamie don’t treat me like a kid, thinking, you’re not much older than me, wishing that she’d catch that look in his eyes that she’d come to recognize in men. The one that lingered a little too long on the skin of her neck, or her small immature breasts, or her thin, athletic legs. The look that brought questions and conversation and prospect. But it remained absent, not there. Scott looked away, to her mother, her father, little red Virginia forgotten.

They saw each other frequently. Scott took to teasing her, as Jamie did. Putting her
helmet on her head when they’d give her rides to trails for mountain biking. Jestingly say, Your mom said you can’t ride without your helmet. Pulling it down over her ears, slapping the hard top, then springing back in his truck. Have fun, kid, he’d yell as they pulled away.

Virginia would linger around him, sleeping on the floor. Look at his wild curly hair, unbrushed, full of sawdust, stubble on his chin, his cheeks, eyelids moving over his eyes, dreams back there, swaying, his firm chest, stomach so lovely, forbidden hairs running down from his bellybutton to his shorts.

Then she’d giggle with Annie and Jamie about his feet. Saying, God, Jamie, you have to talk to him about it. It’s ruining your apartment. Laughing and laughing about how he never noticed the fans pointing straight at him and moved them just a little when they got too cold.

Jamie’s twentieth birthday was that summer, July 16, exactly one month after Virginia’s fifteenth. He acquired a cooler full of beer, taking Anne, Virginia, and Scott to Hedges, a favorite of all of theirs to camp for the night.

Virginia sat in the tent, watching her three companions take knife-hits of pot. Annie held the propane torch, Jamie the knives, held them in the flame until they were red, then pressed them together on either side of a little bud for Scott to suck through a broken Absolut Vodka bottle, just the bottom gone. She had not succumbed to pot yet, though around it constantly, joints always passed at the apartment, bongs and pipes so familiar. Feeling like she had to maintain some of her morals, as she’d had Annie and Jamie get her drunk earlier that summer, camping on the Missouri River, where their parents had bought 22 acres, they got the girl trashed. She could not deny its merits.

She left the tent as it filled with smoke, strolled up to the knob where all the world was visible, their fire and tent below, in a sunken plot on the mountain’s top. She sat next to the stone with the Hedges marker in it, sun down and light quickly fading, where town lights look like mirages, flickering between real and dream. It was warm still and she wore just a jeans and a T-shirt.

Quite a view, huh?

Scott. Oh, god, Scott. He came and sat beside her, looking at the valley.
Yeah, it’s a great view. I was the first one to come up here—a neighbor of ours took me up here on his motorcycle.

So you’re saying it’s more yours than everyone else’s.

No. I’m just saying I was first.

They looked at each other. Virginia saw him see her. He smiled.

So tell me about you, kid.

You already know about me. I will soon be a sophomore in high school, I play soccer for the city team, I hike, I mountain bike, I work at my parents’ restaurant.

No, I want to know more than that.

So she told him about growing up, told him about Mike, about how much she hated school, how hard it was to move. Told him about her best friends in Ocean Shores, Charlie and Desiree. How she’d do anything to have them here, and how jealous she was of Annie and Jamie, their perfection, their love.

And he became enamored with her, right there, put his arm around her, listening to her talk, watching her face move, the way she told stories, the way she smiled. When she looked at him, he kissed her, kissed her for hours and said, god, you’ll be so good.

They were torn away by screams, yelling and a loud smack, that of wood against wood it seemed, or hand against tree as it turned out. A figure ran from the tent into the trees, little Annie. Virginia ran after her.

She walked between the trees yelling, screaming for Annie, oh, Annie come out, love. Please.

Then a small voice, Gin?

Yes, Annie, come here, where are you?

Anne came quietly out from behind a tree and sunk into her sister, as Virginia had so often done to her. The older girl cried and cried and said, We just fight so bad sometimes. So bad.

Virginia just held her, not knowing what to do. Icons crumbling around her. These were her models. They were perfect, could not fight, no. She wiped the tears of her sister away, kissed her cheeks and brought her to the fire.

Scott and Jamie arrived in time and the way Jamie looked at Anne erased it all. Looked at her like he always had, like his love, his greatest love sat in front of him and he
would never, god, never hurt her for the world. They went to the tent and Scott and Virginia pulled out sleeping bags and cuddled in front of the fire.

Virginia lying on her back, with Scott propped on an elbow leaning over her, a hand tracing her features, her chin, eyes, neck, he said, Jamie said he grabbed her throat, that they were fighting and he grabbed her throat. It pissed me off cause you never touch a woman like that. Never. No matter how angry, or scared. He let go fast and that’s when he hit the tree—did you see his hand?

Virginia nodded, picturing the swollen bloody knuckles, so battered, fist still clenched.

Do they fight like that a lot? Scott asked.

No. They never fight.

Scott pulled her eyes from the sky, to look in his, held her face and kissed her again and again. Virginia touched his dirty hair, his scratchy face.

We won’t fight, he said as he laid his head next to hers. We won’t ever fight.

__________________________

Twenty.

Virginia got to go home, to Ocean Shores, in August. She flew over, met at the airport by Desiree and her mother, Roxanne. Anne and Jamie were driving over, as was Scott, days later. She would ride home in one of their cars.

She was her radiant self around Desiree, funny and beautiful, full of laughter. They recounted all their trials and all their wonders from the year absent one another, concluding that they still missed the other’s company as much as the first day it was deprived.

Virginia spent days just with Desiree at her parents’ house on the ocean. They ordered pizzas and watched movies, explored the beaches and jetty. New resorts had sprung up along the main beach; the girls visited each one, claiming to be sisters, wanting to get a room for their parents’ upcoming 25th anniversary. How wonderful, owners said, such caring daughters, come, we’ll show you our best. They poked through each beautiful suite, saying, yes, yes, lovely, and Francis (for they had to have different names) come
look at the balcony.

Oh, Anna, they’d just love this Jacuzzi tub.

Then they’d run giggling to the water, teasing it to attack them, and go wading
down at the jetty, the string of boulders offering some kind of comfort.

Such a hot day, wading to their chests, letting the water lift them, then settle, lift
and settle, floating in its tumbles. Virginia was side-stroking toward the shore when she
heard Desiree say, Ginny... Ginny, I can’t move.

Her friend was so close, a gap of ten feet, no more, maybe less, just ten feet
further out, Just swim toward me, Des, just swim back.

I can’t, she returned, eyes so big, brown big eyes screaming from her head, arms
beginning to thrash, I can’t move, I can’t get anywhere.

Virginia swam to her, it’d been less than a minute she was sure, but Desiree
already panicked, craving air, fresh and free, shoved her friend under for a moment’s
gasp. Virginia surfaced sputtering, thinking oh, god, oh god. The goddamn undertow that
we scoff at tourists for disrespecting, the one that claims a good couple ignorant lives a
year. We’re locals. We can’t drown in our own ocean.

In the course of her thoughts, they’d been swept away. God, miles, it seemed.
Virginia had looked at the rocks to her right, identifying them, their distance from shore
and now gone, so fast, so quickly ripped out, further and further and far. Their jetty was
ending, then open sea, nothing to grip and swimming parallel ‘til the beast will let you
back in, ‘til it opens up a space, can take hours of swimming, oh god, hours of swimming.

Des, we have to head for the rocks. We’ve got to pull ourselves out on the rocks.
Okay, go, I’ll follow you.

She swam toward the jagged boulders on her right, waves mounting and
overcoming her small body, fogging her eyes, closing her ears. She made out people,
running parallel with them, fishermen, they must be, a quiet day on the jetty, sun and
swallowed salt water, coughed as some sought her lungs. Her hand grazed a rock, oh,
pull, she hauled herself onto its mussel-covered surface, tiny cuts opening over her body,
her hands gushing blood. She breathed for a moment, on her belly, out of the water,
breathed, sucked in, reveled and heard, Watch out, there’s a wa—
And shoved into a towering rock in front of her, water propelling her forward, hands clawing at the tops, breaking mussels, slicing skin on shells, knees bashing against the sharp edges, mingling blood and salt, feet without a plant, hands holding, waves returning, Desiree screaming in the back, Help me, please, help me, two hands grabbed each of her arms and pulled. They set her on a flat warm rock and ran to help an older man pulling at Desiree.

Her best friend was plopped next to her on the rock, warmth on their backs, sun on their faces, whole bodies screeching, blood coating their skin, tiny slices everywhere. Figures over them, Are you okay, girls? Talk. What are your names? Are you okay?

Virginia sat up suddenly, scared, crying, needing to get off the rocks, out of the midst of water surrounding her on all sides, goddamn water, wanting me, can't have, god no, not ready to die, beast, fiend, I am not ready to die.

She stood and ran, jumping across the rocks, flying down, back to shore and upon reaching it she gathered her clothes, dry on land, gripped them to her, fell to the hard moist sand and sobbed. Desiree came and knelt over her, holding her back as someone called Roxanne. That's where she found them, curled together on the sand, holding on to something, crying and crying the salt from their bodies.

Roxanne peroxided their wounds, bandaged the worst ones, none needing stitches, the possibility of infection the only real threat. Virginia thought only of Scott, waiting impatiently for the doctoring to cease to run to the phone, to hear his voice, to tell him she wasn't ready for him to lose her to the mouth of raging water rushing about their old hometown.

Scott had tears in his voice, desperation, need, Virginia flittingly seeing Mike, holding her there on the track field, gripping her, this was Scott. I cannot lose you, god no, never. I've just found you, my perfect girl. My perfect girl. I'll be there so soon, in two days, I promise. I'll hold and never let anything happen to you. I'll be there so soon.

Calmed, she called her parents, relating the account in moderation. Saying she was fine, just fine, a little shaken, that was all. Do not worry. She was just fine. Would be home in a week. Just fine.
She ventured out the next day to visit other friends, namely Charlie, who came to Desiree’s door seeking Virginia, his Ginny.

He tenderly embraced her aching frame and stole her away to his house, to sit on his same old bed, to trace the *Ginny loves Charlie* in his headboard and feel it as fully as she did when she wrote it.

God, I’ve missed you, Ginny. I wish you were here, that you could come back.

I know, Charlie. My only friends in Montana are those I’ve kept from here—Jamie, Annie, Scott. Scott is wonderful.

Do you love him?

Yes, Charlie, I think so. He’s so real. We have such fun together.

Did you know that Mike’s dating my sister, Roxy? I told you that, didn’t I?

Yeah. I hope he’s happy. I think about him sometimes, some similarities with Scott, I think. They have some of the same looks in their eyes. And the parent thing—you know how my parents were so against Mike and I—well they aren’t real fond of Scott, either, being so much older than me, Jamie’s age, a couple years out of high school, and me only my second. They’re being fair though, because they like Scott, think he’s a good guy, just too old, so they let us go out, just limit it a little, which I understand.

Charlie watched her speak, watched her idly touch the new scabs on her knees, watched her bite her lip and look at the ceiling when she spoke. He knew her so well, could tell her what she was thinking, he was sure, could hold her better than anyone.

Could you love me, Ginny? Could you love me like you’ve loved Mike and Scott?

Oh, Charlie, she said, sitting up, cupping his soft face in her hands, still free of harsh stubble, still so young, and his gray-blue eyes so clear, his milky skin so perfect, gentle Charlie, so different from the men she pursued, but so pure. Her Charlie, yes, she could love him, could hold him like the others.

Yes, I could love you, dear Charlie. I always have loved you and I always will.

She held his hands in her red and scabby ones, took one to her heart, there, she said, there is your place, and side by side on Charlie’s bed, legs dangling off the side, one hand on her chest, the other moving to her waist, they kissed. Gentle and calm. Then held each other, Charlie’s heart beating so quickly, his breath erratic, his eyes filling with salt,
his love in his arms. Right there, everything faded away but their memories of each other. Virginia’s other boys were gone, even her Scott, for here was Charlie. Beautiful, pure Charlie who wouldn’t hurt her for the world, who would die and worse for her happiness, who let her go a multitude of times because he knew he had to. Charlie. Charlie Allen Hulet.

Kissing once more when he dropped her off at Desiree’s house. A long, drawn-out, this will be our last kind of kiss. A good-bye so soon. Charlie felt it, caught it on her lips. She would stay with Scott and Charlie would slide back to his role of friend. Virginia could not meet his eyes completely, could not hold them, such aching they offered.

Entering the house so torn. Wrong, she felt in hurting Charlie by stealing away so quickly what he wanted from her always and so wrong to her dear Scott, who would be there the next day to hold her tattered body in his arms and kiss her neck promise her anything.

She called Scott and told him.
I kissed Charlie.
What?
I kissed Charlie. I am so sorry, love. He’s been my best friend for years now and he’s loved me the whole time and I had this moment of complete love for him in his room today, looking at him, my dearest friend and I kissed him.

Gin, what does that mean? Do you want to be with Charlie?
No, my love. No. I want to be with you. I want you. It was weakness and stupidity and I’m sure it was worse for Charlie in the long run as well, because now he’ll hope even more for something I cannot give him. I am so sorry.

Promise you’ll never do it again. Promise you’ll never cheat.
I promise.
Okay. I’ll be there tomorrow.
Okay. I’m sorry again.
I know, Ginny.
I love you, Scott.
I love you, too. Never again.
Never again. I promise and promise.

Twenty-one.

Virginia said good-bye to Charlie with Scott standing at her side. Held him for a moment, looked in his eyes and said good-bye, I’ll write and call and we’ll stay in touch, promise?

Of course, said Charlie, eyes down. Of course.

Virginia rode home with Annie and Jamie, in the dodge spirit because her parents had forbidden her to ride with Scott, twelve hours on the road alone was too much, to out of everyone’s control.

Annie and Jamie honked and cheered when they crossed the border into Montana.

Aren’t you happy, Gin? We’re home.

And for the first time, she believed it. Montana. Yes, it was home.

Scott and Virginia running through woods, river trails, deserted peaks. Always outside, basking in the sun. They grew tan.

Jamie made Virginia tell Scott about his feet, how they smelled like rot and stunk up the trailer, how the laundry room at John and Debbie’s house was impossible to stand in when Scott discarded his shoes there with the rest, then his feet propelling the smell into the living room, the dining room, the carpet as his shuffled forth.

Jamie, that isn’t fair. If I had something like that wrong with me, I’d much rather hear it from my best guy friend, than my girlfriend. It will be ten times more embarrassing for him to hear it from me. You’re the one that lives with him.

But Jamie refused.

It’s your duty as his girlfriend to tell him, Gin. Your duty.

Fine.

So one evening, cuddling on her parents’ couch while they slept behind another wall ignorant to the bare chested youths in their living room, shirts discarded on the floor, light afgan thrown over them, Virginia said, If there was something wrong with me, would you tell me?
Yeah, why?
Oh, I was just wondering.
Is there something wrong with me?
Um, no....
What?
It's just that your feet smell real bad, love. I'm sorry.
I know they smell.
You know, she said, sitting up, shocked. How could anyone know and let it
continue, although he had to know really, couldn't just ignore the odor, but how could he
let it just go on.
I've had bad feet since I was little. They get all peely and gross and I don't know
why.
Well, could you try to do something? See a doctor if you need to?
Yeah, I will. I'm sorry.
Oh, love, don't be sorry. I just wanted to tell you, wanted it to be fixed.
So Scott started wearing sandals, which let the feet air out, let the rot breathe and
dry. His one flaw, gone.

Jamie bought a trailer in East Helena, a town skirting Helena, dominated by a lead
smelter and ill reputation. John and Debbie co-signed the loan, sharing in the boy's
excitement of owning something substantial, a house.
The trailer had two bedrooms, so Scott wouldn't have to sleep on the floor in the
living room any longer and there was a place where the door could be closed and he and
Virginia could be alone.

There, school underway and Virginia skipping afternoon classes to be with Scott,
the two would creep, and shed their clothes.
Scott's body was so different than others, than Mike's.
Lying on top of him, naked, Scott letting her move, letting her decide, she moved
over him, onto him, his presence so near, his hands on her back, his face in her neck,
pressing, a moment's pain, a change, different feeling and quick retreat. Virginia slid off,
sobs welling.
Was that it, Scott? Were we having sex?

No, love. Close. That wasn’t it. Don’t cry. You’re okay. You’re the same person you were. Nothing’s changed.

But still she cried, as she had with Mike, maintaining that her virginity would shield her if she kept it long enough. Held it tight enough. Scott would not claim it, no. Not yet.

They took a shower together, washed it away, Scott saying he’d wait forever ‘til she was ready, the age difference after all and Scott hadn’t slept with his first girl until he was sixteen, so he understood, but itched for her all the same. More than desire, he said, so much more, felt somewhere different than all the others, even Bridget, who he’d been with for three years. Even her. Virginia outdid even her.

In October, Jamie proposed to Anne Catherine. Placed his cherished North Beach gold pendant and chain around her neck as proof, until he could buy a ring. They smiled like children, like Virginia and Lyle holding hands at an Easter egg hunt, when they told the family. Bursting with idea.

Virginia smiling back, hugging them both and turning away. She would be married some day, would hold someone like Jamie, would be loved by someone like Jamie. Yes, maybe Scott. Maybe Scott.

In November Scott moved, stole away to California to do construction for his father, to make some real money, though leaving Virginia broke him apart. Killed him nearly. But he wouldn’t be gone too long and there were letters to write and phone calls to make and all would be fine. They were meant after all, weren’t they? Yes, they were meant, of course they were meant.

Virginia skipped morning classes to say farewell, Jamie scolding her at the trailer.

Shouldn’t you be in school, kid?

Shut up, Jamie. What say do you have anyway?

I could tell your parents.

And Scott coming out to make him stop.

Leave her alone, Jamie. I’m leaving today, remember?
Jamie rolling his eyes, stomped away, into his car to work. Such a cock, Virginia thought, so sure that he knows what’s best and overprotective, worse than a real brother, much worse.

She lay with Scott for an hour on his small bed, fully clothed, just holding each other, silent and teary. Sitting up, she extracted a small object from her pocket and pressed it into his hand.

It’s a worry-stone, love. My father gave it to me years ago, said to tell it all your worries before you go to sleep, all your sadnesses and fears, that he’ll swallow them by morning so you can start anew. Keep it while you’re away from me. Tell it your worries.

He’d held it tight, the little etched face, marking his hands, the wise mustache and serene eyes of a stone that would ease his pain, looked at Virginia and said, Thank you. Oh, love, thank you, I’ll keep it with me always, keep it so safe.

Virginia kissed him goodbye leaning against his truck, hands on his strong, flat stomach. Then drove away, to school, to kids she’d long grown past, friends she’d quit associating with for the presence of her older lover, her twenty-year-old lover. Scott.

They wrote often, swelling letters saturated in fluffy debris. Oh, I love you so, can’t wait to see you again, oh, god, the pain, hurt, suffering, so dreary without you, and on and on.

Scott called also, from pay phones around the work site. Told of his days, rise to set, and how much he wanted to hold her, god couldn’t wait to hold her. Oh, and she couldn’t wait to hold him, could not wait, the loneliness like icicles dripping in the first bit of spring, dripping away to nothingness. God, couldn’t wait for him to come home.

But time crept on, sped up, turned around.

A month passed with Virginia beginning to have trouble writing back, procrastinating and letting enough time slide that three letters of Scott’s would sit on her nightstand unanswered. Quietly they sat, piling until she started putting them in a box with other old letters, letters from Mike and Lyle and little trinkets that once met something, where they’d mingle with other words and grow quieter.

She’d met some new girls, wonderful friends, whom she could laugh with, play with, dance and lose sense. She went out during the evenings and missed Scott’s phone calls. She spent the night at friends’ houses on the weekends and talked to cute boys her
own age, her twenty-year-old lover growing duller and weaker, sliding further away into cluttered drawers in the recesses of her memory, sliding and falling until he blinked out, drawer closed, gone. With no goodbye, just silence, speaking more than she could ever say, the worst goodbye, finish, just a fading, a quiet on the other end.

Twenty-two.

Jamie and Virginia worked every Thursday night together at RB. Just the two of them, Jamie cooking, Virginia hopping. Joking and swaying, dancing in the skill of torment, Virginia loved Thursdays. Time with her brother, Jamie. Her brother Jamie.

Early in January, the first Thursday of the month perhaps, or something close, they worked as usual.

Jamie, Virginia said, do you work at the county building tonight?
Yeah, he replied, another night of janitoring.
Virginia laughs.
You measly janitor.
You filthy brat.
At least I don’t clean toilets.
At least I make my own money.
Fine.
Fine.

They smiled, Virginia leaning on the silver hop counter in the front, looking through the open space where food is passed back and forth, through and out. Jamie sitting on the tall yellow counter in the kitchen, picking at his stubby fingernails on the ends of his firm hands. Small, compact firm hands, like his body, so lean and perfect, but short, the same height as Virginia and even the same shoe size. His dark cream skin, like Milky coffee, glowing with grease and light from the fluorescent overheads. His father was an Indian, Jamie’d confided in Virginia once, hence the prejudice. Had run away while his mother was still pregnant and never laid eyes on the son he’d created. Virginia hated Jamie’s father. Knew that he must hate himself as well for abandoning such a
beautiful son, even if he’d never seen him, Jamie’s father had to know, somewhere inside that he’d had a hand in perfection.

Does it suck working up there? I mean, kidding aside. Aren’t your hours nine to midnight?

Yeah, those are my hours and yeah it sucks, but I need the extra money with no one helping with the payment since Scott moved.

You were glad to have him gone.

I was not.

Yes you were.

Just because you didn’t bat an eye doesn’t mean I didn’t.

Fuck you, Jamie. I missed Scott for at least a month.

Jamie laughed and shook his head.

Loyalty at its grandest.

Virginia walked back into the kitchen, toward the back to grab a towel.

Bite me, Jamie.

Where?

Anywhere you want, Virginia returns, sing-song play along voice, ha, ha ha.

Anywhere you want.

Jamie sliding off the counter, just leaning against it then, still picking at his hands, still otherwise occupied, detached he said, Well, kiddo, for where I’d like to bite you, you’d have to lift up your shirt.

He raised his head, looked Virginia Therese right her in green eyes, then her small breasts, then her eyes and held them. She leaned against the back sink, the towel she had sought in her hands, twisting, ringing. Then she laughed, sighed, laughed more.

Well, shit Jamie, I guess not anywhere you’d want.

She walked back to the front, shaking, heart beat pulsing in her skin, drumming, her head careening off damp walls. Anywhere you want. Fuck, what a stupid reply, but then who would ever say where as a retort to bite me, goddamn it, this wasn’t anything, nothing at all. Shit, it was Jamie. Just Jamie, her Jamie. Jamie who’d teased her and ruffled her hair and called her kid always. Always a kid, just a kid, his kid sister and that was it and he was just joking around again, just a different kind of joke, a different
caliber, but a joke all the—

I’d let you bite me anywhere you want.

Jamie standing right there, near her silver counter, in her part of the restaurant, standing there, leaning, smiling, his crooked teeth so personal shining at her, Virginia Therese, and big brown eyes, looking at her, little Virginia, young, green Virginia. Where would you like to bite me, kiddo—anywhere you want—where? Her voice too high, a little squeaky, not hers, definitely not hers, by no stretch could it be hers.

Um, I guess I’d bite your ear, Jamie.

Well, you’re welcome anytime.

And back to the kitchen, up on his counter. The ordermatic beeped.

Hi, what can I get for you?

Scratchy old voice, tinged with smoke saying, A double bacon cheeseburger, small fries, large chocolate shake and don’t put too much chocolate sauce in the shake cause last time made it way too chocolaty and I had to throw it away.

I’m sorry, ’mam. I’ll make sure to put the right amount in. Would you like this to stay or to go?

To go.

Thank you.

The ticket printing out. Virginia ripped it off with timid fingers, hung it on the wheel and spun, avoiding Jamie, slapping two patties on the grill. Don’t look at him, don’t look.

She made the shake a light sandal brown, hardly any chocolate. Stupid bitch for complaining. Virginia made the best shakes out of everyone, perfect consistency. And never too much flavor, dumb old lady.

Here’s your food, kid.

Bag in hand, Jamie bringing it to her, rather than passing it through the space, getting the change for her, putting his hand on her back as he opened the side door for her to exit. She saw him watching her from inside, watching her freezing fingers drop a quarter under the lady’s car and crawl down in the snow to find it, because the woman couldn’t live without that twenty-five cents. Watching as she blew on her hands to warm
them, while the woman tasted her shake to see if it would suffice; watching Virginia’s fake smile when the woman said, Fine, I guess it’ll do, honey. Watching her move uncertainly back to the building like treading water, but not water, mud, heavy and thick, coating her lungs, her stomach, her feet, with Jamie at the end, a bursting forth, gulp of air or not, a predator waiting on the surface, crouched, winded tight to spring.

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**Twenty-three.**

He opened the door as she neared. Held it open for her as she passed, watched her body as she moved to the cash register.

> Let’s close, Jamie said.

That’s a deal, she replied, relieved, ah. Her routine. Dismantle the ice-cream machine, wipe the counters, sweep, mop, count the money. Jamie and her would finish in the same amount of time, having worked so many Thursdays, all the same. She would drop the money in the safe at the same moment he poured out the mop water, then to the back, the little counter in the back, where they’d clock out.

> Why don’t you bite my ear?

Virginia’s head down, concentrating on her timecard that required no concentration. Her head raised.

> What?

> Why don’t you bite my ear?

He to her left, hands on the counter, both of their stomachs resting on its edge. He was smiling.

Virginia leaning over, slowly, gently. Making eye contact with him before she touched him, before her mouth barely opened to kiss his ear. Leaning back, she saw him still smiling.

> There. You got to bite me where you wanted. I’ll bite you back.

His lips kissing her left ear, kissing it tenderly, longingly, forever.

As he drew away, he said, Now we’ll have a secret.
Their time cards back in their slots, the two standing outside, Virginia down the three cement steps, on the rough pavement, Jamie locking the door. It was snowing, large innocent flakes that stuck to Virginia’s eyelashes, hair, clothes. She was looking up.

Why don’t you come back in here a minute, Gin?

Looking up when she said, Okay.

Said okay so quietly, to herself almost and caught a flake or two of snow in her mouth before she climbed the stairs.

The door shut quickly, Jamie’s back against the counter, his hands in front of him.

Remember where I said I wanted to bite you?

Virginia tentatively placing her hands on the bottom of her navy blue sweatshirt, on the ribbing that held it in place, curling her long fingers around the hem and slowly raising it to her neck.

Jamie’s hands touched her stomach, ran up to her small breasts. He pulled her white cotton bra from covering the left. She watched.

He smiled at her before he brought his face to her chest, his lips to her small nipple, cold, hard, scared.

She shaking as he moved his hands to her neck, grabbing her head, tilting it for his kiss. His long lover’s kiss that shifted Virginia’ guts, made them crawl up her back, made her heart pump extra blood that coated her skin in its red. Her hands gripping the back of his head, soft short brown hair in her fingers, her body to his, she kissed him back. Kissed him back so strong.

Then fear, oh god, fear. Virginia drove fast to her friend Nicole’s house. Opened the door quickly, ran to her room and cried. Cried for hours.

And poor Nicole, the girl who Virginia laughed with, danced with, played with, she could not comfort. God, couldn’t touch, but to stroke her hair and tell her all would be fine, just fine, don’t worry, Ginny, everything’s okay, but knowing of course it wasn’t, no, jesus christ, no. Definitely not okay.

Virginia continued to cry until midnight. Had to go home, had to drive to York. Nicole walked her to her car, saying again and again, It’ll be okay, with Virginia nodding slightly, hiccupping dryly.
Jamie's car there when she arrived, across the wooden bridge, sitting there fat and content. She parked next to it, walked inside.

On the couch, lovers entwined, her sister and Jamie, her favorite couple, the best couple, so honest, so pure. Virginia walked past, throwing a goodnight over her shoulder.

Back in the laundry room, going through her bag, Jamie came, whispered, Are you okay, kid? You're fine aren't you?

The word of the evening, Jamie. God, yes, I'm okay. Just fine.

And past him, straight to her room. She shut the door quickly and slept with it closed to her parents' confusion in the morning. Never a shut door. Never.

It stayed closed for six months.

Virginia sickly walked through hallways, teacher babble, homework, parental conversation. Her green eyes dimmed and she didn't eat as much. It had only been a week.

Then Thursday came crawling. Alone again with Jamie. Crying on sight would be too blatant so she simply didn't speak as she walked past him to the hop area. She spread American History books on her silver counter, perched on a stool and moved her eyes over the words, all illegible, her mind suddenly illiterate.

Jamie watching, sitting on his counter again, he watched. He didn't pick at his fingernails; he just leant forward, peering at Virginia through the space where food passed. Watching her nervously turn pages and pretend to ignore him.

He let her sit for half an hour. Let her squirm and fidget with her hair. Then approached, around her, then behind, hands on her shoulders, massaging, he said, How are you, kid?

Fine, Jamie.

No you're not.

Yeah, I am.

She kept her head on her books, down, thinking of his hands, his beautiful hands on her shoulders, rubbing, as he rubbed Anne's.
You don’t have to go through this alone, kiddo. Talk to me about anything, okay? I’ll help you any way I can.

Virginia shrugged off his hands and turned, so close to him, faces so close, his body so close and her mind so swollen.

What’s that supposed to mean, Jamie? I shouldn’t go through this alone—what about you? Are you feeling anything? Didn’t last Thursday happen to you too? Wasn’t that you with your tongue in my mouth? You. Wasn’t that you, my sister’s fiancé? You, my brother?

She cried, stupid tears streaming. Stupid, weak tears.

I mean that I wish you had someone else in your life, like I have Annie. I wish you could’ve gone home to someone’s arms last Thursday, to someone’s comfort. Do you see?

So you wouldn’t be the only cheat? she asked.

And Jamie shaking his head, turned from her, saying, No. So you wouldn’t be crying right now.

Virginia stared at his back walking away from her, thinking, *I'll always be crying, Jamie. Someone else wouldn’t stop that.*

Then another. Virginia’s stomach got tighter through the week, gripping her with claws on Thursday morning. Claws and fangs and unset blood.

She hadn’t spoken to Jamie alone since the preceding Thursday. She spoke to him with Anne at his side, his hand on Anne’s knee, his eyes on Anne’s face. Virginia talked with them both, sitting at their parents’ kitchen counter, holding on to every time Jamie laughed abruptly and kissed her sister in a moment of complete awe over what she said. Virginia watched Annie’s eyes never leave Jamie, never travel to her when she spoke, just Jamie. Watched how much she loved him.

How are you holding up?

Virginia smiled. A pained smile, pulling back her lips, displaying her white teeth, yet off, lips not stretching far enough, or not enough teeth, or too many.

I’m holding up all right. And you?

I’m all right too. How was your week?
I just talked to you yesterday, Jamie. Remember? You and Annie at the counter at Mom and Dad's. Told you guys all about my week, how soccer's starting and my classes suck and I'm growing apart from my friends for some reason that I just can't quite put my finger on. Hmmm. Maybe cause I don't laugh anymore. What do you think?

I saw you laugh yesterday.
Virginia's eyes caught him.
Then you never saw me laugh before.
Jamie looked at the fryers in front of him, French fries sputtering in their grease.

He met her pale, growing paler eyes.
I've been thinking about you, Gin. Thinking about you all the time, about that night and your beautiful little body and how good it felt to kiss you.

He lifted the fries from the oil, dumped them in a basket and stuck them in a bag, shooting it through the opening. Virginia went outside. She shivered in the cold and tried to think of the perfect reply, the answer. Hoping he'd touch her, claws in her stomach twisting tighter.

She entered the building, put her money in the till and Jamie was behind her, hands on her narrow shoulders, entering her shirt, on her bare skin.

I've been attracted to you for so long, he said, hands moving up her neck and down, again to her shoulders, rubbing hard, strong.

The first thing I liked was your legs. So beautiful. You're so tall and slender, not like Annie. She's more compact, you know, cause she's so much shorter.

Then he leaned his mouth to her neck, close to her ear.

Once when I was in the bathroom out at your parents' house, I watched you as you undressed to go to bed. Watched you climb into bed in just your little maroon underwear. Beautiful little Gin.

She turned. His face right there, meeting her.

What do I say to that Jamie? she asked. How do I take that?

Take it as you will, kid. I'm being honest with you. I'm telling you how I feel, how you affect me. We've got to be honest with each other.

Honest, huh Jamie?

Yeah.
I should tell you how I feel then?
Of course.
I feel like I love you, like I always have and I recognized it for the first time two Thursdays ago.

Jamie took half a step back.
Don’t love me, he said. I don’t love you. I won’t love you. It’s physical for me—just attraction. You’re gorgeous, Gin; that’s what I can’t resist.
Virginia took two steps back.
Fuck honesty if that’s your truth, Jamie, Virginia said, her voice dropping, low and targeted.

Gin, I care about you, it’s not that. God, don’t take it like that.
He closed the fresh gap, stepped up to her so that the presence of each body pressed into the presence of the other; took her hand.
I just feel so strongly toward you, Gin.
Virginia looked away, up, anywhere but his face coming closer.
Leaning in, he said, Maybe if we’d finished it, I wouldn’t feel this way.
She looked at him. Big brown eyes looking back, saying, it’s just me, Jamie. Just Jamie, your brother.
What do you mean—finished it? she asked.
Come to the back. I’ll show you.

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Twenty-four.

Virginia did not speak in her classes. She barely finished her homework. She fought openly with her father. She played soccer, but not very well, missing the ball and running laps without thinking. Her coach shaking his head, so hard to watch skill deteriorate.
Thinking she just didn’t love the game anymore. Lost passion. Sigh.

Virginia Therese met Jamie at a lake on the way out to her parents’ house. Met him after soccer practice, around nine in the evening, shin-guards still on, cleats, sweat.
He liked it more like that, forbidden in her parents' car in a deserted dirt lot, night cloaking.

She hated it, would rather him come to her window, her room in her parents' house with her sister two doors down. Rather him sneak in a window, than meet here, dressed in her soccer clothes, save for shorts, thrown in the backseat, steering wheel in the way, so clearly wrong.

It was the first time they met outside of RB. First time they made it on their own time. Crossed a line.

John couldn't talk to his daughter, so irrational, always on the verge of tears and taking everything he said as wrong.

He would go to her closed door, always closed now, his and Debbie's old records wafting out, sometimes Virginia's voice following the lyrics, knock, stick his head in.

How you doing, kid?

Fine, Dad, she'd say, shoving her journal into her nightstand, I'm fine.

He approached her bed and sat down next to her.

You've seemed so sad lately, Gin-o. What's wrong?

Nothing's wrong, Dad. I'm fine.

No, you're not, kid. I can tell. Why don't you talk to me?

Christ, Dad. There's nothing fucking wrong with me. Can't you just leave me alone?

John stood up, anger making his green eyes, shadowed perfectly in the face of his daughter, move, tear about the room.

Is it me, Gin? Am I a shitty father? I mean, I must be. I can't even talk to you without making you mad. What am I doing wrong, kid? Tell me what the hell is wrong with me.

And Virginia, reeling in the sarcasm of his voice, would roll over, turn her back, and say, God, Dad. It's not you, okay? People fight sometimes; it's no big deal.

Oh, I'm glad you don't think it's a big deal, kid. That makes me feel much better. It's no big deal to scream everyday, to lock yourself in your room and listen to sad, old music everyday, to quit doing your homework and stop eating. No big deal.
Fuck you, Dad, Virginia said quietly, head shaking. Fuck you.
Beautiful, kid. Just great.
And he’d leave, disgusted, nauseous, so confused. Daughter wasting away in front of him, behind a door he owned, for no reason. No reason at all.

Giving her a ride home one day, he brought it up again. Her eyes out the window, away.
Hey, kid, how are you? How have you been?
Virginia looked at him, something in her face had altered. A line on her forehead, maybe, a crease in her fresh, young skin.
Fine, Dad, she said. Just fine as can be.
Her hands clenched each other in her lap, fingers white with lack of circulation.
Silence.
Then John saying, Gin, sometimes I feel like a failure as a father when I look at you.
And silence again. Deeper than the two had ever known.

He convinced the girl to start seeing a counselor. That he would go too. For they’d reached that point, hadn’t they? Obviously John was doing something that was causing his daughter’s depression. Obviously it was he; his lack of communication skills, or his harsh words, something, anything. Just let us get some help, okay kid?
Fine.
Her name was Jerry. A nice woman with a beautiful friendly face, hair piled on her head and stylish clothes. A nice office. She must be happy, Virginia thought, quite.
Virginia sat in the middle of her parents on a soft couch as they told about her childhood to this stranger with a yellow legal pad.
I think she’s always competed with her sister, Debbie would say. I think she thinks that she doesn’t add up, that we love Annie more, which isn’t true. Not true at all.
We’ve given just as much time to Ginny.
Okay, Jerry would say, tell me more about the competition.
Well, she thinks that Annie’s better in school.
Mom, Annie is better in school. She gets better grades, learns more, does more homework; that isn’t some fabrication of mine.

Ginny, you are no less intelligent than your sister and you know it.

Okay, Jerry would say, let’s get back to the competition.

Well, Annie spends more time with John. They share interests—hunting, fishing, working on cars. I think Gin envies that.

Do you Ginny? Jerry asked.

No, Virginia said, I don’t like any of those activities, why would I envy them? I mean, just because my folks have never seen a soccer game of mine, or come to a choir concert, why should I envy time with Annie?

Kid, you’re exaggerating, John said. I’ve been to a concert of yours and we never missed a dance recital when you were younger.

When I was eight, Dad. Eight. Some years have gone by, you know.

Okay, Jerry said, let’s move along. John you think that Ginny’s having direct problems with you and the relationship the two of you have?

Yeah, John said, crossing his legs, leaning back into the couch a little.

I think she’s real unhappy with me. I think I don’t know how to communicate with her. She takes everything I say as negative—

When you tell me that the sight of me makes you feel like a failure as father, should I take it as positive? Virginia asked, looking at her father, prying with the same sarcasm he fired against her.

I meant that as insulting to me, kid. Not to you.

Oh, I see, Dad.

She looked at her hands. Time clicked by.

Go on, John, Jerry said.

She comes home from school and goes straight to her room, closes the door and turns on sad, old music. Bob Dylan and Neil Young. Sometimes when we knock, she’s crying, other times she’s just sitting on her bed listening to the music. Sometimes she’s doing her homework. She’s out of our reach; she’s cornered herself off.

Ginny, why do you do that?
Because I like to be alone, Virginia said, looking straight at Jerry. *I like to be alone.*

Okay, can you expand on that? Like why you like to be alone? Jerry asked.

No.

Hmmm. All right. John, do you have anything else to say?

No, that’s it, I think. I just want her to be happy. I want to be able to help her, not hurt her every time I approach.

A minute went by.

Ginny, do you have anything you’d like to add? Jerry asked.

No, the girl said. That sums it up.

She gave a cocky smile and rose to her feet, heading for the door. Enough, she thought, christ.

She called Charlie that night.

How are you, Charlie? It’s been months since we’ve talked.

Yeah, I know, he said, a strangeness in his voice, off somewhere, distant.

Well, are you good? she asked.

Yeah, I’m real good. I started dating a really great girl named Kelly. She’s in your class and real pretty. Smart too… We’ve been together for a couple months.

Wow, that’s wonderful, Charlie. You deserve a nice gal. Anything else new?

No. Nothing changes on the beach, Ginny. You know that.

Oh yeah.

How about you? Charlie asked.

Oh, I’m all right. Things are kind of tough right now, strange and hard, but I’m okay. I’ll make it through.

What’s wrong?

Oh, I’m just fighting with my dad a little and all my friends. Lots of stuff.

Well, that sucks. But, hey, can I let you go—I was just on my way out the door when you called.

Jeez, Charlie, you’ve never had to run off before.
Yeah, I know. I’m sorry, I just have to go; I’m supposed to be meeting Kelly right now and I’ve got a fifteen-minute drive.

Okay. Will you call me soon, then?
Sure. I mean, if I have time.
What?
If I have time, listen, I’ve gotta go, okay? I’ll, um, talk to you later, all right?
Okay?

Fine, Virginia said, small, so, so small. Fine.

And Charlie put the receiver down. Not even room for good-bye, just a hallow click.

Virginia looked at the cordless phone in her hand, then at her closed door, listened through it to laughter in the kitchen. Jamie’s laughter and Annie’s. So merry. She got out her pen and journal and wrote

_I sit here in my bed and I cry and I hate knowing that he is in the next room and I want to leave and I want to die. I read this poem yesterday and one line etched itself into my mind: War has its price and peace never lasts. I feel the price of war, I lose a little bit more of myself everyday in this on-going war with my father; and in the few precious moments that peace does come, I do not enjoy it; I do not relax, I do not take down my walls, for the knowledge that it will not last, the knowledge that it will leave no matter how hard I try to make it stay. So I lose one more battle and a little of me and a lot of tears everyday and begin to believe what comes out of his mouth so often. And Charlie. Now Charlie on top of it all. What will I do when the last shoulder turns? When no one’s left to cry on but the people making me cry. It is loss that moves mountains, not faith. God, not faith at all._

Virginia saw Jerry on Tuesdays, at about four o’clock in the evening, for about one hour. They spoke of Thursdays.

On their first meeting alone, no parents, Virginia said, Jerry, it’s not my folks. I have issues with them, yes. I think they love Annie more than me; I think they’re prouder of her than they are of me; I think a lot. But I know they love me. I do not doubt that and it’s not my father making me sad right now, though he swears it, always.
What’s wrong with me is much different.
Sitting for a moment, looking around, Jerry’s eyes intent upon her.
Then firmly, Virginia Therese said, I’m having an affair with my sister’s fiancé.
It’s been going on for about two months.
Oh, Jerry said. And Virginia became her most important client.

Twent-five.

Spring came. March and April and more sun and a little warmth.
Virginia saw Jamie at least once a week outside of RB and home. Saw him at his house or at the lake, in her car.
He became bolder, touching her under the water in her parents’ hot tub when the jets were on high. With Annie right beside him.
Annie always got out first, to shower first, a routine developed long ago for Sunday morning hot tubbing. Jamie and Virginia would stay until Anne came back dressed, towel on her head, saying, Okay, who’s next?
Jamie would sit across from Virginia, his foot moving up her leg, smile on his face. He didn’t notice that she never smiled, never laughed. Didn’t notice how often she cried while he kissed her, how hollow her face had become, and the new lines in her forehead.

Toward the end of April, Jamie and Annie got an apartment together. Jamie’s parents had moved to Helena from the beach and they took over the trailer.
Virginia hated it, hated that Annie wouldn’t be living at home any longer, that Jamie would have her to himself, always. That Jamie and Anne would share a bed; that Virginia would meet him in their home, rather than his alone. Another step toward their marriage. ‘Til death and all.
Virginia went there one day during school, skipping afternoon classes, strong, she was sure, and solid, god, so solid. He would listen and understand.
She climbed the old stairs; the door was half open; Jamie stood right inside, smoking a cigarette, the first Virginia had seen of the habit.

I didn’t know you smoke, Jamie.

There’s a lot you don’t know about me, kid.

Virginia closed the door and sat down on the couch.

Jamie, there are things I have to say to you and you have to listen.

Jamie sitting down beside her, cigarette in his right hand, ash-tray on the armrest of the couch.

Shoot, he said.

First, I think that you and Annie shouldn’t get married. I mean, think about it, Jamie. You guys can’t have a perfect relationship if this is going on between us. There has to be something wrong. Don’t you see that it would be so wrong to marry her?

Why, Gin? I love your sister, just like I always have.

But you care about me, too. You’re having an affair with me, Jamie, you have to care about me.

Jamie crushed the end of his cigarette in the tray and rose to get another from the kitchen. The smoke hurt Virginia’s eyes, the smell aching her head.

Jamie returned, sat, lit his new cigarette, dragged, exhaled, and said, Kid, I told you from the very start of this thing that I didn’t care about you like that and I know you care about me and that’s real flattering, but I emphasize again that you shouldn’t. Because you’re a face and body to me, Gin. That’s it. That’s all you’ll ever be.

Virginia looked away.

I still don’t think you should marry Annie. It isn’t fair to her. I mean what about in five years, Jamie? What about when I’m twenty and you’re twenty-five and you and Annie have been married for five years and I’m still meeting you at the fucking lake?

You’ll be even better looking, kid.

He smiled, Even better.

Virginia smoothed out the fabric on her pants, spread her hands on her legs, looked at her fingers. She’d stopped wearing rings.
We’ve got to stop this, Jamie. Stop seeing each other. Go back to the way we were— you as my big brother and me as your little sister and everything good and innocent between us. Okay?

Jamie had risen and gone into the bathroom.

Hey, kid, come talk to me while I take a bath.

No shower in the apartment, only a bathtub. Virginia thought it was romantic almost, a reason to slow down.

She stood, entered the bathroom, put down the toilet seat and sat. Jamie’s naked body so familiar, a routine image, seen a thousand times. His beautiful body.

She watched him climb into the water, wash his hair, the front of his body, his legs, his face. Watched him rinse, neither speaking.

Come wash my back, he said.

Virginia approached, knelt on the ground and washed, scrubbed with the washcloth he provided, rubbed ‘til his back was red.

When he stood, whole body erect, he said, Look what you do me, kid? See?

And he took her to the bedroom he shared with the girl’s sister and promised her this would be the last. Just this one last time.

Virginia skipped school with Anne a week later. Annie suggesting they go hiking, such a beautiful day. So they drove to York and hiked the huge hill across from their parents’ house. They built a fire on a ridge and talked like they had when they still lived together, when there wasn’t a canyon between them that only one could see.

Sitting on a rock, hands near the fire to keep off the briskness of new air, Virginia asked, What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done, Annie?

Anne Catherine sat for a minute, looked in the flames, then up at her sister.

I cheated on Jamie once. With that guy, Tim, that I worked with at the Overland—you know the guy I got drunk with when I wrecked the Dodge. Yeah, I was naked in his bed and ready to sleep with him when it hit me what I was doing. I told Jamie about it and he was understanding. He was mad, but let it go. I hope he knows how much I love him, how much I regret it.

Virginia said nothing.
Anne looked at her sister, looking into the fire. They sat in silence until they climbed down. Virginia thanking it every second, fearing the reiteration of the question to her. For had Anne asked about the worst thing her little sister had ever done, Virginia Therese would’ve had to lie. Lie and lie and lie.

Twenty-six.

Summer edged up like a blade. Days warming, growing hot. School ended. Soccer continued, though Virginia skipped practice at least three times a week and sat on the sidelines during games, the coach having lost all patience with her.

Jamie lurked in her corners. Jerry told her to tell her parents.

Ginny, you have to tell your parents, to tell someone. You have to get this out in the open or it will never stop.

But Virginia couldn’t tell her parents; didn’t know if she was ready for it to stop; didn’t know if she could face Anne’s eyes the second she found out why Jamie’s hands had felt different for so long.

Virginia took deep breaths that didn’t give her air. She imagined herself turning purple and knew she was lacking oxygen.

And she started to bite her nails.

John would look into her room, still the only place she frequented, the living room long used to her absence, the kitchen no longer missing her. The house knowing she was gone. Look in and see her reading or sleeping or just listening; scratched records turning and turning.

At the end of May he looked in on her listening, just listening, knees pulled up, back against the headboard of her bed.

Hey, Dad, she said.

Hey, kiddo.

He looked at her sadly, falling away.

Come in here, Dad. I’ve got a song to play for you.
John came in quietly, closed the door behind him, so surprised, pleased. He sat on her bed as she put a cassette in her stereo.

I picked this up today. I hope you remember.

Quiet for a moment, just the sound of the reels turning slowly on the tape, prior to music. Then Dylan, the Bob Dylan she couldn’t recognize two years before in his car on return from Mike’s house. And the same song.

*Down the street the dogs are barking and the day is getting dark. As the night comes gently calling, the dogs will lose their bark. You’re right from your side, I’m right from mine. We’re all just one too many mornings and a thousand miles behind.*

Virginia sat on the floor next a speaker, head against the wall, eyes closed. She hummed.

I still love the words, Dad. That’s how I feel, you know, like I’m one too many mornings behind. Like, if I could’ve woken up one day sooner, all would be well.

John just looked at his daughter, not pushing, knowing he couldn’t push, that it would drive her deeper. He felt her there, little girl lost in something, saw that image in her mirror eyes, his eyes in another face, saw something looming like the tidal waves they’d run from in Ocean Shores, saw the sea crashing in her tired skin, saw her struggling in the swells near the jetty, bloody and scarred from mussels.

Virginia’s eyes stayed shut though salt squeezed from them, dripping from her chin to her clothes, steadily.

John stood and touched the girl’s head, bent and kissed her fine, silky hair, told her he loved her and left, knowing she was further gone than he could go.

Letters to Charlie returned unopened with a bright red stamp on their front, reading *Return to sender: Refused.*

On the third, Virginia stopped crying. She sat calmly in her living room after her family had gone to bed and wrote a clean, simple letter.
Dearest Charlie,

If this one comes back, I'll burn it with its contents and never try again. I know we've both been through a ton. I moved. You stayed. Of course we'd grow apart. We are naive to think things last forever—friendship, love, anything. It fades.

I can forget now and this gap, this huge distance between us that won't close. I can forget it, because I'll remember you. In your entirety. Because we loved each other once and you were the best I've known.

I'm returning your bracelet, not to hurt you, but to remind you. I don't need it. I'll remember always.

I wish you everything.

Love, Ginny

That letter was not returned.

Virginia planned a trip back to Ocean Shores for her birthday. Jerry thought it would be good for her and they had a deal that upon the girl's return, the affair would be made public, through a friend of the family, an unbiased person, one of her father's friends, who would know how to bring it all forth. And it would end. Forever.

Jamie and Annie had gone back a week before Virginia was due to fly from Helena. She would arrive in Seattle on June 16, her sixteenth birthday. For her birthday gift, Jamie and Annie would meet her at the airport and take her around the city—aquarium, science center, space needle. The whole works.

Twenty-seven.

Eleven o'clock in the morning. Annie and Jamie stand at gate C12 in the Seatac Airport. They hold hands.

Virginia Therese walks down the tunnel. She is wearing new clothes, but feels old, weathered, wrinkled. Her eyes do not light up as those around her do when seeing
the family or friends there to greet them. Her eyes find Annie and Jamie, they go to the joined hands, then away. She feels nauseous.

Hey, kiddo. Happy birthday! Annie says, embracing her, arms circling the girl’s thin waist.

Jamie smiles and hugs her, whispers, Happy birthday. *You look great.*

Virginia Therese pulls back. She thanks them both. They venture away.

The day drags its feet, like running in sand, getting nowhere. Virginia isn’t interested in the fish, the seals, the sea anemones, the trinkets and gizmos. She doesn’t see them, their colors, their shapes.

Anne goes to the bathroom, or turns away, or reads a sign and Jamie’s hand coasts down Virginia’s back, touches her ass, her hips, then up. He is full of whispers.

They are meeting Desiree and her parents at the Tacoma mall, where they’ll trade Virginia off to other hands.

The three arrive early, meandering through clothing departments. Anne finds a shirt to try on and retreats to a dressing room. Jamie pulls Virginia to him.

I should go with her, he says. If I stay out here all I’ll want to do is touch you.

Virginia looks in his eyes. She feels that soon she’ll hate him.

Desiree appears and Virginia glows. Ah. Her friend, her age-old friend. This will repair, this will right all the tipped scales, the unleveled playing field, the off-handed caresses. Her old friends to surround her, to feed her, to make her fat and healthy. To erase the lines from her forehead.

Virginia hugs Anne goodbye and swims away. Jamie she does not touch.

Desiree’s parents take them to a restaurant where they tie balloons to Virginia’s hair, her clothes, her chair and sing a strange rendition of happy birthday. Virginia eats a steak for the first time in months and laughs. And laughs.

In the car, Desiree says, God, Ginny, so much has changed in Shores. You’re not going to believe it. New buildings all over and new people. We’re going to have a blast though. I’m so glad you’re here.

Me too, Des. God, me too.
They go to a bonfire in the woods that night. Old, old friends all asking about Virginia, how’s she been, what it’s like in Montana, telling her it’s so great to see her.

And Mike appears. Oh, lord, Michael Baxter. Michael whose heart she broke, who told Kelly Virginia was crazy. Crazy as a loon and keep her away from Charlie, she’ll only steal him or do something to fuck everything up. Ah, Michael.

Virginia is sitting on a log when he walks up. She’s drinking a forty-ounce bottle of Rainer and talking to a boy named Ryan.

Mike stops, turns, almost retreats, turns back and approaches.

Ginny…

She looks up, fresh, smiling. Her face is red with the heat of the fire, her hand wrapped idly around the huge bottle.

Michael, she says.

He takes Ryan’s place and looks at her, remembers her. Remembers his room on salty afternoons, the way she smelled, her touch.

How are you? he asks.

I’m better, she says, much better.

He nods and looks into the fire.

So you drink now, he says.

Yeah, I drink now. People always go back on their vows, Mike, especially when they make them so young. Of course I drink.

She takes a swig. Smiles.

Then they talk, spill out the last two years. Virginia tells of school, friends, her parents’ restaurant. Everything new, save for Jamie. She omits Jamie completely; she shoves him away.

Mike talks of dating Roxy, Charlie’s sister, their living together and the messy breakup just months ago.

They laugh and prod in old ways. Michael puts his hand on Virginia’s knee. She lets it stay.

The bonfire burns low, people leave. Mike says they should continue down on the beach, go for a drive, drink some more beer, night still young and so much more to say.
Desiree concedes, so they climb in Michael’s Blazer. Virginia and Mike in the front. Desiree and a boy named David in the back.

Mike drives to the spit, a string of sand spilling into the bay, parks near the water and shuts off the engine. His arm goes quickly around Virginia and she leans into him, weaving, drunk.

Desiree and David sit in the backseat attempting small talk. Desiree has a boyfriend named John who means much more than David. His hands are shooed away, his advances declined.

The couple in the front breathe into each other for what seems like hours. Meeting under old ground, they hold and kiss. Virginia’s hands in Mike’s hair, on his rough-hewn face, mingling with his fingers. For that moment she loves him again, loves him more than anything.

Virginia tumbles out of the truck to piss. She doesn’t bother to go anywhere, just squats outside the door, insiders looking on.

When she climbs back in Desiree says, Can we go, Gin? I think it’s been enough for your first night in town.

Virginia hiccups and giggles.

Yeah, she says. Definitely enough. Take us home Michael!

The girls stumble up the stairs to Desiree’s rooms, on the third floor of her parents’ beach house—two rooms and a bathroom, just to herself.

Laughing, Virginia says, I’m sorry, dear Des, for making out with Mike when you guys were in the backseat.

It’s okay, Gin. I’ve already forgiven you.

Desiree laughs as Virginia falls down trying to remove her pants.

No go with Dave, huh?

No. Definitely no go with Dave. I’ve been with John for years now and I’m not saying that I’ve been completely faithful, but Dave’s not worth the aftermath, if you know what I mean.

Yeah, I know.

The girls crawl into bed.

Des, it feels so good to be here, Virginia says as she fades.
Yeah, Ginny, it does.

Twelve-eight.

Another bonfire the next night, just down on the beach rather than the woods. More old people and Scott. Shit, Scott.

Scott who moved back to Ocean Shores after California. Scott whose hair has grown long and rough again, whose arms are tan, smile so genuine.

He approaches carefully, timidly, a dog that’s just been scolded.

How are you, Ginny?

I’m fine, Scott. How are you? How was California?

It was all right. Although I wish I’d never gone.

He looks in her face to see if she understands his meaning, saying under his words, had I never gone, I’d never have lost you.

It was good that you went, Scott. Good for everyone, I think.

Was it good for you?

Virginia looks at him, trying to remember loving him, dreaming of him, holding him. Looks at his face for signs. She sighs, rubs her hands on the biceps of her crossed arms, cold in her small T-shirt.

Looking away, she says, Yes. It was good for me, Scott.

Scott looks away. He downs his beer.

Are you cold, Gin? I have a coat in my truck.

No, Scott, that’s okay. I’m fine.

Scott moves away, reappears in minutes with a flannel coat, old, one he had when they dated. Virginia Therese puts it on, smiling.

Thank you, Scott. You’ve always been such a gentleman.

Scott smiles.

Virginia looks away, around the circle crowding the fire. She searches faces one by one until her eyes land on Charlie. Directly across the flames, staring back. Charlie.

He ventures over, slowly. Scott fades away.
Hello, Ginny.

Hello, Charlie.

Can we go talk?

She nods and follows him away from the fire, down toward the water where tourists stroll in bare feet, rolled jeans.

Virginia does not look at him. She watches the sun sink, thinks of the settings in the mountains somehow and flashes to Jamie’s face, then gone.

Charlie is saying, I’m sorry, Ginny. I’m sorry for all that happened. I didn’t send your letters back—it was Roxy. She hated you because of Mike, because she always thought Mike still loved you, thought he always compared her to you. And Kelly got to be good friends with my sister and she’s never liked me having such a good friend who’s a girl. And I really care about Kelly; she’s the first girl that’s loved me back, Ginny. You know.

I loved you back, Charlie.

Not how I needed you to.

Charlie takes one of her hands, holds it next to his body.

I never wanted to lose you, Ginny. I am so sorry.

Then he holds her, holds her so close to him that she feels for a moment it’s never changed.

Mike arrives while the two are gone. He asks around for his newly reclaimed love, showing slight anger when told she’s away with Charlie—one of those two hugging down there by the shore.

When they return, Mike grabs her hand, kisses her. Scott is near and looks away, sickened, sad. Virginia feels treacherous wearing his coat.

Michael is attached; he will not let her go again. No. This time she’s his. For good, forever.

Virginia cannot say that she was drunk the night before. Senses impaired and not thinking straight. Can’t say that she does not want him as her one true love again. Wants only Charlie of the men here, wants only his arms around her waist, his hand on her knee.
Virginia cannot break his heart again, cannot hurt another, so many lying in her filthy wake.

She’ll leave in a week, can carry Michael on her arm for those seven days, freeing him with a predetermined separation.

Michael tells her that she holds him, has always, will forever. So hard to ever let go.

Virginia drinks her second beer, then third. She smiles at Mike, holds his hand, says he’s always been so flattering.

You deserve it though, Ginny, so easy to flatter. You’re so wonderful, beautiful, special. The most amazing woman I’ve ever known.

Virginia kisses his hand.

Thank you, Mike.

Twenty-nine.

Roxanne and David leaving two days later. Leaving for a night to spend some time together. Desiree and Virginia alone in the house.

No parties, no drinking, smoking. You know what you shouldn’t do.

Of course, say the girls. We promise.

They’ve already planned a huge party, the entire beach invited. Bring your friends, everyone together.

Desiree is at work earlier in the evening, gets off from her hostessing job around six.

Virginia is at the house alone, writing in her journal, a letter to her dearest Charlie.

*Charlie, it was so important to be with you the other night, to see you again, to speak to you. I wish you could’ve held me forever. There’s been such a gap in me since I lost you, an unfilled slot, like an empty stable in a full barn, all the other horses stamping and frothing, yet this one space so empty, the most important, the one that holds the others*
together. I’ve had such a hard time lately—this thing with Jamie that I haven’t been able to talk to you about—has done such strange things to me, made me so different. And all I’ve wanted is to lean on someone, someone who loved me for more than superficial reasons. That was you, my beloved best friend, for years. I never doubted your feelings, your love. I hope this is a new start. I hope we’ll make it through all the shit on the sides of us.

I love you, dear friend, more than I ever have.

Ginny

A knock on the door. Two flights of stairs to run down to answer it, Virginia skips, so happy. Michael stands outside.

He hugs her first, grips her tight, then pulls back.

Hand still on her hip, he says, We’re going to the drive-in theatre in Aberdeen—want to come?

When will we be back? she asks.

Oh, ten at the latest, I think.

Sure, that’ll be fun, she says. Let me grab my shoes and stuff.

They stop at the restaurant where Desiree works, Virginia running in to tell her of the new plans.

Desiree looks disappointed.

We’re having a party at my house tonight, she says.

I know, Des. I’ll be back by ten at the latest. That’s plenty of time. Okay?

Desiree looks at the wet mark on Virginia’s shirt, looks at her eyes.

Have you been drinking already? Desiree asks.

No, I just opened a Zima in the car and spilled it all over myself, Virginia laughs. I hope this isn’t a sign for the night to come.

Desiree smiles at her friend.

Fine, she says. Have a good time.

Virginia hugs her, says, I’ll see you soon, so soon, then off, jumping into the front of Mike’s blazer, to the drive-in. Oh, the drive-in.
Virginia the only girl. Three other boys and Mike in the blazer, plus three carloads of others. They like the addition of her, a novelty, the beauty amongst them that they all can claim.

Half-way to Aberdeen, a guy in the back swings out a bottle of Seagram’s 7 and a liter of 7-up.

Hey, Ginny—you a friend of seven and seven.
She turns.
Who?
The boy holds up the bottles.
Seven and seven, he says. A swig of Seagram’s, chased with 7-up. You’ll love it.
Virginia watching the ritual back and forth in the backseat, then up to her. She laughs, squints, pours in the alcohol, screaming on its heals the 7-up. Grimacing, she laughs again.

Not bad.
Have another, they say.
She does. And another and another.
She’s giggling madly when they enter the theatre, laughing at the woman passing tickets through Mike’s window. Mike is smiling at her, his drunken little girl. The boys in the back tease her.

A bit of a lightweight, huh Gin?
She swings her head in their direction, First time I’ve drunk hard stuff, she says, giggling more, should’ve warned me.
But they all laugh, yeah right, warn you, why do you think we gave it to you in the first place?

The screen is blank, the space a little clearing in dense forest. A divot. Mike parks his truck, Virginia tumbles out. The day is getting dark.

A group of boys from her old class approach, absent at the other parties. Hugs all around, Goddamns, and good to see you, and shit, you look good, and how’s it all been, flung back and forth, Virginia leaning on one of them, then the other, head lolling forward and back, elastic. She can’t see Mike.
She’s sitting on the ground, how did I get here… shifting in her mind, her eyes. John, Desiree’s boyfriend sits on her right. He’s saying, What else have you been doing?

Else? she asks. What have I been doing already?

Well, you told me about the first bonfire in the woods and the bonfire on the beach, all the boys you guys were with, the spit with Mike and David. Leave anything out, Gin? I mean, I have the right to know what my girlfriend’s doing behind my back.

Virginia tries to rewind.

Des didn’t do anything wrong, John. She’s been totally loyal to you. I’m the one who’s been fooling around.

She leans on John’s knees, Listen, buddy, don’t be mad at her, please. She’s been perfect. I swear.

John pats the drunk girl’s head, smiles.

You didn’t do anything wrong in telling me, Ginny.

Then up and gone. Virginia’s head swings in another direction. In front of her, ah, a boy named Nathan. Old lover of Teresa’s, but been with Cassandra for years. Heard they’re breaking up, Nathan a cheat or something, some girl in Aberdeen for months, sleeping with her behind Cassandra’s back and finally she found out and they’re on the out and out.

Nate, she says. I haven’t seen you forever.

Hello, Ginny, he says.

He helps her to her feet, they idly chat. Virginia fades…

Someone puts her back in Mike’s truck. She rolls around; it seems late, extremely late. Mike sits behind the wheel, staring, glaring. Virginia tries to smile.

What’s wro—

Did you enjoy making out with Nathan against the side of my truck for half an hour, Ginny? Did you?

Virginia swings her head to the window, looking for the image, calling it back. It will not come.

What?

Did you enjoy making out with Nathan against the side of my truck for half an hour in my plain view?
Virginia spins again.
No...

She’s pissing in the men’s bathroom, Mike in a stall next to her, her stall completely open. *How did I get here*...

Then Mike in the headlights, Virginia’s head rising from its rest on the window. Mike busting a gate to the drive-in, confused, she looks around. No one near, the ticket box empty, no cars. Locked in. She looks at the glowing digital clock on the dash. 3:00. *Home no later than ten, I swear.*

She closes her eyes again. Mike jumps in beside her, puts the blazer in gear and drives over the chain.

They stop at Taco Bell, Michael smearing hot salsa on three soft-shelled tacos. Virginia sips a coke.

Through the food in his mouth, Mike says he’s sorry.

You’re not mine after all, Ginny. I just wish you were. I know all this is temporary—you, me, this stay of yours here. I know you’ll go back to Montana and I’ll fade away again and hopefully you won’t hate me this time, but you’ll let me go. I know all that. It’s okay.

God, Mike. No it isn’t. I’m so sorry. I honestly don’t remember making out with Nathan—I remember him coming up to me, talking to him a bit, then it’s blank. A huge black screen, fuzzy in the corners. It’s a lot of things, Mike, but it’s not okay.

She leans to him, kisses his mouth reeking of tacos.

I am so sorry.

His arm goes around her. They drive to Ocean Shores in silence, anger dissolved.

Mike deposits Virginia Therese at Desiree’s house, kissing her at the door, the small girl still swaying, holding onto the doorframe, Mike’s arm to kiss him.

Thanks, she says. I’m sorry again.

Don’t be. I forgave you in seconds.

He kisses her again, jumps in his car, pulls away.

Virginia opens the door with the key she was given, a registered guest. The stairs confront her, all of them to climb.
As she latches the door behind her, Desiree’s voice sounds from upstairs.
You’re a lying fucking bitch, Ginny!
Stunned, she pauses for a moment, swimming. *Lying fucking bitch how did I get here...*

She goes to the second story of the house, to the kitchen and pages Mike, knows he’ll just turn around, so soon departed. Then leaves. Back down the stairs, out the front door, down the road, walking fast, head hung, arms crossed, cold.

Mike’s headlights disturb her, pulling up. She gets in.
Desiree screamed at me, she says, barely crying, silent tears.
What?
She called me a lying fucking bitch. I don’t know what I’ve done.
Mike’s hand goes to her knee, pats gently, says, It won’t last, Ginny. I’m sure you guys will work it out tomorrow.

Virginia hunkers.
Mike drives to his house, shared with his mother, a change from the one Virginia used to know, up the beach in Copalis.

They sneak in, go to Mike’s room, littered.
Want a pair of boxers to sleep in? Those jeans don’t look very comfortable.
Virginia looks at him. She feels old, older. She runs her hand over her forehead, sensing the lines, like neon.

I don’t think I should take off my pants Mike, she says. Then smiling, For any reason.
Mike nods.
They sleep entwined, fully clothed.

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**Thirty.**

Desiree knocks on the front door of Mike’s house at 6:00 a.m.

Mike’s mother pounds on the door to his room, Mike stands, opens it slightly.
Is Ginny here? his mother demands.
Yeah, he says quietly. She needed a place to stay, Mom.

Mike’s mother shakes her head, knows of their past, her son’s infatuation, says, A friend of hers is here. Wake her up.

Virginia is awake already, dragging.

Mike holds her for a minute, squeezes her hand, tells her everything will be fine.

Just fine.

She walks to the front door slowly, reluctantly.

The two friends walk silently to Desiree’s car—a Geo Metro of her parents’—white, small, absurd.

They climb in. Virginia sighs. Her head aches, her temples turned soft.

Your mom’s been calling, Desiree says. She’s called everyone in town. They’re all looking for you. Some friend of yours in Montana ran away and her parents are sure that she’s with you or something. You’ve got a lot of phone calls to make. Your mom didn’t know Nikki’s number so we can say you were there.

Virginia nods, swallows, checks another box in her mind.

That’s not all, Gin.

Virginia looks at her friend, eyes saying, please don’t say anything else. Please oh please. Don’t.

Notice anything about my windshield?

Virginia looks forward for the first time. A crack spans the width of the tiny car, a lovely fracture.

Desiree sighs.

After you got done telling John everything we’d been doing—the parties, bonfires, late nights with other boys (though I’ve been entirely loyal—he decided to come calling, being the overprotective, psychotic boyfriend that he is—which you knew. He found me in the parking lot at Dick’s, talking to some people and before saying anything, came up and punched my windshield.

She looks at Virginia, who stares straight ahead, through the crack, at Mike’s house where they still sit.
His hand might be broken, Ginny. But that’s not the biggest problem—we worked everything out. I told him you were drunk and lying, that you were known to do that sometimes.

Virginia laughs a little.
Am I known to do that, Des?
Of course not, but I wasn’t going to tell him the truth, Gin. We’ve gone two years avoiding that entirely.
They look at each other and laugh.
Smiles fading, Desiree says, We have to get my windshield fixed before my parents get home.
Okay, Virginia says. I have about two hundred dollars in cash. We can call places in Aberdeen at 8:00 when things open. No problem.
She thinks fleetingly that all can be simply solved.
Are you ready for the rest? Desiree asks.
Virginia’s eyes swivel. No more, no more, no more.
There’s more? she whispers.
Yes, Desiree says, hands on the steering wheel. While you were off getting drunk at the drive-in, making out with Nathan—the whole town knows about that, by the way, including Cassandra, who has sworn to kick your ass the next time she sees you—I was throwing the house party we’d planned. I told everyone the upstairs was off limits, my rooms and all, but Kelly didn’t listen. She went through all your things, including your journal, and found a letter you’d recently written to Charlie, with a line reading something like I wish you would’ve held me forever. So she thinks you’re fucking around with him, and you know that her and Cassandra are real good friends.

Virginia squints.
Needless to say, those two girls aren’t real happy with you, Gin.
Needless to say, Virginia returns.
She spins, just going to the drive-in, she thinks, a little fun with the boys, back by ten at the latest and then a party and all’s well.
Desiree drives home.
They clean the house, stash beer cans, mop up the dirt and fluid. Virginia calls her mother, Yep, sorry, yep. Nope. Um, yeah, I was at Nikki’s. I forgot to tell Des, yeah, I know it was stupid. No, I don’t know where she is—haven’t talked to her for days. Sorry again. Yeah. Okay. Okay. Love you too. Bye.

She begins calling the other parents her mother called. Half the town wondering where she slept last night.

All’s fine until her friend Lura’s mother. Oh, you were at Nikki’s? That’s strange, because I just called her and she said you weren’t there.

Huh, that is strange, because I was. Don’t know. Okay, bye.

Virginia Therese hangs up the phone. Her upright image in parents’ eyes slipping through her fingers, such a dishonest girl, they’ll say, blatantly lied to me on the phone that time when she was nowhere to be found—God knows where she really was—probably screwing around with some guy; heard she’s turning into quite the little fox. Sad, isn’t it? Used to be so good.

Virginia sighs. She thinks of hands, different shapes, those she’s touched and held. Scott’s and Mike’s and Charlie’s and Jamie’s. His crooked teeth smile at her. She looks away.

Desiree asks, You okay, Gin?

Yeah, it’s just that Lura’s mom had already called Nikki and been told that I wasn’t there, so I was caught lying to her. Lying through my teeth. I feel my identity shriveling, Des, like a grape in salt-licked sunshine.

You’re no grape, Ginny.

Virginia looks at her friend, standing tall in the doorway. Beautiful, she thinks, Desiree’s thick brown hair, slightly wavy, growing long past her shoulders, perfect skin and a woman’s body. Virginia wonders when she grew up.

Why don’t you start calling windshield shops, she says.

Virginia pulls out a phone book, hides in the task. She gets a quote for 350 and takes it, hangs up without asking questions.

They pool their money. Desiree comes up with the other 150. They drive to Aberdeen, thirty minutes. Virginia thinks of the night before.
The girls arrive at the windshield place and are told that the windshield is being ordered—will be there in a couple days—come on back then. Sorry.

They walk slowly back to the car.

Let’s just drive away, Virginia says.

Desiree laughs. How about if we come up with a story instead?

Virginia concedes, though she wants her friend to know she wasn’t joking. No, not at all. Let’s just drive away. Please.

Roxanne and David are home when the girls arrive. Their eyes are angry and their first words sneer, Who puked on the floor?

What? in unison. What?

Desiree and Virginia are led to an enormous pile of vomit on the first floor, absorbing into baking soda, right in line to the bathroom. They had missed it, somehow, in their focus on the upstairs.

The four stand around the vomit, transfixed. Neither of the girls speak.

It smells like alcohol, David says.

They look at each other. Desiree’s eyes flash brilliance.

God, Ginny, it must have been Chris or John after we got back from the drive-in, she says. Those sick bastards. I can’t believe they didn’t tell us.

The parents forget the vomit at their feet, their heads to each other, then to the girls. The drive-in? Roxanne asks.

Oh, yeah, God, I’m sorry we didn’t tell you guys, Desiree says. The guys invited us to the drive-in last night and it sounded like so much fun, that we couldn’t pass it up, so we went in my car—Ginny, John, Chris, and I—and a bunch of people met us there. God, and it was the craziest night.

Desiree looks at her parents. They’re intent.

What made you think you could go to the drive-in? Roxanne asks. You’ve never even driven out of Ocean Shores.

God, I don’t know, Mom. I mean, I know how to drive, so I thought it’d be fine. Anyway, there’s more to the story. While we were there, Gin and I were milling around outside my car and these guys came over and started talking to us and wouldn’t leave us
alone. John finally came back and told them to take a hike, but they started talking shit to him so John and the main guy start pushing each other and then it turns into this full-blown fight, and John ends up body-slamming the guy on the windshield of my car. It made an enormous crack and that’s where we were just now—we felt so bad about it, that we went to town to try to get it fixed this morning before you guys came home, but they had to order the new windshield. We even have the money to pay for it.

Virginia nods along.

Roxanne and David soften. Oh, girls, you know you shouldn’t have gone to the drive-in, but you’re sweet to try to patch things up like that.

The girls smile. Sorry, they say. Especially about the vomit.

Is John okay, Roxanne asks, moving the girls upstairs, away from the pile, David staying behind to clean.

Yeah, Desiree says. His right hand is pretty beat-up from hitting the guy, but he’ll be fine.

A breath of ease sways between the girls, gently sways their hair, smooths their lips.

Roxanne takes them to Dick’s for groceries, anything they want, take their fill. They get candy and soda and chips—Let’s just have a quiet night, Desiree says, just you and me, Gin and screw everyone else.

Virginia smiles. Wonderful, Des. You’re so wonderful.

They walk out of the store, move toward the car. Roxanne is ahead of the girls, pushing a cart full of bags. A voice yells, Desiree!

The girls turn to look. A car with Cassandra and Kelly inside. Lovely.

Virginia contemplates following Roxanne, but she moves over with Desiree, staying behind her as she speaks to these two new foes.

Are you going to the party tonight? Cassandra asks, ignoring Virginia, focusing on Desiree.

No, Desiree says, We’re just going to stay home—we’ve done enough lately.

That’s for sure, Cassandra says. She looks at Virginia

Heard you had fun last night.

Virginia reels.
Listen, Cassandra, I was drunk—so, so drunk. I swear I don’t remember making out with Nathan. I was just drunk. It was a stupid drunken episode—we all have them. Cassandra is not swayed. That’s bullshit, Ginny. I know you’ve always wanted Nathan.

What?
Kelly interceding are you fucking around with Charlie too?
She waves pages torn from Virginia’s journal over her head, like a ranting lawyer, here’s the evidence, you can’t refute it.

Jesus, Kelly, Charlie is my best friend. He’s been my best friend for four years. That’s all, okay?
She feels tears coming. She swallows rapidly, don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.
Kelly laughing. He’s not your best friend, Ginny. You moved two fucking years ago, remember? He let you go, why can’t you do the same?
Virginia trembles, she eyes the pages of her journal on the seat of Kelly’s stupid red convertible, wanting to grab them, to set them on fire, to break the girl’s nose, to prove her wrong.
Desiree takes her arm, Come on, Gin, let’s go. Let’s just get out of here.
She glares at the girls in the car, she keeps her hand on Virginia’s arm as they walk away.
Twenty feet separating the pairs, Cassandra flings a word to follow.
Whore!
And Virginia crumbles.

Thirty-one.

In a file cabinet in the back of Virginia’s head there’s a checklist. All squares are full.
She sits on the floor of Desiree’s room, a ball-cap on her head, pen in hand, journal on her lap. She’s wearing a green fuzzy shirt, light jeans, talking to an old friend that moved to Seattle. Jack. Desiree snaps a picture, frozen in time. Virginia smiling and writing.
Jack talks in her ear, Desiree throws in comments, Virginia floats between them. She’s writing a letter.

*To everyone I love.*

Jack is getting off the phone. Yeah, see you soon, Virginia says. Ironically.

What are you writing? Desiree asks.

Oh, I’m just marking down words, you know. Writing as I do.

Desiree nods, continues painting her fingernails.

*I am so, so sorry.*

What do you want to do tomorrow? Desiree asks.

Oh, I don’t know. You have to work, don’t you?

Yeah, from 3:00 to 9:00. My Mom and Dad are going to be gone then too. I think my Mom leaves at 4:00 or something.

Well, I’ll just watch some movies while you’re gone—or hang out with Mike maybe—then we’ll do something when you get home, okay?

That’d be great, Desiree says.

Virginia looks down. Her pen is blue.

*Sometimes things can’t be fixed. They just break and keep breaking and never really go back, even with tons of glue and lots of time. I’ve broken so much. And one broken things leads to another and another and it’s impossible to live with nothing complete.*

Are you going to be okay, Ginny?

Virginia looks at Desiree, her dear Desiree. Yeah, she says. I’ll be okay.

Charlie wasn’t that big of a loss, Ginny. He’s not the same person he was.

Yeah, I know Des.

*Charlie, you, more than any other, were the hardest to lose. I’ve been lost for decades and you’ve been my ground and all of a sudden you slipped away. I loved you more, I think, than any other thing in this world. Even this man I’m ruining myself for. Even him. Your support could’ve pulled me out, but don’t ever regret, because regretting is worse than anything. Know I miss you. Know that I miss you and have missed you for so long.*
And Kelly’s just dumb, Ginny. She’s not worth worrying about and she’ll never really do anything to you—she’s all talk.

Oh, I know Des. But it’s talk that does so much, you know. I think I’d rather have had her hit me than say what she did.

Yeah, but there’s so many people who matter more than her—people who love you and know how wonderful you are. Like me and Mike and your family.

Mike. I’m sorry for anything I’ve done to you, for everything I’ve done to you. I think, I believe that you genuinely loved me, that every time you touched me it meant something and your smiles were always real. Thank you for loving me, for making me so beautiful in your eyes. I loved you as well, for better and worse and all its faces. I did love you.

And the people who really love you are the ones that mean everything, Gin. They’re the ones that keep you going.

Virginia smiles. I know, Des. It’s hard to shake the ones that don’t matter though. It’s hard to shed them off like water. I think we absorb a little of it all and we always remember what we’ve done, that’s our punishment, the memory.

Mom and Dad. You’ve been wonderful parents—you did nothing wrong, you raised us with honesty and purity and let us grow. I love that; I love the choices I had. Thank you for your arms around me, your house, your support, your love. You’ve influenced me more than I’ve ever let you know and I’ve loved you more than I’ve ever shown. Please forgive me.

Desiree looks at her friend, back against the wall, still writing.

Punishment fades, like memories, Gin. It’s supposed to.

Virginia doesn’t look up as she says, Some things don’t fade, Des. They stay fresh and bright—they thrive.

Desiree, you kind friend. Thank you for holding me, for loving me since sixth grade, for watching me change and caring for me no less. Don’t ever doubt your assets. Don’t ever lose your laughter. I love you.

What memories thrive in you, Ginny?

Virginia sets her pen down on her journal. She looks up.

Ah, let’s see. I remember lying naked in the woods with Lyle.
She smiles a little. 
And I remember the empty halls of the hospital when I broke my arm, but I don’t remember the pain. And I remember the first time I kissed Jamie like it was yesterday, or maybe even this morning. 
That’s still going on? 
Yeah, Virginia says. It’ll go on forever, I think. 
Desiree looks away. She reads the hollowness in her friend’s eyes, but doesn’t know its depth. 
I remember Annie taking me to the drive-in—the same one that brought all this—for my fourteenth birthday. She bought me roses at Safeway on the way home. 
Desiree smiles. Annie’s always been so great. 
Yeah, Virginia says. She has. 
Annie, my dear, beautiful sister. I hope that through this, you’ll forgive the evil I’ve done, the awful betrayal of you, my best friend. You’ve been the pillar of my life, dear sister, you’ve been my mother, father, sister, mentor, friend, and I’ve respected no other person more. I am so sorry, so very sorry for the pain I’ve caused you, the events behind your back. And I want only your happiness, your smiling, radiant happiness. It is my greatest desire. You are so beautiful. Remember that always. I love you so. 
Desiree swings her legs around, lies back on her pillow. 
You want to rent some movies? she asks. 
Yeah, Virginia says. That would be great. Let me just finish this thought. 
I know nothing will ever be the same, this road or any other. This feels like the best solution. I think I’ve caused enough pain. I hurt too much to keep going. I know time will seal it all. My love to everyone. 
~Virginia Therese Reeves 
Virginia closing her journal, smiling, thinking of tomorrow. Five hours alone. She follows Desiree downstairs, out the door, into the car. They go get movies.
Thirty-two.


Virginia Therese stands in front of the mirror in Desiree’s upstairs bathroom. She traces the lines on her forehead, leans in close, moves out, then close again. They’ve grown deeper.

She holds a razor blade in her right hand, turns over her left wrist, bare and pale and perfect, streaked with blue veins.

She grazes the skin. A thin line of tiny points springs. Glorious red.

Virginia Therese breathes.

Ginny? Roxanne’s voice calls from downstairs.

Virginia freezes, a statue with real blood. Her voice wavers, Yeah?

I’m just going to be home for a minute—going to grab a bite to eat, then head back to work.

Okay, Virginia shouts. I’m, uh, just going to take a little nap. I’m feeling tired.

Okay, Roxanne says. I just wanted you to know I was here, so I didn’t scare you.

Have a good sleep!

I will, Virginia replies and turns back to the mirror.

She stands still, blade poised, a hunter, ready, just set it free. She stands until the door latches downstairs and the engine fades away.

Then she turns back.

Virginia Therese lies on the floor of Desiree’s room. The floors are linoleum, no stains. She is wearing her favorite jeans and a little white T-shirt, flecked with red.

She is hot, no cold. She puts on a white Adidas sweatshirt, saturates the sleeves, then takes it off, wadding it up under her head as a pillow.

*Interview with a Vampire* spins in the VCR. The voices float through the room. They keep her company.
Virginia stands and heads downstairs. Into the pantry. She finds the prescription pills, takes them all upstairs—codeine, anti-inflammatories, something else.

She swallows them all with water, spies a bottle of rubbing alcohol on the counter and drinks a good four healthy gulps.

She returns to the puddle on the floor, head to the sweatshirt, arms in front of her. It spreads.

Virginia awakens to static. She is drowsy and weak.

She crawls to the VCR and puts in another movie. Sinks back to blackness.

Virginia vomits up water, untouched, it seems from when it went down. No pills surface, thank god, no pills. Just sit there, boys. Do your job.

The water-vomit mixes with her blood, swirls in circles. She falls asleep.

Virginia hears loud footsteps on the stairs. No, no, no. She thinks about sitting up, trying to sit up, saying it was a joke, never mind, let’s just clean this up. Realizes her head cannot move.

She hears Desiree scream.

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Thirty-three.

On a stretcher in the ambulance with Jim Powell and a trainee named Jason and one thousand questions she will not answer.

She sleeps the last half of the ride, waking to a kind-faced male nurse, a sterile hospital gown and an ugly room.

She looks at the man adjusting the needle in her arm. There are three other holes and new bruises.

They had a hard time getting your IV in, he says.

Looks that way, Virginia replies.

Well, your veins were lying flat—almost emptied them out.
Virginia looks at the ceiling. How did I get here... She fades away.

The male nurse again. Maybe just seconds later. He is looking at her.
Will I need stitches? she asks.
Yes, you’ll need stitches. Those are pretty hefty cuts, kid.
Will I have scars?
Yeah, stitches always mean scars.
He smiles sadly and winces. There is real hurt in his eyes.
We’re going to have to pump your stomach, he says. Ginny. Ginny? Are you listening, kiddo? We have to pump your stomach.
Virginia doesn’t answer.
This long tube has to go down your throat, he says. It might make you gag.
No, she says, scowling, shaking her head slightly, slowly, No.
It goes down. She vomits on the sterile hospital sheets, on the floor, on her right arm, noticing the bandages on her wrist.
A doctor comes. Angry aura and awful presence. Her eyes close.
Ginny... GINNY.
She opens he eyes.
Were you eating marijuana?
She looks around, eyes fall on the regurgitated lettuce amidst the debris and she struggles a laugh before falling away. Eating marijuana.
Her nurse says, We’re filling you stomach with water... We’re pumping it out... We’re filling your stomach with charcoal.
What?
He sees her question.
Charcoal absorbs anything left in there, kid, he says. Soaks it all up.
You’ll probably throw up in about ten minutes.
In fifteen, she does. Vomits all over him and a pretty young nurse who looks disgusted and rushes away. Her nurse laughs though.
Haven’t been covered in charcoal for days, he says. Suppose I was due.
Virginia is a medley of colors.
Virginia hears commotion somewhere. Her nurse appears. There’s a man named Scott here to see you, he’s causing all kinds of problems in the emergency room office. He gave me this to give to you.

The man presses something hard into one of Virginia’s hands.

Fog lurks in the corners as Virginia closes her fingers around the object.

My worry stone, she says. Oh, God, my worry stone.

It’s a worry-stone, love. My father gave it to me years ago, said to tell it all your worries before you go to sleep, all your sadnesses and fears, that he’ll swallow them by morning so you can start anew. Keep it while you’re away from me. Tell it your worries.

My worry stone, she whispers.

Virginia cries.

Her nurse tries to wipe away the fat tears slipping down her cheeks, falling in her ears, but she flops her head away, she says with her eyes, Don’t stop them.

I’ll hold it for you, he says. It’s time for stitches.

Virginia lets it go sadly, watching it slide into the single pocket on his blue shirt.

A large mean-looking woman rinses one gash. It bleeds fresh blood. Virginia watches. Betadine spreads across her skin.

The woman is humming.

The nurse is saying, Did Scott have anything to do with this?

No, Virginia says. Scott’s just a boy. An old boy that I was with forever ago. I swear it’s been years.

You shouldn’t talk like that at your age, kid. You’re too young to have old boys.

Virginia looks at him and smiles.

I know, she says.

He looks hard at her, Virginia swears she sees him escape one tear, then hears him, on his way out, Shit, no matter how many times it happens, I will never get used to this. She’s just a sixteen-year old kid. Sixteen.

A voice says, You can’t take it on yourself. You have to let it go.

The nurse never reappears.
Virginia awakens to a wall of curtains. *How did I get...* Then back, suddenly, she knows. God, sighs, breathes. She knows.

A clock on a far wall, glimpsed through a crack in the curtains reads 8:00 a.m.

No one comes.

At 9:00, a boy is brought to a curtainroom about two down. They are loud, those nurses. He is screaming. His arm is broken.

Virginia is alone in her cell.

She opens her eyes. 9:15. Swears she slept longer than that. Her wrists throb, deep and low, they whisper.

At 10:00 Virginia Therese initiates fear. Scared.

No one comes.

She drifts to teary sleep; she feels mangled and dirty.

Her mother arrives with a hoard at 11:15.

Where have you been? Virginia pleads.

In the waiting room, Roxanne replies.

Virginia looks sick.

David went home to clean the house. We got you this elephant, Roxanne says, as Desiree sets a simple gray elephant next to her head.

Virginia looks at him.

An elephant, she says.

They never forget, replies Desiree and her eyes say, *This will thrive, Ginny. My punishment. Bright and shiny.*

Debbie is crying, sobbing, touching her daughter, stricken with the sight of her, pale and skinny and so, so small, flecked and smeared in blood and black. The girl smells like death.

Can I go to the bathroom? Virginia asks.

Yes, they say, helping her up.

Her bare feet swing to the frosty tile floor. Her energy is gone. Her mother supports her as a nurse pushes an IV stand behind her, down a hall, some tucked away bathroom.
Virginia hears their whispering through the door.
They bring clothes. Debbie helps the girl step into them, helps her pull a sweater on over her blood caked hair, shuddering. Debbie ties her daughter’s shoes.
Virginia touches her head, her hair.
There’s blood in my hair, Mom, she says.
I know, honey.
I don’t want to go outside, Mom. I don’t want people to see all this blood in my hair. They didn’t even clean me up here—they just sewed up my wrists and shoved a fucking ton of tubes down my throat and wheeled me into this stupid curtained room and left me to rot. They left me alone forever, Mom. For hours. I don’t want anyone to see my hair, Mom.
Virginia cries. Hunkers into her mother and sobs.
Here, pumpkin. Wear my hat.
Debbie tucks all of Virginia’s hair into her RB Drive-in cap.
I’m sorry you were alone, kiddo. I’m so sorry. I got here as fast as I could.
Virginia hugs the others. Shallow, ugly embraces, relationships withering away.
They smile as she leaves, tell her she’ll be okay, good luck and take care, and please, Debbie, let us know how she does.
Mother and daughter pass Virginia’s second grade teacher in the parking lot. She stops them, pleased to pass their way—how are things in Montana and things are okay here and Ginny you look gre—
Virginia stares at her. Just how do I look, Mrs. Emerson? A little different than the seven-year-old you knew?
Her mother is saying, Good to see, yes, yes.
They move away.

The rental car is a Dodge Neon. Virginia straps in and rests her head against the door. Aberdeen is gray, clouds cloak the city. Ugliness. Virginia hates it—the harbor’s gentle taunting.
Talk to me, Gin-o, her mother says.
Virginia swallows.
Everything went wrong, Mom. Charlie wasn’t here for me—he has this stupid girlfriend, Kelly who wants to kick my ass because I wrote him a letter that said I wish he could hold me forever and I kissed Nathan at the drive-in, so Cassandra wants to kill me, and I got back together with Mike, but betrayed him from the get-go by kissing Nathan, and someone vomited on Desiree’s parents’ floor when we had this party and we didn’t clean it up and I wasn’t at Nikki’s that one night, I was at Mike’s because Desiree was mad at me and I got home late from the drive-in where I’d kissed Nathan and hurt Mike.

Virginia stops. Takes a deep breath. Tears cost.

Her mother flashes a glance at her.

That’s not it, kid. I know you. I know that those things hurt you, but they wouldn’t make you do this. What? What happened?

Virginia’s eyes swim, she looks at her mother, thinks of Jerry saying, *tell her, tell her, come on.*

There’s something going on with Jamie.

And Debbie understands.

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**Thirty-four.**

They rent a room in Olympia.

*Virginia steps into a stream of hot water.*

*Her mother helps her wash her hair. The tub turns red, deep red, then fades, grows clear. Virginia stands in the water for an hour. Still not clean.*

*I feel so small, Mom, she says, stepping out. Her mother sitting on the toilet, with a towel, ready to dry her off.*

*No, kiddo. You grew.*

*They check out, confused desk person looking apologetic. I have to charge you for a whole night, she says.*

*I know, Debbie replies. That’s fine.*

*They fly on a Delta plane to Salt Lake City, where they rest for two hours, laid-over, before flying to Helena.*
Virginia drinks kiwi-strawberry Snapple at a little café. Her mother across from her, eyes never straying from the girl, needing her close.

They board the plane for Helena. Side by side. Debbie keeps her hand on Virginia’s leg the entire time, to make sure she’s there.

The plane lands.

I don’t want to get off, Virginia says.

You have to, kiddo, Debbie returns. You have to.

Debbie kisses her daughter on the forehead, gently holds her right hand. It is the 23rd of June. A warm summer evening.

They step off the plane. Walk in the air to the terminal. Virginia sees her father, her sister, and Jamie waiting.

 Thirty-five.

She tries to breathe.

John embraces his daughter, quietly, tenderly. Hello, Gin-o. I’m so glad to see you.

Anne holds her sister even longer than John. Hello, my dearest Gin. Oh, my dearest Gin.

She cries with her father.

Jamie next in line. Virginia’s eyes cast toward her mother, hovering on the outskirts. His arms go around her.

I’m glad you’re okay, kid, he whispers in her ear.

His eyes reek of fear; they spin. They plead. Don’t tell, don’t tell, don’t tell.

There is awkward trivial talk in the car. The weather and business at the drive-in and what to have for dinner. Virginia sits in the back with Annie and Jamie. She says nothing and dozes a little on Anne’s shoulder.

They arrive in York. Night slinking in the mountains. Virginia speaks of fatigue, so tired, bed, please.

But not alone, I can’t be alone, she says.
Annie and her parents pull out a spare mattress, extra blankets for a bed on Anne’s floor. The young girl puts on pajamas, curls under the covers. Everything fades. Virginia sleeps for three days. Sometime on the second, Jamie surfaces. She swims to the top of consciousness, a wavering image of him, sitting cross-legged on the floor near her head.

She opens her eyes.

Jamie.

Hey, kid. How are you feeling?

Old, Jamie. I feel old, she says, rolling onto her side.

He glances at the bandages, then her face, the bandages again.

He touches her right wrist.

Did any of this have to do with me? he asks.

Virginia rolls onto her back, staring at the ceiling. Various sparkles catch the light. Her eyes scan. She sighs.

Still looking up, she says, Yes. It had everything to do with you.

Did you tell anyone? he asks.

Virginia nods. Yes, Jamie. I told my mom.

She rolls back onto her side to look at him, looking down at his strong hands clasped in his lap.

He looks up, at her. Looks in her green eyes and holds them, crooked teeth exposed in a sad smile, a shake of the head.

I guess I have to tell Annie then.

Virginia nods. Yeah, Jamie. You do.

They sit in quiet. Jamie looks at his hands. Virginia looks at his face. Her eyes flutter, sleep threatens.

Jamie touches her right arm, extended. He runs his fingers down it, to her hand.

They look at each other.

I love you, he says.

No you don't.

Virginia’s eyelids lower. Jamie fading on a shimmery surface, wavering and reeling.
Screaming and doors slamming. Fists on walls and counters and buildings. Feet moving quickly, so fast over carpet, tile, through the hall, and back.

Worried voices.
Where’s Annie?
She’s back outside—out in the pasture, I think, but I don’t know. Where’s Jamie?
Shit, I don’t know, maybe up in the barn.
Do you think Gin’s awake?
No.
Mumbling.
Virginia looks at the Labrador standing over the head of her bed.
Gonna protect me, DC? she asks, mind slipping over. Gonna keep them out.
She laughs giddily, eyes slipping shut. Keep ‘em out and stop the racket; don’t let them touch me.

Waking to rummaging, plastic bags against each other and zippers and eyes opening to Annie, shifting through things of hers in her old room now held with the sick breaths of her weak little sister.

Annie...?
Yeah, kiddo? Annie says, pausing, hands in mid-motion, looking at the sick girl lying on her floor. Sick girl.
You okay?
Yeah, kid. I’m okay. A little shaken up, you know. But okay. I’ll be okay. How are you doing?

Virginia Therese looking at her sister, beautiful dark-haired, darker skinned Anne Catherine with blue eyes like their mother, strong arms from working on cars, and built-in grease on some nails, under some nails. Tough, strong Annie. Smart and genuine and always honest, wasn’t she? Yes, so honest. And good. Good to her sister, her little sister. Little, weak sister.
I’m not doing so good, Annie. Not so good at all.
Virginia noticing that Anne’s left hand is swollen at the knuckles. Swollen and bloody.

I’m sorry Annie, she says.

I know kid, I know.

Then nothing for a minute, watching Virginia watch her, green eyes moving back and forth between her blue ones. Sighing.

Yeah, I know kid. I broke his nose when he told me.

Virginia sleeps for another day. Waking to the same Labrador at her head. _He stayed there the whole time_, her mother saying later, _only leaving for walks. He guarded you._

Virginia pets DC’s head, such kind eyes. They are alone.

She hears voices come from outside. Hushed, tragic voices. _This is how people sound when someone dies. Just like this, quieter._

Her mother looks in.

You’re awake.

Yeah, I just woke up.

Debbie smiles a little.

How are you feeling?

Virginia looks around. Annie’s room. The same beer light hanging over the bed, her drawings of dragons. Beautiful drawings. Sun shining through the window. Warm day outside. DC’s head still under her hand. Her home. Her family. Her mother at the door.

I don’t know, Mom. I don’t know how I feel.

Annie’s not here, her mother says. Jerry and her colleagues think it’ll be the best to have the two of you apart for a while. To help you heal.

Annie would help me heal, Mom.

Debbie looking away, her eyes saying, _Of course she would._

It’s just for a bit, Gin. ‘Til you’re better. You know.

No I don’t, Mom.

Virginia focuses on petting DC, his flopping ears, soft like velvet.

Are you hungry?
Virginia keeps her head turned, looking in DC’s eyes, staring, reading. They smile at her.

Yeah, she says, starting to stand. I am hungry.

Eating bacon and eggs. Toast. Eating completely. Delicious food. She drinks three glasses of milk.

Her parents watching, vaguely scared. Showing in the corners of their eyes, salt and water and something else, like the food will kill her, like she isn’t real, like she’ll vomit or faint or die instantaneously, any moment. Watching her close.

She finishes the last of her milk. Wipes her mouth. Breathes. A huge, loud, strong breath, flushed out like a dam flooding, like water and air and stone rushing over the leaf-patterned counter, the dirty plate, empty glass, slender hands with bandaged wrists resting there, slamming into her chest, her small breasts, her full stomach, coasting through the lines on her forehead, betraying her age. Her scars. Ripping through her lungs, in and out of them, through and through.

She leans back.

Saying, I’m full, Mom and Dad. Full for the first time in so long.