

An Overwhelming Loneliness

Eli understands his difference. In church, the pastor describes Jesus, the crown of thorns, his suffering. The way the thorns prick the thin skin of the scalp. The trails of blood, the unwashed hair. He sees his parents' pious, straining faces, but he doesn't feel what they're feeling. He sits beside them in the pew, ass aching from the hard wood, mouth dry from the spill he pocketed and lit in the parking lot. *I forgot my jacket, Mom, and you know how cold it is in there.*

The bleeding man bled but remained beloved. A charmer, no doubt, a fake, a faker. The center of attention, all eyes cast his way. A perfectly timed moan. A wince. The eyelids raising and lowering in performed agony. A small bit of suffering for eternal worship, and the man knew the whole time. Knew he'd be whipped up from the earth and the dirt and the worms and sent through the heavens, back to Daddy.

Some fucking sacrifice.

Given the chance, if no one was paying attention, Eli would inch the crown down further. Try to make the man scream. Make him regret his martyrdom. Make him feel every inch of his humanness, his brief time here among the heathens. The joke of it all.

On the way back to the parking lot, Eli waits as his mother and father clasp hands with each pale, ugly chump they pass. Churchgoers, their shirts buttoned snugly over beef-fed bellies, the women smiling, lipstick smudged on their yellowish teeth, their breath a mix of coffee and toothpaste. When he was littler the men would try to crush his shoulders in their meaty paws, the women bending to pet him, pressing their breasts against his neck and shoulders, and he'd wait for his body to react, for the erection to hover uncertainly, even as his mind sat empty like a junkyard refrigerator, a receptacle of nothing, no pleasure or pain. A mystery whether the light is ever on, was ever on.

Eli knows his parents come here to feel something, some relief or chance to refresh their faith, not just in God but in their own righteousness. They tithe and suck their teeth, fish bits of egg and bacon from their back molars as the pastor drones on about sin and redemption, about compassion and belief, trots through the desert and murderous sons

and pathetic, mewling fathers and, afterward, Mom and Dad are made clean another week. He sees it in their wet eyes, the way they hold one another's hands, squeeze until the whiteness of their veiny flesh looks even whiter, and his mother's tiny sigh, like what he imagines her orgasm must sound like, chaste and small and grateful. Quiet enough to express thanks, but nothing to anger her God. To make Him worry she is too happy. Too ecstatic in her belief. She has learned, Eli believes, to feel just enough, where Eli, her son, has been shut out. Left in the desert, friend to the lizards, a cold-blooded boy turning man.

In the back seat of his father's Lincoln, Eli slumps into the plump, red upholstery, gazes out the window, the waving hands and wiggling upper arms of the congregation slowly dispersing to their set tables, their all-you-can-eat buffets, their fried chicken sandwiches à la the fast-food joints on Route 29.

The spliff has worn off and now everything is pale again. Sometimes weed can make things have a glow along the edges and Eli wonders, though has never said aloud, if this is how it is for other people, his parents even. That the world has a halo, a haze to keep it interesting, when most of the time to Eli there's a flatness, a 2D quality, bland, tame shades smacked flat one atop the other. But he's been told he's color-blind, so maybe this is that.

The driver's door opens and Eli's father stands finishing a conversation, his hand tapping the roof of the car. Eli sees only his midsection, the dated look of his olive sports coat. His father settles himself into the car slowly. He's older, has always seemed old to Eli, who sometimes pictures his bones like frail shards swimming in the oozing red meat of his flesh. Eli, their miracle baby, after a decade and a half of trying, his mother managing to get pregnant at 43, his father then 48, and so now a junior in high school, Eli's parents are *old*, his father nearing retirement, though without work Eli cannot imagine the man's purpose. What would he do without the binders, the endless brown filing folders of tax documents stained by the rings of forgotten teacups?

"What'd you think, son?" His father doesn't glance back, but Eli straightens at the sound, adjusts his posture, presses his palms flat against his knees, smoothing his khaki pants.

"Enjoyed it, sir."

"Which part, especially?" His father looks at the rearview mirror, squints his eyes, lets the twinkle form. The blue of his iris recently cleared of cataract, fresh now and all-seeing.

"I always like the story of Abraham. But I like the stories in general. Helps me understand better."

"*Take now thy son, thine only son whom thou lovest—even, Isaac—and get thee into the land of Moriah.*" His father chuckles, turns to pat Eli's knee, but stops, touches his own shoulder instead.

"It's still stiff?"

"Must have pulled it moving that chair for your mother." His father shrugs and Eli sees the grimace of pain reflected in his eyes. "I'll be all right." His father turns back toward the front, taps his hands on the steering wheel.

The car quiet, the air thick like the spray of canned cheese, or how Eli has come to imagine it, the way these moments can feel when he's stuck pretending, his jaw aching from smiling, his back sore from sitting up, the image his parents hold of him like a still life he must maintain.

The passenger side door opens, and his mother shouts some final well-wish, her Sunday perfume of page-pressed lilacs invading the stale car air: "Tell Sarah I'll keep her in my prayers." A brief silence as she bends, settling herself beside Eli's father.

"My boys," his mother sighs happily into the car, reaches back and squeezes Eli's knee. He smiles at her, imagines his face like the shiny poster of an after-picture in a braces advertisement.

"Something happening with Sarah?" his father asks, concern flickering in his voice, but also curiosity, desire for the misfortune of others, unspoken but something Eli has come to recognize, the duplicity of human socialization.

"Oh, hopefully nothing. Just she's been feeling under the weather about three weeks now so she's going to see the doctor." His mother exhales dramatically. Eli imagines the Holy Spirit exiting her nostrils, escaping her windpipe. "Nothing's ever easy, I guess."

His father grunts and starts the car, the murmur of talk radio like a low drone, a hive of wasps tucked into the dashboard.

"Did you see Marie, Eli? I think she was looking for you, but you escaped so quick." His mother doesn't turn but smiles at her own reflection as she checks her nonexistent makeup.

"I must have missed her."

"Such a pretty girl. You know, she seemed a little upset to me, so you really ought to try and catch her next time. Or give her a call?" His mother half turns, and Eli closes his eyes to control himself.

"OK, ma'am."

"You know, honey, even if our feelings change toward someone, we need to remember to be kind."

"He's a heartbreaker, our boy."

The car makes its way out of the parking lot, his father giving his weekly thumbs-up to the policeman in his yellow vest directing traffic. Along the road leading toward the main thoroughfare they pass rows of trees lit with small, white petals, the annual rebirth his mother calls it, but Eli thinks the flowers smell like cum, pretty to look at, but only if a person ignores the stench.

He could guess what Marie wants to say to him, imagines her hands balled into fists, the way she looked when she tried to confront him outside the 7-Eleven last week. He'd avoided her. Jumped into Randall's car when he saw her coming, her little brother dragging behind her like a deflated balloon. He'd told Randall she was a crazy bitch, wanted the dick then got mad when she choked, and Randall laughed, shook his head, *Eli, you're crazy*, and they'd peeled away. Eli had turned back to watch her rage, fumes of imaginary smoke coming out the top of her head. Her fat lips curled down in frustration. He'd felt nothing, which was to be expected because he never felt anything. Even when he thought he should.

Of course, it wasn't sex that had Marie so pissed, but that didn't matter. Randall barely paid attention, didn't worry himself about Eli's actions, so he was the perfect friend, if that's what it meant to hang together. They played basketball and they rode in Randall's car and they smoked and that was it.

In the front seat, his parents discuss the sermon, his father trying to make a point about how the pastor misinterpreted today's scripture because he likes to be right, and his mother hmm-ing, but always in the end saying, *Well, you were always the closest reader I knew, dear*. He imagines before he was born, during the years they tried to make him, how they'd sat in the study, fingers thumbing the Bible for comfort, reading and rereading and studying with their friends, as if by repetition there might suddenly appear an answer or an embryo, and then, one day, there was.

The power of faith, a way of seeing all things as beatific, as on purpose as tiny sparkles in the Funfetti cupcake of God's plan. The desire to be happy enough to make it true, to paper over the demon in their back seat. Or else they really don't know him. His disguise flawless and entire.

"I could eat a whole lamb, that's about how hungry I feel, what do you think about that, Eli?" His father laughs and his mother joins him, and so he laughs also. Feels the *ha ha* has come out of his throat, circulate into the cheese-thick air.

"Depends which lamb, right, sir?"

His father groans. His mother smiles, purses her thin lips. He catches her studying him in the side-view mirror, a glance he isn't meant to see, he knows, because there, there in the half-raised brow is that hint of worry. The littlest fraction of doubt. Who is he? Who *is* he?

"I think Dad hurt his shoulder, so I can help out in the garden this afternoon, if you like?" Eli raises his eyes slowly to meet hers, the practiced gaze of the innocent. His mother nods, something like relief on her face. He's her good, good boy, that's who.

"You're our true blessing."

"He does his best."

Eli relaxes back into the upholstery. Inside, an emptiness like a field stripped clean by locusts. No love, no sadness, no joy. Instead, a loneliness he wonders what it would be like to feel.

Monday morning, second period physics class, Eli sits in the third row from the front, his assigned seat. His lab partner, Tommy, absent for the day. Eli doing his best to sleep without being noticed, his left hand holding his pencil, his other hand positioned like a visor over his forehead to shield his closed eyes. From the front, Ms. Sheffer lecturing about force and mass.

Ten minutes later and he must have drifted off, laughter coming from somewhere to his right. He glances up to see Ms. Sheffer shaking her head. “Eli, feeling a little tired this morning?” He sits up wiping the drool from his lip, someone behind him making a snoring sound. A tingle of rage rising alongside his unwanted erection.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

Again, an echo singsong from behind. “Sorry, ma’am.” Eli doesn’t turn but imagines his hands ripping apart the face. Blood, teeth, and spit cascading over the floor in a kaleidoscope of what’s inside made outside.

“Since your partner isn’t here today, Eli, I’ve got you paired with Ava.” Ms. Sheffer points to a girl on the far side of the room. In front, the overhead projector illuminates a set of instructions. “All right, everyone, let’s partner up and you can start to discuss your ideas for the egg drop.”

Across the room, Ava sits by the windows. She smiles at Eli, waves, invites him to join her at her table. He grabs his book and notebook, stuffing them into his L.L.Bean backpack, and walks over.

“I don’t know why people laugh at stuff like that.” Ava blinks, her already big eyes made extra-large by the lenses of her glasses. Her black hair, cut to the chin, falls in a perfectly straight line, thick and shiny like horsehair. “But I don’t know why people do most of the things they do.” She shrugs, lets out a shy cough.

Eli nods. He’s never paid attention to this girl before, one of those Nice People, not popular, but liked well enough, smart, bit of a geek, potential star of a film like *She’s All That*. Eli thinks about what to say back, what version of himself to be, and decides on decent. “I shouldn’t have been sleeping, serves me right.” He takes out his notebook, his textbook. He turns and looks at Ava, holds her gaze a moment longer than he would if he weren’t trying to make her uncomfortable. Then he looks down, forces a shy blush which he sees mirrored on her face.

“Want to get started?” she asks.

“OK.” He moves so his body is just at the halfway line of the shared desk, so she must move back slightly to avoid brushing his forearm, then he pulls back as if suddenly conscious of the space he’s taking up. “Sorry.”

“It’s OK.” She half smiles, one tooth on the bottom slightly in front of the tooth beside it. “So I had an idea. What if we get a bunch of empty paper towel rolls and put them

together, make a kind of base out of those, and if we double layer it then I think we could get a lot of cushion there.”

“Is it me or does this feel like something out of a movie?” He pushes a hand through his hair, tries to, the curls dirty blond and thick like Brillo.

“What do you mean?” Ava’s hand hovers over the drawing she’s been sketching. Their assignment to plan a mechanism in which a dropped egg might survive intact.

Eli breathes in. “No, nothing, never mind.”

“You mean making the egg drop? I guess I’ve seen that on TV.” She presses her lips together as if thinking.

Eli nods like this is what he meant. “If we don’t get it planned today, maybe we can get together after school to work on it? Did she say when it’s due?”

Ava hesitates; her chin bobs slightly. “The plan is due next week, and the report the week after that.”

Eli leans back in his chair. Outside the window he sees a car pull up to the school’s entrance. A boy gets out on the passenger side, pulls out a pair of crutches and scoots toward the front doors. “I’ve got practice till five every day except Friday, so would that work?”

Ava nods, her front teeth pressing into her lower lip. She stares down at the drawing.

“Will you explain to me what you have so far?” He puts his elbows on the table, his face close to the drawing, then, as if he’s embarrassed, he folds his arms against his chest. “Sorry, I can tell you’re really smart.” He swallows. “And nice.”

Ava laughs, a tiny, unexpected snort. Eli catches her eye, the oversized pupil like a glistening fish egg. “I think being nice is pretty easy.”

Eli shrugs. “Not always for me, but maybe you can teach me.”

Ava shakes her head, but it doesn’t stop her from smiling, trying to squelch the smile, which is even more of a tell, thinks Eli. He moves his leg so his knee is a couple inches from hers, then stops. Too soon. This one more delicate, he can tell. Smarter, wilier, but no match for him, of course, no match in sight.

Eli’s heart is a black box. Jammed in the meat of his chest, a secret flight recorder, and once dead, they’ll excise these recordings to learn what made him tick. What possessed him to do what he did, if they even care, because there’s a chance they won’t and they shouldn’t. The regular input of *if a, then b*, missing. The baby cries, the person comforts. The boy steals, the boy is caught, the boy feels guilt. But not for Eli. For Eli, a crying baby warrants duct tape. A theft uncaught, a win. Lately, the only feeling is thrill, so why not pursue it till it breaks open? The stakes raising higher and higher, the outside need to appear good, golden, greater and greater. His parents like a veil with which to cover himself, to pretend his purity, to cover his tracks.

A pleasure in being the source of fear, the one in control. Easier though if sex alone is the goal, but lately, that drive feels absent. Erections coming and going but satiation only seeming to come from deceit, from taking deceptions as far as he can, from the look in their eyes when they realize the extent of his ability to not give a shit. As if godliness is the true orgasm, seeing the pitiful puppets, his hands on the strings, the only way to safely nut.

Like Marie from church. They'd sat kitty-corner to one another in last semester's English class, and she'd developed a crush, told him she thought he was cute. Almost too easy. Though they never did anything more than make out on her front porch, behind the school, chaste kissing, her heart beating against his chest almost a turnoff because she liked him so much, his calculated shyness, his ability to appear sensitive, to shed a single tear. Like a performance, a way to live another kind of existence, role-play the good, Christian boyfriend, watch the lie grow wings, develop musculature, become a flesh-rippling beast. The long con. Invitations to her family dinners, her parents fawning over his good manners, his turtlenecks, his decent grades, his straight, expensive teeth.

The thrill lay in getting someone to hate you. Making them doubt themselves, their judgement. He hadn't had a master plan with Marie, but once he had ingratiated his way into the family, the promise ring glinting off her finger, he'd decided that the challenge here was surgical in nature. How to hurt the girl without jeopardizing his own reputation. A classic gaslighting. To help, he'd befriended the dopey little brother, Max. Gotten him to think Eli was the funniest: armpit farts, Super Mario cheat codes, buying him those little plastic garbage cans filled with SweetTarts from 7-Eleven.

Then, three months into dating, he'd offered to look after the little shit one day when Marie had accidentally double-booked herself with French club. He'd taken Max to the mall, walked him around and around to tire him out, let him stare at the Legos, touch whatever he wanted, put on headphones in the listening booth at Sam Goody. He'd bought him an Auntie Anne's pretzel, told him to sit tight while he went to the bathroom, and he'd left him there. A thrill like a cold wind whistling from groin to throat.

He drove around for an hour, not thinking about anything really, smoking the end of a blunt. Then he'd called Marie right when he knew she'd have just gotten home, called her private line, told her that he and Max had been waiting at the mall for her, and why hadn't she come? That he'd left Max to find a pay phone and when he came back, the boy was gone. He'd made his voice worried and angry, and when she started to cry asking what they should do, he'd raised his voice and said how could she be so flaky as to forget their plan? This was all her fault, and now Marie's parents were going to hate him, and they'd never be allowed to marry—how could they have a life together when he was going to end up in jail and—. He'd worked himself up to the point where he was crying almost, and then he'd hung up on her. He drove back to the mall, found Max, his head down on

the sticky food court table, his eyes red from crying. He drove him home, explaining on the way that his sister was supposed to have been there, but she wasn't. That they both should be angry at Marie. Max, tearstained and exhausted, agreed.

He could still remember Marie's panicked face as he pulled up to the house, her little brother trudging past her, Marie's mother yelling at her to stop acting so flighty, why was she crying, looking for attention when everything was fine? There's Eli, saving the day, what a good young man.

In the foyer, she'd tried to kiss him, to apologize, ask what had happened. She put her arms around him, but he'd kept entirely still, unmoving. He wouldn't look at her, and he'd wondered if this would make him feel anything, her body crumpling against him like he was the brick wall and she was the plastic bag blowing around in the wind. But he'd felt nothing. No remorse, only a vague annoyance that she believed him. That she would trust him over herself. Eventually he let her make it up to him through baked goods and some under-the-shirt action, but before long he was bored and repeating similar stunts. When the first glimmer of awareness began to percolate across her plucked brows, her barely mustachioed upper lip crinkling, he'd dumped her. Told her he didn't want her virginity, she was needy. Her family made his skin crawl, pretending they were holier-than-thou, and honestly, he'd never liked her, was only using her to make his parents happy and now they'd heard a rumor she was a slut.

He wonders lately if everything that happened with Marie had been a kind of test. A way to see if he really was the person he thought he was, or if there was still a chance he might develop feelings. That there was the capacity in his dark heart for something like tenderness. But it had all been so easy, boring almost, the way he could get her to love him, trust him, believe in him, when how could anyone believe in him? His brain an imperfect puzzle, whatever it was that let people love one another profoundly absent. And there were benefits to his mind, sure, never concerned with guilt or sadness. Yet always being forced to navigate a species of creature that didn't make sense. Himself a parasite, feeding off their weakness, and maybe, the only glimmer of hope, the fact that he sees this difference, the overwhelming loneliness in being different, even if the feeling itself is empty, a bird hitting the cold, smooth glass of his heart. Stunned. Dropped to the earth. A casualty lacking blood.

On Friday afternoon, Eli meets Ava at a public park to work on their project. He'd suggested they go to her house, wherever that was, but Ava said the park would be better because she had two little sisters and they made getting anything done impossible. Eli considered pressing on it, but he heard a firmness to Ava's voice that intrigued him. Too much pressure early on might ruin his chances.

His chances for what he isn't sure, but since Marie there's been a tedium, a dullness like a persistent drought, and for once even basketball and weed aren't doing the trick. Now, he sits across from Ava at a picnic table, her spiral notebook out, one of the cheap ones, he notices, the ones from Walmart, no Mead Five Star for her. Wide-lined pages a little yellowed like they've been left sitting out somewhere, experiencing a radiator's wet hiss.

Ava has been all work from the beginning. He got stoned before coming, so as he sits across from her, the quickness of her words, her pencil scurrying across the page, arrows and circles and equations multiplying, he tries to look focused even though mostly he's thinking about the nachos he might get later, about whether he can see her nipples what with the late spring chill—he can't—and then about whether she's intentionally kept him out of her house and if it's because she likes him or she doesn't.

"So what do you think? I don't mean to take over everything." She looks at him, those big eyes still big in the refracted lenses.

"Honestly, it's shit I'm your partner because it's all Greek to me. But this seems good." He coughs into his palm, presses it against his chest. "I can buy supplies or whatever, you know, since you did all this work already."

"I just like getting things done, so I don't have to worry whether it will, you know?" She wears a pink jacket that says PUMA in faded letters. It looks soft from all the washing.

"Right, I wish I were like that."

"I don't know." She shrugs and lifts off her glasses, rubs at the indentation on the bridge of her nose. "I have to be like this, to get a scholarship and all that. You've got basketball, right?"

He shakes his head. "Not really, no."

She leans back, closes her eyes, lets the wind whip at the ends of her thick hair. The light dappling across her small features, the tiny, flat nose, the pointy chin, her heart-shaped face. "But your parents can afford school, right?"

Eli nods. "I have a savings account for it."

"That's nice not to have to worry about it." The sun moves behind clouds and Ava's eyes open.

He's leaning forward, staring at her, but doesn't realize it at first, something about the weed maybe, how it makes all the browns—her hair, her skin, the tan wood of the table, the trees, everything—look like stained glass cut into triangles, those plastic shapes he used to play with as a kid, make into dragons. It's as if he's forgotten who he is, and he sits up slowly, trying to remember himself, the emptiness, the possibility of disruption.

"Where'd you go?" She looks at him, her head cocked to the side, pencil eraser pushed against her lower lip.

“Sorry.” He shrugs. “Can you just explain it one more time? In case Sheffer asks me.”

Ava goes over the drawing again. The balloons to alleviate the rush of the descent, the paper towels to serve as cushion. The rubber band harness to allow for flexibility. Her fingernails are longer than he would have thought. Unpainted but shaped into points.

“You said you can get supplies?”

“Yeah, let me make a list.” He rips out a page from the back of her notebook, writes down the items. “We can meet next week and build?”

Ava shrugs. “She should give us class time, too.”

From a tree by their table, a squirrel falls to the ground, runs startled toward them, then bolts in the opposite direction. In the distance, a dog barks three times in short succession. The wind doesn’t feel so cold with all the sunlight against his back.

“You drive here? Or I could give you a ride home?” Eli feels the high leaving him. Wants to reach out and pull it back toward him. The fractals of her face becoming simple again, unpoetic.

“I took the bus. I’m fine.” She pulls out a book. “I’m going to stay and read for a bit. It’s so nice out.” She gestures at the sun. The sky and its clouds like fuzz escaping an ancient stuffed rabbit.

“Can I stay, too?”

“All right.” She squints at him.

He hasn’t brought a backpack, so he has nothing to read. He closes his eyes, lets the sun turn everything red and molten. He can hear her turning the pages, quickly, then slower, and he senses her watching him.

“You’re not really how I thought you’d be.” He looks up and Ava’s fingers are pressed against her lips, studying him.

“What did you think I’d be like?” He puts his hand against the table, flat.

Ava picks up her book. They sit diagonally and he wishes he were closer, but he doesn’t know how to make it happen. “I thought you might be a little mean. Just the things you hear and all.”

“Like what things?”

“You know.” She blinks at him.

“But I’m not?”

“Not what?”

“Not mean,” he says.

“I guess, no. Not yet at least.” She laughs. Sunlight glints off her glasses’ frames, so to look at her blinds.

Underneath the table he squeezes his hand into a fist, then relaxes. “Maybe you make me want to be good.”

Ava snorts, pulls her book to her face. “I doubt that.”
Eli nods. So does he.

On Sunday after church he calls Ava’s house, but she isn’t home, she’s babysitting says someone, maybe one of her sisters. He calls her again that night, and a woman answers in Spanish, and after a minute or two, Ava comes on the line, sounds a little annoyed. He asks if he can see her after school the next day, not for the project, but to help him with physics in general, he’ll blow off practice. No, she can’t, she says. Then Tuesday? He hears her hesitate, breathing into the phone. Fine, she says. They can meet after school for an hour on Tuesday, then she has to pick up her little sisters.

Tuesday morning he shaves the stubble on his face, the patchy hairs. He puts on cologne.

Getting ready, something gnaws at the back of his mind, like a rodent caught in a trap, tickling, chewing at its own leg to free itself, and he understands that with Ava, he isn’t sure what he plans to do. Ordinarily, the path feels clear, the challenge obvious as with Marie, as with Angie before her, and Ryan before that, all the way back to his earliest “friend” Mikey and their soccer games, when he’d convinced the boy to eat dirt.

All the challenges, the enacting of suffering, the attempts at control, he knows it’s all guided by a desire to feel anything, like sticking your hand in the toaster just to know you’re alive, capable of pain. Loss, compassion, empathy, these terms rattled about by coaches, by English teachers, by the pastor every so often, remain meaningless, all he knows is disappointment, frustration, a sense of pleasure in his own will’s enactment.

Like God in this way, Old Testament style, at least. One way to understand himself. He remembers being a little boy, the babysitter stepping on his fingers, a desperate attempt to stop him from grabbing the baby, his cousin, who was staying the weekend, and the lack of concern he’d felt, glowering up at the woman’s face, smiling through what should have been pain. Crying later to his parents, not because of the sensation, but to get her fired. His will, law.

After school Tuesday, sitting in the courtyard, soaking in Ava’s laundry-fresh smell, moving his hand to be near enough to brush hers, and each time Ava carefully extracting herself. Always with a smile, an adjustment of her body made to look natural, a yawn or a stretch. He likes the way her hips widen out, the smallness of her waist, these things disguised by the ill-fitting clothes. Her disinterest, he assumes, in looking good. He listens to her explain the equations, she’s in calculus, so it makes more sense to her, she says, and he thinks about what it would be like to convince her of his goodness, a coup, no doubt. Someone smart like her. Someone grounded without time to waste on boys like him. He offers to drive her and her sisters home, to buy them ice cream, and she blinks at him, slowly shakes her head, *We’re fine. But thank you for the offer.*

He asks if he can call her later, just to chat, or if she's on Instant Messenger? Yes, she has a handle she says, but they all share the computer, so it might be hard, and why, she asks him.

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to talk to me so much?"

Eli looks down at his hands, grasps and ungrasps them pretending to be nervous or this is real. "I guess I like you," he says.

The snort escapes her lips. "You like me?"

"Sure," he says. "Why not."

"You don't know me. And I don't know you. Not really."

"But we could change that?" Stares into the thick puddle of her brown eyes, shy smile.

"Maybe." She shrugs. "But I have to go or I'll be late."

Block scheduling so he sees her at school only Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, makes a point of lingering near her desk. He's looked for her on AIM, but she hasn't shown for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time, and he hasn't wanted to be too eager. Thought about calling but figured her parents might not like it. Something like an obsession building, he can feel it. Sees the look in her desk partner Jessica's eyes, like Ava watch out, but Ava laughs, whispers something to her and they both glance his way. His desk mate Tommy doesn't speak to him, but that's another story. Rumors of which maybe Ava has heard, the fire and all that, but he knows she's not the type to believe in rumors.

He and Randall drive around and around after practice on Wednesday. He thinks of bringing up her name, see if Randall has heard of this girl, but doesn't. They smoke, listen to Ice-T, hit the Taco Bell drive-through for chalupas, a Mexican pizza. Randall tells him Coach is fed up with Eli for skipping practice. Railed at them for fucking around the day before—weed, drinking, all that—but they'd played hard, and he'd let up.

Eli half listens, presses his fingers into his chest again and again to see how much pressure he can take. He tries to decide if it's that he wants to sleep with Ava, if he wants to get her to like him, then humiliate her. Or if he wants to simply freak her out, pretend to mess with her sisters and make her feel guilty and ashamed. Or he could get her to take a naked photo for him, then blackmail? Ruin her good girl image? Or, maybe it's something different, maybe he doesn't want to hurt her, and she can be evidence of his potential to fake it? To appear human and for someone decent to believe it, to spread good stories about him, of his humanity, not the truth of the shadow person he knows he is.

Thursday, they spend the class period working together on the project. He's brought the supplies as promised and he tries a new tactic, no longer the subtle physical pressure, but

now Eli, the serious student. He pushes his tongue against his upper lip, all business. He makes suggestions that are actually helpful, a way to better harness the egg, ideas about gluing the tubes together.

Then, when he's proven himself useful, he makes jokes, tries to get her to laugh, allows himself to be silly, goofy even, and she does laugh. Hiccups and eye rolls and everything, and by the end of the period he sees the tiniest evidence of melt, the relaxing of her shoulders, the lack of apology when their hands accidentally brush. He wants to ask her out again but holds off. The slow burn here, the plan becoming clearer—maybe it's her love, after all, which merits the greatest reward.

Saturday, he catches her on AIM, asks her out for Sunday, specifically says after church? Get an ice cream, something like that, and to his surprise, she acquiesces. Says she has an hour she can spare, OK. Tells him her address, an apartment complex, and that he can pick her up, she'll meet him out front.

He keeps his church clothes on. Feels oddly nervous pulling up and at first he doesn't see her, but then she appears, wearing a dress and sandals, and what's funny is he feels sorry for her, the effort she's made, that he knows how this will go.

The car is his mom's old car, a red Saturn, and he gets out and opens the door for her and she laughs, but he can tell she likes it.

"Nice ride you have here."

She's wearing lipstick, pale pink, or maybe it's lip gloss. "You look really pretty."

At the ice cream shop, he tells her he guesses she'll get strawberry and she rolls her eyes, orders pistachio. He gets chocolate and they sit in his car.

"Drive us somewhere," she says and rolls down her window, her cone in one hand, her other hand out the window, fingers waving in the spring air.

He drives around, tries to go down streets with lots of trees in blossom, asks her if she likes this time of year, everything in bloom.

"It smells like weed in here. Your parents don't notice?" She crunches the end of her cone.

He's got chocolate on his thumb and he licks it off. "I don't think they know what it smells like." He swallows the last bite. "Do you smoke?"

"No." She shakes her head, then smiles at him, her eyes dark with mascara, magnified like delicate spiders beneath the lenses.

He parks in the lot of a failing Bealls and asks if this is OK. To stop and talk for a bit.

"What do you want to talk about?" She keeps her hand out the window, moving it around like a bird in flight.

"I don't know." He shrugs. "Whatever you want to talk about?"

She nods her head, turns toward him slowly. She's close enough that he can see the fuzz on the edges of her cheeks. The downy stuff that most of the time no one notices. She asks him about God, whether or not he believes. He tries to be honest, his half-belief, his doubts. Then they talk about school, about people, who her friends are, what it's like to play on a team and be watched by so many eyes. Having parents who don't know who they are, not really.

A lull, but not because there's nothing to say. A fire truck goes by, its wail a spell between them. Bizarre how comfortable he feels. This strange realization that maybe he's being himself, so unlike how he was with Marie, how he is with his parents, even Randall.

"What's the worst thing you've ever done?"

Her lips are full, fuller than he'd realized, plump almost. He wants to lick them.

"Worst thing, huh." He closes his eyes for half a second, expects something to flash before them, but nothing does. "I bit a cat once, when I was a little kid."

"What'd it taste like?"

"I don't remember." He leans toward her to see her reaction. Their faces a foot apart.

She presses her finger against his lips. "What's the worst thing you ever did to a *person*?"

He wants to kiss her, wants to bite her lip, taste the iron of her blood, break the skin of her finger. "What's the worst thing *you* ever did to a person?"

Ava leans back, withdraws her hands into her lap, the closeness dissipating like water vapor. "I lied to a friend. Told her I thought this guy liked her when I knew he didn't, and then he embarrassed her in front of all these people at a party."

"Did you feel bad?"

She reaches her hand out the window again. "I think so? Maybe not. Probably, though. She's OK now, so that makes it all right, you know?"

He nods, wants her to lean toward him again, get close, and then, like an answered prayer, she does. Like he's willed her toward him. Their faces brush and he kisses her. His tongue maneuvers into her mouth, avoids her teeth, feels the warm press of her lips. He turns his head to switch sides. All he's been waiting for—

But no. No feeling. No rush of anything. Nothing.

And why did he think there would be? His heart still, the growth of an erection, the body's only metric.

"Your turn." She pulls away gently, brushes her hand against her mouth to wipe away the spit.

He nods. "I should get you back, right? The hour's up?"

"Yeah." She closes her eyes, smiles, the sun through the window turning her glasses into little ponds of silver.

He puts the car in drive, moves his hand so it's between them on the gearshift, then brushes her leg, ever so gently. She doesn't pull away. "I lied to a girl once. Made her think I liked her. Kind of like your story, I guess."

"And is she OK now?" He feels Ava's fingers brush against his own. He takes her hand in his.

Eli nods. "She's OK. She'll survive."

Her fingers in his feel bony, delicate, surprisingly cold. His chest a marbled block of muscle and skin and blood, impenetrable.

"What can we do but survive," she says, a tiny laugh.

He squeezes her hand. She squeezes back, hard, for a girl.

The following Wednesday they meet at the park to launch their prototype. He's purchased a disposable camera and they take turns posing and dropping, losing eggs, picking out the goopy shell bits, Ava wondering if there's a way to waste less, but a certain pleasure in the mistakes. He reaches toward her with slimy fingers and she laughs, ducks her head, sun dappling against her dark hair, imperfect teeth exposed. They add more paper towel rolls, have one successful launch and Eli clicks and clicks and hopes something has been captured, emulsion exposing their success.

Afterward they sit at the picnic table, backs leaning against the wood side by side. Neither of them speaks, and Eli considers the silence, that she's the type of person to appreciate a good silence.

In the field beyond the tables, two boys kick a soccer ball back and forth. One of them has long hair, reminds Eli of someone he used to know, a boy he'd played with in elementary school. He sighs, doesn't mean to but lets the air out and it feels strange to do something uncalculated, accidental. A vulnerability she might never suspect.

He keeps looking straight ahead, but he feels her eyes move toward him, senses her studying him, imagines what she sees in his face, tries to make himself look kind, eyes sensitive, mouth just barely open. How his father looks when he's moved by something in church, when he wants to appear moved.

The taller of the two boys kicks the soccer ball into the shorter one's stomach on accident, and the boy falls down with the force. The kicker runs up to him, crouches down in the grass by his friend.

All the ways they might affect one another. Pain and pleasure. Hurt and betrayal. Wonder and fear.

He imagines what it will be like to see Ava naked. How she'll be embarrassed, shy, and he'll make her feel like she should be embarrassed, but that he's tolerant. If she just lets him take a photo, prove her beauty. How she'll look a few months later, that anger,

like Marie, hate that's really shame and hurt and loss. And he'll rub his thumb back and forth across his breastbone, searching for what should be there but isn't. As if remorse knew how to hide, would one day be found, lurking like a bear in the woods, like a child in a stable.

"Eli?"

His hands on the strings, this one connected to the mouth, this one connected to the heart, calluses forming where he turns the charm off and on, pulls up, pulls down.

"Are you OK?" Ava faces him, staring.

He lowers his hand from where he's been stroking his chest. Feels something drip on his leg, a wet circle, then another. He touches his face, his cheeks, and there's wetness there. Liquid running down from his eyes. A heat from within, a puffiness, and he licks his upper lip, tastes the salt. He tries to speak, but he can't. His tongue a slug, lips fat and useless. He makes as if to laugh, but he gasps instead, like a baby. How she'll sound crying at night to herself after he's posted the photo on the school bulletin board, a sound he'll never get to hear.

Something broken inside, the gears turning but no master at the wheel.

She stares at him, her mouth curling into a frown, makes as if to reach toward him but stops.

Her hand halts in the air, an offering refused.

He waits for her to soothe him, what must have been his plan, only, he doesn't remember deciding this, to appear this way before her.

She folds her arms across her chest.

The tears flow but he doesn't move his hand to stop them. Funny, really. A mechanism destroyed or short-circuiting. He feels nothing. Inside, he feels nothing. He reaches for her hand, her thigh, something soft to grasp. She'll comfort him, let him inside. They always do.

She doesn't look at him. Her voice turned low. "Why are you like this?" She rolls back her shoulders, eases down the bench, just out of reach.

What is nothing, what does it mean to feel something when there is never anything? The soul, a plate licked clean.

"You know"—she shakes her head—"Jessica said you were all bullshit, but I thought no, maybe you were capable of more. I should give you a chance. That we might be alike."

He keeps staring straight ahead. The soccer boys dribbling the ball, neither of them very good, their legs too short to do much of anything. But they try anyway, keep trying, the waste of it.

"What do you even have to cry about?" She pushes her glasses back up from where they've fallen down her nose. "You think I have time for whatever this is?"

Sometimes little kids could tell in a way that adults couldn't. He remembers how Mikey had gotten them to surround him, kick him again and again and he hadn't said anything. Maybe he'd liked it. The way it stung. He'd pushed them to the point of it. He could make them love him, hate him.

"I'm going." Ava turns toward him. Her uneven teeth bared. "Even if this were for real, what makes you think I'd care?" All of them pushing him down. Dirt on his face, his clothes. The weight of all those boys on his back, his neck. He'd wanted them to crush him, make him nothing.

The collar of his T-shirt is wet, inexplicable. What comes, unending. "I'm sorry," the words a squeak, humiliating.

Ava stands, shoulders her backpack. "No, you're not." She reaches at his face, her long nails swipe his cheek, catch the moisture, scratch the flesh. She flicks the drops into the grass at their feet. She leaves him there.

He's all that's left.