Needles: a memoir

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy
For my parents
I know about needles. Growing up, my sister left them everywhere. I filled her syringes with water, transforming them into mini water-guns. I had a diabetic Barbie doll and cooked meals for imaginary diabetic friends. I watched my sister give her shots and when she threw the syringes into the bathroom garbage can, I would grab them. Looking out for my parents, I sat cross-legged on the bathroom floor, removing the orange cap from the syringe and setting the point against the skin on my leg. I longed to insert the needle into my body. I didn't think about how it would feel, but rather how it would look, protruding from my thigh.

I was only in kindergarten, but it seemed like such a natural thing, to give shots. Setting my stuffed animals on my bed and shooting each of them with a syringe full of water before dinner, I told them it would only hurt for a second. They needed to have insulin in their furry bodies if they wanted to eat dinner. We all understood the rules about when they had to have their shots. Pretending their pancreases didn't work anymore, I lined them up and poked them each once with Denise's used syringes.

Even though my own pancreas was still secreting insulin, I loved to play with the needles. My older brother and I would have water fights with them after school when my parents were at work. My sister was living at home, finishing her senior year of high school, so we could still dig through the bathroom trash can and find her syringes. The orange caps stood out against the white tissues. Brian filled the kitchen sink with water and I used the one in the bathroom. We met in the living room, doing battle and seeing who could get the other one wetter. I always won. I could run faster. And I had been playing with the needles
for years, popping the caps off and pulling the plunger back, squirting him twice in the time it took him to hit me once. I knew how to keep bubbles out of the syringes too. With a tap of my finger, I could get them all to the top of the needle, push the air out and be armed with a syringe filled with water. Sometimes my brother would run into the living room, not realizing that he was holding a needle full of air. Brian hadn't been careful enough when he drew the water from the sink. He'd point it at me and only a few drops would dribble out at the end. A big pocket of air in the syringe. The expression on his round face was always one of shock. Like he should have been able to get it right by then. I used to laugh at him.

Sometimes I hid my sister's needles in my backpack and took them to school with me. My friends were fascinated by them. We played doctor’s office along the fence behind the jungle gym at recess, rolling the syringes between our fingers and carefully pulling off the orange caps. They would stare at the metal tips with wonder. Wonder bordering on horror. We took turns being the physician, diagnosing rare diseases, giving our advice, and administering the injections. Pretend shots. No one wanted to be that close to reality. We had all been to real doctors, and we all associated needles with pain.

We were secretive and discrete and never got caught. I told my friends it was just a game anyway. That we couldn't get in trouble because we weren't doing anything wrong. I reminded them that my sister took her needles everywhere with her. But we still kept an eye out for the teachers and sat with our backs to the kids playing on the swings. We pretended we were doctors and patients. Until the bell rang. Then I would slip the syringes into my pocket and head back to class.

One time I let a friend take a syringe home with her. She promised to keep it for the night and bring it back the next day. But her mom caught her trying to put the needle into her younger sister's arm after school that day. And when the phone rang in our house in the evening and my mother looked over at me while she listened to the woman on the other end, I knew I was in trouble. When she hung up the phone, her face got red. She told me that I
shouldn't be digging in the trash and playing with sharp objects. Not that I shouldn't be taking needles to school or sending them home with other children, but that syringes were too dangerous to be toys. Someone might get hurt.

I played these games until I was nine. Until the needles belonged to me. On October 31, 1981, my father asked me to leave some urine in a glass on the bathroom counter. Just pee in the cup and then you can go back outside and play, he told me. My sister had moved into an apartment by then, but she was home for the weekend, sitting on the couch staring at me when my dad told me he wanted to test for sugar. I looked at Denise and knew she was the one who had told. Probably made a comment to my dad about how thin I looked, how much water I was drinking, or that I was going to the bathroom all the time. I stared back at her and took the cup from my father’s hand.

My parents didn't notice how sick I looked, but my sister only saw me every other weekend. Denise noticed. That day she had come over early and we spent the morning in the back yard together. She was teaching me her old high school cheerleading cheers, telling me that if I started practicing now, I'd be guaranteed a spot on the squad when I got to Hoover High. The judges would be impressed at how much I already knew. Even though I had six years until high school, I couldn't wait to follow in Denise's footsteps. I was usually excited to practice the cheers, but I didn't have the energy to jump that afternoon.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Just tired. Let's go see a movie," I replied, taking a long drink from the glass of water I seemed to be carrying with me everywhere.

"Just one more routine," she said, narrowing her eyes and studying my face.

And then I lost my balance when I tried to do a handstand. She told me to try it again and she would hold my legs, knowing that I usually had perfect balance on my own. And when I got my legs in the air, she steadied them for me. But my arms buckled and I crashed down on my head.
I didn't cry.

"You hurt, little missy?" she asked, smoothing the hair away from my face.

I just stared at her.

"Let's do something else. Are you hungry?"

I nodded because I was always hungry. Eating all the time and dropping more and more weight, having less and less energy. But I don't think I noticed at the time. It was just how I felt. Normal. Even when I couldn't hold myself upside down and keep my balance, I thought I just needed to practice more. Try harder. I didn't think about my body failing me.

Denise tried to take me inside the house, but I told her I wanted to ride my bike for a while first. Alone. So for two hours I slowly rode up and down my parent's driveway. Time passed by quickly on that pavement. Some days in the summer, I would do nothing but ride back and forth, garage to the curb, curb to the garage. I don't remember what I used to think about. But that day I thought about the way my sister had been looking at me when I couldn't do a handstand. Something between disappointment and concern. So I knew she was the one who told my father to test my urine for sugar. She suspected I was diabetic

Denise was diagnosed with diabetes in 1962. She was two years old. My parents had thought she was being exceptionally fussy, but dismissed it as a "terrible twos" stage.

Finally, my mother took her to the doctor and they admitted Denise to the hospital that day. My parents tell stories about how no one seemed to know anything about diabetes back then. They say that it was like Denise had been the first child diabetic the nurses had ever seen in the hospital. My mother describes that time as one disaster after another, trying to get my sister to sit still for the painful injections every day, having trouble getting her blood sugar regulated. Denise was in the hospital for three weeks. My mother took the bus downtown every day to be with her and my father came after work.

My parents left the hospital feeling like they knew nothing, like they didn't have enough information to care for her. They learned about diabetes on their own, checking out
books from the library and contacting pediatric doctors throughout the country with questions. My parents were scared. Afraid that they might lose their first child because they didn't know enough. But my sister grew up fine. My mother said it was because they didn't listen to the doctors most of the time. She says they didn't become a slave to the disease, but rather made diabetes fit into their lifestyle after the initial shock wore off. They didn't treat Denise like she was sick. Because she wasn't. Even though my sister had no medical problems throughout her childhood, death was still on my mother's mind until Denise got older. The horror stories about diabetics who died from complications couldn't be avoided, and the extended family didn't make it any easier by treating Denise like she might die at any time. My uncles stopped tossing her up in the air, afraid they might hurt her. My grandparents babied her at Christmas, probably wondering each year if it would be her last. It made my parents scared to have more children, but they had my brother who never developed diabetes and twelve years later my mother became pregnant with me. My sister was 21 when I was diagnosed, and she was still healthy.

I thought about the way Denise was looking at me as I rode my bike up and down the driveway that afternoon. And she continued to stare at my skinny legs as I turned my back on her and carried the cup for my urine into the bathroom. I thought about mixing water with the urine, diluting it just in case sugar did show up in the test. The water would do something, I thought. Then it occurred to me to just put pure water in the cup, but I knew my dad would notice that the fluid was too clear. He'd been doing these tests for twenty years. So I held the cup under the water faucet for several seconds without turning it on. Weighing my options. Knowing in the back of my mind that eventually the truth would come out. Finally, I gave them the urine they wanted and set the cup on the counter.

I walked past my family in the living room, glancing at them briefly and raising my eyebrows. My mother wouldn't look at me, trying to tell herself that whatever my sister had said to them couldn't be true. My sister was staring at the carpet now. I hoped she was sorry
for telling my parents. My dad just winked at me like everything would be okay. Like he
didn't want to make this test anymore than I had wanted to pee in that plastic cup. I walked
past them and closed my bedroom door behind me.

I heard my dad in the bathroom. I knew what he was doing. Mixing five drops of
urine with ten drops of water in a test tube. Pulling a tablet from the bottle with a rusty pair
of tweezers and dropping it into the solution. Then waiting for the color to change. And I
knew by the soft knock on my door that the color in the test tube was probably orange from
too much sugar in my urine. If the test had come back blue, meaning no sugar was present,
he would have knocked louder. He would have been excited. But there was sugar in the
little, plastic cup, and it made me think of how diabetes got its name. The Greeks named the
disease diabetes, meaning "siphon" and later added "mellitus," meaning sweet. They used to
diagnose the disease by tasting the urine, and if they thought sugar was present, the
individual was supposed to drink his own urine. They said sugar was escaping and the
person needed to replace it. Get the sweetness back in their bodies. And diabetics
eventually died because there was nothing that could be done for them, especially younger
diabetics. Their cases were more severe.

It wasn't until 1921, when two Canadian doctors discovered insulin, that diabetics
started living longer. In the late 1800's, scientists had removed the pancreas of a dog and
produced diabetes in the animal. They understood that the absence of the organ resulted in
diabetes, but still didn't know how to treat it. Then they narrowed it down to the
insulin-producing cells in the pancreas. Later the two Canadian doctors figured out how to
remove the insulin from cows and pigs and inject it into diabetic people, providing them with
a way to control the disease.

"Come in," I yelled, jumping up and grabbing the play blender off my child-sized
refrigerator, pretending I had forgotten about the test, as if I was just making my dolls dinner
like any other night. I didn't even turn around when he opened the door. I put my beanbag
clown in his highchair and stirred air in the pan on my stove. My father sat on the edge of my bed, rubbing his left temple and staring at me for the longest time before he spoke.

"Andie, we're going to have to go to the hospital soon."

I started feeding my clown.

"Whenever you're ready to go, honey. We don't have to go right away," he said. Then he took a deep breath and added, "but we're probably going to have to check in sometime in the next month or so."

I couldn't ignore him anymore and started to cry. He walked over to me and took the spoon and plate out of my hand, carrying me to my bed and holding me close to his chest. I lost track of time, but when I opened my eyes, finally breathing normally, it was dark outside. He started talking again.

"We can try some other things first," he said. "Maybe cutting sugar out of your diet completely for a while. We'll see if we can't get the tests back down to negative."

I nodded in agreement. I knew what he was talking about. We'd watched a show on television the week before about two young diabetics who avoided insulin injections by not eating refined sugar. The kids had gone almost a year without giving shots and had gained weight and seemed to be growing fine.

"It's worth a try. And even if we have to go to the hospital, you know it's going to be okay, Andrea. You know that we'll handle it as it comes."

I nodded again, but felt a lump in my throat. Something between not being able to speak and bawling. Because I knew too much. I realized the difference between playing water games with the needles and owning them. Between longing to put one in my body and having to. And my father knew as he kissed me on the forehead that I was going to grow up more quickly. That my childhood would no longer be just reading and playing in my imaginary world with my stuffed animals. Responsibility had entered my life. I would be bound to a more regimented lifestyle, but my dad would never say that to me. We just knew.
"Are you ready for dinner?" he asked.

"I'm not hungry," I replied. "I think I'll just lie down for a while." I was exhausted from all the tears and wanted to be alone. I didn't want to sit down to a dinner table of awkward silences.

"Okay, kiddo." He squeezed my hand and left, not looking back at me and closing the door behind him.

I never cried when I was alone, lost in my own thoughts. It was like the only things that had the power to bring tears were the words of other people. The concern in their eyes and the sympathy in their voices. I think I cried for them. Or it was their words that made everything too real for me to handle. But when I was alone, I could be in my own world. An imaginary place where I wrote the script and everything went according to my plan. I turned my head to the wall when I heard another knock on my door.

"Hey little miss," Denise said, opening the door before I'd told her she could come in.

I ignored her. Maybe even blamed her. Not just for having diabetes, but for making me always want to be just like her. Cheerleader, straight-A student, on a full-ride scholarship to college. That night I finally became her. Not just because we both had brown hair, green eyes, and an identical birthmark under our left breasts, but because we shared more than genes now. We shared a lifestyle. Though she was twelve years older than I, she knew what I was feeling. I think that made me push her away even more.

"You gonna lay in here all night?" she asked. "Why don't we take a walk, just you and me?"

I stared at a single rose on my wallpaper.

"Are you mad at me, Andie?" she asked.

"Why'd you tell them?" I replied. "You didn't have to go telling Dad before you asked me. You didn't have to tattle just because I couldn't do a handstand."
She slowly let all of the air out of her lungs. "Maybe you're right. It's just that you'll feel a lot better after we get you to see a doctor. It's not good for you to be this thin and I know you don't feel like you used to. They can make it better."

She knew it wasn't just a matter of seeing a doctor. It wasn't that simple. It meant spending two or three weeks in the hospital, missing school, explaining to my friends.

"Come on, Andie," she said.

I wouldn't look at her. I needed to be mad at someone. It was safe to be angry with Denise because she would never hold it against me. I knew that. I continued to stare at the wall when she kissed me on the back of the head and rubbed my neck. Concentrating on opening the rose on the wallpaper with my eyes, I tried not to think about the fact that this had been Denise’s bedroom for twelve years before I was born. That she picked out this wallpaper for her tenth birthday.

I tried to push the stories my parents had told me out of my mind. They said that when my mom got pregnant with me, Denise started rearranging the furniture in her bedroom, telling them that she was going to share her room with her little sister. My sister said she knew it was going to be a girl. God would not make her live with another brother like Brian. When my parents laughed and told her I should have my own room, she moved upstairs with my four year old brother, saying she agreed the baby should probably be in the room next to theirs and she would just visit. After I was born she never slept up there. My parents would tuck her into bed and the next morning they would find her wrapped in a blanket, sleeping in my room. My mom even has a picture of Denise lying on the floor of my room, one arm wrapped around the leg of my crib and the other holding my doll. My earliest memories are of Denise and what I can't remember, I can see pictures of in our family photo albums. Denise reading me books. Teaching me to brush my teeth. Showing me how to feed my dolls. But I tried not to think of the stories and memories when I felt her push
herself off my bed and leave. I thought about what I was going to bring to the hospital with me.
CHAPTER TWO

I didn't go to the hospital for several weeks. My parents waited for me, told me we'd go when I was ready. I stopped eating sugar the next day and a week later, no sugar was spilling in my urine. I crossed my fingers that I would be like one of the kids I had seen on television. Maybe I could avoid the needle too. The tests were coming back negative, but that was only if I'd played hard outside in the autumn leaves. If it was raining or I was too sick to exercise, the solution in the test tube would come back orange again. I would be okay if I burned off every calorie I consumed. I heard my parents talking in the kitchen about how I would never grow, never gain any weight if my body couldn't store the food. I was getting thinner. I wondered if there would be a point when they would force me to go to the hospital, or would be forced to take me if I had collapsed and not gotten back up. But whenever I felt dizzy, I sat down or went to bed. I reported that I had a lot of energy on days when I could barely walk. I read books instead of building snowmen. My father would look in on me wrapped in blankets on my bed and study the expression on my face. If my eyes were closed, he would feel the pulse in my neck or check my breathing. They were scared.

I had dropped from 51 to 40 pounds and the kids at school were telling me I looked like a skeleton. I convinced myself they were jealous. They told me I was bony and my teacher asked me if everything was okay at home. I had arguments with my best friend in the cafeteria about who weighed more, each of us wanting to be the heavier one. She always won. She would prove she was right by having other kids compare us, asking them which one of us thinner. She'd pull me off the bench as I was taking a sandwich out of my lunch box and lead me around the lunchroom, conducting her survey. People really started to
notice my weight then and asked what was wrong with me. They said my mother wasn't feeding me. The kids in the cafeteria told me to go back to my lunch box and eat, putting the food they didn't want from their sacks in my hand as a joke.

They said I looked like a starving child. Someone who doesn't eat any food. And in a way, I was. The difference is that the body of a starving person can use food but there isn't any food available. I was surrounded by food, but my body couldn't use it.Diabetics eat food, but none of it can be used for energy or stored as fat without insulin. My body was feeding on itself. I could eat and eat, but it wouldn't matter. Without insulin, the food was useless. Because my body couldn't metabolize glucose either, a process vital in creating body cell energy, I had no energy. And all the extra glucose was building up as sugar in my bloodstream and spilling into my urine. My kidneys were working harder, uselessly trying to get all the sugar out of my blood and at the same time sucking all the water out of my system. Dehydrating me. Having an elevated blood sugar for too long can cause ketosis, a condition that can lead to coma and possibly death. So what the kids in the lunchroom were saying to me wasn't necessarily untrue. I could be compared to a child dying of starvation. Still I was determined not to go to the hospital.

Then after Christmas, my sugar-detecting tests were coming back orange, the highest on the sugar-detecting chart, every time. I blamed myself for sneaking cookies from my grandmother's jar in the middle of the night while we were visiting her for the holidays. While the rest of the family slept, I silently crept downstairs to the kitchen and climbed up onto the lime-green countertop. I ate six gingerbread cookies and set the jar back in its place. The weekend had been a disaster from the moment we arrived.

My grandparents had met us at the car on a snowy afternoon, two days before Christmas that year. Their mouths dropped when they saw me. We hadn't been up to Minnesota since Easter and I guess I looked a lot different. Sicker. They kissed me anyway and my grandmother said she was going to feed me all weekend. But when I ran off to play
with the farm cats in the snow, my mother must have explained the situation to her, because she never gave me anything sweet during those four days. She served me potatoes and apples and healthy food. She didn't take me on long walks like she used to, wanted me to stay close to the house. She asked me if I'd help her roll yarn while my cousins had snowball fights out in the back field. She said I was a lady and needed to learn to sit quietly sometimes. Instead of rolling my eyes, I just stared at her in amazement. Surprised that she was treating me like that because my grandfather was diabetic.

There's strong evidence to support the theory that the tendency to develop diabetes is inherited. They say it's totally genetic and that some individuals have the predisposition to develop diabetes from birth. The insulin producing cells in the pancreas will eventually die, but it's a matter of time. In some people it takes two years and in others it might take up to seventy. It had taken my sister's body two and mine nine.

If one member of a family has diabetes, the chances are five times greater for other members to develop the disease. Some scientists believe it skips a generation and this was the case in my family. But my grandfather never talked about his disease. The needle on his dresser was the only evidence, and I was scared to even touch it. Before I got diabetes, I would play with my sister's needles, but never my grandfather's. His were somehow different. Sacred. I wouldn't even have known what that needle on his dresser was for if I hadn't associated it with my sister's condition and later my own.

That year I didn't get a box of chocolate from my grandmother. She took it out from under the tree the second day I was there. She didn't know that I had already looked through the wrapped packages and spotted three with my name on them. I knew the familiar shake of Fanny Farmer chocolate, but on Christmas morning, I ended up with a new pair of mittens instead.

So I took those gingerbread cookies while everyone was asleep. When my dad mixed my urine in the test tube the next morning, the color ran the whole spectrum and ended up
being a red. He'd never seen that color before, so he read the package insert and found that I was off the chart. More sugar than the tablet could adhere to.

"It's a 2+, kiddo," my dad told me, sticking his head into my grandparent's guest room where I always slept.

I looked up at him, raised my eyebrows in surprise and went back to watching cartoons.

He walked slowly down the huge staircase to breakfast. He never said anything to me about the urine tests, other than what the results were. He knew high sugars for long periods of time could harm my body. Blood vessels, my kidneys, and my eyes could all be damaged. Diabetic complications are usually associated with high sugar readings, but my dad knew that I knew these things. For years, research had shown that diabetics who keep their blood sugars as close to normal as possible have the least number of complications. Fewer amputations. Fewer cases of blindness. If a diabetic keeps her blood sugar stable, she may put off having a kidney transplant for many years. But my dad never talked about these things with me until I got older. He never lectured me about the possible harm being done to my body. He was a quiet man and I was grateful. The only thing I worried about was upsetting him, seeing him cry. And the one time I ever saw tears in his eyes was the night he made the first test on my urine, but he had quickly blinked them away. He didn't say anything to me about my decision not to enter the hospital sooner. He just waited for me to say I was ready to go.

By January I was ready. I started to feel really sick, notice the lack of strength in my muscles. I didn't want to give up, but I didn't have the energy to continue. I could hardly play with my friends outside anymore. I remember the snow feeling like lead on my feet as I tried to run through it. When I would fall down or collapse from lack of energy, I made myself laugh out loud in front of the other kids. I told my friends I had just tripped or that I had the flu or I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. They seized the opportunity to
take the soccer ball from the girl who they had never been able to catch before. But when I sat down in the snow during an intense game of snow-soccer in the middle of January, my friend Blair sat down next to me. He looked too concerned for an eleven year old.

"Move over that way," he yelled at the other kids, motioning with one hand and forming a snowball with the other.

"You feeling okay, Andie? My mom doesn't think you're looking very well. She wanted me to ask you if you were okay. She said she saw you fall off your bike or something, and you had trouble getting back on."

"Yeah, I hurt my knee that day. I'm fine now," I told him.

We watched our friends playing. Blair threw his snowball at one of the boys, but no one noticed. They were moving further away from us and I finally felt like talking. I looked at him, wondering who I ever would have played with in the neighborhood if I hadn't met him. The other kids were either my brother's age or several years younger than me. Blair and I stuck together. He had lived two houses away from me ever since I could remember. I trusted him.

"Well, I think I'm going to start giving shots like my sister," I said.

"Why?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Because I have diabetes too, silly. It's not like I wanna poke needles into my body for fun," I replied. "So I'm gonna have to go to the hospital and stay for a while. You gotta promise to come see me."

"Every day. Maybe I can just come with you and I'll miss school too," he said.

I wished it could be that way. Because I didn't know what to expect and I was scared. Scared to stay alone in the hospital at night without my parents.

"I don't think they let ya do that," I said. "I think there are visiting hours though." I didn't know much about how hospitals operated.
He had taken his hands out of his mittens and was tying his boot lace. He didn't look up at me when he spoke.

"My grandma has it too, and she's really healthy," he said. And he went on to talk about his grandmother, a diabetic women in her seventies who still played tennis three times a week. He told me everyone in his family said she'd live to be 100.

I didn't stop him to explain the difference between juvenile onset and latter onset diabetes. For most adult diabetics, diet change is the only treatment needed. Sometimes they take oral medications and if that doesn't work, they may take small amounts of insulin. Obese adults are more likely to develop diabetes and it relates to the gradual loss of elasticity in the cells of kidneys, nerve tissues and blood vessels. They may be diabetic for many years and not know it. They don't get the symptoms a child does. An adult might have some vague fatigue or a persistent infection, but they don't think about having diabetes. Sometimes testing for diabetes doesn't occur to the doctor either.

Juvenile diabetics are usually diagnosed with the disease by the age of 8 or 9. It is also known as brittle diabetes, often detected relatively quickly because we drop extreme amounts of weight and become completely fatigued. There are approximately 12 million diabetics in the United States, and kids account for less than 8% of them. Also, because the bodies of diabetic children are still growing, it is difficult to maintain control over the disease. Usually the beta-cells in our pancreases which secrete insulin die early. No one seems to be able to explain exactly why this happens.

But explaining all this to Blair seemed too complicated for the moment. He was in the fifth grade and I was in third. We had barely started learning how the body worked and Blair wouldn't listen anyway. He was a talker, and when I stood up to head home, he continued to talk. Walking me all the way to my front door with stories of his grandmother, he spoke words I couldn't comprehend. I wasn't hearing him. My mind was fuzzy.
I walked inside the house, tracking snow through the kitchen, hoping it would disappear before my parents got home from work. Sitting down at the kitchen table and staring at the telephone on the wall, I thought about Denise. I waited several minutes before I dialed her apartment. It rang three times.

"Hello?" She sounded like she had been sleeping.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"Hello?" She paused. "Little missy? Is that you?"

"Uh huh," I replied, wondering how she knew it was me.

"You okay? What's wrong? Where's mom?" she asked.

"At work. I'm okay," I said, picking up a pen on the kitchen table.

Silence.

"I think I'm ready to go," I told her. I could hear her breathing. "I can't kick the soccer ball anymore, Dee Dee."

"I'll be over in a minute, okay?" she said.

I hung up the phone and thought about taking off my boots. Instead, I tracked more snow through the living room and into my bedroom. I pulled my suitcase from underneath my bed and opened my dresser drawers. Staring at my clothes, I took out a red cardigan and a pair of jeans, carefully folding them into the suitcase. Then I threw in my clown, two books, my set of cooking pans, a deck of cards and a package of magic markers. I barely got the lid zipped down.

With snow from my stocking cap melting into my eyes and my hand wrapped around the handle of my suitcase, I stood in the doorway and looked around my bedroom. Like I was trying to memorize the way I was leaving everything before turning out the light. I reached over and straightened my bedspread, saying good-bye to my dolls.

I sat on the edge of the living room couch and waited, jumping up every time I heard a car. I turned on the TV, flipped through the channels and turned it off. I picked up the
phone and tried to call Denise again, but there was no answer. I called my dad at work, but he was in a meeting. Then my mother walked through the back door. Brushing snowflakes off her plastic raincoat, she stared at my suitcase.

She stood in the doorway because if she got too close to me, she would cry. I was amazed that a woman of such strength could look so fragile. Her broad shoulders seemed surprisingly small under the green coat. She ran her thick fingers through her graying hair, melting the snowflakes instantly with her palm, before she spoke to me.

"I called the hospital today," she said. "They're ready for you any time you want." She was still staring at the suitcase.

It seemed like an eternity before my sister came through the back door. My mother hovered over me. She didn't say anything about the melted snow all over the carpet. After my sister came in, I didn't hear my mother's voice again for several hours after that. She finally spoke when a nurse in the hospital insisted I wear a gown. Then my mom yelled at the woman, saying that her daughter wasn't sick and wasn't going to wear it.

Denise looked at my suitcase and sat down next to me on the couch.

"So what happened today, little miss?" she asked.


She nodded and looked up at my mother.

"It's not going to be that bad," Denise said, glancing back at me. "They're really nice people there. I was there too, ya know. You'll have a roommate and everything."

That's what I feared. That they'd put me in a room full of other diabetic kids and make us give shots to each other. I would become one of them.

"Think I could get my own room?" I asked.

"Maybe, but I doubt it. It'll be more fun with a roommate anyway. You can talk with her before bed and you'll have someone to play with."
I envisioned some sick little girl in the hospital room with me. I thought of her limping on one leg from her bed to mine, telling me I had to play with her. Or else I would have to feed her or take her to the bathroom in the middle of the night. I thought maybe I'd get a really mean roommate, someone who was dying and stared at me with wild eyes all day. My imagination started to go crazy and my sister saw it on my face.

"She's not going to be that sick, Andie. Just like you, probably. There to get better," she said.

I believed her. Denise always told me the truth when I was a child, never tried to protect me from the reality of the world. She was honest. When my grandfather died and no one would talk to me about it, Denise had explained what death meant. She said his body didn't work anymore. It would happen to all of us eventually. Even her someday, she had said.

I looked up at my mother. She was still wearing her coat, leaning against the orange, plaid chair and staring at the wall.

"You ready?" my sister asked.

I hesitated and started thinking of excuses not to go. I figured I could probably play ball with Blair now. I felt much better. I knew that if I took a nap, I would be back to feeling okay in a few hours. I wasn't dizzy anymore and wanted to go back outside. I could hear the kids yelling in the yard next door. I thought about telling Denise we should wait, go tomorrow. But I nodded instead.

"Okay, looks like you're all packed. Come on, you can ride in front with me," Denise said.

The three women in our family walked single file out to my sister's silver Camaro. My mom climbed in back and my sister told me to fasten my seat belt. She turned on the radio and hummed to songs blasting out of the speakers the whole way downtown, nudging me and pointing to old brick buildings and the people in the sky walks. None of us spoke.
CHAPTER THREE

Diabetes is the United States' fourth leading killer. It is a major contributor to heart disease and stroke and the leading cause of kidney failure, blindness and lower limb amputations. Lutheran hospital had treated thousands of diabetics over the years, educating them and teaching them the best way to live with the disease. The doctors and nurses were prepared for another diabetic to come through their door, but not a nine-year-old juvenile onset diabetic. Most of their patients were older, more accepting of their advice. I wasn't as cooperative. They couldn't frighten me as easily with their tales of the health complications and deaths related to diabetes. I was too young to fear my own death. I had a thorough understanding of the illness because my sister had lived with it my entire life, but I still wasn't prepared for a hospital stay as Denise pulled up to the front of the building.

The sidewalks were slick. Snow was accumulating faster than the hospital janitors could get the sand down, and my mother almost slipped. Denise caught her by the arm. A nurse named Marsha met us at the door to the Pediatrics ward. With red hair and a pink blouse, she looked strange to me. People working in hospitals always wore white on television. She led us down the hall and told me my roommate would be back shortly. I wasn't even thinking now about who the girl would be, because the pictures of Walt Disney characters on the walls held my attention. My room was light blue.

Denise set my suitcase on the bed and looked around the room.

"Not too bad, huh, little missy?" she asked.

I nodded.
She opened the closet and started unzipping my suitcase, but a man in white walked in, telling us that blood work had been ordered by the doctor on duty. I glanced at my mother and she raised her eyebrows in agreement. She knew the procedure. So by seven o'clock that night, I had my first bruise. A circular, greenish tattoo on my inner arm where the needle to draw blood had been inserted. It was the first time anyone had taken blood from my vein and I watched in awe at the way it flowed easily into the tube. Pulsing through the plastic to the beat of my heart. I hardly felt the stick that first time, fascinated by the long needle disappearing into my skin.

When Denise opened my suitcase, she started laughing, asking me if I had packed enough toys. I forgot my Garfield pajamas and didn't think I was going to be able to sleep without them. But Marsha stepped into the room, carrying towels and a tiny white gown with blue flowers under one arm. In her hand she held a plate of crackers and grapes. She set the snack down on the night stand and spread the gown over the bed.

"Just for tonight," my mother said, nodding toward the hospital gown. "I'll bring your pajamas tomorrow."

"Oh, that's okay. It would be best if she just wore this while she's here," the nurse replied, nodding her head toward me. "We'll be sure she has a clean one every day." She set her hand on the white gown. Her nails were painted bright pink.

My mom raised her eyebrows and I stared at her, hoping she wasn't going to start an argument with this nurse my first night there. I was going to have to stay alone with these people and I feared what they might do to me if they didn't like my family. Before my mother could speak, Marsha took a wristband from her pocket and held my arm in her hand. She secured the band and snipped the excess plastic with a pair of scissors also hidden in her large pockets. I looked down to see my name and social security number. Now I was official.
"I don't think so," my mom said. "She'll be just fine in her regular pajamas. Don't want to make this more difficult for anyone and we just as well get it all ironed out here tonight. There's no need for Andie to be wearing these hospital gowns. She has her own clothes." She talked about me like I wasn't there.

The nurse stared into my mother's eyes, sizing her up and knowing it was best to let it go. Like she feared this woman might snap. My sister broke the tension by laughing.

"Well, what's the plan for tonight?" Denise asked.

The nurse replied that we had arrived late and it was probably better to wait until morning when Dr. Manning, our family physician, would be in to see me. Denise had become his patient when she was 15 years old and he was still a resident. I'd been seeing him since I was in kindergarten. We trusted him and agreed that we'd rather wait too. In the meantime I should make myself comfortable, get unpacked and try to sleep. They'd have the results of my blood work in the morning and would be taking my blood four times a day for the remainder of my stay. I would be attending classes on managing and living with diabetes. The dietitian was stopping in tomorrow to work out a meal plan that corresponded with my insulin and activity level. Marsha asked if we had any other questions or needed anything and left after we all shook our heads simultaneously.

The three of us were alone. It felt uncomfortable because I didn't want them to leave, but we all knew they had to go. I sat on the bed while my sister piled my toys in the closet and my mother examined the rest of the room. My roommate's belongings were all neatly stacked on the floor next to her bed. Books were piled on the night stand, and my mom flipped through them, holding up the ones I had at home. Showing me that this might not be so bad after all. Whoever the girl was, I figured she had to be around my age. We had many of the same toys.

My roommate Jessica was tiny. She wasn't anything like I had imagined. A year younger than me with cancer in her leg, she laughed a lot. Every other day I watched her
drink a strange, colored fluid and then go for x-rays. Jessica told me it was something that stuck to the tumors to help the doctors see if they were shrinking. She was losing her hair. The nurses closed the curtains around her each morning and I listened to her scream when they gave her an injection. But she only cried when she thought I was asleep. I liked her. She was sick, but tough.

Our mothers became friends during the next few weeks. They sat and talked while Jessica and I played in the toy room down the hall. Sometimes I would catch bits and pieces of their conversations, surprised that my mother was sharing her life with a stranger. Jessica and I would stand outside the door and try to hear what they were saying to each other. We figured they would be talking about us. They weren't. Jessica's mom talked about her divorce and my mom talked about her relationship with my dad. It was as though the two women needed each other the same way Jessica and I did. Talking mostly about things outside the hospital, none of us focused much on why we were all there. Our mothers didn't say anything about their daughters being sick. They talked about what we did in school, how we were so interested in books, and our accomplishments. Avoiding the reality of the starched, white atmosphere of the hospital.

Jessica and I played every day. We pretended the two-year-old down the hall was our son and we made a house out of the huge blocks in the playroom. Brad was there because his mother had wrapped a rubber band around his thumb when he wouldn't stop sucking it. She left it on for two days and then got scared when it turned purple and took him to the doctor. Jessica and I decided we could nurse him back to health. Even though the doctors were doing everything they could to prevent amputation, his thumb was black and looked completely dead to me.

I played games with Jessica and the other kids on the floor. None of them were diabetic, but were there for surgeries and cancer and heart problems. I thought my illness was simple compared to theirs. I knew what was going on inside my body, and I believed I
had more control over what happened to me. Finally, Jessica asked me what was wrong with my body. I tried to explain diabetes to her.

"If your pancreas," I said, pointing to her lower abdomen, "didn't work, you would have diabetes. It's when the cells in the organ aren't making any insulin. Then you can't use any of the food you eat."

"That's why you're so skinny?" she asked.

I nodded my head. She was skinny too, but I didn't say anything about it.

"So if someone shot a hole through my stomach and hit my pancreas, it would make it so I had to give shots?" she asked.

I thought about her question.

"I'm not sure. I don't think so, though. It's the cells in the organ. I guess if they shot holes in all the cells, you'd have to." I wasn't sure.

She stared at me and thought about what I had said. Finally nodding like she understood. Then she explained the cancer in her leg to me.

And even though I had never known anyone with cancer, I understood what she was saying. It was like her own body was working against her. She explained that bad cells were multiplying and the doctors were killing them. She would stare across the room at Brad's hand and talk about maybe having to get a new leg. She compared it to Captain Hook in Peter Pan. I wondered why the doctors couldn't just get me a new pancreas.

Jessica and I were different from the other kids on our floor. We had a pretty good understanding of what was going on inside our bodies. But some of the kids, even the ones older than us, couldn't give a reason for why they were even in the hospital. They knew it was something to do with their heart or their kidneys, but they just shrugged their shoulders when I asked them what exactly was wrong with the organ. No one had explained anything to them.
I watched all the kids in the Pediatrics ward. The way they acted. Some of them laughed all the time, others cried. One older girl in the next room never spoke to anyone the entire time I was there. I never heard the sound of her voice. I didn't know what was wrong with her, because she didn't seem sick and always had on a sweatshirt and jeans. I peeked into her room whenever I walked by and noticed the makeup and brushes on her night stand. Always combing her long, red hair, she looked about thirteen. I wanted to talk to her, but could tell by the organization of her room that she had been there a long time and didn't want to be disturbed. She had been lying on her bed, flipping through a magazine and watching a soap opera the day I checked into the hospital, and she was in the same position the afternoon I checked out. Like it was her home.

Two of the kids across the hall from me never had any visitors, and my mom would make comments to my father about their parents.

"Where could his mother be?" she would ask.

"Even if her parents work, you'd think they would still come in the evening. Don't you, Ray?"

"I can't believe that little boy across the hall never has anyone in to see him."

My dad would shrug his shoulders, rarely acknowledging my mother's words. Sometimes he would tell her that he didn't understand either. I thought those kids without visitors had been abandoned. I thought they were going to die. Die alone. I felt lucky around them.

That first night, my mom and sister left at eight o'clock, telling me they would be back in the morning. I brushed my teeth, slipped on the starched hospital gown and walked around the room. The floor was cold. My roommate still wasn't back and I peeked in her closet. No clothes. Keeping an eye on the door and stepping softly, I opened the drawer in her night stand. Jacks, cards and crayons were all neatly piled inside. I picked up the jacks, thinking about the games I played at home with Blair. We had matching jack and marble
sets, but I put Jessica's back in their place and crawled into the plastic, orange chair next to my bed, turning on the television.

When I woke up, a faint light was beaming through the side of the curtain, casting an almost fluorescent glow on the tiny figure in the bed next to mine. That was the first time I saw Jessica. I stared at the shape on the bed before looking up at the nurse. They wanted more blood. I was curled up in the chair when the woman shook my shoulder, realizing no one had been in to check on me during the night. She told me it was almost time for breakfast and the orderly was on his way to collect blood. Four times that day, just like Marsha had said. After a few days, I could no longer bend my left arm. They had targeted one tired, deep-green vein, explaining it was the best place they could find. They said they were sorry, but didn't have any choice. Diabetics have narrow blood vessels and it's hard to find veins that will "cooperate." No one's sure exactly why the veins become so small, but they could never get blood from my sister's arms either. So the people in white used the same vein four times a day for thirteen days.

I hated them. I'd avoid being in my room when I knew the orderlies were coming. If I was there, I started just opening my arm out onto the bed, never looking up and continuing to stare at the television screen. I think I became immune to pain. Or angry. I only liked one of the orderlies. A woman in her thirties, she was rounded and had the eyes of a deer. She must have been new, because tears welled in her eyes whenever she wrapped the rubber tubing around my biceps. She was the only one I could look at. She would have given her own blood for me if she could have. Before she left, she would pat my skinny thigh, tilt her head and wink at me like she knew how I felt.

"It won't be much longer till you get to go home," she said, slipping my vial of blood onto her tray.

I pulled my lips tightly together, looking her in the eye.
"You're pretty brave, you know," she continued. "I see lots of young people in here who cry and make a fuss. I bet your mom and dad are really proud of you."

I didn't talk back to her, but I wanted to. She was never in a hurry, never treated me like I didn't know anything. Tucking her dark hair behind her ear, she would set her tray of blood samples down and watch television with me for a few minutes or pick up the book I was reading.

"So people call you 'Andie' for short?" she asked.

I nodded, finally allowing my own voice to escape from my throat. "Well, I was born right before Christmas and my dad picked out the name 'Andrea.' Five days later, I had a Christmas stocking with 'Andie' on it."

I paused to make sure she was listening.

"And then they did the same thing to my sister," I continued. "She was born eight days before Christmas and her name is Denise, but her first stocking had 'Dee Dee' on it."

"I know what you mean. My first name is Nancy, but everyone has called me 'Nan' ever since I was a little kid. It just sticks."

I looked up at the television, but could feel her staring at me. Probably wanted to tell me that I needed to take a shower. The nurses couldn't get me into the tub, tried to bribe me into brushing my teeth. I didn't care that my hair was sticking to the side of my head. Nan brushed it behind my ear with her finger before leaving.

After the blood withdrawal came the insulin shots. The first morning, a nurse insisted on giving me my injection. I couldn't convince her I was already an expert with the syringes. She wouldn't believe I had been holding them between my fingers for years. She told me not to be difficult. Going through the standard procedure, she inserted the needle into my thigh. It didn't hurt as much as I had always expected it to. It was familiar to me and didn't feel foreign inside my leg. Then she left and returned with a silver tray holding an orange, alcohol swabs, a bottle of insulin, and needles. She made me practice giving shots
on oranges. I took the bright orb from her and said that fruit was for eating, not injecting. But I set the orange on my thigh anyway, swabbing the surface, and inserting the needle. She was impressed. Later in the week, when she left me alone in my room with the orange, I peeled and ate it. She said nothing, picked up the peels and returned with a new piece of fruit, sitting on my bed until I had correctly administered ten shots.

I only took two units of Regular insulin and one unit of NPH insulin twice a day. Regular insulin begins working within the hour, acting on the food I had just eaten. I had to give my shot a half hour before I could get my breakfast or dinner, allowing time for it to go to work and keep my blood sugar stable. NPH insulin starts working in four to eight hours, taking care of afternoon and evening snacks. By injecting insulin, I fooled my body into thinking it had a healthy pancreas. Put the hormone into my body because it wasn't being naturally secreted. It worked for me.
CHAPTER FOUR

I had come into the hospital with a blood sugar of 650. The insulin got me down in the low 100's, closer to normal, but it still took over two weeks to see any consistency in my blood sugar readings. This worried the doctors. Even though I might get a reading of 120 in the afternoon, by bedtime it would be up to 300. They just kept adjusting the dosage. Trial and error.

I started attending my meetings on diabetes maintenance. The nurses told me they were "mandatory," explaining that meant I was required to attend. I raised my eyebrows at them and walked down the hall to the classroom. The first day of class, an elderly nurse in a white dress and black hose told us we would be learning the standard injection procedure. I looked around the room. No kids. No one under forty. There were four men and one woman and they looked back at me, like I was in the wrong place. I thought so too. Even though there were no other diabetics in the Pediatrics ward with me, I had expected to be with other kids. I thought they would just appear. Thought it would be like school. But the people in the meeting with me probably had grandchildren my age.

"So, have you all been giving your own shots by now?" the nurse asked.

We nodded back at her and I glanced at the name tag pinned on her dress. Claire. I could tell she had been teaching these classes for years. She looked worn, but acted excited. Happy to be helping us even though her feet hurt.

"Anyone have any questions about the procedure yet?" she asked.

The man across the circle of chairs from me spoke up.
"Is it really necessary to swab the skin after the injection? My brother has been giving shots for years and I've never seen him do it," he said.

"Ah, yes. Important to reduce the chances of infection. Let me just go through what exactly administering an injection entails." Claire passed out photocopied sheets with a list of the proper steps on them and began reading.

"First, make sure the insulin you're using is completely mixed in the vial. For those of you using NPH or any of the Lente, you must roll the bottle in your hands several times before you draw insulin. If you don't do this, it will either be too potent or too weak," she informed us, looking up to see if we were following along on the paper.

"Next wash the site of the injection with soap and water and apply alcohol with a cotton swab."

I rolled my eyes. Knowing now that this was going to be the longest week of my life, I settled back into my chair and stared at the woman next to me in the circle. She was wearing a hospital gown and had her hair in pink, sponge curlers. Listening carefully with her eyes narrowed, she planted her fuzzy slippers firmly on the linoleum and moved her head in the direction of Claire, straining to hear every word the nurse was saying, as if she might not understand what the sheet said if someone didn't read it to her. I noticed the wrinkles under her eyes.

"Then," the nurse said, elevating her voice and staring at me, "you set the plunger of your syringe at the mark of your dosage and stick the needle into the rubber stopper on the vial. Push the air into the bottle. Pull the plunger back to the mark showing your dosage. If there are air bubbles, push the insulin back in or tap the syringe with your finger."

I watched her now. She was demonstrating with a real syringe and that's when I spotted the bowl of oranges on the table next to her. Syringes, cotton balls and little bottles of insulin were next to the bowl. I knew what was coming. A quiz to see if we'd been
listening. So I focused my attention on what she was doing, telling myself I would disregard this entire procedure when I returned home.

My sister never used soap or alcohol. In fact, if she unexpectedly ran out of needles, she would dig a disposable syringe out of the garbage and use it again. My sister thought all the information about contamination was a scare tactic. Something created by pharmaceutical companies so they could sell more prescriptions for syringes. They're making us think giving a shot is supposed to be a major medical procedure, Denise had told me. She didn't think she could contaminate her own body. Sometimes she used the same syringe four or five times.

"Now," Claire said, picking up one of the oranges, "hold the needle steady and inject it into the site quickly and deeply, at a 90 degree angle."

She stabbed the needle into the fruit and one of the men shuddered and looked away. A giggle escaped from my throat. Everything was too dramatic. Claire raised her eyebrows at me.

"Now, remember, you have to pull the plunger back and check the syringe for blood. If you ever get blood in your syringe, you'll know you've hit a capillary and you need to start all over. Pull the needle out immediately and start over. You can't inject insulin directly into the blood stream. Not only will it shock your system with insulin, resulting in an immediate insulin reaction, but if there's an air bubble in there that you didn't get out, we could be in real trouble. So if there's no blood, push the plunger down slowly and then pull the needle out. After that, you'll swab the site with alcohol again."

My eyes drifted away from the nurse, and I spotted my mom looking through the window on the door. She was staring at the orange in Claire's hand. Looking at my watch, I knew the time was up. One hour a day for five days and they told me I'd learn all about diabetes. Everything I needed to know to live a normal life. I had tried to tell them I didn't want to attend, told my dad I bet I could teach the classes myself. He had nodded, but
replied that I should just cooperate for now. You might even learn something new, he had
told me. We'd go home soon.

Claire looked up at the clock on the wall behind me and her pace quickened. She
passed out the oranges, syringes and swabs, telling us to practice a few times on the fruit. I
thought I could slip out of the room, but the woman next to me started asking questions. She
wondered why we couldn't just take some kind of insulin pill.

"It just doesn't work like that," Claire replied.

The woman asked why.

"The body can't use insulin unless it enters through the tissues. That makes the body
believe it really came from the glands in your own pancreas." Lips pulled together tightly,
Claire shook her head, satisfied that she had answered the woman's question.

I wanted to explain it to the woman in curlers, tell her that the gastric secretions in
her stomach would destroy the insulin. Help her understand that insulin has to be injected
into the subcutaneous layer of fat beneath the skin to be absorbed. People had tried
swallowing insulin. It didn't work. Scientists had been looking for years for another way to
get the hormone into the body. They had tested nasal sprays and pills. I wanted to tell the
woman she had no choice. To just accept it. But I needed to get out of there, so I gave two
perfect injections to the orange, slipped my shoes back on and walked toward the door to my
mother.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"I don't want to go back. I don't like that woman and everyone in there is old. They
look at me like they want to feel sorry for me, but they're too busy feeling sorry for
themselves. Stupid," I said, my voice trailing off.

"No, it's not stupid. They're just learning. It's just a few days, Andie. It's not going to
kill you." My mother put her arm around my shoulder and pushed the elevator button,
looking like she was going to cry again.
They say when a child is diagnosed with diabetes, the doctor ends up with two patients. The child and the mother. My mom was emotional to begin with. If I had been a nurse in that hospital, seeing her for the first time, I would have thought she only knew how to scream or cry. She'd already made one scene at the nurses' station since I'd been admitted.

I had been waking up with insulin reactions in the middle of the night all week, and when I would start to shake and ring the bell for the nurse, no one would answer. Finally, I would wander into the hall and the nurse on night duty would tell me I'd have to wait for an orderly to draw my blood and confirm that my blood sugar really was low. Like they wanted to make sure it wasn't my imagination. Standard procedure. So I would go back to my room and wait. An orderly would come in, take blood, return to the lab and test it, and then call the nurse and tell her the reading. She would never give me the number of my blood sugar, but she looked nervous when she walked in with a glass of juice. Sometimes I had fallen asleep by the time she woke me up with the glass to my lips. I mentioned it to my mother. Her face got red when I told her. It was the first time I had witnessed her anger at medical personnel first hand. I'd heard the stories about when my sister was little, but I'd never actually seen her scream at a doctor or nurse. It seemed to be the only way she could protect us. So I peeked around the door and watched her stomp down to the nurses' station and start yelling. Telling them nothing like this better ever happen again. If her daughter said her blood sugar was low, it was low.

I called insulin reactions "funny feeling." I couldn't really give them a description. Because a natural hormone is being injected into the body by a human hand, mistakes are bound to happen. The calories a diabetic consumes have to match the insulin dose. They should be balanced. If I had too much insulin in my system, I started to feel weak and shaky. My skin would crawl and I had trouble talking. I knew what a low blood sugar felt like. They happened to me exactly as they did to my sister, just as she explained they would. Denise said it was my body's way of telling me when it needed food. If I went too long
ignoring the symptoms, I could end up in a coma. And over time, too many insulin reactions might result in brain damage.

So my mother was really mad. She told the nurses if she ever found out that they made me wait 20 minutes to do blood work again, she would not only file a complaint, but would pull me out of there right then. I thought the nurses would probably be thankful if I left, but they gave me orange juice right away whenever I asked for it after that.

My mom knew how to be difficult. She only did it when she thought what she was arguing for was important, which seemed to be just about everything during those two weeks. Each time she disputed the doctor's orders, she would start her sentence with the words, "I've had a diabetic child longer than you've been practicing medicine and..." She told the dietitian we would not be including meat in my menu plan, because her daughter had already been a vegetarian for two years. The man replied that I needed protein and my mom rattled off the protein diabetic exchanges of cheese, nuts and eggs. So he altered my menu and specially ordered my meals. Then my mom told the nurses that my food had better be in front of her daughter when she gave that shot, or else. No insulin until the food was there. They had been late with my meals and my blood sugar was getting too low by the time the food arrived. The people in the hospital listened to my mother.

I think her attitude was contagious. When Claire gave me my First Alert bracelet and ID card, I threw them in the garbage can in the hall right after the class. She had handed me an extra small silver bracelet and a card with blanks to write my name and address.

"Keep this on your wrist all the time and put the card in your school bag," she said.

I looked at the items. Written on the card were the words "I am a diabetic. If I am unconscious or behaving abnormally I may be having an insulin reaction. If I can swallow, give me sugar, candy, fruit juice or a sweetened drink. If I cannot swallow, send me immediately to the hospital."
"You're kidding, right?" I asked Claire. I knew she had already decided I was uncooperative. Someone who would end up dead because I never followed instructions. I had been questioning the things she told the class the entire week.

"Andie," she said, taking a deep breath, "I don't like this any better than you do. But you have to accept this, live with it. These are designed to save your life. They very well might save your life. I'm here to help you. I mean, I don't always enjoy seeing people in pain, but we can make your life easier if you'd just cooperate. I know it isn't fair that a pretty little eight year old has to go through this."

"Nine," I replied, staring into her eyes. "I'm nine. And I'm not just going to keel over and die in the middle of the playground at school. And I'm sure not going to wear this bracelet." I wrapped my fingers tightly around it, wanting to crush the silver metal in my palm.

"You're probably right. But if you ever need to be taken to the hospital, that bracelet will let them know what to watch out for."

I knew the last place I ever wanted to be again was in this hospital. Thinking about having to wear that bracelet to school, I threw it away. My friends would ask me questions. They would want to know what the little, red First Alert symbol meant. I didn't want to explain. The kids at school didn't even know why I was in the hospital. They just thought I was sick. My teacher had delivered a bunch of cards the students made me, all saying they hoped I got well soon. I kept the manila papers, which had been folded in half and colored on, in my night stand drawer. I counted the number of cards and found it three short. I wondered why the twins and Stacey hadn't made cards with the rest of the class. Maybe they were sick that day.

I knew it was better if the students in my grade school just thought I had a cold or the flu. I had seen them tease the epileptic boy two grades behind us. They would walk up to
him at recess and drop to the ground, pretending to shake uncontrollably. The boy would cry and run inside. I wasn't going to wear the bracelet.

Claire asked me the next night why it wasn't around my wrist. I told her it was on my night stand back in my light blue room. The other people in the diabetes maintenance class were getting used to their bracelets. They would twist them around on their wrists during class. Run their fingers over the silver band like it was sacred. I lied and said that I just kept forgetting to put mine on.

I lied a lot during those two weeks. Told them I was feeling better than I was. Said I'd eaten everything on my tray after flushing half of it down the toilet. I made balancing my food and insulin difficult for the doctors. They could never understand why I was having an insulin reaction when my plates had been empty after dinner. They couldn't figure out why my blood sugar readings wouldn't stabilize. Then I started telling the nurses that I couldn't go to the bathroom when they wanted a urine sample. I'd take the cup into the bathroom and sit on the edge of the bathtub for five minutes before opening the door. I'd hand the nurse an empty cup and say I couldn't do it. They told me they would wait. Hand me a glass of water and come back in 15 minutes with the testing kit. And it was usually high. So I decided to talk my sister into leaving some of her urine for me to use. She walked into my room the next morning, carrying balloons and a new Judy Blume book. I couldn't wait to ask her.

"Hey little missy. How ya doing?" she asked, looking around the room and setting the book on my bed.

I took the balloons from her hand and tied them to the orange chair, telling her to have a seat because I had something serious to talk to her about.

"Dee Dee," I said. "I was thinking of a way to get me out of here faster."

She raised her eyebrows and waited for me to continue.

"Well, they're getting all upset because my urine tests are running too high. I thought maybe you could pee in this cup," and I held up the plastic cup I had been saving, "and leave
it for me to use instead of my own. Then they'll think my sugar is under control and they'll let me come home."

The expression on her face teetered between laughter and tears. I thought she was going to smile, but she drew her lips tight and shook her head.

"Andie. You're being silly. They've got your blood work four times a day too. They would know it's not your urine. And besides, my urine has sugar in it too. Why are they still high?" she asked.

I just looked at her. Thinking about what she said, I felt somehow betrayed.

"Are you sneaking candy from the other kids?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"They'll get regulated pretty soon. It doesn't take them long. Just a few more days to balance everything out and then they'll let you go. Cheating them doesn't really help you, you know."

I knew.

Denise sighed and looked at me. Then she started laughing.

"Pretty clever though, kiddo," she said. "You're always thinking. But you know it's going to be over soon. The doctors just want to be sure you're healthy and okay before they send you home. Otherwise, you're no better when you leave than when you came in."

"I'm sick of it here," I replied. I told her about the argument I had with Jessica the day before over what we were going to watch on television. I complained about Claire and the other nurses, about missing school and having to make up the work. I held out my arm and showed her the bruise. She let me talk.

My mother walked into the room, looked at us sitting there, and said she'd be right back.

"Well, maybe Jessica could pee for me then," I continued. "She has cancer in her leg, but her pancreas is working."
Denise rubbed her forehead and stared at me. "That's not the point, Andie. And you know it. You'd never get away with it anyway, and even though you think you might want to, you really don't. Just a few more days."

I felt alone. There was suddenly a gap in our relationship, like she was trying to be my mother instead of my sister. And I wanted her to be my friend instead of taking someone else's side. Even if I was wrong, I wanted her support. Denise had always sided with me, and when she hadn't in the past it was only in private. If I was arguing with my brother, Denise would settle the dispute, usually taking my side. But she always told me later, in private, why I had been wrong too. She wanted me to trust her, but she wanted me to learn. Learn not to be so impatient about things. But I was getting frustrated in the hospital. So I peed in the nurse's cup, hoping Denise was right.

She was. The next day, all my urine tests and blood work came back with acceptable blood sugar readings. One more day of good readings and they finally decided to let me go home. My mother had been complaining that I'd been there too long anyway. She told them that regulating me meant having me in the environment I would be living in. My parents wanted me home. I had gained twelve pounds and the doctors couldn't argue against the fact that I was doing much better. So they signed the release.

My parents attended my last management class with me. Friday was the day that family and friends were invited. Claire spent the entire hour talking about the psychological effects of having diabetes. For both the patient and the family.

"It all might be very hard to accept right now. Diabetes can be lived with and maintained, but you might feel depression for a time. It is normal and will pass. It may seem like people treat you differently now, as if you're sick. Let them know that you're happy. Healthy." She smiled.

I rolled my eyes at my mother, but she continued to look straight ahead. It was one of the only times I'd ever seen my father hold her hand.
"And you might feel like rebelling at first," Claire continued. "Against the advice of your physician or even the disease itself. It's not uncommon to feel that way. Just remember, when you rebel, you increase your chances of insulin reactions and ketosis. Talk to your primary physician about how you feel. Find a productive way to deal with your aggressions."

I looked around the room. I'd spent five days with these people and now I knew their names. James and Ted were with their wives, and Betty, who I'd still never seen without curlers in her hair, was sitting next to her daughter. Thomas and Ernie were alone. Tom had been divorced almost ten years and Ernie's wife had died less than a year ago. They say stress can trigger diabetes that may have been dormant for years. These people were real to me now. I knew the stories of their lives. They made me feel inexperienced.

"Your loved ones might have trouble differentiating between your normal mood swings and those related to your fluctuating carbohydrate metabolism," Claire said. "Be patient with each other. Those people surrounding you might become controlling or resentful. Understand that this is their disease to live with too. Diabetic relatives might even feel guilt," she said, glancing at me.

I realized Claire was talking to us. The five of us. Not the spouses or my parents. Because even though they would have to deal with it, we would have to live with it. I looked at Betty. Her husband had left her a few years ago when she started to get sick. She said he couldn't handle watching her suffer. But we all knew the truth. I thought she was more alone than any of us there. She had aged since the first day I saw her. The lines around her eyes looked deeper now and her hands shook.

No one asked any questions when Claire had finished talking. But they lingered. Wandered around the meeting room as if they had nowhere else to go. I wanted to pack my suitcase and I pulled on my dad's shirt sleeve. He held up his finger for me to wait and went
to the front of the room to talk to Claire. I knew he was thanking her. My mom and I walked out into the hall. I was ready to go home.
CHAPTER FIVE

“Watch this.”

I glance up at my sister to make sure she’s looking at me. Wrapping my fingers around a felt tip marker, I draw a small black square on the back of my hand.

“I learned this in science class,” I tell her.

Picking up the sewing pin from the back of the kitchen table, I proceed to poke it around inside the square while I talk.

“There are pain points in some places and pressure points in others. There are points all around your skin that pick up different sensations. Even in this little area on my hand there are thousands of different points.”

“Yeah,” she says, narrowing her eyes.

“Well, you can push the pin down on some spots and not even feel it. Mr. Pershau said there are points everywhere, but in some tiny places you might not feel the prick.” I continue to move the pin on my hand outside the square.

“So I can push a syringe around on my arm and find the best places to give shots. I’ve been moving the needle around and it works. There are some spots on my arm where I can feel the prick and other places where I feel nothing.”

“Clever,” Denise says. “You can give your shots and not even feel them, huh?”

“Yup. I don’t think anyone in the class was as amazed as I was. Mr. Pershau said our skin is our greatest protector, that all the points are necessary. They pick up the sensations that might be deadly like heat and cold.”

“Pretty important, huh?” Denise asks.
“The class was interesting, but I stopped listening once I started thinking about coming home and trying it out with a real needle.”

“Smart, little miss.” Denise winks at me. “I’ll have to try it.”

I know she won’t. Denise has given her shots in the same area on her thigh for the last twenty-three years. The skin just below where the leg the hip meet is atrophied. A mound of scar tissue protrudes, but she would never insert the needle anywhere else. My mom says it’s the old, large hypodermic syringes that did it. No one taught them the rotation method in the 1960’s. My parents brought her home from the hospital and gave her shots in her legs until she was old enough to give them to herself. She sat on the kitchen table and waited while my mom pumped the alcohol out of the syringe and filled it up with insulin. Once a week my mom boiled the syringe on the stove and then placed it back in the jar of alcohol in the kitchen cupboard.

Sometimes my sister would run from my parents when she knew it was time for her shot. They would go ahead with dinner and wait for her to come out of her room. She knew she couldn’t eat until she had the injection. So she started hiding the syringe. She would climb up onto the kitchen countertop and pull it out of the jar, carrying it off to her room. My father knew where to find it. Feeling carefully under her bed, he pulled the syringe out from between books and stuffed animals. By the time she was four and a half, she was giving her own shots. And as she grew up, the needle became thinner and sharper. By the time I was diagnosed with diabetes, the packages read “microfine” and “designed for comfort.” But Denise had given shots with the old needles for too many years, and no one told her to rotate her injection sites until she was in her twenties.

When I was in the hospital, the nurses stressed the importance of rotation, telling me that if I didn’t change the location every few days my skin would eventually become hard and my insulin might not work as well because it wouldn’t be able to work its way through the scar tissue. So the nurses gave me strips of paper with holes cut out about every inch.
They told me to set the paper on my leg, upper arm, abdomen, or buttocks and insert the needle into a different circle every time. This was to prevent atrophy in any given area. They claimed that no area would ever bulge out if I rotated injections, that my skin would never sink in.

The tissue over my triceps has hardened. It looks like an overdeveloped muscle on the back of my arm. If I hold my arm straight out and twist it so the triceps face the ceiling, the mound is evident. I don't deny that if I had used those papers with the holes, this probably wouldn't have happened. It was just the most comfortable place to give a shot. I can fold one leg up against my chest, set the back of my upper arm on my knee, and insert the needle with the opposite hand.

It's been almost four years since I was in the hospital and I've deviated a lot from the advice they gave me there. The experiment in my science class last week was a breakthrough for me. My teacher didn't know that as he explained the workings of the excretory system to seventh graders, I was revolutionizing my procedure for giving insulin injections. I went home from school that afternoon, took a syringe from the linen closet and tried the experiment on my leg. My sister looks impressed.

"Did you bring home your algebra book?" she asks, pushing her own textbooks to the back of the table. Denise is working on her Master's degree in Clinical Psychology and she's explained to me the research for her thesis. First she had to explain to me what a thesis was. Then she told me her research had something to do with childhood trauma and its relationship to an inordinate fear of dying. Denise had a professional fascination regarding phobias, and a personal fascination with death. Sometimes I go with her up to the university and watch as she conducts surveys for her study. Asking undergraduates questions about death and their childhood. They fill out survey after survey, contributing to her data collection.
“No. I left it in my locker again,” I say. I’m having trouble in my math class and I told Denise I would bring the book home so she could explain some of the word problems to me. When I’m trying to work through a problem, I can never remember which formula I’m supposed to apply. I told Denise I’d have my book with me tonight so she could help me. She’s come over to watch me because it’s my parents’ 27th wedding anniversary and they were going out for dinner and to a movie. My brother is spending the night with a friend down the street, so it’s just me and my sister sitting at the kitchen table. She walked in three hours ago, her arms full of books, but I kept interrupting her as she tried to study. Finally, she gave up and turned all her attention to me, listening to my stories of my teachers and friends at school.

“You’re going to have to bring that book home if you want me to help you.”

“I know. It’s an advanced class anyway, Dee Dee. I didn’t even have to take it until next year if I didn’t want to. I should have started the French class instead. Ann said they don’t have any homework in there and the teacher is always gone to get things cut off her face or something. I guess she has skin cancer. Ann says they have a substitute almost every week and the class is a lot of fun. The subs are never sure what they’re supposed to be doing and when the teacher comes back, she’s forgotten what chapter they’re on too. They’ve been conjugating the same verb for two weeks now.”

Denise laughs. “Sounds like they’re learning a lot. You should be glad you didn’t take it. If you do this math class now, you’ll be way ahead of everyone when you get to high school.”

“Did you take it when you were in my grade?” I ask, knowing she probably did.

“Yup. And it wasn’t that hard, Andie. You just need to pay attention in class. They give you all the answers in class if you just listen.”
School has always been easy for Denise. She skipped the second grade and graduated from high school with a 4.0. During college she received a Phi Beta Kappa key and never got less than an A in any class. She loved school and thought I should love it too.

“You’re too smart to let yourself do poorly in this class,” she says.

I roll my eyes.

“Just a few more weeks and it’ll be Christmas break,” she says. “You should try to study an hour a night until then and see if it gets easier.”

I roll my eyes again.

“Okay. A half an hour a night then. Just thirty minutes a night and if you’re still having trouble after break, I’ll come to your class and sit in on it.”

I loved it when Denise came to my school. When I was in fifth grade, one of the boys in my class kept teasing me about being diabetic. He would follow me around at recess and poke his finger into his arm, pretending to give shots. He would ask me if they hurt and tell me that his grandmother lost her feet to diabetes. Sometimes he would follow me around on his knees, pretending not to have any lower legs and tell me that I was going to look like that someday. I would go home and cry.

When I told Denise about him, she called the principal. When the boy still didn’t stop, my sister came to my school and sat in my class for an entire morning. Glaring at the boy from the back of the room, he squirmed in his seat. During our lunch recess, Denise pulled him aside and whispered something in his ear. Then she headed for her car when the bell rang. I don’t know what she said to him, but she must have scared him pretty badly. He avoided me after that and never teased me again.

The kids at school didn’t know I was diabetic when I first got out of the hospital. I didn’t tell anyone except my close friends, and the teacher didn’t make a big fuss over me. But one afternoon near the end of my Fourth grade year, I started to have an insulin reaction during class. I thought I could make it to the end of the day, but I almost fainted when I was
asked to walk up to the chalkboard to write a word. The teacher acted fast, grabbing a stash of candy out of her desk drawer and taking me into the hall. She unwrapped pieces of peppermint as she walked me slowly to the nurse’s office. I wanted to tell her I was fine, that she was overreacting. I didn’t want to go to the nurse, but rather back to class so the other students wouldn’t wonder what had happened. I tried to get her to let me go back, but I ended up in the nurse’s office for an hour. My friend Stacey told me that the teacher had come back in and explained diabetes to the class. They had a half hour discussion about insulin, injections, diabetes, and me. When I found out, I was furious. And I blamed the teacher when the boy started teasing me.

“Why don’t you come to my class next week?” I ask.

“First you try to do it on your own. If you’re still having trouble, I’ll come in and see what she’s teaching you and then I’ll know how to help you better. If she’s showing you how to figure out a problem one way, I don’t want to show you another way that might just confuse you even more. I’ll come in to try to understand what you need to know, okay?”

I feel disappointment. I thought maybe she was going to sit in on the class to glare at the teacher. Instead she plans to be another student in the class, paying careful attention to Mrs. Anderson’s words.

“Okay.”

“Are you hungry?” she asks.

We ate dinner two hours ago. Denise ordered pizza for us and I had the first slice in my hand before she even paid the delivery driver. I had eaten almost half the pizza in ten minutes. My stomach is still full.

“No.”

“How about a game before bed?” she asks.

I think about the board games on the shelf in my bedroom.

“Operation?” I ask.
I know Denise loves this game. She gave it to me for my fifth birthday even though the box reads ages 8 and up. She always bought me games designed for older kids, telling me I was as smart as an 8 year old at the age of 5. My mother told me that when I was three, Denise bought me Monopoly, determined to teach me how to move the little metal car around the board. Denise changed the rules about money in the game because I could only count to seven, but she forgot that reading was also an integral part of playing monopoly. She put the game up after I drew a get out of jail free card. She read me the cards when it was my turn to pick one, but when I asked what a jail was, she realized maybe I was a little too young.

I caught on to Operation though and we played that one for years. I sometimes think she really got it for herself. Whenever I wanted to play a game, she suggested that one. She was good at it. I got tired of pulling the plastic bones from different parts of the chubby man’s body. I always anticipated the familiar beep that let me know I had to drop the bone back down and wait to try again. I could get the funny bone and wishbone out, but the pencil and bread box presented real problems. I couldn’t keep my hand still enough not to touch the side. And the beep that comes with touching the side tells you you’re never going to make it as a doctor. Just grab the Adam’s apple, but if you hear the beep, you’ve sliced the poor guy’s throat. I like to play it with Denise though. I laugh at her as she dramatizes what strategy to take in attacking the butterfly in the man’s stomach.

I pull the game down from the shelf in my bedroom and walk it back out to the kitchen table. She pulls the little man from the box and taps the metal tweezers on his metal parts to be sure the batteries are working. I shuffle the cards.

“Dad told me you smell like smoke a lot lately,” she says.

I stack the cards in a neat pile.

“You’re not smoking cigarettes, are you, Andie?”
“Stacey and Ann smoke. I must smell like them from being around those guys,” I say, knowing I can’t lie very well to my sister.

“Don’t smoke.”

“You smoke,” I reply.

She sighs, searching her mind for a way to respond, knowing she can’t just give me the excuse that she’s older.

“That’s why I’m telling you not to do it. I speak from experience. If I had a chance to do it over again and do it right, I wouldn’t have ever picked up that second cigarette. You can do it the right way and stop smoking now.”

“Everyone smokes,” I tell her. The worst excuse to give Denise is one that says I do something because everyone else is doing it. She raises her eyebrows and I expect to hear the familiar analogy of whether or not I would jump off a building if everyone were doing it. Instead she says she understands.

“I know. The kids smoked when I was about your age too. I’m just trying to tell you that I wish I hadn’t done it. That just because I do it, doesn’t mean it’s right.”

“Yeah, but it won’t be what kills you. It’s not like we don’t already know what we’ll die from. If I can live long enough to die from lung cancer, I’ll be happy,” I say.

She looks shocked and speechless at my words.

“Okay, so maybe it won’t be lung cancer, but smoking will contribute to what might kill you.” She takes a breathe. “Just don’t do it, Andie.”

I am silent after that. We play the first game without speaking.

“One more?” she asks, placing the bones back into the plastic body.

I shrug and she looks me over before inserting the tweezers into the man’s stomach.

“Is your school having a Christmas dance?” she asks.

I shrug again.

“Are you going to go?”
I mumble something that sounds like "I don’t know."

“What about Eric down the street? I bet he asked you.”

“The girls are supposed to ask the boys,” I inform her. “I think Alicia already asked him though. Stacey said I wasn’t quick enough. She said he wanted to go with me, but Alicia asked him and she thinks he said he would go with her.”

“Who’s Alicia?” my sister asks.

“Some girl in the eighth grade. She likes him.”

“Are you sure he said he would go with her?”

I shrug.

“You better find out and ask him to go if he didn’t say yes to her,” she says. Then she pauses. “Why don’t we call him now?”

“No way. Not unless you’re going to pretend like you’re me. I’m too embarrassed. He doesn’t think of me like that anyway.”

“Like what?” she asks.

“Like a date. You know, like the kind of girl he’d want to take to a dance.”

“Why not?”

“Because we grew up together. He just wants to be friends,” I say.

“And you don’t think he’d want to go to a dance with a friend?” she asks. “I bet he’d rather go with you and have fun.”

“Stacey and Ann said that boys don’t think like that. Ann read in a magazine that they’re not rationale creatures.”

Denise laughs. “Isn’t dad a rationale creature?” she says, still smiling.

“I guess. Except when it comes to me liking boys.” I smile at my sister.

“He’ll get better. I broke him in for you.”

Denise was a rebellious teenager. I remember. When I was very young and she was in high school, she would come home late at night. Sometimes my dad would wake up and
they would argue about what time it was. There was one night during the spring of her senior year that she was so drunk my dad had to go pick her up from a basketball game. A teacher saw Denise and called my parents. I remember peeking around my bedroom door, watching them quietly fight. My parents called her independent.

Denise pulls the last bone from the man’s kneecap to win the second game. “Why don’t you go get ready for bed and we’ll watch some TV?” she suggests. “It’s getting pretty late.”

When I was younger and Denise baby-sat me, she never made me go to bed. Instead she let me stay up until we heard my parents pull in the driveway or I fell asleep on the couch. Then she carried me to my bedroom. I’m older now, too old for a baby-sitter I tell my mother, but I don’t mind Denise coming over. It’s not like she’s here to make sure I don’t burn the house down or drink bleach. She comes to talk to me.

“I’m tired,” I tell her. “I think I’ll just go ahead and go to bed. You need to get some studying done so you can graduate and make lots of money and buy me a car.”

Her eyes smile at me.

“Okay then. Get some sleep,” she says.

“Night, Dee Dee,” I say, turning around to leave the kitchen.

“Andie,” she calls after me. “I think you should call that Eric boy up tomorrow afternoon and ask him to go to the dance.”

“Maybe,” I reply. I head for my bedroom.
CHAPTER SIX

The nurse pulls the needle from my vein and applies pressure to the spot with a
cotton ball. Her eyes tell me to hold it in place as she bends my arm. With gloved hands,
she picks up the sample and exits. I wait.

I look around the familiar office, realizing that this is the only one of Dr. Manning's
three examination rooms I've ever seen. The same art on the wall, the familiar cracked,
brown stool the doctor sits on when he talks to me, the same glass jars filled with cotton
balls. I've been coming here for almost eight years now. Today I had to take an unexcused
absence from my high school, because I didn't want to ask my mother for a note. I'm ten
weeks pregnant and the family planning clinic in Des Moines wouldn't perform an abortion
without consent from my primary physician. They don't want to be responsible for
individuals with health complications. The woman at the clinic told me diabetics need
special permission to obtain an abortion there. They're more prone to infections, may have
problems maintaining normal blood sugar levels and might need more aftercare than a
non-diabetic woman after an abortion.

I'll be 18 years old in a few months. Old enough to have a baby. I think. But I know
the risks. Not just to my education and future, but to my health. I've heard the horror stories
growing up. I know that my blood sugars have not been as closely controlled as they should
have been for the last several months. This puts both myself and the fetus in jeopardy. So
I'm here to get consent from my family doctor to go through with an abortion.
Dr. Manning knocks once and enters. He's probably about 5' 8", not much taller than me. His hair has gotten longer since the last time I saw him, making him look ten years younger. He reminds me of a hippie stuck in a white coat, and his plaid tennis shoes catch my eye. He told me last time I was here that his nine-year-old daughter gave the shoes to him for his birthday. Dr. Manning is easy-going, but the sight of him always makes me happy and nervous at the same time. I've known him for years, but he's still the potential bearer of bad news. I'm never sure how I'll feel at the end of our visit, and my blood pressure is always high in this office. He tells me it's "white coat syndrome," but he doesn't know why I get it. He says I should feel at home here after all this time, surrounded by the watercolor series hanging on the wall. He painted the pictures of his family farm himself. I don't have any reason to be nervous.

"Hey kiddo," he says, winking at me and setting my chart down on the counter.

I force a smile.

"What brings you here? Looks like your pap smear results came back fine and your glycohemoglobins were up last time, but I'm not going to lecture you about that. You know what you have to do." He's flipping through the pages of my thick folder and glances up at me.

"I'm pregnant."

I just say it. Feeling like I'm reciting lines from a movie. I've been on birth control for over a year and don't know how this happened. I never miss a pill, taking one every morning when I give a shot. With my heart racing through my sweater, I can't look Dr. Manning in the eye. So I continue to stare at the beige carpeting as words tumble from my lips.

"They told me at the clinic that I had to have your okay to get one. You know. They're scared of the complications associated with diabetes or something. I was there and ready to go through with it and everything, but when they did a blood sugar it came back
high. Then they got mad that I hadn't told them I was diabetic to begin with. Like I was lying on purpose or trying to pull one over on 'em. I didn't know it was a big deal."

He pauses and collects his thoughts before acknowledging what I've said. I'm scared to look up at him, scared to see the compassion behind his brown eyes.

"They've got to be careful to protect both you and the agency. How far along did they say you were?" Dr. Manning asks.

"Almost ten weeks, so they let me go ahead and schedule for next Wednesday. But they said I had to have consent from you or they wouldn't perform the procedure and I've already been throwing up in the morning."

But it's more than just morning sickness. I've been really sick. Unable to eat and having insulin reactions twice a day because my body isn't getting any food. I almost passed out twice during my Journalism class and I wake up in the morning between sheets soaked in sweat. I feel strange. Weak. Infected. A kind of feeling like nothing I've ever felt. Like my body is rejecting what's happening to it, not giving my mind a choice in the matter. For the first time in my life, it's like something has taken over my health, something beyond my control. My body is angry with me, making me pay for having sex.

But I don't feel any guilt. I wasn't raised in a religious home. In fact, my family was very open in talking about sex and birth control options. My mother never made me feel like sex was sinful or dirty. All she ever said was that I should love the person, use birth control, and feel free to go to her with any questions I had. So in the back of my mind I know that my body isn't really angry, but probably just scared.

And I know Dr. Manning will understand how I'm feeling. He used to work for a family planning clinic before he went into private practice, volunteering his time one day a week to perform abortions for women who couldn't afford them. And he's had many diabetic patients in the twenty years he's been practicing in Des Moines. But he doesn't jump to
support my decision like I thought he would. Instead he pulls his rusty stool over from the corner and sits face to face with me. I look up at him.

"Is that what you want to do? You're a senior now, right?" he asks.

I nod.

"How have your blood sugars been?"

I lie that I think they're doing okay. He just frowns at me, as if he knows that I'm not checking them like I should be or not telling him the truth.

"And you've thought about this a lot?" he asks, the words sounding more like a statement than a question.

I nod again.

He pauses for almost a full minute before he opens his mouth again. Exhaling, he closes his lips and finally looks up at me.

"Not everyone has to have children, Andie. Not every woman should have them. It's not a rule that because you're female you have to bear a child," he says, never taking his eyes from mine. "So many young people now getting pregnant. Rushing into having babies." He shakes his head and flips through my medical file.

I can't say anything. Because I agree. But now this is my life and the whole issue of choosing between raising a child or having an abortion is different.

"Same boyfriend?" he asks.

"Yes." I talked to Dr. Manning about Jake last year when I started taking the pill.

"Does he know?"

"No," I reply.

Jake is 500 miles away at college. I haven't talked to him in over a week and I know if I tell him he'll want to get married. Married. Not because he wants to spend the rest of his life with me, but because it would be the right thing to do. He always said he would marry me if I ever got pregnant, assuming that eased some kind of fear I had about being alone.
Jake doesn't know me very well. My fear isn't of being alone, but rather of spending my life with someone I don't love. Raising a child with someone I don't even like most of the time.

"I don't want to marry him," I say.

Dr. Manning takes my arm in his hand. He lightly touches my fingers that have been holding the cotton ball on my arm in place. I realize now that I've been pressing on the cotton ball the whole time he's been in the room. I've been putting so much pressure on it, my whole arm aches. He slowly takes the cotton ball off and looks at the mark the needle has left on my inner arm. He pushes the peddle on the garbage can down with his colorful shoe and drops the cotton inside. He settles back onto his stool.

"Things aren't working out between you then?" he asks.

I shake my head. He waits for me to speak.

"I'm just too young, you know. I love him and everything, but I know I want to do other things. Things that don't include him. Our definitions of what love are just aren't the same."

I can talk to Dr. Manning like this. He never makes me feel rushed, so I continue.

"I don't even want to tell him. He's just not the kind of guy you'd want to be the father of your child, you know?"

Dr. Manning looks at me with wonder, probably wanting to ask me why I'm with him then. He asks about my parents instead.

"Have you told your mom and dad?"

"No." I pause. "Not yet."

He doesn't respond and the silence is painful.

"Okay, kiddo. Well, you know that this is ultimately your decision and I'll support you in whatever you want to do. I don't want you to think you can't have children because you're diabetic though. If you're going to undergo an abortion it should be because you, your mind," he sets his hand gently on the top of my head, "not just your body doesn't want to have
a child. And there's adoption to think about. You have to consider all your options. The main thing I'm concerned about is what you've been doing for the last few months. If you've been running high blood sugars, that complicates things in carrying a child to term. You know that."

I know.

"But," he continues, exhaling loudly again, "I'll write you a consent and you can take the next week or so to think about it. You want to decide before you get to the twelve week mark though."

Dr. Manning had gone on to explain to me the risks of diabetic pregnancies, particularly to the fetus in the first three months. A closely regulated blood sugar is crucial during this time to prevent possible birth defects. Even if a diabetic mother is extremely careful throughout the pregnancy, complications may still ensue. She risks her own health and longevity more than anything. Blindness and kidney failure are sometimes the results of a diabetic woman giving birth to a child. It can put a strain on the circulatory system as well as all the major organs in the body. He said that if I decide to have the child, he would refer me to an OB/GYN who specializes in diabetic pregnancies, but he looked at me like he knew the referral wouldn't be necessary. He could tell by the expression on my face that my mind was made up.

I had told Dr. Manning that I knew a diabetic woman who had two children and was just fine. He explained to me the differences. That I was different. And that unplanned pregnancies for diabetics can be catastrophic. And I think about the movie Steel Magnolias. Julia Roberts plays a diabetic who suffers kidney failure and eventually dies after the birth of her son. My sister and I used to get so pissed about the portrayal of a diabetic in that movie, dubbing the character's severe insulin reactions completely unrealistic. But now I envision myself holding my child, and my arms belong to Julia Roberts. In the movie, she underwent kidney dialysis and her inner arms resembled railroad tracks from the treatments. Finally,
her mother gave her a kidney, but Julia's body rejected it, resulting in her death. I think of holding my child and not being able to see it because I've gone blind. I think of my child attending my funeral before she is able to understand what a funeral is. I see my father holding a little baby in front of my casket. More than anything, I think about the value of my own life, wondering how much I'll ever be willing to sacrifice to have a baby.

My sister is twenty-nine and doesn't have any children. She never talks about kids, avoids even looking at them when we're in public. A few years ago, while we were shopping at a mall, I asked her if she wanted a baby. She didn't answer my question, but continued to flip through the sales rack of jeans and hum a song. I thought Denise was different because she got diabetes when she was two. I didn't get it until I was nine, so I just assumed I'd be healthier. Always healthier than her. Like I would always be seven years behind her in developing any complications of the disease. I'd have the time to prepare myself. My sister would prepare me for my own future. And if she had a baby, maybe I'd feel safer doing it too. But she never did. She never prepared me for an unexpected pregnancy.

And I definitely wasn't prepared for this. I tell myself it's not the same decision my other friends have made. I skipped school and drove them to the clinic, waited hours in the waiting room while the abortions were performed. Then I drove them home to tell their mothers they had the flu. It seemed so simple. Like their decisions were not as difficult, but I realize now that maybe they were. Issues like college and their parents' reactions always seemed to be their deciding factors in choosing to have an abortion.

Not everyone should have children. These words ring in my head as I push open the outer doors of the office. Instead of getting in my car and heading back to class, I walk across the parking lot to an empty football field. The sky is rumbling and rain threatens to fall at any moment. I spread my body out on the cool grass and watch the clouds darken above me. I run my hands over my stomach and speak in a whisper to the entity in my belly.
Rain begins to fall and I blink my eyes to clear my vision. The drops come larger and faster. I remain very still until I am completely cleansed.

Flat on my back, my hair soaks up rain drops, forcing the brown strands to spread out onto the earth around me. And I realize that I am like my friends. I want to go to college and live in the dorms with other kids my age. Kids who don't have children back home. I'm not going to tell my parents either, not for several years anyway. Then, one night over dinner at my family's favorite Italian restaurant on my 22nd birthday, I will be discussing abortion laws with my father and it will come out. I will tell him that I was working on the Spring Dance committee and applying to colleges and yelling at basketball games while a fetus was growing inside me. He will be shocked, but it won't show on his face. He will be secretly thankful. And he'll believe that so much time has passed by that birthday dinner that I don't think about it anymore. This rain falling on me now will all be a memory as I look over our plates of spaghetti at him.

My mother will be sitting to my right and will cry, sobbing so loudly that the young couple celebrating their second wedding anniversary at the next table will look over at us. Tears will fall from my mother's eyes as she reminds me that she always told me I could tell her anything. She will feel like she failed somewhere along the line. And I will try to explain, telling them that it wasn't my relationship with them, but my relationship with myself that kept the secret. I will tell them I love them and am thankful for being raised in an open, caring family. But I will remember this rain soaking my purple T-shirt today. I'll remember Dr. Manning's words even in the warm, dry restaurant on my birthday. The smells of garlic and pizza baking in the wood fired oven won't completely replace the smell of the wet grass around me now. I will carry the memory of this day.

At first my father will look at me with a kind of disappointment in his eyes. Disappointment in himself. And then he will look away from me and stare at the photographs hanging on the wall. Pictures of the small, Italian town the owner of the
restaurant grew up in. My father will stare through the photograph in a black frame, searching his memory to remember our family four years earlier. To remember me as a senior in high school. Finally, he'll raise his hand to catch the attention of the waiter and ask to have our iced tea glasses refilled. My parents will never question me about my decision. And I know they wouldn't question me today, but I don't want to tell them. I didn't even want to tell my doctor, but I needed the consent letter in my backpack next to me. He wrote that my health was fine and gave his okay to perform the necessary procedure. It seems ironic as I lay here. That they say I'm healthy, but won't perform an outpatient surgery on me for fear of liability. Like there is some unspoken gap between the definition of 'healthy' and the definition of 'normal.' Dr. Manning signed his familiar signature on the letter and folded it before handing it to me. He said he'd mail me the lab results from my blood work in a few weeks.

My cholesterol levels have been high ever since I was ten. When I first went into the hospital with diabetes as a child, they were over 300. They're still over 200 because a diabetic's body doesn't process fats the same way a healthy person's does. Dr. Manning said this is normal. He told me that sometimes he discovers that his patients are diabetic because their cholesterol levels, rather than their blood sugar levels, are so high. So this blood work will tell me my triglyceride count and what my glycohemoglobin counts are running. It gives an estimate on my average daily blood sugar for the last 100 days. Dr. Manning tells me that this lets them know how I'm really doing. Whether or not I've been keeping my blood sugars stable for the last few months, and not just the day before I have to go to the doctor.

I sit up. My clothing is covered with mud, and grass is sticking to my body. I hold my leather backpack close to my chest and turn my head to watch the cars whiz by on the interstate. The grass around the football bleachers is starting to turn green and soon the hot, Iowa weather will be here again. I will listen to Dr. Manning's advice.
I look down at my muddy shoes and know that I won't be going back to class today. The school nurse never says much to me when I'm not there. From grade school through high school, my teachers have always known I was diabetic. Next to my name on every attendance sheet, the clinical term "diabetes mellitus" is written. They try to hide the side note from my view, but I know it's there. And it's worked to my advantage.

Particularly last year after I started sneaking out of my bedroom window late at night and staying out until morning. I was cruising around town with my girlfriends and getting little to no sleep on school nights. My Government teacher, a man who'd been there as long as the building, had no sympathy for students who fell asleep in his class. He stood at least 6'5" with a mass of gray, curly hair and thick glasses over his wild eyes. He called me "Dominick" or sometimes my sister's first name by accident. Denise had been in his class twelve years earlier.

Everyone feared Mr. Drummond's temper. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the law and thought everyone else should too. But in the eleventh grade, one is not too concerned with the Fourteenth Amendment. Still, we pretended to care in his presence. Walking on eggshells around him, always in agreement with his statements and supportive of his radical opinions. His class had been the last place you wanted to be caught sleeping.

My friend Jessie had fallen asleep in his class once while he was lecturing. His eyes kept darting back to her every few seconds as he continued to talk, making the entire class nervous and excited at the same time. He intentionally allowed her to descend deeper and deeper into her dreamland. After about five minutes of watching her, he had picked up his leather-bound copy of American Government and The Constitution and walked silently toward her desk. He raised the book over his head and slammed it down on Jessie's wooden desk, missing her skull by an inch. She shot straight up and was met with those eyes.

I had witnessed this scenario more than once. I knew better than to fall asleep in his class, but the last thing I remember that winter day last year was his gruff voice reading the
class an article about a candidate for governor in Iowa. The next thing I remember was a tap on my shoulder. He hovered over me with a look of concern on that usually stern face. Later, my friends reported that there was no book threatening to crash on my skull or angry eyes focused on me as I dozed off. Instead, he whispered, "Do you need some sugar?" in my ear.

So no one at school will question me about where I was today. I won't have to come up with the usual excuses of having a cold or a dentist appointment. They won't call my parents to inquire about the absence. They'll just assume and they don't want to ask anyway. I have the time to sit in this rainy football field. I look at my watch. It's only noon and my parents don't get home until five.

I decide to take a drive. My shoes squeak as I walk to the car and duck inside. I put the key into the ignition and stare through the windshield at the door to my doctor's office. I know I'll be back soon. I know this man cares about me. As busy as he is, he never forgets what grade I'm in or fails to tell me that I have my sister's eyes. He felt my emotion today. But the windows are fogging up and I have flyers to print out on my computer at home for the party after our next game. Dr. Manning's words linger in my head as I fasten my seat belt.
"You doing okay?" Ann asks.

I look out the window and nod.

"I just can't believe I'm doing this," I reply. "I never thought I'd be doing this."

She pulls up to a red light and reaches over and sets her hand on my arm. I look at her and remember when I was in her place last year. Driving the car to the clinic with her sitting in the passenger seat. And as she looks into my eyes, I know she is feeling my pain.

"I know what you're thinking," she says. "And it wasn't the same for me as it is for you. You've got your shit together, you could have a kid and go to school. I think you could do it all better than anyone I know. And even though maybe this isn't the thing to say right now, I think you'd be the best mom in the world. But that's not the point."

Her voice trails off and she focuses her attention on the road. She knows too much about diabetes. We've been best friends since Eighth grade and she is too concerned about my health. Her mother is a nurse and Ann never fails to inform me of new medical breakthroughs regarding diabetes. If a new insulin is approved by the FDA or any information is released about anything having to do with diabetes, Ann tells me about it. When the insulin pump was developed, she brought me an article about it with a picture attached. She had said that she "thought it was a good idea in order to regulate your blood sugars and prevent any future complications which may arise due to high blood sugars and this pump releases insulin whenever your body demands it and it just seems like a sensible
thing to do and I'm really concerned about your long-term health and maybe you should give it a try.” She's scared of losing me.

And I guess she has reason to be. Two years ago I was hospitalized for diabetes. I was 16 and decided to stop giving my shots. The rebellion that had been quietly building inside me for the past six years finally had manifested itself. I decided to stop giving my shots. I knew too much, knew that if my body didn't have any insulin, I would lose weight. And I thought I was fat at 110 pounds. My boyfriend was looking at thinner girls. So for almost a week during my 10th grade year, I put my vials of insulin at the back of my bedroom dresser. I continued to eat, but knew that my body couldn't turn any of the food to fat. Or energy. I wanted to lose five pounds and knew that this was the easiest way for me to do it.

But I ended up in the hospital, this time in the intensive care unit for several days. My blood sugar was well over 800 and my body had started to feed on itself because it couldn't utilize any of the food I was eating. Just like I had wanted it to. But diabetic acidosis, a potentially deadly condition, had also set in. So they put me in intensive care and I underwent tests to determine damage I may have done to my internal organs and listened to the lectures from doctors. Scare talks, I called them, but I knew the men and women in white coats were right. I knew I was sick and their words instilled the fear in me that I was mortal at the age of 16. In the hospital with a 50% chance of death, I learned quickly that I didn't hold the power I thought I did over my body.

And when Ann walked into the hospital and saw me lying there between the crisp, white sheets, my diabetes became real to her too.

"I know," I say. "But can you imagine what Jake would do if he found out? He always talks about what a great dad he would be."

I laugh, but Ann wraps her knuckles around the steering wheel tightly.
"Fuck him. You know what I think about him. He doesn't give a shit about you or your health. He doesn't even have a clue. It's like he wants to be with you because he wants to live your life. Wants you to be his picture perfect wife. All he thinks about it the wife and kids and house with a picket fence. A house we both know he's gonna sit around in and drink beer while you mow the lawn. That's the reality of how it would be. He doesn't give a shit about what happens to you. He doesn't love you, he loves the idea of you."

I am silent, but Ann takes a deep breath and continues.

"The idea of the perfect little family where everything is smooth and no one gets sick except the kids with chickenpox or something. And it's your fault, Andie," she says, looking over at me. "It's your fault because you never say anything to him that breaks his little bubble. Nothing that shatters his perfect little dream. So maybe I should get pissed at you instead of him. I'd be surprised if he even knew you were diabetic."

Now I'm getting mad as she continues to talk.

"I know what you're going to say. You don't even think yourself about the reality of it and why should you paint a bleak future for anyone, right? Why think about the negative, right? Well, maybe you need to think about reality. Jake's complete failure to acknowledge reality could kill you someday."

Ann has never spoken to me like this before. I'm not even sure what to say. I've never had an argument with her and I don't feel like arguing now, but her words are making me upset.

"Well, Ann, I don't know what to say to you. You sure as hell don't have to marry me and you certainly don't have to live the life I live, so why don't you just calm down. Have some trust in me, some trust in the decisions I make. If I was stupid about my health, do you think I'd be on my way to the fucking abortion clinic? If I really loved Jake, don't you think I would have told him. I know what I'm doing." I take a breath. "Jesus, Ann, I'm only 17. I don't think either of us is going to be getting married anytime soon."
She stares straight ahead at the blue Citation in front of us.

"And," I continue, "I don't think you have any right to tell me I'm not realistic. I'm the most realistic person I know. Anyone can wake up in the morning, step outside and get hit by a damn bus. I'm not sure what the future holds, but I know I have a good deal of control over what happens to my health. And I'm sure as hell not going to spend every day of my life thinking about what my medical condition might be in ten years. I don't want to live like that, and neither would you."

She takes a deep breath and blinks her large, brown eyes several times.

"Besides, it's over with Jake," I say.

Usually, she would roll her eyes or say something sarcastic if I said I was thinking of breaking it off with Jake, but she is quiet now. She has heard the conviction in my voice today.

Because when I made up my mind to go through with this abortion, I made up my mind about Jake. Even though he loves me as much as he knows how, it's not the kind of love I want. He's not the kind of person I want in my life anymore. I've gotten older and more independent since he left for college. I don't even miss him anymore and I don't ever want to see him. When he calls, I tell him I'm walking out the door. I made up my mind the last time I had sex with him that it would be the last time. I wouldn't even think about him anymore. But that was almost ten weeks ago and now I'm here.

I'll be going away to college in a few months and that will bring our two year relationship to an end for good. We'll be too far apart and I will build a new life. I will find out who I really am and I'll look back and be happy for my experience with Jake, but I'll be too busy to miss him.

"Sure you don't want me to drive, babe? I gotta give a shot," I say this to ease the tension and I break out in laughter.

Her grip on the steering wheel loosens and she laughs at our inside joke.
The sight of the needle makes some people squirm. I've forgotten that many times over the years. I always chuckle when friends turn their heads as I draw insulin from a vial or close their eyes when I insert the needle into my skin. Over time, their curiosity gets the best of them and they watch. Ann used one of those friends.

She'd never really watched me give shots, but last year we were driving up to Minneapolis to visit my aunt, I pulled my insulin out of my purse and filled the syringe while I steered the car with my knee. Giving shots while driving a car is an art. I can fold my knee up against the steering wheel and maneuver the vehicle with my shin as I give a shot in my arm. Ann had watched me fumbling around with my needle and started to get very nervous. With the odometer pushing 70 mph, I told her not to worry, I did it all the time. I laughed. She had asked me why I didn't just pull the car over for a minute. I told her to watch and see how good I was at it. She moved her nervous eyes from the road to my arm as she set her finger on the steering wheel.

But she laughs now.

"So what about prom and stuff?" she asks. "Who are you going to go to prom with?"

"I don't know," I reply. I'm starting to feel like I might throw up again. I haven't been able to eat for several days and I'm scared about what's going to happen today. I've heard the stories from my friends about the procedure.

They'll take me into the exam room after I go to the bathroom. They'll feel my uterus, determine the size and position and confirm the stage of pregnancy I'm in. With local anesthesia and my legs in stirrups, they will wash me out with antiseptic. Then pressure and pain. But I tell myself that pain is relative. That my friends don't have the tolerance for medical procedure pain like I do. I've been conditioned. And when they empty out my uterus with the aspirator, the noise of the vacuum will be the worst part.

Vacuums for abortions. I know how it used to be before they were used. Abortions were performed by a method known as dilation and curettage. The cervix was opened far
enough to pass an instrument through and scrape out the contents of the uterus. Sometimes the uterine walls, which were soft during pregnancy anyway, were punctured or the cervix was torn. Sometimes it resulted in internal bleeding, infertility or death for women. But in the 1950's, the Chinese introduced the vacuum technique, something that quickly caught on all over the world. Rather than scraping out the fetus, the contents are sucked out through a straw-like tube. And the nurse at the clinic told me that suction abortions are now very safe. The procedure has few risks. And when the doctor is done, my uterus will contract to its normal size. I will be my old self.

My same self with a secret. And I know it's silly because I could have told my mother, told my parents and they would have driven me here, they would have paid for this if this was my decision. I haven't even told my sister yet, because that will make it too real.

Denise doesn’t like Jake. She calls him a textbook passive aggressive. The first time she met him, he was drunk. My parents were out of town and Denise stopped over to check on the house. Jake and his friends were playing drinking games with a deck of cards at the table. My sister didn’t care about the party or the drinking, but when I introduced her to Jake, he started to stand up and spilled his beer. Then he broke out in laughter and never acknowledged her. After that I made the mistake of telling Denise too much about our relationship. I shared too many of the arguments with her.

Denise would want me to get an abortion. She would tell me it was the sensible thing to do, that I had a future and I needed to go to college. She would say that I’d meet a nice man later in life and that wasn’t what was important anyway. She is almost thirty and isn’t married yet. She says she chose a Master’s degree over a wedding. Denise would want me to finish school. I’ll tell her after tomorrow, after this is over, because she’ll be relieved instead of worried.

"Are you gonna tell your parents?" Ann asks.

"No. I just wanna be done with it."
Ann knows. And she says something about calms before storms and how now the storm is here. But smooth waters return. More gentle waves. I only catch part of it, even though I know it was one of those statements I should have listened more carefully to. Like the advice you get from your father. But right now I'm wondering if there are going to be protesters at the clinic. A man who greets me at my car with a smile and tells me I'm a baby killer. A woman who places her body in front of our car at the entrance. I see them on the news.

And I don't have the energy to argue. Not today. Because I don't believe this is a sin. I don't think I really believe in sin anymore, and I'm hoping that I learn not to believe in guilt. I don't know how I'll feel after today. I've imagined it will be relief, and maybe it will be tomorrow, next week, next month. It's next year I'm worried about. Maybe I'll wish then I had a baby.

Ann pulls into the parking lot and I look for protesters, but no one is around. No one holding a picture of a bloody fetus or a sign that says "Abortion is murder." And I'm looking for people I know too. Wondering if I'll run into someone my mother works with or another student from school. But I tell myself it doesn't matter. What I'm doing is legal. It's my body. My health. My life. That's what I tell myself as I reach for the door handle.
CHAPTER EIGHT

My eyes open and I look at the alarm clock. The red numbers glare against the blackness of the room. 1:51 am. I think it was a loud noise that brought me out of my dream, but I'm not sure. I listen. The house is silent. My eyes start to close again and I hear the sound of glass being crushed on the linoleum in the kitchen. I jump out of bed and when I turn the corner into the hallway I see her on the floor. The refrigerator bulb radiates light onto her pale skin. A pitcher of orange juice has broken and the orange fluid is surrounding her. I know immediately what has happened. Low blood sugar and she probably crawled to the kitchen to get some sugar. She must have been too weak to pull the pitcher off the refrigerator shelf and it fell to the floor.

I jump up the step to the kitchen and kneel next to her.

"Are you awake?" I ask, shaking her shoulder.

"Denise, wake up."

No response.

I pull open the cabinet door and take hard butterscotch candies from the shelf. I place one under her tongue and talk loudly to her.

"Wake up, Denise. Suck on that candy if you can."

I know it will take a few minutes before she comes around, and I don't want to call an ambulance. They would do what I'm doing with glucose tablets. I need to use something that dissolves faster. Pure sugar. I take a spoonful from the canister and put it into her mouth.
"Eat the sugar, Denise." I shake her shoulder again, trying to get her to regain some consciousness.

She opens her eyes but doesn’t speak. I know she’s going to be fine because it’s only been minutes since she passed out. I talk to her while I grab a roll of paper towels and wipe the drops of orange juice off her face and neck. Her skin feels sweaty and cold. I carefully push the shattered glass away from her body.

"Here’s another spoonful," I say. Pulling out her bottom lip, I put the sugar in her mouth. She blinks.

“That was an ordeal, huh?” she mumbles.

I’m relieved to hear her voice.

“Ready to sit up?” I ask.

She pushes her body into a sitting position and leans against the refrigerator. I take a granola bar from the cupboard and hand it to her.

“What happened?” I ask.

“I’m not sure. I think I crawled to the kitchen and thought I could pour the orange juice from the top shelf into my mouth. It just fell.”

I feel anger rising in me.

“Why don’t you put some candy by your fucking bed like you always told me to do, Denise?”

She stares at me.

“This is the third time this has happened in the past three months. One of these times I’m not going to hear you out here and I’m going to wake up and you’re going to be in a coma.”

We’ve only been living together for six months. I moved out of the dorms at Iowa State University the beginning of my sophomore year and back to my sister’s house just north of Des Moines. I commute the 20 miles to school every day. My sister had lived here
with her boyfriend, but they broke up a month before I moved in. I wonder how many times he found her like this.

"You need to make yourself get up when you have a reaction. Make yourself get out of bed and not close your eyes again."

She stares at the wall. A blank stare. I remember the first time I found Denise unconscious. I was six. I went into her bedroom at my parents' house to wake her up on a Saturday morning and I knew there was something wrong when she wouldn't respond. I shook her and pulled off the covers. She had wet the bed. I remember the expression on my mother's face when she walked into the room. The fear in her eyes when she grabbed Denise by the shoulders and screamed for help. A neighbor heard her through the open window and called an ambulance. While we waited for them to arrive, my mom placed candy under her tongue and kept yelling at my sister to answer her, but Denise wouldn't respond. She'd been asleep too long. I sat in the corner and stared at my sister's limp body. I thought she was dead.

This was the first time I had experienced the sensation of being completely numb. I just kept thinking that my sister wasn't going to be there anymore. She wouldn't take me with her shopping on the weekends or help me finish the book about birds we'd been reading. I closed my eyes and prayed that God would make Denise open hers. I wanted her to wake up, but when I looked up at her again, her face was still pale and sweaty. I thought that was what death looked like.

They woke her up at the hospital, but she had temporary amnesia. I cried when she couldn't remember my name. It took almost a week for her to get her memory back. Slowly she started to remember family members, but she still didn't know what had happened. My mother had to hide her insulin and needles because Denise would try to give one shot after another, forgetting that she had given one only an hour before. She sat in the living room and stared at the television, asking when her soap opera was going to come on after she'd
just watched it. It was frightening for my parents the first few days, but finally they began to laugh about it. My dad typed up a sheet of paper for her to keep in her pocket detailing the events of the previous week. When she asked a question, my dad would tell her to pull the sheet from her pocket. Every time she read it she showed surprise at having been in the hospital.

“I’m just afraid sometime you might not wake up,” I tell her. My voice is apologetic.

She places one hand on the refrigerator handle and pulls herself into a standing position, staring down at the broken glass on the floor.

“I’ve got it,” I say. “You all right to go back to bed?”

“I’m awake now. I just can’t remember exactly what happened.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I tell her.

Memory loss is common in diabetics when their blood sugars get too low. The insulin in the body, looking for sugar, deprives the nervous system and cerebral cortex of energy. This causes disorientation and memory loss. Sometimes a diabetic won’t even remember having an insulin reaction or eating sugar to counteract it. I know Denise will probably not even remember getting up tonight or the conversation with me. Her last memory when she wakes up in the morning will probably be going to bed.

I follow my sister to her bedroom and she turns on the television before crawling under the covers. I lie down on the bed next to her. Sometimes I sleep in here. We watch movies late into the night and fall asleep with the television on. Denise loves comedies and her copies of “Coming to America” and “A Fish Called Wanda” set on top the dresser. Like a child, she watches them over and over, laughing just as hard each time. She’s been trying to get me to appreciate comedy, telling me laughter is good for me. She says I need to lighten up. I reply that I just don’t see the humor in the movies like she does. I like dramas.

But our differences are few. Mostly we are alike, and since we’ve lived together I’ve really noticed our similarities. We both love to watch the news and read the newspaper
every morning. We eat the same cereal for breakfast and both have trouble falling asleep at night. She brushes her teeth in the shower and that’s something I’ve been doing for years. I didn’t know these things before I moved in with her.

We have the same sized feet and now I can wear her black boots in the winter. We share shampoo and groceries and the glucometer that tests our blood sugars. We borrow each other’s cars. She borrows my needles because she’s always running out and forgetting to buy more. She’ll come into my bathroom in the evening and grab a package of ten from under my sink. If she runs out of insulin, she’ll inject a clean syringe into my bottle and pull out 30 or 40 units to last her until she gets to the drug store. I’ve learned more about her in the last six months than I’ve known for the past twenty years. After I moved in, I realized that I’d never really lived with her while I was growing up. By the time I was starting First grade, she was going off to college, and my experiences with her were only during the weekends for years. I never knew that she whistled in the shower or danced while she was making dinner.

I look over at her. She has fallen asleep. Her brown hair is falling around her eyes and I watch her lips form words in her sleep. I look around the bedroom. Clothes are strewn about the floor and glasses half full of water are leaving rings on the furniture. We are both messy. Her college diplomas are framed and hanging on the wall. Pictures of friends are glued to the mirror on her dresser. Most of her girlfriends have gotten married and had children by now. I wonder if she wanted to marry Tony. They had lived together almost five years before he moved out last fall. She said it was a harder break than she had expected, but it was for the best. She doesn’t talk about him.

I close my eyes and try to relax, but my adrenaline is still flowing. My heart is still pounding from the fear I felt. The fear I feel that she’s going to die. I try to make my body go limp. Listening to my sister breathe, I make my own breath match the inhales and exhales. In and out. Slow and measured. The night becomes darker.
I'm standing ten feet from the coffin of my sister. My parents couldn't protect me from this funeral because I'm 21 years old now and I was the person who found her dead body. The smell of flowers in this room is overpowering and I feel nauseated. I've read the cards attached to each bouquet three times. Anything to avoid looking at the casket. It's too finely polished. Too expensive.

I wonder how sending flowers became part of the funeral ritual. Perhaps it originated as a polite way to mask the odor of a decomposing body. My sister had been dead three days when I found her, and the body had a sharp, moist odor. It's been six days now and I can imagine the smell being contained by the sealed casket.

When I first walked into this room, I didn't even notice the casket sitting in the corner. I was distracted by the flowers and the pale pink furniture. It looked like someone's living room. Music was playing softly and people were talking quietly amongst themselves. Everything was very surreal and when I finally did notice the silver oblong box, I felt my body jerk.

There is a wreath of orchids placed on top of it. Two banners hang from the center. The words "Sister" and "Daughter" are written in pink. The casket is skirted with a crisp, white cloth. It looks like it belongs here in this rented room. Frozen in time.

The casket looks very heavy and I notice the metal bar running along the side. I know from television that this is how the box is carried to the grave. In fact, all my experience with funerals comes from books and TV. My parents had always left the kids at home whenever they attended funerals. I was thirteen when my grandfather died and I didn't
even go to that one. I had heard my mother arguing with my aunt about why we weren’t
going. She didn’t want my last memory of him to be in a funeral home. But today, the casket
is closed.

There is a collage of photographs of my sister which rests on a stand next to the silver
box. My brother was digging through picture albums and boxes yesterday to put it together.
He even included the Far-Side cartoon which had been found taped to the refrigerator in our
house. It is of a boy pushing on a door that says “Pull.” The sign above him reads “Midville
School for the Gifted.” My family loves the Far-Side.

I feel an arm slide around my waist.

“I’ve seen drag queens walk better in heels.” I turn and look into the eyes of my
childhood friend. Blair has a way of breaking the tension.

“Let’s go smoke,” he suggests.

He takes my hand and leads me around the corner and out the front door, slipping his
sunglasses on. He puts a cigarette in my mouth, lights it, and eases me onto the cement
bench outside next to a small fountain. There is no water running out of this concrete
structure, only the silt deposits left from previous days. It worked at one time. Cars are
passing by and we watch them in silence for several minutes.

The sunlight feels hot through my black hat. Blair reads my thoughts and lifts it from
my head, placing it on his lap. His black chinos have a hole in the right knee.

“This sucks, ya know. But we’re lucky,” he says, “people like you and me. People
who love and appreciate art and literature and music. It gets us through. It’ll seem like
you’re experiencing more pain than you thought imaginable. Every time you listen to a
certain song or read a poem or something…but it will help you in the long run, honey. It will
get you through.”
I'm not sure what he means, but I nod. I don't say anything because I think it's one of those statements that I'm going to find to be very true later, but can't really understand today. Like the advice you get from your father.

Blair takes the orchid-frost lipstick from my purse and runs it over my lips. I tighten them to make the application easier.

"You gotta keep your face, girl," he says as he smoothes the color with his pinkie. He has painted his fingernails black today.

This scene is familiar to Blair. Funeral home etiquette is second nature to him. In the last two years, he's lost his brother, his father, and two close friends. He still talks about these people as if they're alive. He told me just a few weeks ago that he could have sworn he saw his brother in the supermarket. When he quotes his father it is always "My dad says..." instead of "My dad said..." Other than that, he never talks about their absences or what he is feeling.

I don't want to say anything. I don't want to talk. So we finish our cigarettes to the sound of the traffic and prepare to go back inside. We stand up together and I just stare at the front door. Blair doesn't make a move to open it, but rather watches me to see what I am going to do. I take a deep breath and step forward. I open the door and a blast of air-conditioned air hits me, carrying the scent of flowers with it. I feel sick again. It smells so artificial.

I stand in this spot for several seconds. The sun is still shining on my back, but my face is being cooled by the air conditioning. Blair is standing behind me and I expect him to comment on how I'm letting the hot, summer air into the building, but he doesn't say a word. It isn't until he sets the hat back on my head that I take another step forward into the lobby.

The coffin is waiting for me through the second door to my left and I know when I enter the pale pink room this time, it will be the first object my eyes fall on. There is a black and white board to my left which lists the surnames of the individuals who have died and the
room number their bodies are in. Ahead of me there is a staircase with mauve carpet. There are more rooms upstairs and I'm thankful they've placed my sister on the ground level. I don't think I could make it to the top right now.

My sister is listed simply "Dominick–3." When I chose her plot at the cemetery, my parents bought their own as well. Actually, we ended up with four plots in a row on the top of a little grassy hill. I might not get married either.

"Come on, sweetie." Blair is taking my elbow and moving me forward.

The casket is still standing in the corner and the visitors are still quietly moving about the room. However, they seem to be steering clear of the silver box. My mother is the closest person to it, but she is facing away, talking quietly to my uncle. She's aged ten years in three days. Her hair contains more strands of gray and wrinkles have formed beneath her eyes.

I scan the room. My brother. My sister-in-law. Relatives from out of town. Two men who graduated with my sister from Drake University ten years earlier. Several people I don't know. And my father. He is sitting on the pale pink couch, staring out the window. I follow his gaze and realize that he must have seen Blair and me outside on the bench. My dad hates the fact that I smoke and I wish now I wouldn't have had that cigarette. I touch Blair lightly on the chest before making my way across the room to my dad.

I sit down and join him in looking out the window. It is a much better view outside. Traffic is moving, two young boys in their dress clothes are throwing a ball back and forth, an old man is helping his wife out of a black Lincoln Continental. I think about a poem I once heard. I can't remember who wrote it or many of the lines, but it starts something like "Stop the clocks..." The speaker has lost someone close to him and the rest of the world just keeps going on around him like nothing has happened. He wants the world to stop and experience what he is experiencing.
My dad looks at me and winks. Neither of us says anything. I don't think I could speak anyway. I wonder if the smell of flowers is making him sick too. He pats my leg and looks back outside. I look down at my shoes. This is the first pair of high heels I've ever purchased. The pain in the ball of my foot tells me it will be the last. I don't know why I even got these. I could have worn the patent-leather flats in my closet. My sister always wore heels.

I buried her in her favorite gray four-inchers. I also selected a gray, suede mini-skirt, a white, silk shirt and matching jewelry. The outfit would have been inappropriate for an open-casket funeral. My parents said I could do whatever I wanted. My mother drew the line at my desire for a pine casket. I thought it was stupid to spend so much money on something that was going to be shut away under the ground. But my mom wouldn't buy into this philosophy and insisted on the silver box sitting in the corner. I gave in. I hadn't possessed the energy to argue at the time.

I want to take my shoes off. I could just take them off and stretch out on this little couch and put my head in my father's lap. And I would let him stroke my brown hair the way he did when I was a little girl. And we could go back in time to the days when we were a family with three kids.

But I don't move. I just look at my shoes and twist my feet around on the mauve carpet. The longer I look down the harder it is to look up. I finally close my eyes and slump forward, resting my head on my lap. My dad places his hand on my back. It rests there for several minutes before I finally sit up.

My dad has very large hands, hands my brother inherited. My sister and I have his eyes. They're a sort of muddy, sea-water color. When we smile, they scrunch up, almost disappearing from our faces.

"Let's go for a walk," my dad says as he stands up. "We don't have to stay here."
So I follow him back outside. My heels click on the hot sidewalk as we walk toward the street. Suddenly, my dad stops. He takes my purse from under my arm, opens it, pulls out my pack of Marlboro Reds and hands them to me. I take them from his weathered hand and light one as we turn our backs to the building and continue our walk.

We've gone about half a block when I stop and remove the shoes from my feet. The ground is hot through my panty hose. I know the cement is going to cause them to run, but I don't care. I'm just happy to be outside in the fresh air, happy to be next to my dad. I know that tomorrow when we bury the body, I'm going to wear my Birkenstocks with my dress.
I stare at the woman across the desk from me. I know what she is trying to do. She keeps asking me the same questions over and over. What was my reaction when I found the body? Is my sister alive or dead in my dreams? Do I feel the panic attacks coming on or do they just hit me suddenly? Have I accepted the death?

I came here because I’m scared. It’s been three months and I’m still scared to stay alone, to drive at night, to sleep. I keep seeing my sister’s body in my head. I know I’m probably a product of too many horror movies, but there’s no monster in my dreams. It’s simply fear. A fear I can’t give a name to.

I keep telling myself that too much time has passed for me to still be feeling scared, but last week I came home from class, walked into my living room and was overcome with the paralyzing fear. I called my father and asked him to come over and then I curled up on the couch and held the telephone receiver in my hand for twenty minutes until he arrived. I couldn’t move. I was scared to open my eyes, afraid to look down the hall to her bedroom. When I drive at night, I turn my rear view mirror to the ceiling so I can’t look in it. I keep thinking someone is in my back seat. I hide under the covers in bed at night like a child. And even as a child, I’ve never had nightmares like I’ve been having the last few months.

But I didn’t come to this woman to cure my fear. I just want some reassurance that eventually I’ll be who I used to be. I’ll be able to function and laugh and think about something other than the night she died. I’m afraid of the fear itself, what it’s doing to me. I
want to know that someday I’ll be back to normal. That this unexplainable fear won’t continue to plague me.

“This is a tragic story,” she tells me. “The mourning process is a strange thing and sometimes it takes people years to move on, but that’s why I’m glad you’re here. We can work on this together to get you functioning again, to alleviate the fear you’re explaining to me.”

I watch the mini-cassette turn in the recorder.

“Who have you been talking to about her death the last few weeks? Was anyone else with you when you found the body?”

“I was alone. My parents came over after I called them and my father looked at her. I didn’t want him to see her, but he told me later that he didn’t want me to be the only one with the memory of her. My friend Holly was there too. She covered my sister’s body up with a sheet before the police arrived.”

“And you talk about that night with Holly?” she asks.

“Yes. We talk about it a lot. It really shook her up, I think. My sister looked pretty bad and Holly had trouble going back to work. She was probably in shock too.”

“Did she know Denise very well?” she asks.

“No, just through me. I mean she had talked to my sister several times over the years, but they weren’t friends. I think it was mostly the sight of the body that bothered Holly. That and the fact that she knew I was so upset. She had dreams about Denise in the weeks following, but she’s okay now. Now she mostly just listens while I talk. She comes over a lot. It’s been hard living there alone now. I’ve been thinking about moving.”

“Well, that can be a good idea for some people, and if you think that will help you move on, you might want to think about it if it’s feasible. Do your panic attacks come when you’re in the house?”
“Sometimes. Mostly when I’m alone and at night. It doesn’t really matter where I am, and that’s why I don’t like to drive home from school after dark. I get really short of breath and my chest hurts. It feels like I’m having a heart attack and then I think I’m going to die and then I feel even more nervous.”

“You know this is a normal response to a traumatizing experience. It’s not a mental illness, it’s caused by anxiety and,” she says.

“Perhaps it is normal,” I interrupt. “But I don’t feel like myself anymore. I don’t know the emotions I feel now. I’m not familiar to myself and that’s what I’m afraid of. I understand what brings these episodes about, but it’s not the way I’ve ever reacted to anything in my life. I need to get some control.”

I pause and take a deep breath. She rolls her pen between her fingers and changes the subject.

“How have your parents been since your sister’s death? Do you see them more often now?”

“My dad usually comes over once a day. I think they’re afraid for me or something. He comes over and stays at my house until I fall asleep. He never cries. I’ve never seen him cry, but I know this is hard on him. The only thing he really says is that it isn’t supposed to happen this way. It isn’t natural for him to outlive Denise.”

“And your mom?” she asks.

“My mom mostly just cries. Cries at the drop of a hat now. And she gets some comfort from all the people coming around and calling. She likes having people to comfort her, but my dad and I would rather be away from everyone. People start to treat you differently, you know. They get a sort of look in their eyes like I’m so fragile that if they say anything about Denise I might break down. So they talk about everything else. I’d rather they say nothing. I’d rather not even see them.”

“Would you rather be alone?” she asks.
“Of course. No one understands what I’m thinking. I want to be left alone, but I’m afraid to be alone.”

She nods.

“I’m not here for counseling on how to deal with my sister’s death. I want you to help me get over this anxiety so I can move on with my life.”

“That’s what we’re going to do, Andrea. It’s just that the way to get through this anxiety is going to include dealing with her death. It’s a very complicated situation when someone loses a sibling. Many of us tend to forget about the brothers and sisters and write books for mothers and fathers and children of the deceased. We forget what the siblings go through, how their lives change.”

I agree with her. I miss my sister right now, but I know that will diminish with time. The hardest thing about her death is going to be dealing with my parents’ deaths without her. Having no family once my parents are gone. I just always thought she’d be around and we could go through that together. I always knew I’d have to deal with my father’s death eventually, but I thought Denise would be there with me. She would understand what I was going through.

I think it’s hard to lose people who love you, you know. It’s harder when they love you because you can continue to love them even though they’re gone, but you can’t feel their love back. I miss her loving me. It’s really very selfish, but I feel like she abandoned me.”

I feel tears welling up in my eyes, so I blink and take deep breaths.

“How is it different now than it was immediately following her death?”

“The first two weeks were the worst. They were the worst because I couldn’t stop crying, and I had so much trouble containing my emotion wherever I was. I’d never cried in public before, not even when I was a little girl, and then I started breaking down in grocery stores and at work.” I pause. “It’s just not like me, you know?”

“And now?” she asks.
“Now I feel angry sometimes and this fear...it’s this fear more than anything.”

She takes a deep breath and looks into my eyes.

“What you’re experiencing is all normal, you know? There are definite stages of grief that survivors go through and some people linger longer than others in each one. We each cope in our own way, at our own rate. There isn’t a set amount of time that each of us is allowed. Even years from now you’ll feel the pain, but over time it will become less intense. You’ll go on with your life. You have to remember that you’re a survivor and everything you go through is going to ultimately make you stronger.”

I know the stages of grief she’s referring to. Crying and loss of appetite to feelings of desertion to depression to anger. I know that everyone grieves in their own way. I find some comfort in that, but I can’t help feeling isolated and alone. I rationalize that women lose their sisters everyday, but I still think I’m different. I’ve read that eventually we all find acceptance and closure.

I don’t want to tell this woman that I wanted to die after Denise did. The first few days I stumbled around in a haze and wasn’t thinking clearly. I kept thinking the only way I could see her again, talk to her again, would be to overdose on sleeping pills and go to sleep. I realize now how irrational that feeling was and I don’t want this woman to think I’m suicidal. I’m not. I just wanted to talk to Denise.

I sat on my living room floor for five days after the funeral, not taking a shower and only moving to get a drink of water or go to the bathroom. I wore my sister’s black T-shirt and a baseball cap to cover my unwashed hair. I didn’t watch TV, but surrounded myself with photo albums and my sister’s possessions. I had carried everything from her bedroom into the living room and started putting it in piles to move it out of the house. At first I thought I would keep everything, leave it just where it had been. Finally I started sorting it into piles to give to people. The dresses to Ann. Silver candlesticks to Margaret. Pictures to
my parents. I kept the things I would use like shampoo and needles. Other than that, I was
left with only a few pictures of us and a sweatshirt she always wore.

My father came over everyday, sometimes twice a day, during that week. He would
come into my living room and sit on the couch and look at me. He didn’t try to make me
talk, but rather sat with me in silence. He would stay for a few hours and then kiss me on the
cheek before he left. I know he was worried and on the fourth day he finally told me I
needed a shower. I thought it was probably time too. I walked into the bathroom and
examined my face closely. I was pale even though it was the middle of the summer. My
eyebrows needed plucked and my hair was sticking to my face. I showered until the hot
water ran out, washing away the grime and tear stains. I felt cleansed and it gave me
renewed energy.

Those four days were a stage too, but I don’t want to tell this woman about it.

“Where do you see yourself with this in six months?” she asks.

I shrug. I have no way of predicting my emotions. Just when I think I’m ready to
turn her bedroom into a den, I have another crying spell that lasts two days. Sometimes after
I cry for an hour, I feel like a new person, ready to go on with my life. I can’t predict where
I’ll be in six months.

“I think you’ll be doing great. I can see the strength in you. Do you still talk to your
sister? Do you visit the cemetery?” she asks.

“No. I talk to her sometimes, but not out loud. It’s sort of like praying, I guess. I
speak to her in my head. I don’t go to the cemetery though. I rode my bike through there
one day and I just didn’t feel her presence. She wouldn’t hang out somewhere like that.”

I think this woman must think I’m pretty strange by now, but her expression doesn’t
change.

“Where do you feel her presence?” she asks.

I look up at her, wondering if she believes in afterlife.
"In my bedroom at night," I tell her. "I feel her next to me sometimes when I least expect it. I really believe she's there. I can't explain it, but hours before I found her body I knew she was dead. Some people think that's crazy, but I just felt her absence in the world. I've heard that mothers feel that when their kids die and I even read about an experiment done with rabbits several years ago that was something like what I experienced. The mother rabbit was kept on land and hooked up to a machine that monitored her vital signs. Three of her baby rabbits were taken away from her on a submarine and killed one by one. At the exact time they were killed, her heart rate accelerated and she got jumpy."

"Other people have told me similar stories," she says. "Especially family members of the deceased. They say it's not anything they can put their finger on, just a bad feeling. Like something's not right in the world."

"That's how I felt that night. I was driving home from Minneapolis and I stopped three times to call her because I knew something just wasn't right. I had goosebumps all over my skin and I couldn't stay warm even though it was July. When I pulled into my driveway and didn't see any lights, my whole body went numb. I didn't want to go inside."

"I understand," she replied. "Do you wish you hadn't seen her like that? Do you feel like it made you accept the death? She was in a closed casket, right?"

"Yes. I don't know how I feel about finding her. I'm glad I was the one and not one of her friends or a neighbor. I think I was supposed to be the one to find her. Somehow it was my responsibility, almost like an honor."

She nods. I feel like I've been talking only minutes, but the hour is up. She looks at her watch and puts down her pen.

"I'm glad you came today, Andrea. You can come as often as you wish and if it's an emergency, you can call me at home." She hands me a card with her office number and a home phone number written in.
“Yeah, thanks,” I say. I fumble for my purse and stand up, wondering if I should shake her hand. She stands up and hugs me. I like her. I had come here thinking she would make me feel crazy, but she makes me feel sane. As I walk out, I know I won’t be back. I know I’ll never see this woman again. I don’t need her. She can’t heal me, but it was nice to talk to someone else, someone who doesn’t know me, who doesn’t expect me to be any certain way. I know she understands, but she’s not my friend. And I feel even more isolated as I close the office door behind me.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

The coroner is explaining to me that the exterior of the body is examined first. Then usual Y-shaped incision is made to expose the internal organs and gastric contents. Body fluids are extracted by the pathologist, an individual specially trained in analyzing body tissues and substances. An autopsy is essentially dissecting and cutting apart a dead body. He informs me that the procedure usually doesn't take more than two hours. Looking for anything out of the ordinary, they document identifying marks on the skin, weigh the organs, take tissue samples. Then they sew the body back up. And he says autopsies don't disfigure the bodies. "As good as new," are the words that come to my mind as I stand here in front of a metal gurney.

I've finally come to see the Des Moines morgue. It is here, in the basement of the county hospital, my sister's autopsy was performed eleven months ago. I'm too curious, feeling the need to know what transpired. I want to know what they did to her body. I'm hoping I will find some answers, come to feel a sense of closure. And this man in a white coat is sparing no details. He shows me all of it. Glancing at his watch, he gives me the specifics on what goes on in this basement.

The morgue has the accommodations to perform two autopsies at the same time and he laughs when he tells me this.

"We've never done it though," he says.

"Never?" I ask, scribbling on the pad of paper I've brought along.
"Well," he pauses. "Maybe once, but that was a long time ago and I'm sure it was just a freak occurrence. I think the pathologist that year was sick or we were behind schedule."

Des Moines does not have the homicide rate of some larger U. S. cities. The majority of Iowans die in accidents and of natural causes. Most of our bodies go from retirement homes or hospitals to the funeral homes in town. The medical examiner's scalpel will only touch a few of us. I follow him as he walks toward a metal door. It looks like a cooler in the kitchen of a restaurant.

"Oh, I remember," he continues, resting his hand on the metal latch and looking back at me. "It was 1983 and our pathologist had a heart attack. We just happened to have a couple cases come in on the same day. We did end up having to do them both at the same time."

"And then you send the people to the funeral home?" I ask. The word 'people' sounds strange, even to me. It acknowledges life.

"Yes, as long as we can collect all the evidence we need. Sometimes we have to postpone a funeral a day or two. Not very often though," he says.

The coroner opens the door and I see more stainless steel. There are no bodies in here, but there is space to comfortably fit eight adults. Shelves for the children. I look around the large, walk-in freezer, squinting my eyes in the dim light, looking for blood. Then my eyes dart to the door. My sister's body was placed on an individual tray and closed behind the heavy, stainless-steel door. She was case number 93-0503 and her autopsy was performed at 9:09 am. I have memorized the details on the report.

"Really, we can keep a body in here for several days. But the lab is pretty quick around here and most of the time we find the cause of death relatively easily," he says.

There's a lump in my throat.
He motions around the cooler and talks about storage, but I move back into the examination room, maintaining eye contact with him as if I'm listening carefully to every word. My pupils readjust to the light in here. Lights everywhere, bouncing off the metal cupboards. Silver lamps stand upright in the corners and instruments are tucked away in drawers. The countertops sparkle, and the faint smell of formaldehyde lingers. Refrigerators hum as he talks again about the procedure.

"Pathologists always wear gloves when they're working," he says.

"AIDS?" I ask.

"We've become more concerned with the HIV virus in the past few years. The dangers of contracting the disease from a dead body are not well-studied and it's better to be safe."

I nod. I understand that medical personnel must protect themselves. He goes on to tell me that a white towel is sometimes placed over the head of the body during the autopsy.

I ask why.

"Personal choice. Some pathologists just prefer not to see the...well, they have a job to do here. Their primary concern is to find the cause of death, determine something that couldn't be determined at the scene or from medical records."

My sister didn't have many recent medical records. When she entered her early twenties, she just stopped going to doctors, never got check-ups. Sometimes, if she needed an antibiotic, she would come here to the county hospital. But she never told the nurses that she was a diabetic, because she said they would have treated her differently. She thought they would look for problems that she believed weren't there. She told me that when you tell people you're diabetic, they immediately assume you're sick.

The coroner is avoiding my question about the towel, but I understand. No one wants to stare into empty eyes. My sister's body had been decomposing. Her skin was purplish and looked as though it was melting from her bones when I found her. Rigor mortis had set in.
They told me not to look at her, that this was the natural process. When the heart stops beating, blood settles outward to the skin, particularly in the area bearing the weight of the body. This bloating is called liver mortis and it occurs when blood stops flowing and starts to clot. Because my sister had been lying on her stomach, the blood was pushed forward into her face. This, combined with the natural gaseous releases, resulted in a plastic, inhuman appearance. I've been reading medical books on the process of death, and I understand the white towel.

"So what if you don't find anything?" I ask, my words echoing between the walls.

"We always find something," he says with an air of confidence. "It's not like Quincy."

I fake a smile and study the lines on his face. He doesn't remember me. He thinks I'm just a curious student writing a report for school. But he's the man who stood in my sister's bedroom and pronounced her dead. Made it official. With my eyes darting from his lips to his forehead as he talks, I feel sorry for him. Because I know the hardest part of his job is dealing with the living.

The night I found my sister's body he was the one who told me I was in shock. Tried to convince me to go to the hospital. I had curled my legs up onto the kitchen chair and rocked back and forth while the police questioned me. When had I seen her last? Did she look sick or had she been complaining about pain? I waved my arm around the kitchen, telling them I lived there and had just seen her a few days earlier. I had been out of town and this is what I came home to. You see what I see, I had told them. Yes, she had been feeling sick lately, but she said she thought it was the flu. Before I left to visit my cousin in Minneapolis, I looked into her bedroom at her. She was sleeping. I had watched her breathe.

So she died sometime after that. In her sleep, I hoped. I remember the voices of the men in suits standing in my kitchen that night. I don't remember their faces. They told me they had been surveilling the house, suspected my sister was involved with drugs. I asked them that if they had been surveilling the house, didn't they think it strange when they knew
she was home and didn't hear a sound out of our house for three days. When they asked if she was on any medication, I dug out the bottle of Regular insulin from her purse. The leather bag was resting on the kitchen counter, the same place it had been when I walked out of the house on Saturday morning.

They nodded when they saw the insulin, as if it suddenly all made sense to them. But I became hysterical, telling them she didn't die from diabetes, demanding answers, staring into their eyes as they stood above me. This coroner sat in the chair next to me at the kitchen table, resting his hand on my arm, telling me he knew how hard this was. Saying I probably wouldn't remember most of this in the morning. I wanted him to leave. Wanted them all to leave. There were too many people in our little kitchen that night. Just take their camera and notebooks and leave me alone with my sister in our home

Denise and I had been living together for almost two years when I came home from Minneapolis and found her. Four days in the July heat had sped up the decomposition process. So maybe he was right. Maybe I was in shock that night, but I haven't forgotten any of it. I can conjure up the entire memory in my head any time I want to, and many times when I don't want to. I can see every detail of the house like I'm standing outside of the image. My mind has protected me by physically removing me from the scene that night, but it won't erase the memory.

My mother sat on the couch in the living room, refusing to speak to anyone. My parents arrived twenty minutes after I called them, walking in the door behind the paramedics. I think my mother screamed. My dad disappeared and I had hoped he wasn't looking at Denise. I didn't want him to see her. I stood up from the kitchen table and stared at the men surrounding me before I walked down the hall to look for my father. He was sitting on the rocking chair in her room watching the investigators take pictures of the scene. They had pulled her head away from her pillow, exposing a brown stain beneath. I walked back to the kitchen where the coroner was still waiting. His eyes had been full of concern.
But that was several months ago and he's probably sat at many kitchen tables since then. I recognize the lines on his face, but I am not familiar to him now.

Our conversation is interrupted when the outer door opens. I tell myself I should look away, but my eyes are fixed on a man curled in the fetal position, being pushed through the doors on a gurney. I back up against a metal cupboard as two men in blue shirts move him forward. They glance at me briefly before speaking to the coroner.

"A trucker. Found him out at Flying J's off the Interstate. Looks like he's been dead several days," the taller man says. He pulls the arm away from the man's body and then releases it. It's loose. "Rigor has already been here and gone."

Rigor mortis begins five to ten hours after death and disappears after three or four days. It helps the coroner determine a time of death. This man's muscles have stiffened and are loose again. The condition is caused by biochemical alterations in the muscles and the body is set in the position held at the onset of the changes. This explains why the man is curved like an unborn child. He was in that truck for too long. I think to myself that someone should have noticed.

The coroner steps forward. The wedding band on the man's finger doesn't even catch his eye. The ring looks several sizes too small now because his fingers have swelled.

"Identification?" the coroner asks.

"Yeah, we've got a name, but they haven't been able to locate any relatives yet. Looks like his home is in Nebraska and he was traveling through. A waitress told us she thinks the truck has been sitting there for days. It wasn't until a customer noticed some blood running down the side of the door that they finally called." The man in blue is now staring at me, wondering who I am and why I'm here.

I try to remember why I'm here. I can't understand how I came to this spot, how I found myself two feet from this dead body. The man is huge and I can't tell if it's fat or bloating. I only know that enzymes and bacteria are decomposing him. The complex
compounds of his skin and organs are being reduced to their elemental components. The simple elements look different. This man didn't look like this when he was alive. I stare at him and think that he was probably very handsome.

"He was slumped over the steering wheel." This is the first time the other man who wheeled the body in has spoken. I think he must be the driver.

"Probably a heart attack," the coroner says. He pulls a bottle of pills from the man's shirt pocket and reads the label. Then he slowly walks in a complete circle around the gurney, picking up the man's boot, checking his ears, lifting his eye lids. The coroner bends down and examines the dried blood which had run out of the man's nose.

"Go ahead and put him in." He motions toward the metal door. He's forgotten I'm here until he turns around to exit and sees me leaning against the counter.

"Well, you're welcome to come by in the morning and witness an autopsy first hand if you'd like to," he tells me, exhaling loudly.

As I open my mouth to decline, I realize I'm not breathing.

I watch the driver pull the metal latch on the freezer as the other man pushes the gurney inside. They stay in the cooler for several minutes before returning with the empty, stainless steel cart. They take it with them, and as they push open the outer door, I notice a note posted in the hall. It asks the medical personnel to be considerate of the hospital patrons. Make sure the double doors to the outer hallways are closed when delivering a body.

My sister's body was delivered through that door on a humid Thursday night last summer. They brought her here in an ambulance, covered with a white sheet. Two days later, her picture was in the newspaper without a cause of death. My mother had chosen her high school graduation photograph, saying it looked just like her. I didn't remind my mom that it was thirteen years old and looked nothing like her. Whoever wrote the obituary listed her accomplishments and diplomas. Told that she had lived her entire life in Des Moines
and listed me as a survivor. But cause of death was pending the results of the autopsy. So the newspaper published the findings about her cocaine abuse in the paper months later at the bottom of the obituary section in small print, after the autopsy findings were made public. My father saw the three lines and called me. A reminder.

I knew Denise used cocaine, so I felt inclined to explain to my father as I held the telephone receiver in my hand. Instead I was overwhelmed with anger, wondering why the newspaper would print something like that. The death was ruled a heart attack, and that should have been sufficient. Even if they would have printed that it was diabetes related, I could have accepted it. Almost every day someone in the obituary section dies from diabetic complications. They never get more specific than that. Telling the public that it was the result of excessive cocaine abuse seemed unnecessary, rude. My silence on the phone line was like lying to my father about something he had the right to know. A detail that might bring him some closure.

Denise had used cocaine for years and I never said much to her about it. I accepted it at a young age. It was part of her personality. She said it helped her study when she was in school, and think clearly when she wasn’t. I denied the reality of her self destruction. Now I realize what she was doing these last few years. She drank too much and smoked too many cigarettes, justifying her actions by saying it didn’t matter. She told me it was quality, not quantity, that really mattered when it came to living. She said diabetes would kill her anyway.

I guess somewhere deep down inside, I’m thankful she was using cocaine. I can convince myself that our illness wasn’t the thing that took her life. If I can accept that it was cocaine that killed her, I don’t have to face my own mortality. But I know the truth. I know that she could have lived longer if diabetes wasn’t putting stress the additional stress on her circulatory system. It doesn’t make much difference now. Time has passed and I’m starting
to feel guilty about still crying when I lie in bed at night. I tell myself I should start forgetting and move on. Her death was inevitable.

The medical examiner had gone carefully over every inch of her body and the autopsy was thorough. It stated "The body appears to be that of a well-developed, very thin, white female, consistent with the stated age of 33 years. The body is unclothed, cool to the touch and preserved within normal limits. Scalp hair is brown, wavy and 1 to 6 inches in length...The ear canals are clean and dry...The skin on the mid and lower abdomen shows prominent greenish discoloration...There are numerous healed puncture sites on the posterior and posterior lateral surfaces of the upper legs...The palms are clean. The nails are cleaned and groomed very long...There is no unusual odor about the body." I read this description over and over the afternoon I received the autopsy in the mail. Her nails hadn’t been long and I wondered what else they had gotten wrong. The sheet said she had coronary artery disease due to chronic cocaine abuse. Other significant findings included abscesses on the lungs, liver disease due to chronic alcohol abuse, and diabetes mellitus. Her death was ruled an accident. I still have questions. The people in the lab had been thorough, but I want to know what they did to her here.

The night I found her I realized that dead bodies don’t really contain souls anymore. As I stared at her on the waterbed, her energy hovered behind me. Her body was face-down and naked. It was dark and hot and the fan blowing on her hair produced the only movement in the room. The faint smell of painting we had done earlier in the week lingered. The clothes she had been wearing the day before I left were in a neat pile on the floor. She had folded them. And the telephone on her headboard stared at me. I held her cold hand for what seemed like hours before I telephoned my father.

"Is it?" the coroner’s voice has caught my attention and he knows I haven't been listening.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" I ask.
"Is this for a school report? Writing on the autopsy procedure?" he asks.

"Yes," I breathe, wrapping my fingers around the papers in my pocket. I don't want to ask him the questions I thought I would about the autopsy findings now. I don't need to know what it means when a peritoneum contains no blood or how the pathologist decompressed the neck organs to examine them. I don't want him to explain to me why the pancreas is reported as being normal when she had diabetes. I don't want to ask to see the Polaroid photograph that was taken prior to her autopsy. I know what she looked like.

Polaroid photographs. They cover the wall around the refrigerator in here. Pictures of the fragments of people jump out at me. A foot, a heart, a head wound. The job here is too obvious. When I asked the coroner earlier what the pictures were for, he replied that they remind the doctors what to look for. You learn from what you’ve seen before. The burned foot was where the lightning bolt had exited after striking the man. The heart in the photograph was covered with layers of white fat. The young man’s head had been torn apart by a bullet from a 9mm. His hair was light brown. Pieces of people hanging on the wall, and as I looked at them I wondered if the coroner remembered the people behind the wounds.

He glances at his watch again and I remove my hand from my jacket pocket, closing the pad of paper.

"If you have the time and if you can be here by seven, you really are welcome to come watch the autopsy in the morning. Pre-med students frequently come in and observe. It should be pretty quick. Coronary troubles are easier to diagnose," he says.

I force a smile and he knows I’ve seen enough. And then he cocks his head to the side, narrowing his eyes like I might be familiar to him. I thank him for his time before he can speak.

I take the stairs two at a time, as if I’m running for air. And my lungs are aching as my foot bounces off the last step and I open the "Exit" door. Daylight envelopes me and I breathe
CHAPTER TWELVE

There are no mirrors here, so I can’t look at myself, but I know something is wrong with my eye. I was sitting by a stream near our camp a few hours ago when I first saw the blood. Our second night on this remote Alaskan trail. Pumping water through a filter and watching for salmon, everything I looked at took on a red tint. My right eye filled with fluid and debris like a big blood vessel had burst or torn back there. I kept blinking and rubbing my eye, but the vision wouldn’t clear. Now I can only see blood and what looks like small, floating nerves. Every time I move my eye, the debris gets disturbed and floats around in front of my vision.

My hiking partner, Joel, says it’s probably just a retinal tear. He was making coffee when I asked him to look at it. He held onto my shoulders and stared into my eye, telling me to look in all directions. Then he shrugged and said he couldn’t see anything and not to worry. The weight of the fifty pound pack had probably just strained my body. But I wish I had a mirror to see for myself.

I’ve been in Alaska six weeks now. It took us twelve days to drive here from Iowa. We left the day after school got out and talked about never going back. We said if we liked it, we were going to stay. Leave everything behind and live closer to nature. But I know I’ll return. I’m starting my first year of graduate school in the fall and this trip is my transitional period. I’m looking for something else here. Like I’m searching to fill a void, and this is the way I’ll do it. Away from the distractions, away from the familiar reminders of the things
that make up my life back home. I feel like coming here is the only way I know how to start again.

The trip up the Alaska Highway was hard. Driving for hours everyday on gravel, waiting while construction trucks opened up roads in front of us, dodging moose and elk on the road, bathing in streams and trying to compromise with Joel on where to camp. I’ve always loved the outdoors, but three months is a long time go sleep on the ground. Joel and I argued about where to stop and pitch our tent or what to listen to on the radio. The driving had put a strain on us, but when we stepped out of the truck and put our feet on the earth, the tension was gone. We both love it here.

We had planned and saved money for months before we came. Sitting up at my kitchen table all night looking through books on Alaska and running our fingers across the maps, we longed for solitude. But as I sit in this tent now, I long for a classroom and for a doctor. Because I am scared. As much as I dream about living my life out here in isolation, the reality is that I’ll always need civilization. I’ll always need medical supplies. It’s nice to think about staying out here though, living away from everyone who knows me. At the same time, I’ve started to miss them. Joel and I don’t have a very strong friendship, more of a common interest in the outdoors. I don’t talk to him about Denise or my family.

I look around the tent. Rain is softly tapping on the tarp outside. The mosquitoes will be out soon. Sheep Camp, the second stop on this trail, is starting to fill up with other hikers who plan to attempt the pass tomorrow. The rangers told us to allow ten hours to make the steep climb over the summit. It had been labeled the "Golden Stairs" because it involved an elevation gain of 1,000 feet in less than half a mile. A 45-degree angle of rocks and snow. And if it wasn’t clear, if visibility was reduced, one should not attempt it. I think of the irony of this advice as I blink my eyes again. I can only see bits and pieces of objects through my right eye, but we’ve already hiked 15 miles in the footsteps of the stampeders to get to the base. I’m tired, but I can’t stop.
I wonder for a moment about those who have gone before us on this trail. Those seeking gold. The Chilkoot Trail had been used by the Chilkoot Indians as a trade route before the white man discovered it in the late 1800’s. It was a shorter, but more arduous route to the mines. Single families carried all their possessions, hundreds of pounds, over this terrain. They were looking for a better life, and I guess that’s what I’m doing here too.

I stretch out on my back and think about the last few days. Yesterday, four hours into the hike, I knew this was going to be the most difficult thing I’d ever done. I hoped my body wouldn’t fail me. My feet hurt and the pack was heavy, but only because I was thinking about it. I learned to lose myself in my thoughts as my legs pumped. Instead of concentrating on my muscles, I became pensive. Removing myself from the physical. And when I became aware of the strain again, I reminded myself that I chose to be here, had dreamed about being in this exact spot.

It’s just that my dreams didn’t include this eye problem. I close my eyes and still see the shadows of debris, thinking briefly about diabetes, but trying to push the idea from my mind. I know a little bit about diabetic retinopathy and I know this is a symptom. I wish I could have believed Joel when he said it was a retinal tear, but the truth haunts me. Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness.

I think about Denise. She always said she’d kill herself if she went blind. She said she wouldn’t live that way. Never being able to look out a window or drive a car. She said she experienced the world through her eyes, that just listening and touching wouldn’t be enough for her. She wouldn’t sacrifice the quality of her life for quantity. But Denise never had any problems with her vision, and I try to convince myself that I’m as lucky. I try to forget what I know about the disease slowly wearing on the blood vessels in the body, the way it affects the circulatory system. This trip to Alaska is the first time in my life I’ve really had to think about my health, had to be careful and realize that I’m out here by myself and I’m my own responsibility. There isn’t a convenience store on every corner to pick up
orange juice or more needles at a nearby drug store. I had to learn how to be prepared for the unexpected. Mentally and physically.

Two weeks ago, Joel and I were hiking through Wrangell-St. Elias and my blood sugar was falling all day. I kept having to stop and rest, feeling sorry for holding up my partner. My body was drained of energy and I sucked on candy to try to keep moving. Joel looked worried and tried to pressure me to just get back to camp. Looking back at me every few steps, I saw the concern in his eyes. I kept forgetting where we were. I would glance up at him to orient myself, wondering if I was going to ever see my father again. My mind was fuzzy and I thought about my own death all day. My own funeral. I couldn’t get the image of the cemetery out of my mind. Maybe I was searching for rest. But we finally made it back to our base camp and I collapsed by the tent.

Our cheap tent. Other hikers have more expensive ones. We got ours at Walmart back in Des Moines. It’s light for back-packing, but it’s not standing up to the conditions like we thought it would. We were trying to save money and only bought the necessities. Joel rain-proofed the tent before we left, but I watch now as the condensation slowly forms on the walls. This thin material barely separates me from the elements. Joel says that’s the joy of journeys like this one. Realizing how fragile we really are.

Joel and I have known each other for two years. We met in a women’s studies class at school. He’d already been at Iowa State for several years and was almost six years older than I. We talked a lot in the back of the lecture hall about camping and hiking. Now we’ve hiked all over the country together, but he keeps his distance from me, careful not to get too close. He told me once he didn’t want to have friends he couldn’t leave if he needed to. Joel thinks it’s necessary to isolate yourself from the rest of the world. He says that survivors keep a guard up. The thing I like most about him is that he believes we have to challenge our mortality to really live. So I came to Alaska with him to test my limits.
And even though I'm in the heart of the state now, my mind is on my eye. I think about how the body is sometimes not as strong as the spirit which drives it. I know I should eat something or I'll be weak tomorrow. I'll have to go outside among the other hikers because a bear was spotted in this camp last night and Joel has strict rules about not eating in the tent. But I realize that I've lost my fear of bears now. As if I know that animal will not be the thing to take my life.

I put on my boots and crawl out. Hikers have gathered near a small Forest Service cabin. They are cooking on their propane stoves, eating granola bars and laughing. There are probably 25 men and women. Their voices reflect fatigue and excitement as they anticipate tomorrow’s trip over the pass. When bad weather slowed the gold-seekers in the late 1800's, 3,000 to 6,000 people could be found in Sheep Camp at any one time. We’re still below tree line here and sheltered from some of the rain. Joel is making macaroni under a tree and smiles when he sees me.

"It's about time you got up," he laughs.

I look past him to his backpack and ask if we have any cheese left. He tells me it's wrapped in plastic in the stream to keep it cold. I grab a knife from his food bag and head over to the water. He turns down the flame on the stove and follows me.

"What's wrong? Worried about the pass tomorrow?" he asks.

"Not really. A little nervous, but not scared. You think visibility will be okay?"

Joel has hiked this trail before. He was a ranger in Wrangell last summer and spent the summer before that traveling throughout Alaska. He tells me not to worry about making it over. It's not as tough as they say. I want to tell him I can barely see out of my right eye now. It’s getting worse. I want to tell him, but I'm afraid to say anything out loud. As if it will make it too real. And he will either overreact and have me flown out of here, or dismiss my complaint as something minor. I'm not sure which.
So I slice cheese while we talk about the trail so far. We fall into a discussion about two retired men from Ohio who are making their dinner twenty feet from us. He says that he hopes he's in that good of shape when he is sixty-five.

Joel continues talking while I stare through the trees with my left eye. I can see the summit from where we're sitting. It looks like a mountain of snow. The rain has let up and the sun is making its way out from behind a cloud. I realize I've finally adjusted to the twenty-some hours of sunlight each day. I stare at the sun, as if it can burn through the broken vessels behind my pupil.

But it won't help. I will find that out when I return home. Surgeries and controlling my blood sugar will be the only things that might preserve my vision. My doctor will tell me many juvenile-onset diabetics develop retinopathy. But I will wonder how many of them are hikers. Those who love the outdoors and will be told by their doctors that they cannot lift or carry anything over ten pounds for up to a year.

Because I will not be backpacking again for a long time. More and more vessels will break over the next year and the doctor will tell me I need to take it easy. Easier. The doctor will say I'm fragile and even doing a few push-ups could cause bleeding in the eye. The laser surgeries will cauterize the weak vessels, but it can sometimes take years for the condition to stabilize in people my age. And that won't be without the loss of more vision, because the surgeries themselves cause permanent peripheral vision loss. This means I will not be able to see well at night. Night hikes, gathering wood in the dark, seeing the lines on the road will all be a strain after the surgeries. I will have the eyes of the old.

"Have you talked to any of these guys?" I ask, nodding my head toward a group of tents.

"Yeah, a couple of them. Most are Canadians. That guy over there is from Germany," Joel says, pointing his fork at a young blond man stirring something in a pan over his stove. "Looks pretty cute, huh?"
I nod, unsure if Joel is directing the question to me or himself. Usually I’m amused by Joel’s comments about people. He is more social than I am. He is friendly to everybody, always asking to be told the stories of their adventures. He makes people feel needed. The hikers here in Sheep Camp will love to talk to him. And tomorrow night at Happy Camp, when we’ve all made our way over the summit, they will share their stories with him again.

The German looks over at us and Joel waves. He waves back. Bound to us by common experience.

“So,” Joel continues, “Are you missing home yet?”

“No.” I pause before continuing. “I wouldn’t mind a hot bath right now or a dry place to sleep, but I don’t miss it.” My words sound convincing and Joel winks at me.

“I told you you’d love it,” he says. “Sometimes when I start thinking I’d like to go home, I remember the feeling I get driving home from work every day. The stress. I put myself back in my truck on the freeway and it reminds me why I’m here.” He pauses, like he’s listening to the silence.

I know what he’s talking about. None of our friends could understand why we were coming here. They said they didn’t know what was fun about spending the summer with the mosquitoes. They asked what we were running from. Or running to. My parents thought I was crazy. They were scared. My mother had watched a television show on bear attacks and didn’t want me to go, but I replied that there are risks to our lives everywhere. That I had a greater chance catching a bullet in downtown Des Moines than I did running into a bear in Alaska. She said that at least she’d know I was dead if I got shot in Des Moines. She’d still have a body to bury. I walked out of the house that day angry with her.

“My parents are probably worried sick,” I tell Joel. “We haven’t called in over a week.”
Joel doesn’t hear me because he’s watching the German. I study my hiking partner’s profile. A strong jaw. I realize that I haven’t noticed the beard he’s been growing for weeks. It makes him too rugged. It seems out of character.

I follow Joel’s gaze to the German. He’s perched on a fallen tree, shoveling noodles into his mouth straight from the pan with a plastic fork.

“He looks like a lumberjack,” I tell Joel.

“Huh?” he asks. “Yeah, well...” His voice trails off and he concentrates on the meal he’s preparing.

“Want some of this?” he asks.

I look at the contents of the pan. It’s beef stew made from a package. None of the vegetables have soaked up any of the water and they’re floating around on top, separated from the brownish broth beneath them. I shake my head.

I’m really not hungry. I want to sleep. Close my eyes and hope that when I wake up my vision is clear. But I won’t be able to sleep tonight. Again. I didn’t bring any sleeping pills to Alaska. I set them on my bathroom counter as I packed, glancing at them as I filled up my bags. But before I left I put them back in the drawer. Now I wish I had one. But I wanted to start over this summer. Learn to cope the way other people do. Sleep the way other people do. Try to dream again.

I got my first prescriptions of Halcion and Xanax a few months after Denise died. I talked Dr. Manning into writing the prescriptions, telling him I needed something for my anxiety and insomnia. I slept. Slept my life away for the past year. Living in a haze, there are entire weeks I don’t remember. Ann was the only person who knew. Everyone else dismissed it as a personality change brought about by Denise’s death. I was more subdued. Removed. They thought I had just changed because of the experience. Ann compared taking the pills to alcoholism, said I craved the drugs like an addict. I had raised my eyebrows at
her and replied that I didn’t have an addictive personality. Told her I’d never been addicted to anything in my life. She said there was a first time for everything.

And I know she was right, but I told her she wasn’t. I could go a week here and there without popping a little blue pill into my mouth before bed. I could recognize when I had to cut back. I told her an alcoholic couldn’t do that, but I didn’t know much about alcoholism. I said my body told me when it had been through enough. I lied to her if she asked about the pills, telling her I hadn’t taken them in a month. But a week was my limit. I’d meditate, take a yoga class, ride my exercise to complete exhaustion, but it wasn’t the same. I still had to think about my life when I went to bed at night. I haunted myself.

I didn’t care. I still made it to my classes and completed my assignments and received my BA from Iowa State. And if taking the pills made my life easier, that was all I thought I needed. And no one really knew, so it was like it didn’t really happen. I accumulated more and more bottles, experimenting with pain killers and various tranquilizers. When my doctor stopped giving me the prescriptions, I asked my friend Holly to get them from her doctor. I was afraid to be without the pills. Even if I stopped taking them for a while, I wanted to know they were there.

So it was hard leaving them home. I sat on the bathroom floor and held the bottle in my hand for a long time before pushing them to the back of the drawer. I told myself that I would learn to relax on my own. But now it seems like I never sleep, like there are twice as many hours in the day. The last six weeks I think I’ve only slept because I was exhausted from the hikes. I don’t like staring at the walls of the tent while Joel sleeps. Tonight I’ll lie awake and worry about my eyes. I wish I had packed just a few.

“Do you?” I hear Joel’s voice.

“What?” I ask. He looks annoyed.

“Do you want to go with me to talk to the German?”
I shake my head, knowing I don’t want to make conversation with someone new. I run my fingers through my hair and feel the grease.

“I’m going to go wash up,” I tell him as he grabs a handful of trail mix. Turning his back to me, I watch him walk away. He looks thin. The back of his jacket is torn and mud looks permanently caked to his hiking boots. I look down at myself. Rummaging through my pack, I pull biodegradable soap out and head to the water.

I sit down and look up toward the summit again. It’s daring me to climb. I fear it, but I’m not afraid. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful and I know I’ll make it up and over and into Canada during the next two days. I’ll find the energy. Denise would tell me it’s all mental.

She said we can muster inhuman strength from the mind. Strength we couldn’t imagine we possessed. But she’d never seen this mountain. I almost laugh out loud, wondering if she’s laughing at me. Stuck in the middle of nowhere with a backpack full of dehydrated food and an eye full of blood. If she were here, she’d tell me I’d gotten myself into quite a situation. Then she’d laugh and tell me how to get myself out of it. Which would probably be just to keep moving up. But she’s not here and I suddenly feel alone.

I dip my head into the icy stream. I can’t be far from the source of this water, probably a glacier somewhere on the top of the mountain. My scalp goes numb as I try to lather the soap in my hair, wishing now that I had never started washing it. The worst part will be rinsing the shampoo out. The cold will make my head ache even more.

I look down trying get a clear image of myself in the water. Trying to see the details of my face, catch a glimpse of my eye. But the water is flowing and I can’t make out anything, so I just dip my head back into the water. Biting my lip, I hold back a cry and let the flow catch my hair. Like it’s trying to separate each strand from my head. Finally, I stand up and wring the icy drops out back into the stream. Running my fingers through my hair, I secure it with the rubber band around my wrist. I feel cleansed.
I head back to the tent and arrange my belongings around me as I lay down on my sleeping bag. Deet, pepper spray, a small bottle of unscented hand lotion, insulin and needles, a bottle of filtered water. And I close my eyes. Because it is the only way I can escape the blood I'm seeing. It starts to rain again and I listen to the sound of the drops hitting the tarp. I stretch my neck and hold my head outside. With my face to the sky, tears start to fall from my eyes. And I become fully aware of the solitude I had come here to find.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The doctor is telling me she will insert a needle into the lower part of my eye socket and immobilize the muscles in the eye. I stare at the white walls while she explains the procedure and hands me a pastel pamphlet giving me the statistics on diabetic retinopathy. It tells me I'm not alone, but also makes me realize I'm not one of the fortunate ones who detected their condition early.

My eyes dilated, I turn the pamphlet over in my hands, barely able to see the print. I almost laugh at the irony. I wonder if there is a closet somewhere in the back of the office used only for the storage of pamphlets. In the waiting room, I looked around and noticed that every patient seemed to be holding a green, pink or light blue pamphlet. Different colors for different conditions. And I guess there is some comfort in having one to take home. It's as if they know you will remember nothing they have said. They send you away with a reminder, something tangible. This pamphlet has a picture of the inner eye. An eye that's not functioning properly.

I guess I feel better in knowing someone went to the trouble to write it all down. I think if there's a pamphlet about it, it can't be that rare. I calculate in my head that approximately eighty percent of diabetics who have had the disease 15 years or longer develop some degree of retinopathy. I should not be surprised to find myself in this office, because I've gone 14 years without complications up until now. Maybe I should feel fortunate somehow.
I squint to see the framed university diplomas on the wall, but I can't make out any of the writing. There is a huge diagram of a retina next to a degree from the University of Iowa. A healthy eye. None of the blood vessels are leaking. The room is all white and a large piece of equipment stands between the doctor and me. Just minutes before, she used it on my eyes, allowing her to see the blood vessels which have weakened and exploded. She gazed at them a long time and it was during those minutes I knew there was a more serious problem than I had first anticipated.

I've been home from Alaska two days, and I asked my father to bring me to this office today. I was hoping it was going to be a retinal tear, but this pamphlet in my hand says "Diabetic Retinopathy" in large, white letters. I've read the books on diabetes and I know that lack of oxygen has caused the vessels in the back of my eye to weaken. Fifteen years of Type I diabetes can have this effect. A few vessels have already broken and caused some vision loss in my right eye. The debris from the hemorrhage is floating around back there, preventing light from hitting my retina. I will have to undergo laser surgeries to cauterize the other vessels and prevent those from bursting as well. During this surgery, a powerful beam of light will be focused on the damaged areas, sealing or photocoagulating the vessels.

The doctor gets my attention by tapping on the pamphlet in my hand with her pencil. She knows I have not been listening because she sees ten of my kind every day. She gives me that knowing look, as if I am going to be one of the difficult ones. The young woman who leaves today and then returns with a list of written questions next week, so she continues to talk about what she knows. Procedures.

"And about that injection into your cheek..." she begins again.

She says this nonchalantly as if another needle shouldn't be a problem for a diabetic. Doctors frequently do this. They believe I have no fear of needles. It's as if they are about to tell me it will pinch for a second before remembering who I am. Then they say nothing. They do this with booster shots, Novocain, and even when they're drawing blood from a vein.
I know this woman will probably do the same thing when I go in for surgery next week. She will remember that this is diabetic retinopathy. That I am a diabetic. And she will give me no reassuring words before insertion, but will be frighteningly silent, even though she has a lot to say right now.

"You'll need to notify your primary physician. Do you have a physician?" she asks.

I simply stare at her and nod my head, knowing I will not report this to Dr. Manning. He will be too concerned. He will make a big deal out of it and insist on blood tests and kidney checks. He'll want to search for other diabetic complications. He's very thorough. He has watched me grow up, and now I don't want to tell him about this eye problem. I don't want him to think I haven't taken care of myself. He has always been too concerned about my health.

"Who is your doctor?" the woman before me asks.

When I tell her she raises her eyebrows and suggests I find another doctor, one who specializes in diabetes. I need to monitor my blood sugars more closely. High blood sugars are probably what leads to the weakening and breaking of these vessels in the first place, she says. She is telling me things I know. She writes down the names of some doctors and hands me the paper. I stare at her immaculate fingernails and tuck the little list of faceless names inside the pamphlet. It's as if she believes these people will save my life. She assumes I have faith in doctors.

And to a certain degree I do. I have to. I need to trust this woman before me, because she called my case severe. I wonder what she sees when she looks through that lens into my eyes. I have no choice but to trust her. This isn't a lesion on my skin or a pain in my gut she is talking about. This isn't something I can look in the mirror and see. The breaks are behind the lens of my eye and no one can see them but me and her. I glance at the degrees on the wall again.
"We do several of these surgeries every week," she reassures me. "You are a bit young to have developed this condition, but we've seen younger."

I was, by far, the youngest person in the waiting room here. Most of my friends just go to optometrists. They read the eye chart and get their new glasses, but the people in the waiting room of this office had eyes sixty or seventy years old. I think a person can reasonably expect some problems by then. But there was one small child who came out of the back room while I was sitting in the waiting room. A nurse was leading her by the hand through the door. With a white patch covering her left eye, the child stretched her other hand in front of her, feeling her way through the air toward her parents. The little girl's mother was holding a pamphlet and brushing away tears as she rose to put her arms around her daughter. When the girl finally focused on her mom and saw the tears, she started crying herself. I watched them together, stared at the child's tanned legs and scraped up knees, wondered how long it would be before she played outside again. Wondered if she was going blind, because she couldn't have been more than four or five years old.

"...and then you'll have to wear a patch for a while," the doctor continues.

She tells me about the gauze patch required after the surgery. It keeps the light out of the eye and I can take it off after eight hours. There will be a little bruise under my eye where the needle was inserted. After I take the patch off, I will have to put drops in my eye for three days to keep the pupil dilated and the muscles relaxed. My vision blurred, it will feel like someone punched me. The trauma to the eye from the laser surgery will also cause me to see spots for several days and I will no longer have peripheral vision in the dark.

She is going to cauterize the outermost blood vessels my eye uses to see when the pupil is dilated. And then I will have the vision of the old. I've heard their complaints about the way they can't see the lines on the road at night and how the headlights of other drivers make visibility hard. I will learn how to drive again.
Seeing in a dimmed room will also be difficult after the surgeries. I will buy another lamp for my living room and use brighter light bulbs after the surgery. I will learn to use my hands to find objects in the dark and my sense of touch will become more keen. I will rely on my fingertips to find the keys in the bottom of my purse or open my car door at night. Vision loss is a result of this treatment. The doctor tells me it's inevitable.

"You shouldn't lift anything over ten pounds either. No running. Don't do anything rigorous," she continues.

"For how long?" I ask.

"We're not sure. We only know that sudden increases in blood pressure or simple physical strain can cause vessels to unexpectedly break."

I wonder who the "we" is she is referring to. Doctors always talk like this. As if when one speaks, they all speak. I think of the Borg character on a Star Trek episode I saw last night. The collective. Every brain is connected to one big database and no independent thought is permitted.

But this doctor is human and I struggle to remember that. She probably has children and a dog at home. Maybe even has medical problems of her own. I don't know about her life, though I find myself longing to know something about her. Something other than what I see before me. White coat. Brown hair pulled away from her round face. Manicured nails wrapped around a clipboard. Moving easily around my chair, she feels at home within this starch, white room. I want to know what she does when she leaves her office at night, but she continues to talk about what the surgery will be like. And when she notices that I am not listening, she sighs. The sigh a parent gives to a small child. A sigh that she gives to my kind every day. Like the pamphlet, I find some comfort in that as well.

So I let that woman with perfect nails perform four surgeries, two on each eye, over the course of the next two months. Just before the fourth surgery, I was sitting on the hospital bed, waiting for her to arrive, and I picked up my medical chart. She had written the
words "severe, high-risk, proliferative diabetic retinopathy" on the top of one of the pages. The words scared me. She walked in while I was reading and took the folder from my hand, as if I hadn’t the right or the knowledge to understand its contents. I never returned to her after that day. I decided I wasn’t going to go anywhere else either, because I had been reading a medical book on diabetic retinopathy and had discovered that two surgeries were usually sufficient. But a week later another vessel broke.

I had been leaning over to turn on my television when I saw the familiar blood and debris behind my left eye. I watched the vessel break and bleed and block my vision as I listened to the weather report. I could see the tiny nerves scattering behind my retina, so I closed my eyes. I sat on my living room floor and listened to the broadcast about the killings in the Middle East. The reporter was referring to pictures on the screen, but I kept my eyes closed. I thought about having to go back to that woman. I knew I wouldn’t, so I dialed information and got the number for the University of Iowa Hospital. I had read in a magazine that their Ophthalmology department ranks in the top five in the nation. I hoped for a more compassionate doctor. One who would tell me that the insertion of that needle was going to pinch for a minute.

* * * * *

This doctor tells me to stare at a spot on the ceiling. I have to keep my eyes open as he inserts the needle into my eye socket. I shift my gaze from the ceiling to his eyes as he pushes down the plunger and I feel the numbing solution enter my muscle. I stare at him standing above me, trying to cling to the image of his sympathetic hazel eyes as everything goes dark. The left side of my face goes numb. Reaching up to touch my own cheek, it’s as though I am no longer a physical presence in this room, unable to feel my own fingertips resting on my face, unable to see my own hand. The doctor leads me through a door marked
"Danger—Radiation" and I sit down behind the familiar machine and rest my chin on the towel. Laser lights fill my eyes. I count the blasts to keep my mind occupied. Tears stream down my face. I'm not in pain, just tired.

The drive to get to the University of Iowa Hospital was long. My father and I left Des Moines last night, but the interstate was closed due to the weather. Luckily we found a hotel room along the road, but we got no sleep. I could sense my father's nervousness the entire night. As if he should have had control over the snowstorm or was failing to get his daughter help. I told him not to worry, that the blood was already beginning to settle out of my eye. There was nothing we could do anyway. I sat on the double bed next to him and pretended to read a magazine even though I could barely make out the photographs of the models in the advertisements.

All night my father kept reaching over and taking my hand, asking me if I needed anything. We were stuck in this hotel full of college kids who had been trying to get home for the weekend and businessmen missing their wives. Finally, my father leaned against the headboard and pushed buttons on the remote control, staring at the wall above the television. He was worried, but we made it here this morning after they opened the interstate.

Today the doctor is doing what he referred to as "heavy laser" on my left eye. He explained that after this surgery I will notice the most significant loss of vision yet. There are still hundreds of weak vessels back there, vessels that if left untreated will explode. If more and more break, the fluid might accumulate behind my retina and cause it to detach. He said then we'd have an even bigger problem on our hands. So he's using laser on those weak vessels to make them shrivel up and die. Then it takes several weeks to know whether or not the eye has responded to the surgery. He said it can take up to two years for this condition to stabilize in someone my age. They don't understand why, but a person over sixty might only need two surgeries, whereas someone in their twenties could require up to eight.
"You're not going to go blind," he says, as if reading my mind. I've counted to 500. "You've lost peripheral vision, night vision, and things will be dimmer, but you're not going blind right now."

I say nothing. I think about my sister, wondering what she would do if she was the one sitting in this office. Denise always told me people didn't have to know that we were diabetic, and having the disease wouldn't change my life. But now it has. My life is different. Not just because I can barely see to drive at night or because my father is reading entire novels to me. My life has changed because I am finally facing who I am. And in three months, this is the first time anyone has told me that I wasn't going completely blind right now. I had been afraid to ask. Scared to say the word 'blind' out loud and afraid of what they would tell me. This doctor said the words. You're not going blind right now. It could happen in the upcoming years from glaucoma or macular degeneration or retinal detachment, but not right now. Not from this condition. I will remember this doctor's words in the upcoming months.

The next time I'm in this hospital, the doctors will tell me that the vessels aren't responding to the surgeries like they'd hoped they would. They'll say that some people go through twelve to sixteen laser treatments and there still isn't any improvement. The doctors will stand in the examining room with me, holding photographs of my retina, and contemplate a course of action. When the vessels in my eye refuse to shrivel up and die from their treatments, refuse to be burned and shrink up and continue to grow and break, I'll try to learn to embrace their will to survive. Their desire to grow in response to the doctor's attempts to kill them. Next month, when the doctors line the pictures of my retina up before me, side by side, and talk about risks and options, I'll try not to tense up. I'll sit back in the chair and close my eyes and breathe.

Right now, my back tight and neck cramped, I hold my breath and count the laser bursts, feeling the rays of light like little fires inside my head, thinking for a moment about
radiation and cancer. When my count reaches 535, the doctor pulls me away from the
machine. He pats my shoulder and talks about the advancements that have been made in
treating diabetics. I feel safe with this man.

I saw the diplomas on his office wall. His wife is expecting their second child.
They've been married for six years and the wedding band on his finger is too tight for his
chubby hand. His hair is thinning and his glasses are scratched and he knows about diabetes.
He had talked to me for a long time before he inserted that needle into my cheek. He even
let me see my medical file when I asked and explained to me what the jargon meant. He
showed me pictures of my retina, and he never handed me a pamphlet.

"How is it, then, that diabetics so often go blind?" I ask.

He sighs. But it is a thoughtful sigh. He tells me that it is mainly people who do not
seek care.

"They ignore the blood they see in their eyes," he says. "They assume it will go away
and things will just heal up if they leave it alone. Sometimes by the time they get here they
can't see anything through all the debris behind the lens. And we have to wait to do surgeries
because we can't see anything either. Other people don't even know they have diabetes, but
there are some diabetic eye conditions we can't do anything for at this time. However, you're
so young..."

I can barely see him, but I nod because I know there is compassion in his eyes.

"...and we're seeing more and more young people like yourself with this condition," he continues. "Individuals who developed diabetes as children and ran high blood sugars
through their adolescent years. They tend to think themselves invincible. They don't listen
to medical advice."

I understand what he is telling me and he knows it. He pats my shoulder, smoothes
back my hair and tapes a gauze patch over my eye.

"Do you have any other questions?" he asks.
I shake my head. The questions I have are not ones he can answer.

He breathes deeply and settles back into his chair. "You have to be sure you're testing your blood sugars every day, Andie," he says.

"I am," I reply.

Last month I went to see Dr. Manning and asked him about new diabetic medications to help control blood sugars. He had narrowed his eyes and asked me if I was having some kind of problem. I lied that everything was fine and told him that I had just decided it was time for me to really start being more careful. He prescribed a new drug called Metformin. It was supposed to aid in the utilization of insulin, but it made me sick. And my blood sugars weren't any lower. It only worked if your pancreas was still secreting some insulin and mine had been completely dead for many years. It helped some Type II diabetics, but he told me I could try it out for a little while and see if it made any difference. I stayed on it for three weeks, throwing up every morning. I stopped taking it, but I just read yesterday about a new medication which should be approved by the FDA this month. It's supposed to slow the absorption of carbohydrates and keep the blood sugar from elevating so quickly. I'm going to go back to Dr. Manning and ask him about that one next week.

"I am being careful," I repeat to this doctor sitting before me.

"Good," he replies. "You have to think about your kidneys. Your eye problems are a sign that the disease has harmed the blood vessels in your body. That means the nerves in your feet, legs and some internal organs might not be getting the oxygen they need either."

I nod.

"And you've had the disease for several years," he continues. "You've got to think more than you probably want to about where you're going to be in five or ten years."

My head is starting to ache and I don't feel like talking about the future right now. I start to stand up and he takes my arm, leading me back to the waiting room where my father is reading a magazine. With the Valium weighing on me, I will sleep while my father drives
100 miles back to Des Moines through this December blizzard. In eight hours, I will pull slowly and carefully at the tape on my cheek as I stand before my bathroom mirror, removing the gauze patch and expecting to be engulfed in blackness. But I never am. I will see light through the lens of my eye, but won't be able to read for several days and then only large print for a week. My father will come to my house and read my class assignments to me.

My dad walks me down the hall to the elevator. I can see out of my right eye, but that too is blurry from broken vessels and repeat surgeries over the past few months. I'm not paying attention and I run into a medical cart. Something falls, but my father says nothing, grasps my arm more firmly and maneuvers me around it.

When we get outside, the sun is blinding. My dad eases me onto a marble bench and I wait in the cold while he goes to get the car. I keep my eyes closed, but I can feel people walk by. I assume they are staring. Wondering to themselves what could be wrong with the eyes of such a young woman. A man pauses in front of me. I can smell his cologne and he asks in a sympathetic voice if I need help getting somewhere. Holding my chin to my chest, fumbling for my sunglasses in my purse, I tell him thanks anyway. I can hear him hesitating as he walks away. Others continue to pass by, but I am sure I only hold their attention for a moment. They, too, are carrying pamphlets in their pockets. Detached retinas, macular degeneration, cornea transplants, AIDS related eye complications. I am not alone as I feel the familiar grasp of my father's hand.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I pull back the creaking doors on the shed and look inside. My bike is resting in the corner behind several boxes labeled with black, felt markers. My sister’s things. Pushing lawnchairs aside with my foot, I lean forward and move my hiking gear out of the way before grabbing my mountain bike. Crumpled leaves are still stuck in the spokes from last fall. I remember wheeling it in here when the first snow was flying, rushing to get plastic on the windows that day. It turned out to be a hard winter.

“Sorry, Sidney,” I say to my cocker spaniel. “I just don’t think you could keep up today.”

He looks up at me and cocks his head to the side, like he understands everything I say. Sometimes I expect him to just start talking, but he never even barks. He’s gotten used to the afternoon walks. The doctor told me nothing too strenuous for several months, so I walked with Sidney through the snow drifts. But it’s been almost half a year since my last eye surgery and during a recent eye appointment, he said things were looking stable for the time being. I’ve been waiting for the sun to come out ever since.

I’d rather ride, see the world more quickly than walking allows. Mostly I ride with my dad. Our pace is easy and people frequently pass us on the trails, but we go long distances on summer days. If we start in the morning, we can usually get about forty miles in before dinner. We ride the trails and side streets around Des Moines. My dad’s been biking for years. He calls himself a “street peddler,” and tells me biking in the city is an exercise in
survival. Dodging cars and sometimes riding on sidewalks, he says he does what he has to in order to stay alive. People in cars don’t like bikers in their lanes.

It gives my dad and me a chance to talk. He retired after Denise died and fills his days with biking and researching the history of our family. I’ve watched him become fascinated with his roots, telling me that someday I might want to know about where I came from too. He’s put together a thick book of the Dominick genealogy. I feign interest in the cemeteries in Luxembourg and stories of my great-grandfather’s infidelities, but I don’t really care. I glance at him to let him know I’m listening as we pedal along the trail, dodging stray tree limbs and people walking. I tell myself maybe someday. It’s my father’s way of somehow getting back to himself, finding himself by learning facts and dates.

Today I don’t feel like talking. So when my dad called this morning to tell me the temperature, I replied that I thought I’d just dig the bike out and ride alone for a while today. He’s been riding all through winter, his sixty-three year old body maneuvering the bike back and forth to avoid ice patches and puddles. But he knows it has to be at least fifty degrees to get me out there. He jokes that I’m a fair-weather peddler.

I spot my neighbor as I walk my bike down the driveway. He lives with another guy and I just figure they’re gay. They’ve lived across from me for about a year, but I’ve never spoken to them. All I know is they both work days and there are never any women around. They’re young and quiet with a neatly trimmed lawn. The one I’m watching doesn’t do any of the yard work, though. I occasionally catch glimpses of him coming home from work in the late afternoon, but he must be here for lunch today. He usually walks straight from his car to the front door like he’s trying to get from one protected place to another. Today he’s outside fixing something in his car.

I push the kickstand down with my foot and lower my body onto the pavement next to my bike. Tilting my head to the side, I pretend to be preoccupied with my tire. I watch him through the blue frame of my bike.
Tall. Not too thin. I can’t make out his face. My eyes don’t allow for many details anymore. The seat of his red car is pulled out and resting in the driveway and he’s leaning against the fender of his car staring at it. There are tools scattered around the outside of the car and a briefcase is propped next to the bumper. He keeps picking up a tool, looking at it, and then setting it back down before grabbing another. He’s confused. He looks out of place. Like he rushed home from work, borrowed his roommate’s tools, and went to work on something that needed fixing without even changing his clothes.

I want to laugh, but I catch myself.

I pedal past him, staring at the side of his head to see if he makes eye contact. He waves and I raise my hand from my handlebars in return. He looks cute from the curb. And more confused about whatever he’s trying to fix. I give him an understanding smile and he shrugs as if to say he’s given up hope and it doesn’t bother him. I like him instantly.

With open road ahead of me, I push the red button on my odometer. I know where I’m headed first. The water. The stream I spend hours sitting by every year. I’ll check to see if my lawnchair has survived the winter. I tucked it under the railroad bridge last fall, knowing it would be months before I stretched out on it again. Last summer after I returned from Alaska, I would go there alone every day. Pretend I was still up north and watch the shallow water run over my feet, looking for the salmon I’d never see in Iowa. I had just learned about my eye problems and kept to myself most of the time. Thinking. And no one else ever went to the stream. It was undiscovered. There were no surprises there. I could take my clothes off and lie in the sun for hours, cupping my hand into the water and bringing the drops up onto my stomach. I loved the heat, the way it burned through my skin. I could feel secluded, but I knew I was only seven miles from my house. It was different than the trail in Alaska.

So I went to the stream to think. To watch the seasons change. Watch my own life change. It was as though I wanted to absorb everything with my eyes while I still could. The
doctors had scared me. I thought I was going blind and I wanted to remember the water. The way it looked. Burn the image into my memory to take with me into darkness. But it was my autonomy I feared losing the most. Not being able to ride my bike there by myself and find my way down the trail to the water. Doing it on my own. I knew that if my vision went, so would my privacy. My ability to function on my own. I wondered how I would find the will to continue.

I wish I could forget about my eyes. The worries about my health that were whispers when I was growing up now scream in my ears. I can’t ignore them. I can’t keep myself from thinking. I try to pretend there’s nothing wrong, go on with my life like before the eye problems. I remember a Seinfeld episode when George said that there was nothing wrong with him until a doctor told him there was. I wish I couldn’t see the vessels breaking back there myself, but I’m reminded every time I open up my eyes.

My legs burn as the bike picks up speed. The wind always seems to blow twice as hard in the country. My dad says if it’s not at your back it’s against you. I ride against the wind. An occasional car whizzes past me on this country road, but mostly I’m alone. Sometimes a driver will honk to let me know he’s there, like he’s doing me a favor by making me jump. Most of the time, they keep their distance, giving me more than my half of the road as they move slowly around me. Country drivers are more courteous.

I thought about suicide a lot last summer while I sat on my lawnchair next to the water. Thought about killing myself if my vision got too bad. I knew coming here would be the best place because my parents wouldn’t be the ones to find me. I didn’t want them living with the image of my dead body in their heads. But then I got worried that maybe no one would find me out there. And I didn’t want my father searching ditches across the state like I’d seen parents on television do. I didn’t want him to think I’d been kidnapped and lie awake every night worrying about what was happening to me at that moment. I remember overhearing my mother’s words when a paperboy came up missing several years ago. She
told her friend that she’d rather one of her children be dead than missing. That way she would just know. So I was sure I’d have to do it someplace where I would be found. I’d want my mom’s mind at ease right away. A quick death that someone who didn’t know me discovered. I’d do it with sleeping pills while the sun beat down on me. I had it all planned.

I’d even written the letters to my family and friends. Addressed and stamped. Telling them not to be sad, that there was nothing they could have done, that it was my decision. I wanted to die. I wanted to die rather than live blind. I wrote and rewrote the letters over and over. Trying to find the words that fit, I settled for what I knew would be unacceptable excuses. A letter wouldn’t console my mother. Staring at my words, my handwriting, might even make it worse. But I knew I would have to write the letters eventually. I couldn’t leave the people I loved no explanation. They deserved to at least know my reasons.

My father’s letter had been the longest. I wrote that I was sorry for doing this, I knew it was selfish. I told him I understood that losing two daughters in one lifetime was too much for anyone, but he had to remember me as I had been when I was happier. He loved to see me smile. I wrote that I knew we’d be together again and I would watch over him until then. But eventually that letter fell into selfish excuses too, defending my decision and arguing that it was my choice, my life.

I could never find the right words. I figured they would just come to me when the time was right. I thought I would just wake up one day when my vision was so bad I didn’t want to go on and it would all hit me. I would know what to write. But it’s been a year and I’m still riding today, looking up at the clouds. I don’t want to die yet.

I’ve heard that we never think we can endure as we much as we can. My friend whose kidneys failed said he thought about suicide all the time when he was first diagnosed, weighing the quality of his life against the quantity. He never thought he would cope, but that was almost ten years ago. He tells me I’m stronger than I think I am. A survival instinct
will kick in. When I say I’d never be able to live blind, he simply responds that I will. I will learn and I will redefine what’s important in my life. He says I will lose and gain vision.

I pull off the road and follow the railroad tracks about half a mile until I come to the bridge. Stepping off my bike and walking carefully down the steep hill, I spot my lawnchair wedged between two boards. I feel secure. No one has been here. The rusty chair is exactly where I left it and the logs I had dragged over next to the water last fall are still in place. Not even nature has disturbed my spot.

I don’t stay long. Sitting only a moment before I push my bike back up the hill onto the tracks. Looking for trains, I remember how they sounded rattling above me last year. I could hear them for miles before they arrived and when they finally made it to the bridge, the ground seemed to shake uncontrollably. I had kept my eyes closed, sometimes welcoming the interruption in the silence. If I was reading I would set my book aside and try to count the cars, but I was too close to them. They went by too fast. Just a blur, I could hardly differentiate one car from the next, unable to even see the space between them. But there are no trains today. Nothing but quiet out here as I lift my leg back over my bike.

* * *

I look down at my odometer as I turn the corner onto my street. 23 miles. I’ve been gone six hours and I think about calling my dad when I get home. He’ll ask if I wore my helmet and I’ll hear a disappointed laugh on the other end of the line when I say no. I won’t tell him it hung on my handlebars all day. I’m thinking about showing him my place by the stream this year, but I know I won’t. I’m wondering if he’s going to be home, when I spot my neighbor again. I slow down.

He’s still working on the passenger’s seat of his car, but he’s wearing shorts now. His roommate, a shorter and darker guy, has joined him and they’re looking at the seat
together. A couple beer cans rest next to them. They look up at me and wave, so I pull into their driveway.

"Hi," I say, surprised that I feel nervous. "Having some trouble there?"

They shake their heads simultaneously and I almost laugh. I want to remind the tall one that he’s been out here for hours.

"Just fixing the seat," he replies.

Awkward silence.

"I’m Doug," the tall one says.

"Craig," his roommate’s voice chimes in.

"Ah, I’m Andie," I say, pointing to the house across the street.

"Angie?" Craig asks.

"Andie," I repeat, emphasizing the ‘d.’ "Andrea." I feel stupid. Uninvited, even though they’ve stopped all their work and seem happy to talk with me.

"I see you biking a lot. Rather, I envy you biking a lot," Doug says. His smile brings a smile to my face.

"Just you two live here then?" I ask.

"Yup. You live alone?" Doug asks, looking toward the single car in my drive.

I nod.

I’m trying to determine if they’re a couple. Watching their body language and listening to the words they choose, I think I have a pretty good knack for knowing gay men from straight ones. Joel and Danny call it my ‘gaydar,’ telling me I picked up my skills from them. These guys are straight.

"You work?" Craig asks.

I laugh because it probably appears as though I’m always home.

"Yeah. Well, I’m finishing my Master’s up at ISU and I teach English up there. But I have a lot of free time to play outside."
The conversation is going more smoothly and they ask me if I want a beer. I decline, replying that I should probably get inside. The temperature is dropping and the wind blowing on my sweaty skin is making me shiver.

“Iowa State?” Craig asks, jokingly holding his stomach like he’s sick.

“Let me guess,” I reply. “You’re Hawkeyes over here. I knew something was wrong with you guys.”

I smile because this is the epitome of small talk. I feel like I’ve just contributed to a conversation about the weather.

“Yup. Iowa fans,” Craig replies.

“I know. Crush us in football, but that’s because our focus is academia,” I laugh. I always use this line when someone makes a comment about my school’s losing football team.

Doug looks me in the eye and smiles. “What are you studying?”

“English.”

“Cool,” he replies.

“Yuck,” Craig says. “All that reading.”

“What were you guys in?” I ask, directing my question to Doug by keeping my eyes locked with his.

“Social work,” he says.

Craig says nothing.

I’m getting cold, and I want to get inside my house and warm up, but I spot a dog tied up next to the house behind them.

“I didn’t know you guys had a dog,” I say, moving toward the puppy. “A husky?” I ask.

“Yup,” Craig replies. “I just got him about a month ago.”

“You should bring yours over to play with him,” Doug says.
Surprise shows on my face.
“I see you walking him sometimes,” he adds.
“Yeah, your dog would probably eat mine.” I smile. “What’s his name?”
“Reggie,” Craig replies.
“Well, Reggie,” I say, holding my hand up for him to smell. “How do you like it in
the neighborhood so far?” The husky proceeds to nibble on my fingers, pressing his sharp,
baby teeth into my hand.
“Teething?” I ask, looking over at Craig.
“I guess,” he replies. “He chews on everything.”
“Your teeth hurt, don’t they Reg?” I rub the dog’s ears and walk back over to the
guys.
“You should rip up a washcloth, wet it down and put the strips in the freezer for him
to chew on. It’ll numb his mouth.”
They both stare at me like I’m crazy.
“He’s just like a teething kid,” I laugh.
“Freezer treats,” Doug comments. “We should try that.” He pauses. “What’s your
dog’s name?”
me a blank stare.
“A puppy too?” he asks.
“Nope, Sid’s six. But I used to have a little retriever and the freezer treats helped
when he was teething,” I reply.
I’m not uneasy talking to these two anymore. The conversation is friendly. It won’t
be so awkward the next time I ride by. Maybe I’ll even ask Doug to join me for a ride
sometime.
He reads my mind.
“Maybe I’ll hop on my bike and take a ride with you one of these days,” he says.

“You should,” I say. Then I pause. “Well, I should get in. Nice to finally meet you guys. Now I’ll know who I’m waving at.”

I feel strange walking away. Like I’m being watched as I cross the street to my own drive. My stomach is full of butterflies. I try to think back to the times I’ve seen them before, searching my memory for regular visits from women. I can’t remember ever seeing a female over there. I find myself hoping Doug is single as I carry my bike up onto my back deck. I peek around the corner and watch them back at work on the car seat. I’ll stop by tomorrow and ask him to join me for a ride.

* * *

“I have to admit, it is pretty amazing,” Doug says, replying to my comments about the pyramids in Egypt. I’ve been telling him about the book I’m reading on aliens and the building of the pyramids. He’s a skeptic and I like that.

I like him. We’ve been riding almost every day for the last two weeks and sometimes having dinner together afterwards. It feels strange spending so much time with my neighbor, and I find myself looking out the window a lot more. Waiting for him to get home from work, then waiting for him to call or walk over. Cycling was our excuse to spend time together, our way to justify what we both knew was happening between us.

“I think we just doubt what we fear and we fear the unknown,” I tell him. My legs feel weak. It’s hard for me to keep his pace.

“Of course,” he replies. “I want to believe, but I need that crucial evidence, you know. Something more than a theory.”

He looks over at me, the surprise showing on his face.

“You don’t strike me as the kind of person too keen on the idea of faith,” he laughs.

He’s right.

“Yeah, but I think I’m learning.”

He’s silent for several minutes after that, occasionally looking over at me and pulling his sunglasses down, away from his eyes. Bright brown eyes. He’s becoming more and more attractive to me and I’m scared, resisting the feeling I get when he looks at me. I’ve been thinking about taking him to my stream.

He kissed me last night. We had been sitting on the couch talking just like we’d done every night. He picked up his biking gloves and was standing up to leave when he leaned over and kissed me. It felt strange. Like we were players on the dating game and this was the obligatory action at the end of the night. I didn’t kiss him back and he looked at me with wonder, because he knew that I had wanted to be kissed. He made it even worse by squeezing my hand, turning around, and walking straight out the back door. I wondered if he would be back. But he showed up again this afternoon.

“I don’t know how else the damn things got built,” I continue. “I mean, humans couldn’t have lifted those stones.” I pause. “Then again, maybe we just assume that our technology is so advanced that we know everything. Perhaps the answer to how it was done is too easy, right under our noses.”

“Exactly,” he replies.

I can tell he wants to change the subject, talk about more serious things. Maybe talk about us what’s happening between us. I don’t want to. I’m afraid of getting too used to him. I welcome the sight of his car pulling in the driveway across the street, like he’s coming home to my house and he’s my roommate. It’s a crazy feeling. I have been comfortable living alone for so long, I’m surprised his presence isn’t an intrusion. I keep waiting to grow tired of him.
“Would you like to head back home with me next weekend? To my parents house?” he asks.

I stare at him, not sure what to make of the question. Thoughts race through my head about meeting his mother, how he would introduce me, what it means to meet his family.

“Um, when are you going?”

“I think I’ll go on Friday after work. Just staying until Saturday, but I thought you might want to come along for the ride.”

“For the ride?” I ask, laughing. “I can get a ride in my own car and end up comfortable in my own bed at the end of the day.” I immediately regret my words.

“Okay,” he says.

“I’d love to go,” I blurt out in an attempt to fix my comment.

He just stares at me.

“Seriously,” I tell him. “I’d like to get out of here for a day or two.”

“Great,” he says, finally smiling again.

I feel like I’ve fixed some of the damage I did by not kissing him last night. I still can’t believe I didn’t respond. I had been waiting for him to touch me all week, and when he did, I tensed up. I had made rules for myself when it came to men. Never like them too much and don’t let them interrupt my routine. My philosophy had stunted the growth of almost every relationship for the past three years, but that was fine with me. I can’t even remember the names of some of the men. I made them insignificant in my life, both during the time I was dating them and after we’d broken up. Their faces eventually became blank spaces in my memory. My friends joked about it, telling me I’d never keep a man around with my attitude. I just didn’t want anyone having any influence over me. I always thought sharing my life meant giving up my independence.

It doesn’t feel like that with Doug. I want him in my life, want to compromise my own plans and spend time with him. My friends don’t understand, and I can’t explain it to
them. They ask me where I’ve been, what I’ve been doing, why I didn’t show up at the movies last Friday night. They wonder who this neighbor is that I’ve never talked about before. They’re surprised to see me care about someone, but I think they’re secretly happy. I welcome the change, because it’s the first time I’ve cared about someone new in a long time. I thought for years I would have to marry someone who had been in my life before Denise died, if I got married at all. I believed I needed someone who understood the kind of person I had been when she was still alive, and could see what her death had done to me. I thought that to really know me, they had to have experienced my entire past. I didn’t want to catch anyone up.

But Doug makes me see the truth. That he cares about the person I am now. He understands that I can only share the memories with him, but he can never relive them with me. He knows that I’ve been through some tough times, but he says they make me the person he admires so much. He tells me the past doesn’t matter. It’s better to focus on the future.

I like the way Doug sees the world and I like the way his eyes light up when he talks about it. He’s got so much hope. Maybe too much, but it’s refreshing. Sometimes I think he hasn’t experienced enough of the world to acknowledge all the negatives. He hasn’t faced his mortality yet. He’s an optimist, but he works with abused and delinquent kids, so I guess he has to stay positive to remain sane. I remember something he said to me last night.

“You know you called me a pessimist yesterday?” I ask.

He laughs.

“You are a pessimist,” he replies.

“No, I’m a realist. You’ve got pessimism and realism confused. And then you call yourself an optimist, but you’re just an idealist. Another idealist.”

He rolls his eyes and waits for me to finish.
“See, I view the world as it is. Reality. And you just don’t have the stomach for it, so you dismiss me as negative. You call me negative because you’re afraid I’m right and you can’t accept the world as I see it. As it really is.”

I pause. I’m not trying to argue with him.

“I don’t mean it’s all a bad thing,” I continue. “John Lennon was an idealist. The epitome of a dreamer, and he made a lot of money off the idea.” I start to hum the song “Imagine.”

“Well, you try to dismiss your own negativity as realism, and you call it realism,” he says. “You’ve got some of us optimists fooled, but not all of us.” He smiles. “And I love Lennon.”

I feel something between wanting to pull over to argue and pull over to kiss him. I slow down and hear his brakes squeak.

“You’re negative,” he continues, coming to a complete stop next to me. “You don’t see the hope in anything, and I’m not sure if it’s your nature or your environment, but it’s definitely there.”

“My nature,” I confirm, rolling my eyes. “How can you be so optimistic, anyway? Don’t you watch the news? How can you see all the tragedy in the world and still be so hopeful about the future. Do you believe in God?” I ask.

“No.”

“See, there’s your problem.” I’ve pushed my bike onto the shoulder of the road, and I sit down on the edge of an empty field. The farmers should be planting by now and I wonder what they’ll be growing here this year. Probably corn again.

He looks out across the field and reads my thoughts.

“Because the corn always comes up again,” he says. “No matter what, the world continues to spin and we continue to move. Sometimes it’s just hard to recognize that.” He pulls a blade of brown grass and sets it between his lips.
I’m not sure how to respond, so I resort to sarcasm.

“That’s poetic. It always dies though, doesn’t it?”

“Now you’re just trying to argue with me for the sake of arguing,” he continues. “It’s the cycle and you know it. There’s nothing sad or negative about death. It’s the way it is. It’s the difference between how I see it and how you see it. The glass is just half empty in your eyes.”

“Hum,” I say, knowing he’s probably right, but refusing to acknowledge that my view of the world is anything other than the best one.

“Are you getting mad at me?”

“No. I just think you put too much confidence in the fact that you think you know me so well. How long have we known each other? Jesus,” I say.

He looks hurt. He rests his hand on his forehead and looks back toward the field. We realize we’ve only known each other two weeks, but it feels like a lifetime to both of us. We were talking last night about how strange it is that we get along so well. I could spend every moment with him. The things he says about me are true. He knows me so well, but I have a hard time admitting it, even to myself. I don’t know how to apologize for the statement, so I look from his eyes out across the field.

He doesn’t say anything, but simply puts his arm around my shoulders. The wind is blowing on my back and I stretch my legs out, feeling the full weight of his arm on my shoulders. His other hand is resting on my leg and I trace the outline of his fingers with mine. Soft hands. They look young compared to mine. I’m self-conscious about the wrinkles on my fingers, and I tighten my hand into a fist and slip it under his. I’ve had the hands of an old woman since I was a child. My mother used to tell me they were wise, told me I inherited them from my grandmother. Just forty years too soon, I would reply. I loosen my fist and feel his fingers closing around mine. I lean into his chest and close my eyes.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I hear Doug opening and shutting the cupboards in the kitchen. He’s wondering again why I have all these pots and pans and I don’t even cook. During the six years I’ve lived on my own, my mother has given me every kitchen appliance and utensil in the stores. Each Christmas I tear the familiar green wrapping paper off the box of an item I’ve never heard of. My cupboards are filled with iced tea machines, toaster ovens, Ginsu knives, juicers, grinders, choppers, mixers. I never knew they made such specific contraptions for food. A special apple peeler. A machine for just potatoes. One spatula for hashbrowns and another just for hamburgers. Pans that steam rice while they cook your vegetables. Then my mom forgets what she’s given me and I end up opening an identical box a few years later. I think she feels guilty that I didn’t turn out to be more domestic, but I never use any of the gadgets. I still prefer restaurants.

Doug drops a pan on the floor. It’s probably his huge, aluminum wok. He brought it with him when he moved in and cooks everything in it. He’s been living here close to a month and the neighbors are finally starting to adjust. We tried to be inconspicuous at first, bringing over one item at a time so no one would notice. But when we had to move a bed, dresser, and rocking chair, the curtains on our neighbors’ windows were pulled back a crack. We had even waited until ten o’clock at night to haul the furniture across the street, but we could still feel their eyes. They had already been watching us the weeks before that, wondering what was going on.
I’ve lived in this small community outside Des Moines for almost four years, but I
don’t know any of my neighbors. I see them coming and going, and raise my hand to them
occasionally, but I’ve never spoken more than a few words to any of them. I felt
uncomfortable around them, like a freak. I lived alone and they all had families. I had no
children to play with theirs and never turned on my porch light during Halloween. I stay
home alone at Christmas and no one comes to my house for Thanksgiving. I’m sure they’re
curious about what’s going on with Doug. Maybe they think I’ll be part of the neighborhood
now that there’s a man living here, out in the driveway with a lawnmower sharing a beer or
cigarette with them during a break from yard work. They stand out there for hours and talk
to each other.

Early one morning about a week before the move, Doug had walked out my back
door and straight into my neighbor, Dave, who was loading carpet into his van. Doug called
me when he got to his house, embarrassed, but trying to laugh. He said Dave had looked him
up and down twice. From his messed up hair to his untucked shirt and down to his shoelaces
dragging behind his sneakers. My neighbor chuckled and gave Doug a knowing look before
he turned back to his work. When Doug said that it was one of those “man to man” looks, I
broke out in laughter into the receiver. I knew that would be the topic of conversation for the
next week in the driveways up and down the street. The strange girl having a secret affair
with the boy next door.

Doug loves to cook and is probably boiling spaghetti and peeling carrots right now.
He knows that’s my favorite meal. Sometimes when he’s cooking for me I just lean back in
one of the kitchen chairs and watch him move around the room. Actually he dances,
ocasionally stopping and biting his lip if he becomes lost in a thought. He pulls his teeth
over his bottom lip when he’s concentrating. I can see the wheels turning in his head as he
plans the simplest of meals. Today I can’t see him, but I listen from the bedroom.

“You okay in there, sweetie?” Doug yells down the hall.
“Yup,” I yell back, my head pounding furiously.

“Just another couple minutes and it’ll be ready.”

I reach up and place my hand over the patch covering my left eye. The pain is bad, and I feel around on the night stand for the bottle of pills. They make me sleepy, but sleep would be better than this headache. I wrap my fingers around the bottle and twist the childproof cap. The doctor told me not to exceed four tablets in a twenty-four hour period, but this is my third today and it’s barely noon. I know that up to three times the recommended dosage won’t hurt me. Doctors are too careful. Turning the bottle around in my hand, I wonder what I’ll do when the prescription runs out early. I might not be able to get a refill. I set the round, white pill on the back of my tongue and take a drink of water. Resting my head on the pillow, I set my hand over my eye again.

It’s like a huge wad of gauze under my fingers. They used a metal guard around my eye and then wrapped it up with layers of gauze and medical tape to secure it. They told me that it was critical I didn’t bump or touch the eye. The doctors always talk about my eye like it doesn’t belong to me, like it’s some third entity in the room with us. They said to wear glasses or sunglasses whenever I’m awake and tape this guard back around the eye every night for the next month. Two different drops in the eye four times each day and a creamy salve at night. Dilation drops, an antibiotic, and a steroid. Don’t rub the stitches even if they start to itch, and they promised my eyelashes would grow back in a few months. They were clipped off before the surgery. The nurse who cut them joked that she heard they grow back longer and fuller if you clip them. I looked up at her smiling face and narrowed my eyes. Forcing a sarcastic smile onto my face, I replied that maybe I’d be back to get the other eye done then. I’d bring my friends. They, too, would be interested in an opportunity like this one. I immediately regretted my comment when I saw the hurt expression on her face, reminding myself that she was only doing her job.
Everyone at the University of Iowa Hospital did their jobs. The doctors explained the procedure carefully to me, handing me pamphlets and small, glossy books entitled “For My Patient.” One doctor did most of the talking. I had never met this particular man before, but I knew he was important around the clinic. His picture was on the wall in the waiting room, but the shot of his head didn’t prepare me for his size. He was the tallest man I’d ever seen, hovering over my chair in the examination room. He said he had watched diabetics come and go through their eye clinic for years, and I trusted him. He had a soothing voice. He smiled when I told him I was a graduate student in English, informing me that his wife was just finishing up her Ph.D. I looked at the wrinkles around his green eyes and wondered if it was a second marriage. He made a joke about all the jargon and doublespeak in business writing. I raised my eyebrows and laughed, reminding him that he was a doctor. He liked me from that moment on. I knew he would do his best. He understood how important my vision was.

“I’m recommending a vitrectomy,” the doctor began. “You’ve had more vitreous hemorrhages and we want to go in and clear the debris out. It’s an invasive procedure, so you’ll have to stay overnight.”

“Are you going to put me under?” I asked.

“Yes. We’ll use a general anesthesia.” He paused. “I’ve seen a lot of diabetics in this position. We’re thinking about your long-term vision and this is my recommendation. We’ll remove the blood-filled vitreous gel and replace it with a saline solution. This won’t affect the function of your eye though.”

There are so many questions running through my mind.

“Doesn’t my body need that fluid? Is it going to make more?”

“Well,” he hesitated. “It will never make more vitreous gel, but the saline will be absorbed by the system as if it belongs there. The natural gel is much thicker and consequently it’s harder for the debris to settle out of your eye. When we remove the
vitreous gel, we’ll also remove the debris that’s in there. You won’t see the spiderwebs and blood you see now.”

It can’t be this simple.

“So it will be completely clear?” I asked.

“Most of it will be cleared out. It’s like a glass of dirty water.” He picked up a clear plastic cup, setting on the counter next to us. “If there is muddy water in this glass and I dump it out,” he said, turning the glass upside-down, “there’s going to still be some dirt stuck to the sides. Then, when we fill it back up, it will be mostly clear, but probably not completely.”

I like his analogy. Suck the dirty vitreous fluid out and put clean solution back in.

He said they were going in through the sclera, the white of my eye. Making small incisions on both side of my iris and inserting instruments through the front. He must have seen the shock on my face, because he gave me a smile and told me he’d performed hundreds of them. He was going to put in a fiberoptic light through one side and a variety of cutters, forceps, and scissors through the other incision. The word “variety” made me nervous. Then they place a microscope over my face to focus through the pupil.

“So what are the risks?” I asked. “Is there a chance I could lose more vision?”

He pulled up a chair next to mine and sat down.

“In twenty three years of performing these, I’ve never had a problem,” he assures me. “However, since the eye won’t make more vitreous fluid, your chance of developing cataracts is increased. We’re not sure why, but somehow the thick, vitreous gel prevents and slows down the development of cataracts. Without that gel there, you might develop one in a year or twenty years.” He chose his words carefully, studying the expression on my face. “I have to tell you that vision loss is always a possibility, but like I said, I’ve never seen it happen here. Not from this surgery anyway.”
"What about infections? I asked. I’d heard that once an eye infection starts, it can be hard to control and easily spreads to the other eye causing blindness. I asked the surgeon about it and he nodded.

"We do everything we can to prevent infections. You’ll be using an antibiotic drop in your eye for several weeks following the surgery."

Then he quickly reminded me that the benefits outweigh the risks. He referred to the vitrectomy as part of the plan. The plan to preserve my vision the best they could. It was never about making me better, or restoring lost vision, but about the future.

Two students no older than me hovered near the door, never looking me in the eye, but listening carefully to the surgeon’s words. They took notes on what he said to me. They were learning about diabetic eye disease, but more importantly learning how to communicate with patients.

The surgeon followed my gaze to the students.

"I will be performing the surgery with the assistance of Dr. Polk. Two students will also be present for observational purposes."

I stared at the students, wanting them to look at me, remember what I was like when I was awake. I wanted them to see my eyes when they were part of a whole person, not just a face under a microscope. I thought having them all in surgery would make me more comfortable, but I was struck with a vision of an argument breaking out between them in the operating room if they didn’t agree on something. Debating about what to do next as I lay unconscious. I knew that the man next to me in a white coat was in charge. He would be the head surgeon, another doctor would assist him, and the students would watch. I had gotten used to several pairs of eyes staring through lenses at my blood vessels. The students were part of the deal at a university hospital, but they were always silent. I never heard a noise from any of them as they looked over the doctor’s shoulder. They were trained to be quiet and ask their questions outside the examination rooms. I knew they had to learn somewhere.
The surgeon set his hand on my shoulder and moved his head closer to mine.

"You’re in the best hands in the country," he said. "If I had to have this procedure done, I would want to be here, and I’m not just saying that because I work for the University."

I nodded, knowing he was responding to the tension that must have shown on my face.

"I’m not going to lie. It’s not going to be pleasant for the weeks following surgery. You’ll have a considerable amount of pain and your eye will be red and swollen."

Then he studied my eyes. Not through a microscope or light, but with his naked eyes. It was like he was looking at the color of them, rather than the vessels behind the eye. He was looking at me instead of just my weakened nerves. I liked him.

"Why don’t you think about it," he continued. "We don’t have to do it this week, but you’ll need to come in for a pre-operative physical and the nurse will brief you on all the details of your stay in the hospital.” He looked straight at me instead of around the room when he answered my questions.

"What’s the alternative?" I asked.

He pressed his lips together. "We can wait and see how the eye behaves. We would definitely have to go in and add more laser to the eye very soon, something we would be able to go ahead and do while you were under for the vitrectomy if you decide to take that route. The alternative is to just wait and see if that debris wants to clear out of there on its own."

He flipped the light on next to him and pulled the photographs of my retina out of a manila folder.

"See how the red is clouding this area here," he said, pointing to the areas of hemorrhage with his pen. "There have been several breaks back there and it’s going to take quite a while for that to settle out of there. We’ll remove this.” He circles the pen around the bloody area. "The bottom line is you should see better, Andrea.”
That’s all I wanted. To see things more clearly and if a vitrectomy would do that, that’s what I wanted too. While I was under, they planned to do a few other things to my left eye. By adding more laser, they would save me discomfort from having to undergo another one of those procedures separately. This would make my seventh laser surgery, the fourth on my left eye. I wondered how many more there would be. How much more peripheral vision I would lose. I had recently read on the Internet about a girl who had undergone sixteen laser surgeries and the vessels in her eyes were still breaking.

But the doctor said another laser was necessary, and he wanted to reduce some of the traction and pulling that was going on back there. The laser surgeries had caused the peripheral vessels in my eye to shrivel up. This is what they wanted to accomplish, but when these vessels became smaller, tension was put on the vessels near the middle of my retina. The center of the eye was beginning to bulge out and leak fluid in my central vision. It was like looking through a cloud all the time. This condition is called edema and it’s unavoidable and almost always permanent. We want the lasered vessels to shrink up, but when they do we get traction, he said. It’s a no win situation. There is nothing they can do, but they always offer the hope that something might improve, the swelling might diminish. You have to wait and see.

That’s the worst part of all of this. The waiting. No one can give me definite answers, only statistics and the stories of cases they’re familiar with. Every time I leave, a doctor says to me that we’ll wait a month and I should come back then. But I’m the one who waits, it’s not something they share with me. I wait every night for something to get better or worse, never knowing which it might be. I am the one who sits down behind the wheel of my car and wonders if I’m going to see blood today. I spend an hour commuting 25 miles back and forth from school every day, concentrating on what I can see in my eyes. The debris holds my attention as I move my eyes around, trying to stir it up. Playing games with myself. It seems like I don’t see anything outside myself anymore, but rather what’s lurking
around my retina. I don’t watch other cars or look at the billboards on the side of the Interstate. I watch the spiderwebs of black lines in my eyes.

I’ve alienated myself from people. It started when I went back to school after the last laser surgery. I would walk down the corridors, unable to make out the faces of anyone coming toward me. I would hear someone address me and search my mind to place a face with the voice. After that I started saying hello to everyone, afraid that I might be offending people by not acknowledging their presence. I felt stupid. Eventually I stopped saying anything to anyone, walking to and from my classes with my face pointing toward the floor as if I was in deep thought. I could be excused if I wasn’t paying attention, because it wasn’t like I was ignoring them. I just waited to see if things were any clearer the next day. I started to feel separated from everyone, unable to experience the world in the same way they were. I couldn’t look across the mall at a sweater one of my friends was pointing to in a shop window. I was unable to focus on objects close to me. I couldn’t pluck my own eyebrows or paint my own nails some days.

When the doctors told me we’d have to wait and see how long recovery time was, I wasn’t surprised. I walked out of the clinic prepared to return three days later to undergo the surgery. I thought he had briefed me on everything from the pain to the patches over my eyes. I knew what to expect, but I guess nothing could have prepared me for how my eye looked when I pulled off the patch in front of the mirror this morning. The blood covered the entire white of my eye. I looked like a demon. The surgeon had used the analogy of someone punching me, but it looked like a baseball full of nails had been thrown at my eye. The lid was so swollen that I had to pry it up with my fingernail to see inside. And when I did get a look, I started crying, yelling for Doug to come and help me put the patch back on. And now I won’t take it off again. I don’t want to look at myself.

Doug’s eyes got big when he walked into the bathroom and saw the blood, but he didn’t say anything. We stared at each other, knowing one of us had to remain calm. His
hands were shaking as he took a sterile gauze pad from a package and placed it over the eye, set the guard on top of that, and started taping it gently to my head. He wiped the tears coming from my right eye with his thumb. He looked sad.

"Sweetie," he said. "I wish you didn’t have to go through this." He was running his hand over my hair, pushing it away from my face.

"It just looks so gross. I look gross," I said, starting to cry again.

"Andie, it’s been less than twenty-four hours. You know it’s going to look better and better each day."

I tried to believe him, but I knew it was going to take weeks for the swelling to go down and maybe months until the blood was cleared. The black stitches in the white of my eye beneath the blood won’t fall out for weeks and I will have to stop my hand every time I reach up to scratch them. It will feel like a foreign object in my eye and my instinct will be to run my nail across the sclera. I will be embarrassed of the blood in the months to come. When I meet someone new, I will lower my head or look away from them. People are going to stare at me as I walk through the mall wearing my sunglasses. Two teenage boys will make a remark about me. Something to the effect of "Isn’t she just cool?" Squeezing Doug’s hand, I will feel ugly.

Some people will be bold enough to ask what is wrong with my eye. A woman checking me out in the grocery store will tell me her mother had blood vessels break on the outside of her eye all the time too, and it would clear out in another day. I will simply stare at her, wanting to tell her she has the wrong diagnosis. I would trade my eyes for her mother’s any day. Other people won’t say anything, but will try to catch glimpses of the blood by lowering their heads and raising their eyes to look into mine, making conversation as they focus both their eyes at my left one. They won’t think I notice. After a few weeks, the swelling will start to go down and I will be able to open my eye further and further on my
own. When people stare at me in the library or at check-out counters after that, I will open my eyes up as wide as I can and push my face toward them.

But I wasn’t so bold when I first saw the bloody eye. I wanted to hide it from everyone. After Doug secured the patch, I edged my way past him and sat on the corner of the bed. I haven’t moved since. I look up to the doorway and realize I’ve forgotten all about Doug. I know he didn’t sleep last night. Sitting next to my bed the entire afternoon following the surgery, he kept whispering in my ear. I had tried to fight against the heaviness pulling me down, tried to keep my eyes open to see him, but the anesthesia wore on my body. I could feel Doug’s fingers wrapped around my wrist and sensed him staring at me.

Outside, thunder rumbled in the sky. It sounded like a bad storm. With rain beating on the window, I felt trapped in the dimmed room. I could feel and hear, but it took too much energy to try to open my eyes or talk. I could experience, but not participate.

When visiting hours were over, Doug begged the nurse to let him sleep in the chair next to my bed. Beneath closed eyes, I focused on the conversation.

“Oh honey, she’s gonna be all right. We check on her every hour. You, though, you need to go get a little sleep. Margie’s making you up a nice little bed in the waiting room down the hall. You’ll get a good night’s sleep there,” the nurse told Doug.

“That’s okay. I can just stay here,” he reasoned.

“You’re sweet,” she told him. “But Andrea will sleep better if she knows you’re comfortable.” There was compassion in her voice.

I heard Doug slowly exhale all the air from his lungs before he stood up. He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead and then followed the nurse down to the waiting room. Twice that night I opened my eyes and he was sitting next to the bed holding my hand. I looked into his tired eyes and wished he would go get some rest, but before I could say anything my eyes were closed again. His didn’t want to leave me alone.
“You still okay in here?” Doug asks, popping his head into the bedroom. He points back toward the kitchen. “I’ve got a little problem with the spaghetti sauce, but it’ll be ready in just a sec, hon.” He puts his hand on the comforter and squeezes my foot.

I quietly laugh.

“How can you screw up sauce, Doug? Straight from the little can to the microwave,” I say.

“I know. I just burned it on the stove. He pauses. “I’m going to whip up a little more. Be right back with it,” he says.

I close my eyes.

I feel his stare piercing through the gauze as he backs out of the bedroom.

“Come back,” I whine in my best baby-talk voice. “Don’t weeve me,” I continue, starting to sniff like a child. Usually I start fake whining when I’m in a playful mood. Doug jokes that when I make my lips pouty, he will fall for anything. Today he doesn’t respond.

I can feel his fear. Doug is afraid of losing me, nervous about my diabetes. I think the shock of seeing me lying in the hospital bed scared him. Like people in hospital beds inevitably die. I keep waiting for his fear to drive him away from me, but it doesn’t. He talks about us like we’re going to stay together and I think I want that too.

The first time he was faced with my illness was early in our relationship. I had joined him on a weekend trip back to his parents’ house. After an evening of elaborate food and conversation, his mother made us up a bed in their camper outside. The privacy was nice as we sat up in bed for hours recollecting the events of the evening. Doug told me his mother had pulled him aside and said she liked me a lot. She thought I was sweet. We laughed together under the covers.

We fell asleep about 1:00, but I awoke shortly after that with a low blood sugar, so low I could barely push myself up. I woke up Doug by turning my mouth to the side of his head and speaking loudly into his ear. He didn’t respond at first, but finally opened his eyes
when he heard the words “I need some juice.” We hadn’t talked about insulin reactions much before that, but he understood what I was saying. Jumping up out of bed, he tore through the little kitchen in search of anything containing sugar. He threw graham crackers, saltines, packaged cookies and potato chips on the blanket next to me. I stared at the items and then up at him. He was standing in his underwear, running his fingers through his messy hair. His worried eyes darted around the room. I told him I needed pop or juice and he jogged out of the camper to the house.

I don’t remember much after that. He later told me that I wouldn’t cooperate with him when he walked back into the tiny bedroom with a can of Pepsi. I said I wanted apple juice and only apple juice. I told him I wouldn’t drink anything else. Instead of making me drink the Pepsi he had found inside, he thought that I meant only apple juice would bring my blood sugar up. He didn’t realize I was only being difficult. He said he couldn’t get me to swallow pop or eat a cookie and I just kept repeating that I wanted to go to sleep. Thinking that if I went to sleep I wouldn’t wake up, he went back into the house and woke up his mother.

When he told me he got his mom out of bed, I felt my face turn bright red. I was embarrassed. She must have thought I was some sick girl who needed to be taken care of. I had myself convinced Doug was probably thinking the same thing. He was shaking as he replayed the incident for me, telling me he thought I was going to die right there in front of him. I watched his eyes for signs of doubt about me. I expected him to decide this was all too much for him, tell me he was sorry, say he wanted someone he didn’t have to worry about all the time. I looked into his brown eyes and saw nothing but compassion. He wasn’t thinking about himself, only about how I felt.

Then we talked. All night. I explained to him what happens when my blood sugar gets too low, informing him that I had never experienced memory loss before. I wasn’t sure if he was comforted or scared by that. I said that nothing was going to happen to me, I would
be fine. Diabetes became part of his life that night, and he’s still learning about it. I tried to protect him at first, not wanting him to know too much, not wanting him to be scared. I told him I was just like everyone else and my eyes were going to get better and I’d had diabetes my entire life and it didn’t interfere with anything I did. I tried to convince him it wasn’t a big deal. He believed me at first, but in the following weeks he started reading up on it himself. The books didn’t lie. He’d walk through my back door carrying a new medical book every few days, pointing to the pages and asking me questions. I would take the book from his hand and pull the library card from the front pocket. Turning it over in my hand, I would look up at him and answer his questions. Yes, lower limb amputations are a possibility. Yes, I told him, there is a chance I could go blind. I raised my eyebrows at him as if to say “So what? We all die.” I became defensive. Eventually he stopped reading. I don’t think he really wanted to know after a while. He said we’d deal with whatever came along. I kept telling him nothing was going to happen to me.

“Here ya go,” Doug says. He’s holding a big plate in one hand and a glass in the other. He comes toward me and I can see a mound of spaghetti garnished with carrots. Iced tea in a big, clear mug. He pulls a napkin, a needle, insulin and a fork from his shirt pocket and sets them on the night stand, eyeing the bottle of pills.

“You’re such a boyscout, honey. So prepared.”

He rolls his eyes at me.

“Eat, woman,” he says in his Tarzan voice, pounding one fist on his chest.

He slides into bed next to me, grabbing the remote control and turning the television volume down. He’s on my right side, so I can still see him. I think I’m finally starting to accept his help, his presence. I’d been alone for so long before I met him, going through the motions of each day and rarely thinking about the future. Even when I first started spending a lot of time with him, I never imagined we’d stay together. I just didn’t think about it. I thought I was destined to be alone like my sister had been. It wasn’t as though I thought
having diabetes made me a liability to someone else, but I just didn’t think I’d live that long. I wasn’t going to be around to have kids and retire. I didn’t want to ruin someone’s life by dying. I didn’t want anyone to love me too much, love me so much that they couldn’t afford to lose me. Now I’m afraid that’s happening with Doug. I don’t want to hurt him. And I don’t want him to feel like he’s obligated to take care of me.

“Hey, why don’t you go out with Craig tonight?” I ask. “I’ll be okay here and you need to get out.”

He looks hurt. “You want to be alone?”

“No,” I say. “I’m just afraid you’re going to get tired of sitting here staring at me and my patch.” I try to laugh.

He puts his arms around me, and I pull away. He holds me tighter. “You’re being silly, and you know it. You’re my whole life. I love you.”

I can’t believe he said it. It’s been four months since the day I stopped my bike to talk to him, and we’ve managed to avoid these words up until now. I lay my head against his chest, not sure what to say because I had imagined this moment would be perfect. It would happen over dinner or after sex or when I least expected it, like it does on television. It shouldn’t happen when I haven’t showered for two days and my eye is a bloody, watery mess. It should happen when I feel prettier, more alive. I don’t want this to be the moment I remember forever, but it will be.

I love him back, but I can’t find the words to tell him. I haven’t said those words for years. Wrapping my arms around his body, I hope he feels it radiating from me. I want him to know that he’s given me new reasons to live. I want to be alive to be with him. Be young with him.

But the feeling of needing him scares me. And the feeling of him needing me is even more frightening. I’m not in control of my emotions. Something else has taken over and left me no choice. It feels like a welcome edict, comfortable. I’ve always believed in real love.
Not the kind of love you hear about in songs or read about in books, but the kind of love that’s natural. It has a definite direction, a sure cycle, but it’s not constructed. Not by us anyway. It plays itself out and I ride its wave.

“Me too,” I hear the words coming from my lips.

He hugs me closer and quietly laughs.

“Is it that hard to say?” he asks.

“What?” I ask.

“Telling me you love me.”

“I said I did.” I can feel this moment changing from tender to tense.

“Hum,” he responds, focusing his attention on the television. The volume is too low and he stares at the silent characters moving through rehearsed scenes.

Pausing for a moment, I unwrap myself from him and pick up a carrot from the plate. The crunch breaks the silence, so I set it back down and pick up the fork from the night stand. It scrapes against the plate as I try to twirl spaghetti. The quiet was more comfortable, so I set the plate gently back on the oak stand. It makes a slight clang, but the sound is amplified by the silent tension. I don’t want to look over at him, because I know he’ll continue to stare at the television. Instead of trying to speak, I do what I’m best at. I slide under the covers and turn my back to him.

I can’t speak. I tell myself to swallow my pride, knowing that pride has nothing to do with this. I want to be with him. I just don’t know how to start the conversation again, so I shut him out. And I know he’s not mad, but I react like I’m mad, because I don’t know how else to deal with the situation. I’ve always had this problem in tense moments. Everything I want to say is clear in my head, but as hard as I strain I can’t turn the thoughts to words. I could write him a ten page letter, but I can’t speak two words right now. I’ve mastered avoidance.
I told Doug I was difficult when he first met me, but he didn’t believe anyone could be as stubborn as I described myself to be. I told him it wasn’t stubbornness, that it wasn’t intentional. I don’t know what comes over me. During our first argument, he tried to hug me when I turned my back to him. He thought he could bring me out of my silence with comfort. When that didn’t work, he tried pretending as though we’d never had an argument to begin with. He would start talking as if nothing had happened. Eventually, though, he started acting as I did, like a stubborn kid. He didn’t know what else to do with me. I got worried because I knew he couldn’t put up with my moods indefinitely. I tried to change.

Sometimes I think I crave an argument, other times I need to be reassured repeatedly that he cares. Doug says I need attention, negative or positive, whatever I can get. He calls it my flair for the dramatic. I tell him to stop talking to me like one of his clients even though I know he’s right. He says I’m not as independent as people think I am, as I see myself to be. He says I get my attention by pretending I don’t need it. Others think I’m independent and stable and some kind of enigma. I respond that people are drawn to me because I’m strong, because I don’t take any shit from the world. I start to shut him out. Doug notices and his eyes soften to reflect sadness. He knows I’m just protecting myself.

I roll onto my back and stare through my right eye at the ceiling. I reach up and touch my patch again.

“Are you going to eat?” he asks, his voice hesitant.

I’m surprised he’s spoken.

“Yes,” I answer, thankful he has broken the silence. I feel guilty.

He leans over me and picks up the plate of spaghetti. “Want me to feed you? he asks. He’s calling a truce.

I turn to face him, letting him examine the patch on my eye without moving my head away. Carefully studying my expression, he runs his finger down my right cheek.

“Honey,” he sighs, but doesn’t continue.
I want to cry, but I can’t let myself. All the tears only make my eyes smaller and more swollen. If I keep it up, I won’t be able to see very well out of my right eye either. I focus on that thought as I force my right eye wide open. If I blink, a tear is going to fall. I don’t know what to say, because I want to lie to him that my head doesn’t hurt, tell him my eye feels okay. I decide not to say anything. I swallow. Then blinking my eyes quickly, I finally close them, feigning fatigue.

“Honey,” he begins again. “Why don’t we make spoons and watch a movie?”

Making spoons means lying close to each other, like two spoons in a drawer. A perfect fit. With my back to his stomach, he wraps his arms around me and holds me close. The back of my head rests against the top of his chest. We can remain in this position for hours. It’s fetal-like, natural. I turn and curl up against him.

“I just don’t know,” I whisper.

He waits for me to continue.

“I just don’t want it to be like this. It’s like I’m not even living my own life anymore. I don’t have a choice, but you do.” I take a deep breath. “You don’t have to go through this.”

He tightens his arms around me.

“That doctor said it could take months, you know? Months before I can see all right again, before these stitches are gone. I shouldn’t have let them do this to me. I should have known it was going to be this bad. I feel like their guinea pig. Like they’ve got this young, diabetic girl and I’m some kind of experiment to them. Everyone else is too old. The doctors think I’m gonna be around for a while and they can watch me. Use me to see if cataracts develop. They know I won’t go anywhere else.”

I don’t feel this way. Not really. I just want to blame someone else for the pain. I want to forget that I could have done things differently, I could have been more careful with
my diabetes and probably prevented this. At least prolonged the onset of it. If only I’d tested my blood sugars all those years. Now I’ve learned, and I pay the price.

Doug lets me talk. I can tell by the way he’s softly resting his cheek against my head that he’s listening.

“I mean I know it’s the best place to be. The best doctors,” I continue. “I just wonder now if this was such a good idea.”

“A few weeks of discomfort, and maybe it’ll be okay after that,” Doug says. “They were confident about the procedure. They know what they’re doing, Andie. Just let them do their jobs.”

The one thing I’ve found Doug doesn’t understand is the medical profession. He’s never had to deal with doctors like I have. He doesn’t realize yet that I can only trust myself. I have to rely on my instincts. I might agree with what doctors tell me and see the logic in their statements, but I never completely trust them. I always want to know more, research the condition and procedure myself. Doug says I learn too much and it only makes me more nervous. I remind him that the problem with our society is that people think doctors are gods. I don’t want to bring up this discussion again, so I agree.

“Yeah, I know,” I say. “But they look through the scope and I look through the eyes. They may know what to watch for, but I see it first hand. They see the breaks once a month and I see them every minute. What they call a tiny hemorrhage looks like a huge pool of blood to me.”

“I know, sweetie,” Doug replies.

I’ve explained to him what the world looks like to me now. A few weeks ago I punched about twenty holes in a sheet of notebook paper and held it in front of his face. I told him to look through it. Spots. I see black spots where objects used to be. I can’t expect him to understand any more than that. He can experience for a moment or two, but I can’t really show him how it feels. I don’t want to anyway.
“I’m tired,” I say.

“Me too,” he replies, positioning himself more tightly around me. He holds on for his life. For my life. Like if he lets me go even for a moment, I’m going to slip away.

The room is silent for less than a minute before I hear his breathing even out. He falls asleep so quickly.
I can feel the energy in this woman's hands as she moves them in circles above my body. Flat on my back with my eyes drifting shut, I hope she can help me, heal me. She doesn’t claim to be the source of the healing energy, but rather a channeler for it. She has studied and practiced hands on healing for many years. She told me I had to believe in order for it to work. Sitting with me for several minutes before directing me to the table in the middle of the room, she asked about my religion, my lifestyle, my health.

“Diabetic 15 years,” I told her.

“And you’re on insulin?” she asked.

I nodded.

“You know that this isn’t a replacement for the assistance you receive from the medical profession, but healing touch should be seen as a complement to your insulin and diet. The something extra that gives you the edge over other diabetics. The mind can heal the body. The mind is stronger than the body, but you must also give the body what it needs physiologically to go on. Your main concern is your eyes?”

“Yes. I’ve been through five lasers and sometimes my feet go numb. I’m concerned about my circulation.”

“Do you take any vitamins?” she asked, scribbling notes onto her pad of paper.

“Yes.”

“List them for me,” she said.

“E, C, B-Complex, Lecithin, Flaxseed Oil, Calcium, and Selenium.”
She raises her eyebrows in surprise.

"The E is for circulation. I’m an avid follower of Adel Davis, a nutritionist from the sixties. When I was a kid my parents had all her books and followed them more closely than any doctor’s orders. I take the C to boost my immune system, the B-Complex because I’m a vegetarian. Lecithin aids in breaking down cholesterol, and I just started taking Flaxseed Oil because I read that it can help people with diabetic retinopathy. Calcium I need because I don’t drink milk or eat many dairy products, and the Selenium is to aid in the utilization of vitamin E.” I exhale and settle back into the stuffed chair.

“Well, you seem to know what you’re doing. How long have you been taking so many vitamins?” she asked

“I’ve taken E and B since I got diabetes, and the others I picked up in the last few years.”

She nodded her head and asked me about my religious beliefs, explaining to me that what she does is similar to a religion. It relies heavily on faith, on healing the body by using the mind. She showed me how to close my eyes, cover them with my hands, and imagine I was healing the blood vessels. Then she went on to explain what she was going to do. She said she would get my energy fields back in balance by using her hands. She told me when there’s something wrong on the inside, the energy on the outside has holes in it. I tried to imagine blue energy broken up above areas of my body. And as she moves her hands in circles above me, I imagine that she’s bringing the broken energy back together. She’s making the fields smooth again.

I force my eyes open and watch her moving slowly around the table. Candles are burning and she tells me the energy in my torso is flowing smoothly. She says my creative energies are strong. I stare at the candles burning by the window and try to stay focused on myself. My mind wanders.
My friend Holly suggested this woman. She came here to get help with the ringing in her ears. Holly developed tinnitus three years ago after a car accident and says the continual ringing is making her insane. The doctor prescribed anti-anxiety drugs to calm her, but she wanted something more natural. She told me this woman taught her how to meditate, relax and ignore the noise. Holly believes she has the power to heal. I hope she can help me as well.

The room is dim except for the light of the candles. This woman has turned her attic into an office filled with pillows, incense, and porcelain animals. Books on alternative medicine line the shelves. I have some of the same books at home on the art of relaxation, how to heal your body naturally, and yoga. I took some yoga classes a few months ago and experienced a vitality I hadn’t felt in years. The philosophy of Hatha Yoga appealed to me, and my favorite pose was the headstand. I could keep my balance and stay straight up with my feet in the air for several minutes, but last week when the blood rushed to my head I broke another vessel in my right eye.

I believe that I can help heal myself, but there’s a part of me that has watched the comeback of alternative therapies and wants to dismiss it as a hoax. And a part of me that feels guilty for waiting until I had exhausted medicine to turn to myself for help. When I told Doug I was coming here today, he narrowed his eyes and asked why. I simply told him that I had to try this woman, partly out of desperation and partly out of curiosity. He shrugged his shoulders.

Doug believes only in what he can see. He says that his experiences are real and he can’t believe in things he can’t touch. He respects what I believe, but can’t accept it for himself. I tell him there’s more to the world than what’s right here in front of us. I have to believe that. It keeps me sane. He replies that it’s hard for human beings to imagine the world without them in it. We’re anthropocentric and scared to think of our own non-existence. I can’t live with that for myself.
I wasn’t raised by religious parents. My father was a devout Catholic, but fell from faith in his late 20’s. He was excommunicated when he married my mother and she refused to convert. She said she wouldn’t promise anyone that she would raise her kids to believe something she didn’t believe in. My parents told me faith was personal. Believe in things, but don’t be limited by them. Explore everything because you stop living when you adhere too strongly to any one thing. Don’t be controlled by what you’re told to do, but rather control what you do by following your instinct for what’s right.

They taught me to always be open to new possibilities and I guess that’s why I’m here on this table. The practice of healing is as old as religion. Even the Bible records incidents of faith healing. It was an important work of the Church and even though I’m not a Christian, the stories of Jesus healing the blind intrigue me. Later healing powers were assigned to royalty and the kings claimed to have a gift to heal through “Royal Touch.” When science tried to explain how healing touch worked, they came up with the idea that fields of magnetic forces act on humans. Some scientists claimed that healing energy could stimulate plants to grow and repair the wounds on a rat more quickly. I hope some people do have special powers, and I hope this woman above me is one of them.

She told me she is only going to touch my energy field, my aura. She said she never will actually put her hands on my body. The healing is done by manipulating my energy. I want to believe in her ability, but I wonder how much of this is about the power of suggestion. Some people say that healers don’t actually heal you, but help to bring you closer to yourself. They make it easier to believe and tap into our own healing abilities. I still wouldn’t tell my doctor I’ve come here though. Our culture doesn’t encourage belief in shamans and healers. We cling to the medical profession to take care of us and refer to people like this woman as quacks and charlatans, but I know she believes in what she’s doing.
Another friend of mine suggested acupuncture, an ancient medical system that originated in China. Their philosophy is one of preventative medicine, to keep the body well. In China, patients used to pay the doctor as long as they were in good health and stopped paying him when they became ill. Acupuncturists believe we each possess a finite amount of energy called chi. This energy is our life-force and we can increase its circulation by taking good care of ourselves or deplete the energy through stress and poor nutrition. Illness is a deficiency or excess of our chi, and the needles used in acupuncture can slow down, speed up, or unblock stuck energy. I've thought about visiting an acupuncturist, but I'm not sure about letting someone else stick those long needles into my skin.

I'll see how I feel after today. This woman seems honest. She doesn't advertise, only takes clients by word of mouth, and charges what the client can afford to pay. She looks peaceful too, seems to possess an inner strength that I can't put my finger on. She is at least 60 years old, but doesn't have the harried look that many older people do. Living alone in the same house for the last 35 years, she still delivers mail for the post office every day. She told me she loves her job because she gets to put the news of the world into mailboxes. Bringing people joy and pain in envelopes, she feels like a messenger.

My legs are getting warmer, and I know without looking that her hands are hovering above my knees. I am surprised by the hot sensation, but I keep my eyes closed, trying to concentrate on the energy. She told me that people describe their experiences with her differently. Some claim that their entire body tingled, others say they felt like they were in a deep trance, and some admit that they felt nothing. Don't go to sleep, she had said to me. She told me she'd know if I did and would gently shake me to keep me semi-alert. It's important that I'm here to participate in this session. She said that both of us have to concentrate for it to work. I focus on my thighs.

After what seems like minutes, I feel her touch my shoulder.
“Do you know how long you’ve been lying here?” she asks.

I think for a moment, trying to calculate passed time.

“25 minutes?” I ask, looking for a clock.

“Almost two hours,” she replies.

“Is there that much work to be done on me?” I laugh.

She smiles. “Well, you have a lot of fragmented energy. I tried to do some overall repair this first time, getting your energy field back in flow.”

She gently eases me up into a sitting position on the table.

“Your energy has the most fragmentation in your lower limbs and in your fingertips,” she tells me.

I wonder if she would have come up with this same diagnosis if I hadn’t told her that my feet sometimes tingle. On my drive over here, I contemplated not revealing any information about my health to her. I thought this would be a great test to see if she was for real. But I was overcome with a sense of trust when I saw her, and I didn’t want to deceive her either. I wanted her to work with me.

“And my eyes?” I ask. “Did you detect anything wrong in my eyes?”

“No, but I didn’t focus on that area. I don’t want to mess around with what’s been done by trying to add laser of my own quite yet. If you decide you want to come back for another session, we’ll talk about targeting your eyes for special work. We have to be more careful with your eyes though. Energy lasers are very powerful and I’ll need to caution you about that process before we start.”

I feel exhaustion mixed with satisfaction as I walk across her lawn to my car. Wondering about the questions Doug will ask me when I get home, I turn the key in the ignition and sit back in my seat. I take deep breaths and try to hold onto this calm sensation. I watch as the lights in her living room go off, wondering what she does all alone in the evenings. I didn’t see a television or radio or computer anywhere in her house, but I didn’t
detect loneliness in her eyes either. I wonder how long she can stand being alone with herself in this brick house on the East side of Des Moines. I look across the street at a dark, elementary school. Perhaps the neighborhood children fear her, call her a witch, and dare each other to walk across her porch after dark.

My skin continues to tingle as I put my car in drive and creep slowly past her house. Glancing at the clock on my radio, I realize that it has been almost three hours since I left my house. I feel confident about having some control over my health. I learned about the human side of healing rather than just the technological one. I understand that my body is not fragmented. Each part works together and I should stop blaming my pancreas or my eyes for failing me. My health needs to be more personal. I can try to trust my doctors, but I need to work to heal myself as well.

As I turn on the country road that leads back to my house, I realize I’ve driven the last fifteen minutes in silence. No familiar sound of the radio blaring in my ears. I think about what the woman said tonight about how our society separates us from ourselves. All the distractions make it difficult to communicate with both ourselves and others. I pull into my driveway and stare at the back of Doug’s car. The kitchen light is on and I assume he’s making dinner.

I get out of my car and walk quietly onto the back deck, watching him through the window. I observe him for minutes as he moves about the kitchen, setting two plates and a bowl of salad on the table. He puts ice in two glasses and looks at them for a moment, probably wondering if the frozen water will melt before I come through the door. Glancing at his watch, he takes a step toward me to place dishes in the sink. He expects me home soon. I stand in the darkness outside and feel the cool, spring breeze on the back of my neck. I want him to see me now, but I don’t tap on the glass. Instead, I reach for the door. I am home.
“Slow, slow, quick, quick, quick, quick, slow, slow, quick,” Doug whispers to himself.

I can’t stop giggling.

“Okay, now we’re going to try it leading her back,” the instructor bellows over the music. “Remember, plant both feet together before you switch direction.”

I step on Doug’s foot and laugh louder. He stops and glances into my eyes before looking down at his leather loafers. They’re covered with dust from the bottoms of my shoes. He smiles.

“This is serious, honey,” Doug says, trying not to laugh. “Come on, now.” He clutches my right hand more tightly and spreads the fingers of his left hand across my back before he starts to move again.

I look over at my parents. They’re not moving and my mom is standing about three feet from my dad, explaining the step to him and demonstrating with her own feet. My father has a perplexed look on his face and he is running his fingers through his thinning, gray hair. He starts to move his feet to follow hers. My mom watches, shakes her head and throws up her hands. She moves closer to him and starts to step with the music. She’s trying to lead now.

“I thought they said they could fox-trot,” I say to Doug, nodding in the direction of my parents.

“I can’t believe you actually talked them into this,” he says. “Especially Ray.”
I can’t believe it either. I never thought they’d go for dance lessons. I convinced my mother it would be fun. We’d get together every Monday night for ten weeks and learn all the old ballroom dances. I’m realizing now that it’s not as easy as it looks on television.

“Sweetie,” Doug says. “Would you let me lead, please?”

“That’s just it,” I reply. “You have to lead me and you’re not. I can’t read your mind. I don’t know which step you’re going to do next unless you let me know with your body language. Whisper it in my ear or something, I don’t know.”

He sighs and holds onto me more tightly. A look of determination spreads across his face and I smile. We’re going to be up all night practicing in our living room again.

“Six months, honey,” I tell him. “Everyone is going to be watching you, expecting you to know what you’re doing out there on the dance floor. The groom is supposed to lead the bride, you know. What are you going to do if you still can’t lead me by then? It’ll be a disaster. Everyone will laugh at us for years.” I laugh out loud again.

“Stop, stop, stop,” I hear the instructor’s voice interrupt. “Let’s line the men up on this side of the room and their partners directly across from them. Pretend you’re dancing with your partner. I’m going to watch to see where the problems are. Men start with right foot forward first.”

I separate from Doug and watch him from across the room. He’s taller than the other men, taller than my father. I watch as my dad nudges Doug in the arm and whispers something under his breath. Doug laughs. They like each other.

The music starts again and we all step. The instructor watches us carefully, correcting our mistakes. Keeping my eyes on Doug, I continue to move my feet in the same six step pattern. He and my father are looking down at each other’s feet moving in sync. I hear my mother laugh next to me and my thumb moves to the back of my ring finger. The gold band is smooth and comfortable.
Doug and I had my mother’s diamond reset for me to wear. My father had bought it for her in 1958, but she hasn’t worn it for years. She told me it was too small and just never bothered to have it sized. She gave it to me in it’s original, black box. It had been set in an old, white gold band and had two broken prongs. Doug and I took it in together and picked out a new mounting. Feeling too practical, he insisted that he keep it until he proposed. He laughed and said he wanted to surprise me.

And he did. That same afternoon we went for a bike ride to my stream. He got down on one knee in the mud and asked me. I laughed and made him do it three times before I would answer. His hands were shaking when I finally let him slip the ring around my finger. He stared at me for the longest time and told me he would make me happy. We would grow old together.

Tears collected beneath my sunglasses as we rode home that evening. I let myself fall behind him so he wouldn’t see me crying. They weren’t tears of happiness, even though I was happy to be marrying him. I knew we wouldn’t grow old together. I knew it and he knew it, but we never talked about it. I envy the elderly couples I see holding hands in the mall, sitting on a bench and watching the teenagers shop. I am jealous of their years together.

I feel his arm slide around my back again.

“You have it all down now?” I ask.

He rolls his eyes at me.

“Open dance,” the instructor yells. The last ten minutes of class, he just leans against the wall and lets the music play. The sixteen of us fumble around the floor.

“Look at your parents,” Doug says.

I watch my dad step on my mom’s foot again.

“They’re really getting the hang of it, huh?” I laugh.
“Don’t laugh,” he replies. “That’s us forty years from now. We’ll still be in the Ballroom 101 class.” He stares at my mother’s face. “They look like they’re having fun though.”

“And fun is what we’re here for,” I say, mimicking the instructor’s words.

“Are you having fun?” Doug asks.

I look up at him.

“I mean are you really having fun. With me. Not just here, but are you happy?”

“Of course I’m happy,” I reply. “There’s nothing I’d rather be doing, no one I’d rather spend my life with. Seriously.” I know he’s the one. I realized I loved him when I caught myself smiling long after he had walked out of the room. I worried about him when he came home late and cried when I had dreams about him dying.

He nods. “It just seems as though you’ve been distant lately. Like you’re not excited about the wedding or us being together.”

I know what he’s talking about. The thought of marriage does make me nervous sometimes, but it’s not Doug. I’m just not sure how well I’ll be able to handle the future. I wonder how happy I’ll be able to make him. I worry that we’ll stop loving each other, and I’ll spend my afternoons reading articles in women’s magazines about how to spice up a marriage.

“I just don’t want us to ever stop being like this,” I reply. “I don’t want us to stop loving each other or stop caring about our life together. I want to know that you’re going to be there every night when I come home and you’re going to be there because you want to be, not because you have an obligation. I’m afraid of living with a stranger someday.”

“We won’t let that happen. I won’t let that happen. I don’t want you to worry about the future, I just want to know that you’re happy now. I want you to be excited to be my wife.”

“I am,” I tell him.
He sighs. “I think we’re learning the tango next week,” he says, stopping mid-step for a dramatic pause. “We’ll show them on that one. We’ll be tangoing all over the place.”

“Maybe we should tango for our wedding dance,” I suggest. “None of that slow, sappy stuff where we just move around the dance floor and everyone looks at us trying to disguise their boredom. Let’s give them something more dramatic.”

“The first dance to tango music, huh?”

I nod and step back from him, taking both his hands in mine. I slide my fingers around the band on his left hand.

“One of my clients asked me why I was wearing a wedding ring the other day when we haven’t gotten married yet,” he says. “I told him it’s a new 90’s thing. That the woman has to wear an engagement ring and men are doing it now too.”

I laugh. “We’ll start a new trend in Iowa. Pretty soon every guy will be wearing an engagement band.”

Doug and I went shopping for his ring last week, and he hasn’t taken it off since. The first night he said he was only going to wear it when he was home, but he kept forgetting to take it off before he went to work. Now he wears it all the time. A woman at work told him it was bad luck to wear his ring before the wedding. She said it was worse than seeing the bride in her dress before she walks down the aisle or spending the night together the night before the wedding. Doug and I laugh at superstitions.

We’re writing out own ceremony and have been reading books on wedding traditions. We found out that the bride stands on the groom’s left so his sword arm is free to ward off anyone trying to steal his bride. We also read that the original reason for a honeymoon was because men used to steal women to marry them. Her family would come looking for her and he had taken her away on a long trip. Usually by the time they did find her, she was pregnant. In writing our ceremony, we left out some of the traditional parts like my parents
giving me to Doug, words like obey, and a receiving line. We want a ceremony that is about us, represented what we believe the purpose of our marriage is.

“Okay,” the instructor speaks again. “I’ll see you all next week. Remember to practice and you can pick up the sheets here with the steps on them that we learned tonight.”

The music stops and we walk toward the front of the room. Doug picks up the sheet of paper and jokes that he’s going to tape it to the front of my wedding dress so remembers what he’s supposed to be doing. We wait in the parking lot for my parents to come out.

“Let’s practice out here,” I say.

He takes me by the hand, leads me to the side of the parking lot, and begins to hum. We dance in the darkness out here, repeating the steps we remember over and over.

The other students file out and glance at us, smiling and occasionally cheering us on. We look to them like the happiest couple in there. The first lesson, one of the couples had a huge argument after the woman told her husband he didn’t have any rhythm. They walked out and haven’t been back since. Other couples come in fighting and go through the motions of the night, never speaking to each other. Doug and I usually laugh.

“Look at these two showing off,” I hear my mother say behind us.

We pile into my dad’s van and head toward home. Doug and I huddle together in the back seat.

“I called that photographer over on Ingersoll,” my mom tells us. “She said you can go over to her house anytime on Friday if you want. She’ll show you some pictures of what she’s done. Look at them closely and see if you like her work.”

Doug acknowledges my mother’s words. I roll my eyes. My mother has been making plans for our wedding every day since we told her we were getting married. She’s excited.

“You also need to get shopping for your dress, Andie,” she says. “We can go out looking this weekend.”
"Okay," I reply.

"How's work, Doug?" my father breaks in.

"Ah, it's going okay. I have one kid who's back in juvenile detention, but the other families seem to be on the right track."

"What did this one do wrong?" my dad asks.

"Originally he was in the system for molesting his little sister. He got put in Meyer Hall last week for stealing a bike. The parents just don't care."

My dad is fascinated by Doug's work with delinquent kids. He shakes his head when he hears the stories of some of these kids.

"And the young guy in the gang?" my dad asks.

"He's about the same. Both his brothers are in a gang as well, and I found out that his father was in a gang and killed in a drive-by shooting several years ago. The whole family is into it. He's going to be a hard one to break the cycle. All his support systems are involved in the behavior."

Sometimes Doug meets my dad for lunch in between meetings. They talk for hours about work, family, and me. Doug doesn't tell me the whole conversations, but I know he likes my father. Doug's parents got divorced when he was seven and he was raised by his mother. I think he feels close to my father. He even insisted on going to lunch with my dad by himself and telling him we were going to get married before he asked me. He said getting my dad's support was the right way to go about it. He was a nervous wreck that morning, wondering what he was going to say to my father. I told him that my dad would be happy about our decision. He was. Doug told me that night that my father was the easiest man to get along with. He always knows what to say and how to make a situation more comfortable. I want Doug to understand why I'm so close to my father.

I squeeze his hand more tightly.
“But Doug didn’t tell you how the little gang-banger set the neighbor girl’s hair on fire,” I tell my parents.

“Jesus,” my mother replies.

My father shakes his head.

I think Doug’s stories make my parents happy their kids are grown up. It makes them realize all the things that could have gone wrong with us during our teenage years.

My dad pulls into our driveway and we tell them thanks as we get out of the car. Instead of going inside, we sit on the steps of the deck and look up at the sky. The neighborhood kids are all sleeping and the street is quiet. I stare at the full moon pull Doug’s arm around me.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The anesthesiologist wraps a blood pressure cup around my arm. I stare at the IV protruding from my hand and wonder if I'm the youngest person they've performed this procedure on in this office. Maybe they coddled everyone the way they had done me this morning, wrapping me in a blanket and placing me in a plush recliner. I thought they treated me so well because I'm young. They're used to middle-aged woman here. Women several years older than myself who are confident in their decisions not to have any more children. Maybe they were so gentle because they felt sorry for me. One of the nurses sat down next to me and asked me how many children I have. When I replied that I didn't have any, she nodded her head and pulled the blanket up around my chin.

Doug is in the waiting room listening to whatever morning talk show is playing on the television. He is probably thumbing through the files in his briefcase, reviewing the cases of distraught teenagers. Kids who use drugs and fight with their parents. I find myself hoping that all the kids he works with will somehow kill his desire to have a family of his own. I think that maybe he'll get discouraged seeing all their problems and decide that it's better we don't have any. But he doesn't. His work only makes him more confident that he can be the right kind of parent. He says he knows which mistakes to try to avoid making. He wants children, but he's still here with me today.

I look up at the man standing over me. He attaches heart monitors to my chest and talks to the nurse next to him about his plans for the upcoming Fourth of July weekend. He and his wife will be taking their children to watch fireworks.
The nurse laughs at a comment he’s made.

“You know how Chelsea is,” he continues. “The little monster will run straight at a bottle rocket to try to catch the damn thing.”

“She is a character,” the nurse replies.

They’ve forgotten I’m here.

“So no more of that this year,” he says. He’s decided not to drive down to Missouri and buy fireworks for his family this summer. It’s safer to watch them from a across a field somewhere. Keep their distance.

“I had a little boy in ER several years ago who had been holding a firecracker when it went off,” the nurse said. “He blew most of his little thumb off. His mother wouldn’t stop crying, telling us she had been watching him so closely.”

“Did they get the thumb reattached?” he asks.

“Yes, just a scar left, but I’m sure it faded.”

“I’m glad they’re not legal here. It would just make it easier for the kids to get their hands on them and blow their fingers off,” he says.

I decided a long time ago that I would never have children. I think it was an idea instilled in me as a child, hearing the stories of pregnant diabetic women who went blind or lost their kidneys. Even when I heard about successful diabetic pregnancies, I dismissed those women as lucky. Exceptions to the rule. The risks to my health aren’t worth it. So I’m here to undergo the surgery to make sure I never get pregnant. The surgery that ultimately makes my decision for me. In case I ever get any crazy ideas about changing my mind.

Laying on my back in this white room, I wonder if I’m doing this because I don’t trust myself, or doing it to prove to Doug that there is really no hope of it ever happening. Before he marries me, I want to be sure he knows that I’m never going to change my mind. That after today we can’t change our minds.
This is the only way I know how to be totally honest with Doug. Making real for him that the decision is final. Dr. Vallerick had stressed the permanence of the procedure, reminding me several times that it was irreversible. He questioned me for a long time as I sat in his office. He even made me think about it for a week and come back and talk to him again before he would schedule a surgery. He showed me a video and told me that diabetes wasn't an excuse not to have my own kids. He said that Type I's can have healthy babies. It's not like it was ten years ago. They monitor diabetic mothers very closely now, regulating their blood sugars hourly. But he couldn't convince me. I was scared about my health. Scared I wouldn't live to see my child grow up. Nothing he said could make me change my mind.

I had never thought I'd be a mother. By the time I was diagnosed with diabetes, I knew more about the illness than most of the doctors. I knew that pregnancy caused complications. That there were risks. And I knew I would never risk my life for a baby. No matter how much I might want one. But now I'm with Doug, and for the first time in my life I understand what wanting to create a child with another person feels like. I'm afraid these feelings might make me do something I regret. So a tubal ligation is my insurance policy against myself. Sterilization is virtually 100 percent effective.

Dr. Vallerick said that he hoped I had thought about what a tubal ligation meant for the future. The doctor reminded me that I might decide I want children when I'm 35. Your life is going to change, he told me. Your priorities will be different in ten years. He asked me what Doug wanted. I lied and said that we had worked it all out between us. The doctor believed me when I told him that neither of us wanted kids.

Dr. Vallerick went to great lengths to inform me of options. When he reminded me repeatedly that I was only 24, I felt he was trying to talk me out of the procedure. And even though I became slightly annoyed at the flood of information he provided, it made me trust him. Believe that he was a good doctor. An ethical physician. And he was. He had been
the man who performed my mother's tubal ligation after I was born. I trust him to do a good job today.

They've injected a sedative into my IV, because my eyelids are getting heavy and I feel like I'm floating as I think about what Dr. Vallerick is going to do to me today. Two small incisions into my belly button. The scar will barely be noticeable. He's going to do what's known as a laparoscopy, the most common technique for sterilization. They don't actually cut the tubes anymore, but clamp them closed. I think this is probably because more and more women change their minds later. Wish they had taken the pill instead even though they knew a tubal ligation should be considered irreversible. I guess they don't know how they'll feel later in their lives. I won't change my mind.

When I told Doug I wanted to have a tubal ligation, he was shocked. I made the mistake of just assuming he knew I would. We had agreed that I wouldn't have kids because of my health, but I guess somewhere in the back of his mind he was still hoping. A few weeks after we were engaged, I heard Doug talking on the phone to his mother, telling her our plans for the wedding date and a few of the details. When I heard him say "not right away," I knew she had asked about kids. After he hung up the phone, I just stared at him.

"Not right away?" I asked. "Tell your family to just exhale."

"They'll figure it out." He paused. "In five or ten years."

"Let your brother carry the load of passing down the name," I said.

"They're probably just trying to find out if you're already pregnant or not," he joked. "People don't get married unless the woman's pregnant, right? Or unless they plan to procreate." He winked at me.

"Well, I hope they don't think that's our plan." Then I just said it. "I'm going to go ahead and get a tubal done."

"What?" he asked.
I had brought up having the procedure done before, but we hadn’t seriously talked about it. He wasn’t prepared for this.

“I talked to the doctor about it. I don’t even have to stay in the hospital overnight. It’s a pretty simple procedure.”

He stared at me.

“Really. I can be in and out of there in a few hours. After that I’ll just be sore for a few days, but they do so many of them now, there aren’t many risks.”

“You talked to the doctor about it?” He raised his eyebrows and continued. “You talked to the doctor about it before we talked about it?”

“We have talked about it,” I said.

Doug didn’t know what to say. I knew he was searching for some memory of this conversation.

“You mentioned it,” he replied. “But I wouldn’t call it a mutual decision we’ve made. I can’t believe you talked to the doctor.”

“What did you think I was going to do, Doug? Cross my fingers for the rest of my life and hope I didn’t ever get pregnant? We talked, you just weren’t hearing me. You just didn’t take me seriously, I guess.”

He held up his hand.

“Wait a minute. Just a second here. Let me get this straight. You went and consulted with a doctor on whether or not we were ever going to have children. You talked to him about one of the biggest decisions in our life without even telling me you were going.”

“I...” I began, but he didn’t let me finish.

“Then you made this decision all on your own and you’re just letting me in on it now.” He slowly let all the air out of his lungs. “I can’t believe this.”
I should have prepared myself for a response like this. I should have known that he would be upset.

“Did you even plan on asking me?” he asked. “In all your deep contemplation about this decision, did you once stop and consider asking me what I wanted to do?”

I started to get angry then.

“Don’t act like this is so simple for me and so difficult for you, Doug. I have thought about it a lot.”

“But your mind is made up, isn’t it?” he asked.

I roll my eyes and look away from him.

“Maybe it’s your decision you need to reconsider,” I said. “Your decision to be with me.”

My comment hit him hard and he lowered himself onto the couch. He looked drained of energy. I remained standing, defensive.

“Don’t do that,” he said. “Don’t turn this into something it’s not. More than I’m upset about the procedure itself, I’m upset that you didn’t even ask me about it. Do you think maybe someday you’ll start taking other people into consideration when you make decisions that affect them? It’s not just all about you anymore, Andie.”

He’s said this to me before and I refuse to acknowledge the meaning of his words. He reminds me that I don’t live in this house by myself anymore, that I need to realize how my actions affect him. I told him that there was a fine line between selfish and self-preservation. He shook his head like I wasn’t understanding him and looked away from me. I do understand him, but I just don’t know how to make him part of a decision I’ve already made. I stood there wishing that I’d undergone a tubal before I met him. If I had gotten it done a year ago, it wouldn’t even be an issue. He would have accepted it or not. Either way, it would have been done.
“Maybe you just don’t get it,” I said. “You think this is an easy decision for me? You think this is what I want?”

He didn’t reply.

“It’s the way it has to be. I need you to know that I’m not ever going to have our kids. You’re never going to have a little boy running around the house with your eyes and my mannerisms. I need you to accept it now. And if you can’t do that...” My voice trailed off.

I’d done this before. Tried to give him an out from marrying me. Made him choose between the traditional life he had always thought he’d have or marrying me. I painted a grim picture to test his love. I needed to be sure that he was sure. When I met him, he had talked about having a family someday and how he was going to raise children. I thought I was shattering his dreams. Making Doug compromise his life is one of the toughest aspects of the decision to undergo a tubal.

“You know I want to marry you. I just don’t want to be in the relationship by myself. Don’t push me out. Don’t act like I’m against you and you’re all alone in this, okay?”

I nodded.

“Just tell your family I’m not the motherly type,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Selfish and self-centered and mean. I’ve told ‘em all about you.”

“I’m serious,” I replied. “How do you think they’re going to react when they find out I had my tubes tied?”

“They won’t find out,” he said. “And it doesn’t matter what they think. It’s none of their business whether or not we have any kids. My mom doesn’t mean anything by it. It’s just that standard question people ask people when they’re getting married.”

“I know.”

We were silent for several minutes, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Finally he spoke.
“It’s not what I think about you know.”

“What?” I asked.

“Having kids isn’t all I want to do with my life. It would be nice, but I’d rather have you than anything. Everything is different now. I just never saw that before I met you.”

He’s referring to his ex-girlfriend, a woman he dated for two years and was engaged to. He’s told me the story of how they met, how the relationship progressed. He said he asked her to marry him because it seemed like the next step.

“I didn’t know what I needed when I was with her. I was going through the motions, thinking my life was on track because I was following the same path everyone else was taking.” He paused. “It scares me now to think about what my life would have been like if I would have married her.”

“You never would have known the difference,” I said.

“That’s what scares me,” he replied.

“Things just have a way of working out. I think back on the choices I’ve made and I see now that it all just brought me here. To you. And what you’ve done so far in your life makes you the person I love.”

He raised his eyebrows at me.

“My sister used to say that if you love who you are, you won’t regret anything in life. If you can realize that everything you’ve done, good and bad, makes you the person you are, the person you love, you’ll understand the way of the world. You’ll have peace. It’s all about perspective.”

“Perspective,” he repeated.

“It’s not what you do or what happens to you. It’s how you chose to see it.”

I was talking to myself.

“We have to trust our decisions are the right ones,” I said.
That’s how I live. I follow my instincts most of the time, try to listen to what my intuition tells me. I make my decisions based on my gut, but Doug is more rational. He thinks things through before he acts.

“So you know you want to marry me?” he asked.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Well, you’ll do for now.” I pause and laugh. “It’s you I worry about,” I said, my voice serious again. “Marrying me is probably the most spontaneous thing you’ve ever done.”

“I know. It’s like I didn’t even have to think about it. I just knew I wanted your muddy little body whenever I watched you planting flowers from across the street.”

“God,” I said. “That seems like an eternity ago. I remember trying to concentrate on anything else, but you kept popping in my mind. I started studying in front of my living room window. Tried to catch a glimpse of you.”

He laughed. “Craig used to warn me not to date the neighbor. He said it would cause problems in the long run. He thought you were weird.”

“I am weird,” I said.

We avoided talking about the surgery for the rest of the week. He knew I had scheduled it, but he didn’t ask me about it. He waited for me to come to him, but I didn’t say anything else about it until this morning on the way to the clinic. I told him I was nervous.

“Don’t worry,” he said, squeezing my hand. “It’ll work out fine.”

I wasn’t sure if he was referring to the procedure or our future.

“I’m nervous too,” he said.

“What?” I asked, knowing that this was going to be the conversation we should have had weeks ago.
“Well I just worry that you’re doing this because of me,” he replied. “Would you be doing this if we weren’t getting married? I mean would you just go get a tubal if you weren’t with me?”

“That’s silly,” I said.

“I just don’t want you to think that I’m the reason. We’re the reason.”

I knew what he was trying to say. Of course I wouldn’t be having the tubal if I wasn’t marrying him. But that didn’t mean I was having the tubal because of him. It wasn’t the same thing.

“Well,” I replied. “In a way I am doing it because we’re together. Obviously I wouldn’t have to do this if I wasn’t having sex,” I laughed. “But now is the best time for me. I’m not sure why, but it is.”

“Would you still have done it if I would have asked you not to?”

This was the question I had been dreading.

“I knew you wouldn’t ask me not to.” I knew these words sounded like an excuse. I was avoiding his question.

“I really want to know,” he continued. “If it had been that important to me and I had asked you to wait, would you have done it for me?”

I felt like I was being asked the biggest question of my life. My answer to this was going to determine my fate. It was the meaning behind my answer that could make or break my relationship with Doug. He was asking me to choose between him and myself. My loyalty to him and my loyalty to myself. And I knew that no answer would be an answer in itself. If I said nothing, it would be worse.

“If I thought it meant that much to you, I would have waited.” I chose my words carefully. “I just didn’t see the sense in waiting.”

“Well, it seems like you just have this ability to make snap decisions without thinking about the impact of them. I need you to understand that this is just as hard for me as it is for
you.”

“I know that,” I said.

“I’m not sure how to handle it because I feel like it’s out of my hands. Like you just expect me to sit back and accept whatever you do and not say a word.”

I started to speak, but he cut me off.

“And I think this is a much easier decision for you to make. You’ve had your whole life to get used to the idea of not having any kids. It’s a very big deal to me.”

I listened carefully to his words, listened to the person behind his words. I wanted to reach out to him, but I couldn’t heal his pain. I was the one who had caused it. I looked out the window.

“I don’t have anything else to say about this,” he continued. “I just need to be sure you understand how I feel. I’m not trying to make this harder for you.”

I could feel him staring at the back of my head. He touched my hair. I thought about the kind of father he would be, how much pride he would take in his children. They say women often choose mates who are like their fathers. I saw more and more of the qualities of my father in Doug. And in the same way my dad had loved me, Doug would love his own kids. I was taking away his opportunity to love a child.

“Come on, sweetie. Let’s get inside,” he said.

I wanted to sit there for a few more minutes. I wiped my eyes with the back of my sleeve and turned back to face him.

“I need to do this, Doug,” I said.

He didn’t respond, so I picked up the pamphlet I had received in the mail earlier that week and concentrated on that. Pretending to read, even though I had read it several times already. It explained the procedure. And now I lie on the table knowing what to expect.

The doctor is going to fill my abdomen with carbon dioxide gas so he can see the tubes more clearly. The nurse told me that my shoulders might hurt for a few days afterward,
but not to worry. The gas is just going to move around my body in an attempt to escape. It’s normal, she had said. Closing my eyes, I try to envision my abdomen blown up. The more I relax, the larger it gets, finally becoming larger than my body. Almost leaving my body. Then I see two hands trying to cut through the skin, but it’s become tough like an orange peel. My skin is transparent and I can see the tubes floating around inside. Waiting. But the doctor can’t get through to them. I open my eyes.

The ceiling is white and I try to focus on the anesthesiologist. He’s stopped talking to the nurse and catches me looking at him.

“Feeling okay?” he asks.

My head moves up and down. I’m not feeling much of anything, like the shell of my body is floating in empty space. I want to sleep.

“You’ll be awake again before you know it,” he tells me.

I hope he’s right, and I hope I’m comfortable with my decision.

I’ve read that over a third of the women who choose sterilization regret it. For some women it’s a good thing, but those who do it before the age of thirty often regret it. The book I was reading included the testimonies of women who felt they were pressured to undergo a tubal by their husbands or physicians. Some of the women wrote that they didn’t feel like women anymore and they were scared their husbands wouldn’t love them. I read about women throughout history who had been deceived by doctors who cut their tubes without their consent. Black women in the south knew a tubal ligation as a “Mississippi appendectomy.” After they gave birth to a baby, a doctor would cut and tie their tubes without the woman’s knowledge. Some of these women would wonder for years why they could never get pregnant again, finally being told by another physician that they had been sterilized. The book said that women all over the world had been victims of sterilization abuse. Many of these women were poor or black or didn’t speak English. If a doctor decided a woman was mentally unfit, he could perform the procedure against her will. There
are documented cases of tubal ligations being performed during abortions. Sometimes the doctors wouldn’t perform the abortion unless the woman agreed to sterilization as well. Other times, they didn’t tell the women what they had done.

I felt a connection to the women I read about. Even though the decision I’m making is my own, I can identify with the emotions they expressed. I understand their concerns about their husbands’ reactions or not feeling completely like a woman afterwards. I could even imagine the anger of the coerced and deceived. Women who wanted to have children, but couldn’t because something had been taken from them against their will or without their knowledge. I thought about these women all week while I waited for my appointment, hoping that I wouldn’t feel regret next year or ten years from now. I hoped that I wouldn’t want something I couldn’t have after today.

I think creating a child with Doug would be the most beautiful thing we could ever do. I would love to leave the world knowing there was still going to be a piece of me behind. Maybe a little girl for Doug to hold onto when I’m gone. She would have brown hair and green eyes and he could tell her stories about me. She would keep me alive for him and give him someone else to live for. Maybe having a child would give me the peace I might need someday when I die. I could go knowing my husband wouldn’t be alone. But I guess I’m selfish. I want the world to belong to me right now.

I convince myself that I don’t want children anyway. I smile when I hear a story about a couple who has been married for twenty years and chose never to have children. I tell myself more and more people want a life without kids. I’ll have more time for myself, more time with my husband. We’ll be able to pick up and drive across the country whenever we want to. I will have options. Not having children will give me freedom. I hope.

Maybe we’ll adopt someday. I tell myself that’s the socially responsible thing to do anyway. If I want to love a child, it won’t matter if I gave birth to it or not. Doug was adopted. His biological mother died when he was only two and he considers the woman who
raised him to be his mother. I guess we could adopt, but I've heard they take the parents' health into consideration in deciding whether or not you receive a child. I have to just trust that it will all somehow work out. That Doug and I will be happy with whatever life brings us.

The doctor walks into the room and rests his hand on the side of the thin mattress.

"Hi Andrea," he says. "Getting sleepy?"

I force a smile. It's almost time. They'll put me completely under in just a few more minutes. He doesn't need to ask me now if I'm sure about my decision. I've signed the consent forms. He is looking over my chart.

I remember something Doug said to me a few weeks ago. He had remarked that maybe the scientists would find a cure for diabetes someday. If that happened, I might not be afraid to have children. I replied that I doubted there would be a cure. I wouldn't bet my life on hope. They've been saying there was a cure in sight ever since I could remember, ever since my father could remember. A breakthrough in diabetes meant a new way to give an injection or monitor blood sugars. I'm not holding my breath.

A cure for diabetes. I don't even think about that. I find myself just hoping for advances in how to treat the complications of the disease. Ways to prevent blindness and restore circulation. A kidney transplant without a life of immunosuppressives. I don't think this is hoping for too much, but a cure is too much to ask for. The doctors say it's manageable, so the focus is on the best ways to manage it. Controlling it, but not eliminating it. Possibly preventing its onset, but not fixing a pancreas that hasn't worked for fifteen years. I don't want Doug to hope for a cure either.

It could be much worse, I told him one time. I could have incurable cancer or MS or a spinal cord injury. I can live with diabetes. I tell him it's a blessing compared to some afflictions. And I sometimes think I was lucky to get it as a child. Even though I will have more complications, I've forgotten the trauma of being diagnosed. It didn't hit me as hard as
it does many adults. It made my family closer, maybe made my mom and dad better parents. I think they lived with more fear of losing my sister and I when we were kids. I was so loved by them.

Thinking about my childhood is the last thing I remember as I drift completely under. The plaid couch my father sat on as I crawled around him with my Barbie dolls. The way my brother cocked his head to the side when he was being scolded by my mother for biting me. His hair was thick and black and he had a lisp. Twenty years later, he’s balding and living in Wisconsin with his wife. I remember my sister’s prom dresses and running her lipstick over my own little lips when no one was watching. I think about my parents and the way they used to laugh at us. We brought them joy and pain over the years. We helped to make the memories of their lives, the thoughts that carry them into old age. I am asleep before I can think to cry.
I had never ridden in an ambulance before last night. I was embarrassed. I thought my appendix had broken and I was going to pass out from the pain, so I curled my body in the middle of the living room floor as Doug dashed around the room with the cordless phone in one hand and my coat in the other. I kept telling him to sit next to me, calm down. His eyes were full of fear as he told the 911 operator about my sudden attack of pain and the symptoms. I could hear her stalling him with questions.

I turned my head toward him. “Just tell her I’m diabetic,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes and relayed the information to the woman on the other end of the line. She said someone would be right there.

A trio of men dressed in blue came through the back door several minutes later. They hovered around me while Doug told them what my complaints had been. The leader stepped forward.

“Does it hurt here?” he asked, pressing firmly on my lower abdomen.

I curled onto my side in pain, wishing I had the energy to reach up and hit him. I felt like he had punched my stomach and Doug stepped forward in disbelief. The man in blue kept asking me about the pain, where it was, sharp or dull, continuous or erratic. I just wrapped my arms around my stomach and turned onto my side. I was afraid it was a complication from the tubal ligation. Two weeks had passed since the surgery and the incision on my navel had gotten a slight infection. I had visions of an infection spreading
through my ovaries. Then I thought the sharp pain must be an appendicitis. I couldn’t tell the man anything, only that it hurt.

The three men were inexperienced. If I would have listened to my intuition as I laid in the living room, I would have stayed home last night. This was the beginning of an evening I would never forget, an evening that would change my already shaky views about the medical profession for the rest of my life. My experience last night would spur me to write letters to hospital administration, file complaints against the head emergency doctor at the hospital, and lose more faith in the men and women who were supposedly trained to heal me.

It began in the ambulance.

"Just test my blood sugar, okay?" I was pleading with the young man sitting next to my stretcher as we whizzed down the interstate toward downtown Des Moines.

"In just a minute, hon."

I opened my eyes and stared into his. Hon?

"Test my fucking blood sugar, now," I said between clenched teeth.

He patted my right arm and told me he’d be getting to that in just another minute. I should rest and let them worry about the situation.

I was trapped in the back of this ambulance with two technicians younger than myself who seemed to know nothing about diabetes. I knew my blood sugar was plummeting and if they didn’t give me some sugar soon, I would pass out. I focused on staying conscious. I thought about Doug following behind the flashing ambulance. I wanted to break open the back doors and get in his car with him. Drive to a convenience store and get some orange juice.

"Test my blood sugar and give me some sugar," I told them again.

"She’s not very coherent," I heard one of them say.
I almost laughed, but tears were starting to roll down the side of my cheek. Finally I felt the prick in my finger and heard the beep of the glucometer.

“No, wait a second to put the blood on,” the man on my left told the technician holding the small machine.

“I know what I’m doing,” he replied defensively.

“You have to wait for the second beep. I’m telling you, man.”

I heard myself enter into the conversation through a cloud.

“I can’t fucking believe you two,” I said. “Push the button, wait till is says to enter the strip and then wait until it says to put the blood on. Jesus Christ.” I hated these two men.

Finally I heard the three beeps and the tech on my right stared at the screen on the small machine. He lowered his voice and spoke across me.

“Is 38 low?” he asked the man across from him.

“38 is comatose, asshole,” I spoke up.

Insulin reactions affect diabetics in different ways. Some people will become withdrawn and pensive. Others will take on a glassy stare and move slowly toward the source of some sugar. Some diabetics start to cry when their blood sugars get dangerously low. Everyone reacts differently. Physical danger is manifested by a different emotion in everyone. For all of us, it is fear. And my fear manifested itself as anger. Low blood sugars had made me belligerent and temperamental ever since I was a small child. I might snap at a waitress, demanding orange juice immediately or yell at my dog because I couldn’t find a banana in the house. I feel like I can’t control the anger I experience when my blood sugar is low. But when I feel like my fate is resting in someone else’s hands, when it seems I have no control over whether or not I might lose consciousness because I can’t get my hands on a packet of sugar, my anger is rage.

“Don’t you have any glucose in this place?” I asked, looking around at the metal walls.
“Uh, yeah,” one of them replied, lifting the latch on a box. I could feel the nervous tension in his voice now. He was no longer the controlling man he thought he was. He was scared he was screwing up. I listened to him rummage through the contents of the box.

“A candy bar? Anything?” I asked. “Don’t you keep your little snacks in here? Didn’t your mom pack you a Little Debbie or anything today?”

These men were starting to hate me, but I didn’t care. I felt justified in my patronizing words.

“Got it,” the man on my left said.

They squeezed pure glucose from a clear tube into my mouth. I coughed it up, reaching up and wiping the slime off my face.

“It’s all we have.” He hesitated, turning the tube over in his hand. “You better take it.”

I closed my eyes because I could feel the ambulance coming to a stop. I prayed the doors would open and I could find some help inside the hospital. The two men jumped up and threw the doors open. The bumpy ride through the emergency room made the pain in my abdomen sharper. I felt like something had burst down there. It was like bleeding pain, moving from one spot and spreading itself throughout my gut. I opened my eyes and saw a nurse in a white dress.

Relief spread over me.

I sympathize with doctors and nurses. Even though they treat diabetics every day, they must accommodate the idiosyncrasies of each of us. Diabetes is a defined illness. That’s the problem. Medical personnel are trained to deal with the textbook cases, the most common problems associated with diabetes. They are taught the magic numbers for high and low blood sugars, and they learn about insulin dosages. They have studied how the body works and how it doesn’t work in a diabetic patient. I trust that most of them understand the disease itself. It’s the individual diabetics who aren’t understood. It’s the way one diabetic
with a low blood sugar might lash out at a nurse or the way another might fear being given an injection by someone other than himself. Sometimes we make no sense to. I trusted that the nurse standing above me would try to understand.

I was wrong.

“Where’s the pain?” she asked.

I rested my hand on my lower abdomen and told her I was a diabetic and needed glucose immediately. My words sounded like they were being read straight from a medic alert bracelet.

“Down here?” she asked, resting her hand on top of mine.

“Yeah. I need to get some sugar.”

“I’ll order a glucose test,” she replied.

“I know it’s low. The men in the ambulance already checked it. Can’t you just get me some orange juice?”

I was talking to myself as she turned away and pulled the curtain closed behind her.

Doug walked in. There was relief on his face.

“Did you bring my purse?” I asked him.

He held it up for me to see.

“Dig around in there and find me a piece of candy.”

He sat down on the chair next to my bed and rummaged through my bag.

I was leaning up in bed, digging my hand into the side pocket as Doug opened up a small case in my bag. The nurse walked back in. She stared at us.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I didn’t answer her.

“Check down at the very bottom. I think there’s a peppermint somewhere down there,” I said to Doug.
The nurse narrowed her eyes. “I told you we’d get you glucose after we run a blood test.”

I ignored her and Doug pulled a dirty, mangled piece of candy out. He held it in his hand and hesitated, looking from the nurse’s eyes to mine.

“I am strongly advising you not to consume that piece of candy,” she said.

Doug started to peel the wrapper off the peppermint.

“If there is a gastrointestinal problem, consuming that might put you in jeopardy. We don’t know what’s wrong with you yet.”

I turned my eyes to the woman. She was huge. Almost six feet tall and thick. Her hips filled the nurse’s uniform and her ankles were swollen. I stared into her eyes, challenging her. The clock on the wall behind her ticked. I took her words as a threat.

“Let me fill you in here,” I began, in a condescending tone. Blood was rushing to my head. “I have a pain in my stomach that has become unbearable. I think my appendix has probably burst, but, believe it or not, I’m not really too concerned about that right now. I had a blood sugar in that damn ambulance of 38 and I haven’t eaten anything for five hours. I’m sure by now my blood sugar is even lower and I’m probably only still awake because I fear that you people would let me die if I passed out. Now, it’s my body and my first priority is getting my blood sugar up so I have the energy to deal with you fucking people.”

Suddenly everything was silent. I could no longer hear the patients in the other rooms and phones ringing in the background. My own words hung in the air around me. The look on the nurse’s face was pure rage. Her eyes pierced through me before she turned around and stormed out.

I’d never spoken to anyone like that before. Doug stared at me in disbelief, but didn’t say anything. He finished peeling the wrapper off the piece of candy and slid it into my mouth. I tried to breathe. I wanted out of there, but I knew a doctor would be in to see me any minute. I was sure a doctor would be as outraged as I was by what was transpiring here.
"I’m Dr. Arnt," he said, pushing the curtain aside and walking in.

I nodded at him.

The next words out of his mouth changed my feelings about doctors forever. I’ll never forget that man standing at the foot of my bed at three o’clock in the morning. The way his glasses sat crooked on his face and his black hair was slicked back exposing his balding head. The threatening expression on his face as he stared over the clipboard at me.

“This attitude is certainly going to have to stop right here. It’s going to be a very long night if you don’t start cooperating.”

The feeling of shock doesn’t even come close to describing how I felt. The adrenaline rushed through my body and I knew the next words I chose would determine how the remaining hours in this hospital went. It seemed like several seconds before I heard myself speak. I knew I had two options. I could either apologize and politely explain what was wrong with me, or I could explode. I couldn’t control the words that came from my mouth.

“Attitude?” I asked. “Attitude? This is the first time you’ve even seen me. What do you know about my attitude?”

He ignored my words and gave me a look that said all his suspicions about me had just been confirmed. The nurse hadn’t misinformed him. I was the uncooperative, brat she described me to be.

“We can do this two ways,” he began. “Easy or hard.”

“All I’m asking for is some sugar,” I told him. “That’s all I’ve been asking for since I got here. And I tend to get a bit uncooperative when my blood sugar is this low.”

“Yes, I understand that,” he said. “We’re waiting for the blood tests to confirm your glucose level.”

That’s when something snapped in my head.

“No one has even been here to take my blood,” I told him.
He looked suddenly shocked and glanced to the chart for some explanation.

“I can’t believe this,” I breathed as I sat up.

I pushed the thin, white hospital blanket off my legs and painfully curled up into a sitting position. I stared at Doug.

“We’re leaving,” I said, holding my abdomen.

Doug was unsure of what to do. He looked up at the balding man holding the clipboard and then back to me struggling to make my way off the bed. Doug hesitated and took my arm.

“Just trust me honey,” I told him. “We’re not staying here. I’m not going to let this man put his hands on me.”

That was the strangest sensation I’d ever had. The feeling that if that doctor touched me I was going to die. Like if he got his hands on me he would intentionally hurt me. I didn’t want to be treated in that hospital. I was ready to leave, even though I knew the pain in my abdomen was getting sharper.

“Let’s just wait a minute,” Doug said. “There could really be something wrong and we probably shouldn’t leave here.”

“Listen to him,” the doctor interjected, nodding toward Doug.

I ignored him and pulled my coat off the back of Doug’s chair. Taking his hand and picking up my purse, I held my stomach as I walked past the doctor. He followed us out.

“Where did you park?” I asked Doug.

“This way,” he said, leading me down a corridor.

I leaned on him, hunched over in pain and barely able to walk from the lack of energy. I looked behind me. The doctor and another nurse were following us, talking between themselves. I thought they might try to stop me from leaving.

“Where are you going?” the doctor said.
We didn’t answer him. I wanted to stop. I wanted to stop and turn around and tell him that he was the most despicable human being I had ever encountered. I wanted to tell him that I felt sorry for the people who came through the doors of the emergency room and were met with him. A part of me wanted to scream at him and another part of me wanted to drop to the floor and let them take care of me. But something stronger, something deeper forced me forward to the exit door.

We drove straight to a Quick Trip. Doug bought me orange juice and I forced the entire bottle down my throat as he headed for another hospital. I wanted to laugh. I felt like a fugitive, but I knew I was going to be all right now. The bottle of orange juice in my hand made me feel safe. I had regained control over myself. Over my life.

"Turn left here," I told Doug.

He turned the wheel and glanced over at me.

"Still hurt a lot?" he asked.

I nodded. The pain was starting to subside, but each time the car hit a bump I felt the jolt through my abdomen.

"I'm afraid it's from the tubal," I said. "I can't believe what just happened."

"I don't know, Andie. You were being pretty nasty to those people."

"What?" I started to shake. "I was nasty to them? I don't think you understand what just happened back there. They would have been responsible if I had gone unconscious."

Doug didn’t argue with me. He knew it would only make me more upset if he challenged my behavior in the hospital. He drove in silence.

* * *

It's almost noon now and I've been home from the hospital for seven hours. The doctor at the second hospital immediately ran an ultrasound and told me I had a ruptured cyst.
on my ovary. He gave me something for the pain and antibiotics and sent me home. I have an appointment with Dr. Vallerick this afternoon. The emergency room doctor told me cysts are common, but the one on my ovary had been very large. When it broke, it caused intense pain that spread throughout my abdomen.

I’m still angry this morning. I keep replaying the events of last night in my mind, justifying my rage over and over. Trying to put into words for Doug why I’m so upset.

“It was wrong. I understand that,” he says.

I’m sitting up on the couch pushing buttons on the remote control.

“It was more than wrong. Someone needs to know what happened. I just keep thinking about what would have happened if we hadn’t left that place.”

“Well, we did leave,” Doug says. “We left and everything is okay now. They probably didn’t handle the situation as well as they could have, but...”

His voice trailed off.

“I’m going to file a complaint against that doctor,” I tell him. “I just want it on the record that I’m upset about what happened and I want someone over there to know.”

“Okay. We’ll file a complaint,” he says. He’s staring at the television screen.

“Seriously,” I say, touching his arm. “I know it won’t probably make any difference, but I think I have to do it.”

“Let someone in the administration know if you feel you have to. And it’ll make you feel better,” he says. “What are you going to tell them? The doctor disrespected you?”

“I’m going to tell them everything that transpired from the time I got there. I’m going to tell them that I sat there in that emergency room with a blood sugar of 38 and no one even took my blood. I’m going to tell them that I was treated poorly.”

And I did complain to a nurse employed in the customer service department of the hospital. She told me the doctor who had treated me was the head of emergency, that she, herself, had worked with him for three years in ER. She was shocked at my story, but she
said she believed me. Believed that I believed that it happened as I said it did. She told me
she would turn in the complaint and we would come to a resolution. Resolution for them
meant not charging me for services. I told her I would gladly pay, it wasn’t an issue of
money. I just wanted them to know. I wanted someone to know that the next person who
was wheeled through that emergency door might not speak up like I did. I wanted to share
my anger with someone. The nurse on the phone listened and sympathized. She did her job
well and apologized for the hospital. I couldn’t ask for anything more.
I can feel my father looking at me as I stare at myself in the mirror. Pushing the headband of my veil down firmly against my hair, I rest my fingers for a moment on the curves of the white braid. My mother had insisted on making the veil and wove beads and lace through the hairpiece before fitting it perfectly to my head. My fingernails are coated with clear polish and I run my thumb under my ring finger. Nothing. I had to give my ring to Doug’s best man ten minutes ago.

I look at the antique clock hanging on the wall. 12:48. Twelve minutes. I’ll reapply lipstick and curl my dark hair around my fingers and smooth my dress repeatedly. I have twelve minutes to talk to my father before we have to walk through a room filled with people. I look at his reflection in the mirror.

He’s leaning against the wall staring at the back of my dress. Not staring at me, but lost in thoughts of his own.

“Are you nervous?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Me? Nah. All the attention is going to be on you.”

“But they take a good look at the man giving me away too, ya know?” I continue.

He smiles.

“That tux transforms you into a pretty handsome guy.” I wink at him. “Better watch out or some woman is going to try to move in on you.”
He looks young today, but perhaps tuxedos just make me think of high school proms. The black suit fits him perfectly and his burgundy vest brings color to his January complexion. In his eyes I find the same hope I see in Doug's eyes.

"I couldn't have found a better guy, though."

I want to tell him that Doug will take care of me. That I'm all grown up and it's going to be all right. But that's too much to say. We both know that already. Doug will devote his life to loving me, just as my dad had done. Both of them are caring men. The best I could ask for in one lifetime. And I don't have to give up one to have the other. I can be my husband's wife and still be my father's daughter. I want to tell my dad that, but I can't find the words. I know I would cry if I said it.

"He's a pretty amazing kid," he says. "You both are. You'll be good together."

I'm waiting for some advice, but my dad never gives any unless he's asked. He's always let me make my own decisions, trusting I would make the right ones. I feel like a little girl before this mirror. A small child playing dress up in her mother's wedding gown. The sequins and lace feel uncomfortable, but somehow familiar. I'm torn between my past and my future as the people file in downstairs. I wonder who is signing the guest book.

"I wonder how many people won't make it because of the weather," I say. It's below zero and even though the sun is shining, the snow yesterday kept the relatives from out of town home. "I guess this was the risk of a January wedding."

He nods. The clock ticks. Ann sticks her head in the door.

"Eight minutes," she says.

"Thanks for reminding me," I say. I'm starting to feel nervous, hoping I speak my vows loudly enough for the people in the back row to hear them. I hope I don't trip over my dress or cry in front of everyone.
“It’ll be a snap,” Ann replies. “Holly and I are going to wait at the bottom of the stairs for you. We should all be ready to go when we hear Danny singing.” She disappears as quickly as she had appeared.

“Feels like a performance, doesn’t it?” I ask my dad.

“It’ll be fun. Don’t worry about everyone staring at you,” he laughs. “You’re supposed to enjoy this.”

“I know.”

I am excited. All the stress of planning the wedding and reception was lined with the excitement of getting married to Doug. I tell myself I should enjoy this day. Knowing the time will pass too quickly, I tell myself to relax and make a memory of it. Because tomorrow I’ll drop my dress off at the cleaners and resume my life as planned. The rest of my years will be spent with Doug. I wonder if my sister is watching me today.

I’ve been thinking a lot about Denise the last few months, wondering if she ever regretted not getting married. Wondering if she would be surprised to know that I’m doing it. I’m starting to think now that I was never as much like her as I had once believed. I had merged my identity with hers the years she was alive, and when she left I had to find who I really was. Discover the person I was without her. She confirmed who I was by being who she was, but I don’t know what she’d say about a wedding. I think she would like Doug though. She would say he’s right for me. And she would be the one standing next to me today if she were here. I like to believe that she’s with me anyway. Somehow hovering above it all and smiling. I look at my father, spotting a tear in the corner of his eye.

I’ve never seen him cry. During my sister’s funeral, he had stared straight ahead and bit his bottom lip. The same Unitarian minister who performed Denise’s funeral service will perform my wedding ceremony today. Some of the readings from her funeral will be read this afternoon. When Doug and I wrote the ceremony, I wanted to include a Ralph Waldo
Emerson quote that had been read at the funeral service. It was my way of bringing Denise into my future. Carrying her memory with me as I go on with my life.

“Did Denise ever talk to you about marrying Tony?” I ask my dad.

“Not that I remember. There was that one man when she was in graduate school. His name was Steve, I think. I thought they might get married, but she never said anything about it. I guess she just didn’t meet the right person.”

“The last time we saw all these people was at her funeral, you know?” I ask.

He nods.

The day of the funeral was harder on my father than anyone. He had turned and walked away from the crowd as the minister spoke by her grave. One of my mother’s friends was handing out roses to set on Denise’s casket. We all set the roses down, but when I looked for my father, I spotted him at the bottom of the hill. Leaning against the back of the limousine, he waited for us to say our good-byes.

“I bet the pictures the photographer took are going to turn out great,” I say, changing the subject.

“It’s a beautiful place here. You look very pretty too.”

I wonder if he’s thinking about his own wedding. He and my mom got married in The Little Brown Church in northern Iowa. They eloped because my father’s family didn’t approve of the marriage. My mother wasn’t Catholic and refused to promise to raise her kids in the Catholic church. I can see now how much I look like my mother in her wedding pictures. I have her dark hair and rounded face.

“How have your eyes been lately?” my father asks, glancing up at the clock.

I don’t want to talk about my eyes, but I expect this question from him at least once a week.

I always tell him they’re doing better.

“When is your next appointment in Iowa City?” he asks.
"Two weeks. Two weeks from Monday.”

"I can drive you, you know. We’ll stop and have lunch on the way.”

I nod, knowing Doug will be taking me. He had already asked for the day off from work. My father took me to all the appointments before I met Doug.

"The blood from the vitrectomy looks like it’s almost all settled out,” he comments.

"There’s still a little around the sides,” I say, touching the corner of my eye. “They told me in some people it will never completely clear. It’s been months, and that eye still gets irritated easily.”

I run my pinkie under both eyes, careful not to smear the mascara.

"No one else notices, though,” he reassures me.

"I guess.” I pause. “So are you okay with all this?”

"All what?” he asks.

"Me getting married to Doug,” I say.

"Of course.” He sounds surprised I’ve asked. “I always knew you would find the right one eventually.”

He’s referring to Jake, Kurt, and Larry. Three men I’d had relationships with, but never contemplated marrying. They drank too much and made the mistake of being rude to my family.

"I just want you to know that he’s a really great guy. He’s the kind of guy who will be there whenever I need him because he wants to be. I can’t really explain it, I just know it. My gut tells me he’s genuine.”

"You’ve got to trust your instincts,” he tells me.

"I don’t want you to think that I don’t need you or anything now.” The words don’t come easily and I wipe a tear from the corner of my right eye.
"I know, sweetie. I'm glad you found somebody you love." He walks over to me and straightens the back of my veil. He leans against me and whispers in my ear. "We better get down there, Andie."

I take one last look in the mirror and turn around. Taking my father’s arm, we turn and head down the stairs.

Holly walks ahead of us, pausing at the end of the aisle and looking straight up like the photographer had told her to. She’s nervous and she tries to walk slowly.

I grab my father’s arm more tightly and straighten out the bottom of my dress.

“We have to pause at the back here before we walk up, dad. Virginia said to do that so she can get our picture.”

“Ohkay,” he whispers.

When Holly gets to the minister, she turns to face the back of the room. Ann steps forward and smiles as she walks slowly, scanning the crowd. She doesn’t get nervous in front of crowds like Holly does. Rather, she enjoys the moment and studies the expressions on their faces. Her parents are sitting in the last row and her mom smiles beneath the tears when she sees Ann.

As I step into the doorway to the left of my father, I think about something Holly said to me early this morning. She told me the only time she cried at her own wedding was when she was standing at the end of the aisle. Holly said everyone stood up, and when she looked at them she started to cry. I asked her why. She replied that she never realized before how many people cared about her. She looked from face to face and all she saw were smiling eyes. She felt loved.

I scan the crowd for friends and family. They’re all staring at me now, but I look straight ahead at Doug. He has his hands folded in front of him, and he smiles when he sees my father and me. I walk more quickly, wanting to get to him as fast as I can. My life flashes before me. Images of myself fill my head. The cakes my mother made me on my
birthdays, playing hide and seek with my brother, the way my father looked at me when I graduated from college. I add today to my collection of memories and feel the tension in my back diminish.

My father gives Doug my arm. Doug extends his right arm to shake hands with my father and I wonder if the minister told him to do this before the ceremony. We didn’t have a rehearsal last night and we were all unsure what we were supposed to do up here. My father shakes his hand and steps back to take his seat next to my mother.

I stare into Doug’s eyes and everyone else disappears. I faintly hear a child talking in the background and a mother whispering for him to be quiet. I smile at Doug, finally feeling the overwhelming joy I’d been waiting for. The minister opens the ceremony and the familiar words ring in my ears. My voice cracks when I stare at Doug and repeat my vows. I speak the words loudly, making promises to both him and myself about our future. He insisted on adding a promise to my vows. He wanted me to promise that I would allow him to love me. He said that’s more important to him than anything. I will never shut him out again. I will not be afraid to let him love me.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Removing the snow to reveal Denise’s name, I sit on a quilt next to her headstone. This is the first time I’ve been to the cemetery in the winter and I panicked when I first arrived because I couldn’t find her grave beneath all the snow. Everything was blanketed white and I brushed the flakes off seventeen other stones before I found hers. Revealing unfamiliar names, I quickly moved down the row in search of one that bore her name. I started to think I wasn’t going to find her. That her grave had somehow disappeared and her death had been a dream. I think I come here to remind myself that she’s never coming back.

When I finally found her headstone, I felt relief. I could breathe. I dropped my quilt in the spot on the undisturbed snow where the casket had been lowered and sat directly above her coffin. Removing my glove and tracing the engraving of her name with my finger, I stared at the gray rock while the wind blew light snow against my face. Pulling the hood of my coat up around my ears, I turned my eyes up to the rest of the cemetery.

I’m surrounded by dead bodies. I am the only breathing creature as far as I can see. Snow blankets the grass and mine are the only footprints. People don’t come to the cemetery in mid-February. Christmas has passed and the groundskeepers have removed the plastic evergreens and wreaths placed on the graves by mothers. My mother decorates Denise’s grave every December. She places a tiny tree with plastic bulbs in the pop-up vase, but she comes back after the holidays and takes the tree home. She wraps it in plastic and places it on a shelf in the basement.
I didn’t intend to come here this afternoon. I’ve only been here four times in the three years she’s been gone. I was running errands and took a wrong turn down University Avenue. I found myself stopped at a red light looking over at the frozen pond in the cemetery. My car turned in the drive before I could think. I needed to come here. I’ve been feeling guilty lately. A strange sense of guilt about being alive. My grief was selfish the first year and when I cried, I cried for myself. For the way I missed her presence in my life. Now whenever I experience something new, I feel guilty that she’s not here doing it too. I’m sorry for what she has missed. For the things she never got to do. I was always three steps behind her when she was alive and now my life has started to surpass hers. I’ve traveled and gotten married and done things she never did. I feel like I’m somehow betraying her by simply living. Guilt for learning to live without needing her to show me how.

I push my hand down into the snow and feel the hard ground beneath me, wondering how they break the earth when someone dies in February. And the obituary section of the newspaper has been full the last few weeks. Car accidents and heart attacks. A man on a farm outside Des Moines murdered his two children and wife before shooting himself last week. A young, black woman was kidnapped and found dead several days later. A semi slid across the median on the Interstate and hit an oncoming Honda. A mother and both her daughters were killed. I wonder how much harder it is for the groundskeepers to break the ground for their deaths during the winter. Denise died in July after heavy rains.

That day was an eternity ago, and beneath the snow this place is not familiar now. I’ve only seen it green and full of life. I chose her plot next to some small trees, but they have gone dormant for the winter too. Ice clings to their branches as they wait for spring to bring them back to life. It is silent here.

“Well, here we are.” I pause to recognize the sound of my own voice breaking the silence. “I’ve been doing a lot lately Dee Dee. Got married, bought a house, got a new dog.
I’ll be finishing my Master’s in a few more months and then I don’t know. You would like Doug though.” I pause. “He loves me.”

The wind blows hard against my face and I lower my head into my hands.

“The house is really big. But the kicker is that it’s pink. Not just painted pink, but pink siding and a pink garage and pink carpet inside. You know how I hate pink, so I suppose we’ll be doing a lot of work the next few months. It’s a nice neighborhood though.”

It was hard moving out of my house. As I packed the boxes, I thought about all I had experienced in those rooms. I felt like I was moving away from the memories I had with my sister. My life changed a lot living there, and even though I’ll miss it, I know it was better to move on. Start a new life with Doug in a new house.

“A lot is going on though. I still feel like I need to find my place in it all somewhere. Sometimes it seems like I’m waiting to die, waiting to go blind or waiting for my kidneys to fail. I had another vessel break in my eye last week. All these surgeries and you think they could get it right by now. I was just helping Doug move a couch in the living room when it happened. Other days I have moments when everything is clear. I know for an instant that it’s all going to be okay. Everything will work out. Then that feeling of being sure passes and I can’t recapture it.”

I pull my hand away from my face and place it on the gray stone.

“I miss you still though. I missed you at the wedding when I looked back at the front row. Mom and dad were both crying.”

I feel strange now, sitting in the snow talking to myself. I stand up for a better view of the cemetery. A look over the hill and see a car parked next to the pond. A father and daughter are walking across the snow toward the water. They keep the pond heated so it doesn’t freeze, and the geese and swans can live here year round. Children come to feed them. The little girl skips ahead of her dad, only looking back to see how far he has fallen behind. The tall man is carrying a bread bag with old crusts to feed the birds. His other hand
pulls a blue sled. He looks tired as he drags his boots through the deep snow. The child reaches the edge of the water and waits. She bends down and dips her mitten in the water, yelling back to her dad that it’s cold.

I scan the rest of the cemetery. White. I sit back down on my blanket. The ground feels even colder as the sun hides behind a cloud. Even though the days are getting longer, it will be dark soon. I can feel the night coming.

“I’m afraid to go blind,” I say aloud. “I’m more afraid of that than anything. And having Doug makes it worse, I think. I don’t want him to feel my pain. I don’t want him to have to deal with the future. I’m scared.”

Denise would tell me to only worry about myself. I know what she would say. People make choices and Doug’s decision was to be with me because he loves me, not because he has to be here. She would tell me that things would work out like they were meant to. Things would be fine, and somehow, just because she said it, I would feel better. I think. It seems like just yesterday I heard her voice.

It’s my voice too. I didn’t realize that until about a year after she died and I called my house, letting the phone ring until the answering machine picked up. I heard my voice on the line and realized it sounded like Denise’s. To the point and raspy. I could hear her in myself.

“Even though he’s with me, sometimes I’m so alone. But maybe it’s better that way. I can’t take anyone with me through the bad times anyway. Not really. I know Doug will be there, but it’s still my life that I must play out. He’s there to hold onto, but I’m still trapped inside myself.”

I hear the little girl’s laughter across the open space. I turn my head and watch her father pulling her through the snow on the sled. She is holding on with both hands and the bag of bread has been left next to the water. Two geese have moved forward to investigate its contents. The father spots the birds and drops the rope on the sled, moving quickly
toward the plastic bag and snatching it up. The child rolls off the sled and runs up to her father, holding out her hands. He pulls a slice from the bag and hands it to her before taking out one for himself. He tears the piece of bread into small pieces and throws them in the water toward the birds. The girl imitates him, laughing as the birds dunk their heads beneath the surface. They swim quickly toward the food. The child decides she wants the entire bag and when her dad hands it to her, she throws whole slices into the water. He takes the bag from her and shows her again how to tear them into pieces. Make the slice last longer.

I fed the birds here as a child. My mother brought me to this pond during my kindergarten year in school. My brother was in Fourth grade and I got out of school at noon. Sometimes my mom would pick me up with a picnic lunch all packed and we would spread a blanket out on the grass and eat peanut butter sandwiches. I saved my crusts to give to the birds. Then my mother would pull out a book and turn over on her stomach. Facing the water, she could read the latest mystery novel and still keep an eye on me. I pulled turtles and fish out of the water, but she never let me take them home. When I asked her why, she just told me they belonged there. They wouldn’t be happy anywhere else. She said their mothers would miss them.

“We got a new dog from the pound after we moved in, too. Lucy. She’s lanky and clumsy, like a puppy slipping on the hard wood floors. Mom can’t come over without wheezing.”

I pull my hood more tightly around my face, not sure whether to get warm by putting my head down and staying still or getting up and walking. I decide to walk. Pulling my quilt up around my shoulders, I know I would be a strange sight to anyone driving by. A tall woman wrapped in an old quilt walking through the snow in a cemetery. I head down the hill and north.

I stop to stare at a mound of black dirt protruding from the ground and lightly covered with flakes. Someone was recently buried and the earth hasn’t settled yet. They’ll have to
wait until spring to plant grass here and lay a headstone. I hate the way fresh graves look. Nothing is complete yet for the dead or the living. They wait for the ground to settle and level out. They want grass to live on the surface above the coffin. I wrap the quilt around me and turn back in the direction of my car.

I approach the road in front of Denise’s grave and hesitate. My toes are going numb in my canvas tennis shoes and the shelter of my car welcomes me, but I turn back up the hill. Dusty snow is being blown back over the headstones I had cleaned off earlier. I find my sister’s place immediately this time and sit back down. Crossing my legs and pulling them close to my chest, I search for the words to say goodbye.

“Well, it’s pretty cold out here, big miss. I’m going to go home to my husband now.” I smile. “Doesn’t that sound strange?: After we got married, I kept saying the word ‘wife’ over and over. It’s weird being someone’s wife.”

I take a deep breath and reach out to touch the stone.

“I guess I won’t be buried here, next to you now, huh? I don’t know. I suppose Doug and I will buy plots together now or something. It doesn’t really matter, does it? Where I’m buried, I mean.” I pause. “I have to get home though.” I stand and turn my back to her grave.

It’s snowing again and the flakes stick to my windows as I turn the heater up. Untangling myself from the blanket and leaning back in my seat, I look in the direction of her grave. The white of the snow makes the spots in my eyes more prominent, but I feel a sense of peace here. Something blowing across the pavement catches my eye. I watch as the wind carries a plastic, bread bag through the cemetery.