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What It All Meant

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

WHAT IT ALL MEANT

By

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A Thesis submitted to the
Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Fall Semester, 2006

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For Ashleigh

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank my committee members for their support. Ned for getting me to really tell the truth and realize things about myself. Elizabeth for her undergraduate workshop that pushed me to go to graduate school. Virgil for reminding me to always be myself, no matter what “they” want. Thank you to Ashleigh for being supportive. Also to my parents, who remind me to always be strong.

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ABSTRACT

It seems as though I always hearken back to the same themes, in whatever I write. This mix of genres I have pieced together hinges off the idea of how there is what is, and how we perceive it to be. I feel that the non-fiction piece is how my life was in high school and it places emphasis on events that shaped my life. The fiction portion is perhaps, how I viewed things in high school, how I would have liked it to be. This collection also focuses on ideas of gender, friendship and what it means to look at the past to understand the future.

Part One

The Whole Truth

What Lincolns Meant

*Anyone can tell the truth, but only very few of us can make epigrams.
- W. Somerset Maugham*

I keep a cork board on the wall in my computer room, in what is now my third college dwelling: a rented house. In the bottom right hand corner is a folded rectangular sheet of college-ruled notebook paper that I can't seem to throw away. It's a pen-sketched picture of a Lincoln Mark V, flames coming from the tailpipe, with big letters "Weeeeeee!" scribbled below. Kyler, my best friend all throughout high school, drew this during third period History one day in our sophomore year. We met during an art class in the spring of our freshman year. Although at one time in my life I felt compelled to destroy every memory of Kyler, even after nine years of friendship, I just can't throw this piece of paper away. I'm still a little bit nostalgic of all the times he and I spent cruising Orange Avenue in Orlando, blasting Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass in his Lincoln.

Kyler and I were on the BeeLine coming out of greater Orlando for about thirty five minutes before it leveled out into some nowhere-ville cracked cement runway to the sticks. This was the land of small-time speedways, trailer parks called "Shady Green" and "Sunny Cove," and junkyards: fences of hubcaps displayed under rusty price signs. But here is where he found his meaning in life. As much meaning as a teenager can get.

There, in Bithlo, Florida, a tiny old frazzled-looking woman who smoked Virginia Slims was selling her 1979 custard yellow Lincoln Mark V. Kyler had been searching the classifieds ever since he got his driver's license a few months before. Lincolns had been a long-time fascination of his. There was something about the sheer size – over nineteen feet; the boaty-ness - - which lured him. His mother used to own an early eighties Mercedes that, as a child, he would imagine being the captain of, sailing the high asphalt seas; he recounted this childhood ambition to me constantly. In his mother's black and red Lumina, we pulled into the dirt driveway and wondered why the Lincoln was not in sight. I stayed in the car. "The boonies make me nervous." I told him. "She may have a shotgun."

"Oh gawd." Kyler chided and walked right up and rang her doorbell, waiting eagerly. The woman didn't look all that ornery but I was suspect as they spoke briefly and she led him around the back of the house, smoking one cigarette after another, into a mess of trees and overgrown shrubbery. I waited fifteen anxious minutes before they re-emerge. They exchanged some paperwork and he came back.

“She says she’ll sell for two thousand. Think I got it.” Kyler was beaming and stuffing her papers into his wallet. “I can come get it next Wednesday after school.”

During that week, Kyler and I made two trips to junkyards closer to our neck of the woods. When the old lady was showing him the interior, Kyler took note of the small things missing: a radio knob, a little plastic tray inlay for the back armrest, a metal Lincoln insignia for the dashboard. He always had an eye for detail. Later, in our senior year, he would sew for me a Victorian dress, five feet in diameter, complete with whale-bone corset. He enjoyed the luxuries that the Victorian era brought and with this dress and his matching coattails, we made a real showing at the prom. We scoured unkempt fields, poking through skeletons of cars, until each piece was procured. I hated the smell in the junkyards, old burned oil, and couldn’t wait to leave. Once back at his house, Kyler laid his finds out on a Victorian Tabourette table in his room to wait for their day in the sun.

The day finally came when the old lady was ready to give up the beast. The Lincoln had been her husband’s some time ago and ever since he passed away, she struggled with keeping it or selling it. On that particular day, I was busy after school with Environmental Club so Kyler had to ask Andrew for a ride. Andrew Pearl was a tubby kid, acne-prone with thick glasses. He wasn’t a nerd really, but an annoying brat with the most messed-up parents I have ever known. His father was a neurosurgeon who, when Andrew was born, had the privilege of making out his birth certificate. His initials were A.A.R.P.: Andrew Aardvark Rumbletiltskin Pearl. Or, American Association of Retired Persons. His father had a weird sense of humour.

His mother was rumoured to be having an affair with the pool boy and once disappeared for a few days after having stolen her husband’s prescription pad and forged his signature to get the goods at a pharmacy in a bordering state. Perhaps this was true or perhaps it was a fabrication of Andrew’s imagination. To me, he seemed so false and always like he was plotting against me. Andrew would oftentimes say things under his breath and when asked to repeat, act coy and say “Nothing,” He was constantly calling shotgun – to ride in the front seat when anyone drove - as if it were even an option since that was my seat, talking over me and vying for Kyler’s attention. Needless to say, I despised Andrew to my very core.

Kyler called my house as soon as he got back from Bithlo, excitement wavering in his tone.

“You have to see it! It’s so big, I can’t believe it.”

“Well come over.” I was excited too but not because I cared about Lincolns. Not in that way. Traveling in this car was to be a new phase in our friendship. It meant freedom in a different way. This Lincoln was the key to many a night listening to Blondie eight-tracks, sipping stolen liquor in our friend, Michelle’s, driveway, and the means to getting away from high school life.

Minutes later the big yellow boat rolled up into the cul-de-sac. It seemed to have an aura about it, something like the wonder of a boy’s dream and the pride of becoming a driving man. Kyler honked obnoxiously until I came out the front door to admire its size, its sheer pimp style glory.

“It’s beautiful,” Kyler mused. “I have to pick a name.”

“Well, is it male or female?”

“I guess male. We could name him Mark!”

“Or Connie, if it’s a girl. For Continental.”

“I’m thinking I like Mark.”

“Mark it is,” I concluded, opening the door and taking my throne as Shotgun Queen. Naturally, I would always ride in the front, alongside my best friend. However, Andrew had ulterior motives for usurping me. It was obvious from the first day we all rode together when Andrew kept interrupting me, getting to the passenger side door before me, nearly knocking me to the ground sometimes.

For the first week, I was barely home between school and midnight. We often drove downtown. A shortcut led us to O’Brien road, across the train tracks. We were convinced that if we went fast enough and opened the doors at just the right time, we would take flight. But we mostly took Edgewater all the way to Colonial, because no one drove there late at night, and we sped wildly, windows open, listening to Fleetwood Mac.

On the weekend, we drove the forty-five minutes to Daytona Beach and parked in a lot we found that had a great view of the moonlit ocean. This car had allowed us to venture outside the realm of our space, to places where we felt far from home and yet, safe, perhaps because he was a friend and one of my first high school friends with whom I felt I could trust. Kyler and I talked about art and film, theorized why people act as they do, and listened to some of the best music ever made. That was a time in my life when I thought these things contributed to who I

was, who I thought I was: better than the other kids in high school, more refined, cooler in my own secret sense, shared only with Kyler and a few others who understood the Lincoln mystique.

The next week, Kyler skipped class twice. His alarm never seemed to work anyway – he was using antique clocks wound so that they would chime the hour at the time he would actually have to be awake - and on those mornings I sat at the living room window waiting for Mark to pull up and whisk me away to school. Luckily, I could drive and had inherited my parents' Mazda 929, a reliable car complete with oscillating air vents. On those days, I also noticed that Andrew wasn't there. I sulked in the halls alone, bumping into acquaintances and praying for the three-fifteen bell. Free, I took a shortcut home and drove past Andrew's house, seeing exactly what I suspected, the yellow beast in the driveway.

At school the next day I questioned Kyler as to why he hadn't been there the day before.

“What? We were just watching movies. Andrew got the special edition Citizen Kane. Besides, his freaky lesbian sister was there with her girlfriend. What a show.”

Kyler made excuses but I was as good as a jealous girlfriend at that point, even though we were only friends. If it weren't totally obvious that Andrew was trying to steal him away, then maybe I wouldn't have cared so much. Of course, Kyler had a hand in this ostracizing too; it wasn't Andrew alone who didn't want me in the picture.

Two nights after they skipped school the first time, they had abandoned me again. They didn't call to watch movies or to have coffee, which I had yet to be left out of. I decided to go get a haircut. I needed to feel independent or get a sense of self, which a new haircut can often give. I especially needed to feel mature, compared to them. I felt that their need to eliminate me from the group was childish and unnecessary, even though I didn't completely understand it. I was frustrated and confused.

On my drive home, I imagined them in Andrew's living room, ignoring the overwhelming smell of dog pee carpet, and reciting “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” lines. My lines. OUR lines. Those that Kyler and I bantered back and forth to each other, as our own little inside joke. We pretended that he was George, the “bog of the history department” and I was Martha, always “braying.” It was funny because in a lot of ways, I think Kyler wanted us to be that old married couple, childless and always arguing yet in love. We WERE George and

Martha. I had gotten myself so worked up over this supposed situation that I hoped he didn't call when he got home. I hoped that Kyler missed school again, so I could forget being forgotten.

As soon as I came in the backdoor, the phone was ringing. My mother wiped a wet dinner-making hand and answered

“For you...”

“Hello?”

“It's over.” Kyler sobbed.

“What?” I took the portable phone out onto the patio, which was all yellow in the late dusk light.

“It's dead. Mark's dead. Andrew and I just barely got out.”

“What the hell – are you all right?”

“Dash fire. Electrical fire.” Kyler was pretty much crying. For all the time we'd spent together, I had never seen him this way and didn't know how to feel or react.

“So, Andrew's not hurt?” I asked, slightly hoping for the worst.

“No.”

“Do you need me to come get you?” I offered. I was trying to be a friend but I honestly didn't know how. We had never been through a trying situation before and I didn't know how to reach out to him. It felt too awkward.

“No, I'm going to bed.”

The night was weird because I kept debating whether to pick up and dial or grab the keys and go. I'd knock on his window like so many nights before, to avoid his alcoholic father. But instead of doing anything, I finished watching “My So-called Life” and went to sleep. I rationalized that there was nothing I could do for him and that he too was probably asleep. Ignoring the problem somehow made me feel better.

The next day, as I sat in the back of my first period classroom, Kyler walked in, breaking up the lecture as he put a charred History textbook on my desk. It had been in his trunk.

“Don't ask.” I said to twenty eight questioning eyes and one annoyed teacher.

Kyler was waiting in the parking lot after school in his mom's car.

“Sorry for this morning,” he said.

“It's OK. Sorry for the Andrew question.”

“It’s OK. He’s a bastard.”

There was a second when we looked opposite ways, seeking eyes of people we knew. No one. Back to each other.

“You wanna see it?”

“Sure.”

The carnage! It was sort of like an accident in that you had to look. The entire front end was charred and degraded to a shell of what had been a beautiful craft. The steering wheel column, once a thick sturdy chunk of plastic, had burned to the width of my forefinger. The moon roof had melted in, a mosaic of cracked glass, nearly brushing the tops of the wire headrests. There wasn’t any fabric left in the entire thing, just metal and springs and the residual smell of burning. Kyler speculated that there was some faulty wiring somewhere in the dashboard. While he and Andrew were driving around town, the eight track had started going in and out so he fiddled with the dials a lot. That’s when it sparked and suddenly burst into flames. Kyler brought a camera for insurance purposes and documented the demise of his first car. I wanted to apologize – because I felt so bad for him - but it made no difference; the dream was shattered. With the passing of Mark, Kyler felt empty, like he’d lost his best friend.

A month passed before Kyler could muster the will to find another Lincoln. He grieved. We drove my Mazda during that time but it wasn’t the same. Sure, we got it up to a hundred and ten on the interstate but we both knew that this car felt short of what all that the Lincoln was. Andrew became a hermit after the accident. Kyler said that Andrew refused to see him, didn’t return phone calls. Although I didn’t tell Kyler, this made me very happy.

Kyler’s new car, purchased from a shady sort of man in an empty parking lot at two a.m., was the same year as Mark but the Bill Blass edition: two-tone navy and white and a coupe. Very nautical. We named her Connie. Kyler’s first improvement was to lay polar white shag on the floors. Kyler thought this would make the car more stylish and swanky but just ended up being annoying when we got in with wet shoes. This particular model did not have oval windows, so Kyler cut out the shape in the back panel and lay mirrors that he got etched with the Lincoln insignia at a friend’s father’s shop. This car was to be his true pimp-mobile. Kyler conjured up the brilliant idea to make a documentary about hookers. He thought that they would be attracted

to the car's Seventies style glamour and that the hookers would then answer some questions. On the West side of town was Orange Blossom Trail, or OBT, where the prostitutes ran their business and Connie the Lincoln had many a stiletto and make-up compact thrown at its retreating taillights. With this new foray, the dream was alive again, in full-swing.

On the weekends, we'd go to Denny's first and get our fill of fried foods, sure to cause heart attacks later in life. We drank coffee until our stomachs swam and smoked clove after clove. Sometimes other friends came with us, because we boasted at school about the film and seeing hookers was not something the average high school kid did in his free time. Kyler and I almost thought we should charge a fee, for the number of people who ended up coming along on our excursions down to the other side of the tracks.

We would use this car in our amateur films as the get-away vehicle, throwing our friend, Garrett, in the trunk. Because you know, Lincolns can hold at least five bodies; we tested it. Garrett was the new Andrew, actually having been Andrew's friend early on in high school. Garret came from a fatherless home; his daddy sent money from a beach-front condo somewhere and his mother worked from their home. Garrett was a needy fellow, so needy for friends, in fact, that as soon as he'd made enough money from daddy and working for his mom, he surprised us with a car of his own: a 1980 Lincoln, sea-foam green, four door. Kyler was in shock, a little frightened and a little flattered. Garrett would try to coordinate his arrival time at school with ours, so he could park beside us and rub elbows with a fellow Lincoln owner. At first, Kyler resented Garrett's suck-up scheme but he soon wore down and they began hanging out, without me. Pushed to the side once again. Garrett got very possessive about his Lincoln and Kyler. Just like Kyler had done with Andrew, Garrett and Kyler conveniently forgot to call me sometimes or made up lies about what they were doing so they could go off and hang out somewhere with out me. What I really felt was sadness and betrayal. I thought that Kyler and I had a much closer relationship than he did with those guys. I based that on our phone conversations where we talked about all kinds of stuff. But maybe Garrett and Andrew fulfilled something that I could not. The final straw for me was the night that we went to Denny's to fulfill a Boston cream pie craving. I went along because Kyler was going; Garrett I tolerated. We decided that we'd pick the pie up and go back to Garret's house to feast. After buying the pie we went back to his car and Garrett, getting in before us, locked us out.

"Come on, Garrett." Kyler whined, yanking obnoxiously at the door handle.

“Stop messing with my car like that!” Garrett hated when we touched things in his car. It was the same with his old junker where knobs were falling off.

“Then let us in.”

“Not until you pay the fee.”

“What fee? Garrett, shut up and let us in. The pie is waiting.” I said.

Kyler laughed and chucked a quarter onto the passenger seat through the partially rolled-down window. “There’s your fee. Come on.”

Garrett laughed a sinister cackle, rolled up the window and wildly backed out of the lot, leaving us ride-less and pie-less, to walk four miles to my house.

Like the aloof teenagers that we were, we forgave Garrett and continued to go to his house at night and let him accompany us on the weekends. I still harbored anger though about the Denny’s night but if I wanted to be involved, I had to keep playing the game. Friday nights were Rocky Horror nights and boy were we a sight. Kyler would pull the Bill Blass right up to the ticket booth where the line formed and let the two of us out: Garrett wearing black slacks, white dress shirt and white alligator shoes, and me in my Goth-girl glory, floaty pants and all. Kyler parked and joined us in his 70’s leather pimp jacket and we entered the theater and danced the Time Warp again and again. But this was all a hoax, just a façade. We were putting on airs, so to speak, but this could not have been who we truly were. I didn’t feel as if Kyler, Garrett and I were an unbreakable band of friends, in sync with each other’s views on the world.

The list of incidents that the Lincoln was involved in goes on and on. Kyler had that car through graduation and the summer before I went off to college; a summer that found us giving up on the old pranks: lewd gestures to old men in Cadillacs and friends pretending to have sex in our backseat when we stopped at traffic lights. We didn’t go to the beach anymore either. Sometimes, I’d call and Kyler’s mom would say he was out driving. He liked to do that a lot: drive as far as he could until it was too late and he’d have to turn around soon, to make it to work or school. But sometimes I’d call Garrett just to see and he wouldn’t be home either. I knew he didn’t have any other friends so I figured they were together, doing something. There *had* been a rumor about Garrett and a tuba player, Ryan; something about Ryan coming on to Garrett at a party and Garrett consenting. But I never suspected Kyler of such sexual misadventures. Even if we suspected Garrett to be gay – and we often did – I told myself time and again that Kyler could

not possibly be as well. His hobbies – sewing, listening to jazz, and filmmaking – fit some stereotypes of homosexuality but to me, those were what made him unique and interesting. Even though I had no romantic feelings towards him, I still wanted him to be straight. I just did. I didn't have a lot of girl friends and I thought that if he was straight at least I'd appear normal. In that way, I guess I needed him. But let's face it: somewhere in the dark recesses of my soul, I knew he was probably not interested in women the way I wanted him to be. So maybe I knew that being around Kyler and his friends was a safe place. What did I get out of it? I looked normal – hanging out with guys – and he got a friend. Sometimes I still feel embittered by the entire ordeal; angry that I would never be his girl, never be that girl in high school with a steady boyfriend, first kisses, backseat groping, and other teenage landmarks. Now, the Lincoln is a landmark in my confusion, both about life and sexuality that I see as a symbol of my lack of understanding.

Connie met her demise early one morning as Kyler returned home, weary from working; he was an Internet support guy, midnight shift. An old lady side-swiped him and coaxed him right off the road. Kyler and I no longer lived in the same city by this point. I had gone to college and was following a path much different than his. I sought a new life in college, away from my parents and high school. He couldn't stand the thought of leaving Orlando – the city he loved – and applied to UCF but never followed through. I was twenty-one when he came to visit me in Tallahassee with his newest – and what would be his last – Lincoln. She was a 1980 Continental, champagne pink. He named her Maybelline, because she was the color of lipstick. Jonesing for some nightlife, he escorted my roommates and me to Brother's nightclub Tallahassee's premier gay club - in style. Getting out of such a stylish symbol of decadence was what had made me proud to partake in the Lincoln era. I liked feeling that Kyler and I were the only two who understood this idea of class and spectacle so that is why in high school I wanted that. When we used to park in the senior lot in high school, first in a long row of Accords, Civics, and Integras, we thought we were high class. Looking back now, the Lincoln perpetuated this delusion that we were better than the rest of those kids. Kyler and I felt above them, both in terms of social status and intelligence. It was stupid, I know, because I am positive that I was just as naive and silly and lost as the rest of them.

Not living in the same place put distance between us, both physically and emotionally; we spoke on the phone less and less and I made new friends and began to discover that the life I used to lead in high school was not who I truly was. Back then, I struggled to cling to whatever Kyler thought was cool – the Jazz music, the Lincolns, our home movies – because I didn't know what I wanted. When I got up to college and did some soul searching, I figured out that I wanted to be a writer and teach writing in high school. But each and every time I went home for the weekend, I felt more and more disinterested in reliving our high school days. Kyler noticed this too, complaining that I wasn't the "same fun Claire anymore". As I changed and he stayed the same, this shift helped to further break us apart. I became disgusted with the close-mindedness we allowed ourselves, that I had allowed myself; the way I followed Kyler's whims, ostracizing anyone who opposed us. The Lincoln facilitated our illusions but once it was gone, and Kyler too, I finally found out what was truly important to me: friends, practicality, a career I enjoy. None of this on the fringe, high brow stuff that felt and appeared all too false.

Kyler had to abandon most of his belongings (antiques and other novelties) along with Maybelline when he moved to New York City to pursue a career in Library Science. I think he finally began to realize that high school was in the past and that he'd eventually have to go with the flow of the world soon enough. He returned to Tallahassee once to collect a cylinder pillow he'd left with me, in a 1976 navy blue Nova and a very effeminate guy named Derek behind the wheel. I haven't seen him since.

The Lincoln saga of our friendship represented some of our best moments and yet, some of the worst. Time spent in that car is what I remember from high school: lying in the backseat on cool musty leather, listening to classic music and reveling in the brief moment that was blissful youth. I don't know if he'll ever tell me whether he was involved with Andrew or Garrett in any other way than friends. I am pretty sure now that he is gay and that he will never tell me. I don't know if we'll even ever see each other again, although every six months or so I get an e-mail from him, nostalgic as ever. I have put him behind me now. Not out of hatred or regret, but because what we shared then, at that weird self-absorbed time in our lives, is gone forever. I'm so far from the person I was in high school that the thought of listening to "Me and Mrs. Jones" on the staticky speakers of a classic Lincoln fills me with a sorrow that I still cannot begin to explain.

Part Two

Novella

Kyra, 1997

Prologue

Things are never as bad as they seem. When you're seventeen, everything is a big deal. I thought that everything mattered and took my life and myself way too seriously. When I look back now – ten years later - and think about my senior year at Lake Vision high school, I just have to laugh. What are kids thinking... ever? I think I was so oblivious to the important things – friends, family – and what they truly mean, that I got too wrapped up in the details. I wasn't really living. What are the "best years of our lives"? Is it high school? Did the phrase form around college years? I still can't tell you if I have lived the best years but there have been some pretty good ones so far and I'm sure I have many more to come.

Part I: Fall Semester

Three Weeks In

Sitting under a blue tent on a rickety wooden folding chair, I drummed my fingers on the piece of card stock which read the order of events, down to the Our Father and some songs which I did not know but that all the mourners sang as men lowered Barrett's grandmother's coffin into the ground and out of his life forever.

"Great way to start our senior year, huh?" I whispered into Barrett's ear. He wiped a small tear from the corner of his eye and tried to look somber. "I don't know what I am going to do without her." he paused. "She was the best."

I pulled at my scratchy pantyhose and tried to stop my brain from thinking about all the scary death stuff running through it. I couldn't stop picturing what his grandmother must look like in her coffin, sleep-like and cold. It brought out all my big fears: senior year, college and death. This was my first funeral and I didn't even know how they worked until then. Barrett, my best friend since second grade, loved his grandmother more than I love my grandparents; at least more than I show them. It made me feel sorry. It made me regret not spending more time with them.

"Do we have to go to your parent's house afterwards to eat all the food that the church people brought?"

“You can go home if you want. I have to be there though.” I was kind of thankful I didn’t have to eat the “congealed dessert”. People suddenly started in with the amen’s and bowed heads. Then they got up to mill about the sprightly bright green lawn of the cemetery and talk in hushed voices. Barrett put his hand on my shoulder. “I’m going to go home now and wait for everyone.” That was the last thing Barrett said to me that month. And it got worse every month after that. Day after day I tried to connect to him – and sometimes I didn’t. I tried to get back into his life but something kept him at arms length always.

Midnight Chaos

One week into my senior year at Lake Vision High School, I was going to bed after a long final day of working at Subway. It had been a summer stint and I finally had to quit once school began. And with all the college applications that I was putting off – application fees and essays about why so-and-so college was my first choice – I was beat. Not one minute after the lights had been turned off and my eyes adjusted to the dark did a sudden knock come at my sliding glass door. My three best friends, Kris, Hayden, and Barrett, were standing there, waving their arms wildly.

I let the blinds go and quickly pulled on some jeans and a shirt. Grabbing my shoes, I carefully and quietly opened the door. My parents' bedroom is on the other side of the house and I was sure they wouldn't hear the lock click. For a split second I worried about leaving my door unlocked. But then I really didn't care. We were young. We were unstoppable. We were invincible.

The four of us jumped my fence, ran like mad, and got out to the main road in my neighbourhood. Stumbling to put my shoes on, I ran to keep up. Once we got far enough down the street, someone spoke. "So now what? We've snuck out and we haven't anything to do." Kris whined, as he so often did.

"You're such a nerd, Kris. Who cares what we do? Isn't this enough?" Hayden said, pushing Kris.

"Yeah, why are we doing this?" I asked. "It's a school night you know."

"Not you too." Barrett moaned. "I don't know what we'll do. I just didn't feel like being at home. And anyway, tomorrow's Friday and it's not like we work on Fridays."

We all mumbled in agreement. Everyone had gotten to the point where school had started to seem very pointless. We had just become seniors. We were officially upper classmen. It was officially called Senioritis. Even though we could all drive, we kept doing things like this: sneaking out and walking everywhere in the middle of the night. It had started towards the end of junior year too and throughout our summer. The four of us usually just went to the park and skipped rocks on the lake. We'd talk about classes and people and play games. I liked the

alphabet picnic game the best; “I’m going to a picnic and I’m bringing…” Kris and Hayden would sometimes skate.

“Hey, let’s put soap suds in the fountain.” Hayden suggested.

“That is so gay, man.”

“Screw you. It’s something to do.” he retorted.

We walked to the edge of my neighborhood and took a shortcut through the gas station parking lot to the corner. I pressed the button on the crosswalk sign even though there wasn’t any traffic. Inside the Denny’s, a lone man sat, wearing a brown coat and a bowler hat. He looked so sad, drinking his coffee and smoking a cigarette.

“What do you want to do, Kyra?”

I wasn’t ready for them to ask me. I just figured I’d go along with whatever. I always did.

“Huh? Oh, um, I don’t know. Let’s do something devious.”

“Like what?” Hayden asked, a smile appearing upon his face.

“Let’s set fire to all the trash cans behind the 7-11.”

“Dude, that’s awesome, Kyra. You rock!” Barrett said

“Are you sure that’s uh, a good idea? I mean, that’s dangerous, illegal…” Kris stuttered.

“So? Let’s do it.”

I admit that I was nervous too. I’m not sure where I pulled that idea from but it seemed cool at the time. We ran across the street and behind the post office. In the alley behind the Italian sub shop, the hair salon, and the 7-11 there were three big BFI bins and about five small metal cans, surrounded by trash in the street. We all looked at each other, our faces giving away our apprehension.

Barrett pulled out his lighter - the one I had given him for his birthday - and lit a piece of rubbish. Then he strung together some pieces of newspaper so they reached out from each of the small cans.

“Ready to run like hell?” he asked.

“Should we run towards home or the other way?” asked Kris.

“Run towards the church.” I said. Barrett leaned in, set the cans ablaze and we ran like we never have before. The neighbourhood right by us has bike paths between the houses instead of alleys. So we were pretty safe as long as we were reasonably quiet. We ran for two blocks before each of us ran out of breath and slowed up.

“Let’s go up on that abandoned house and see if we can see the fire.” Hayden said.

There was a house for sale down the street from him that the people had already moved out of. So we boosted each other up onto the flat roof over the porch and strained our eyes to see. We could see the fire, all nicely contained in the trash cans. No police or fire trucks yet either. It was beautiful, the way the fire lit up the alley. And it was peaceful even though fire is so wild and chaotic. Up on the roof, it was quiet and breezy and I felt like I’d created something artistic down there. Like that light flickering on the walls of the buildings was the most beautiful thing ever. And it was ours.

“Woo hoo!” Kris quietly cheered.

“Yeah!” Hayden jumped a little and hugged me awkwardly, trying to keep his balance.

“Let’s go down to the football field at the school and celebrate.” Barrett said, pulling a flask from his jacket pocket.

“Ha ha, always thinking, aren’t you?” I asked, grabbing his hand and letting myself down from the roof. On the football field, we pushed together two of those things football players use to practice their tackles and laid between them, heads and feet propped up on either side. That way, no cops could see us. Barrett passed around the liquor - vodka he’d stolen from his mom - and we all gradually got drunk and silly.

“Hey Kyra, who do you like? At school?” Hayden asked. His legs were thrown over mine, tangled together. Kris had laid his head on my shoulder and started to fall asleep.

“I don’t know. No one I guess. No one’s worthy of me.” I joked, running my fingers through Kris’s dyed green hair.

“Michelle told me you were all about Joe Rollins,” he said, taking a swig and making the face of disgust.

“Joe? Please. He’s kind of cute but he’s not for me. And besides,” I said softly, “I like being alone.”

“Now, how do you know that? Barrett interjected. He’d been pretty quiet and separated since we’d started drinking.

“I just know.”

It was late but no one was thinking about time. I started to doze a little in the dreamy haze of the buzz. A car whizzed by and I came to, realizing I should get home or else I’d be in trouble.

Everyone was sleepy so we crossed the main road that cut through the neighborhoods, and took a side route home. We didn't want to go back by 7-11 just in case someone saw us and thought we were the ones who had caused the mischief. It was four fifteen when I got home. My parents appeared asleep and they weren't waiting for me in my room to pummel me or anything. Scot free once again.

Just when you thought...

My alarm still went off at 6:30 A.M. like it was supposed to. Although I told myself I didn't need to get up. Moaning in protest, I turned over to face the wall.

"You need to get up... now!" My father shouted, flinging open my door. He wasn't angry, just loud. I moaned and flopped around, denying it. But I had to turn in a short essay anyway so I unwillingly showered and went to school. I was more tired than I can ever remember being. Sleeping through first hour I was barely awake to walk to second. I got a Coke to try and give myself a caffeine kick but I was still dragging by lunch. I only had one class after lunch so I skipped and slept in my car. Hearing the bell ring in my state of unconsciousness I was caught off guard as Hayden flailed himself onto the hood of my Toyota. So I got out and beat him in the arm.

"I was sleeping, dammit."

"Yeah, so I noticed. What for?"

"I'm tired. I didn't sleep at all." I said. We both sat on the car to wait for the parking lot to clear. "Did you get caught last night?"

"Nope. You?"

"No. Did anyone else?" I asked.

"Don't think so. We're all pretty lucky. But my parents prolly wouldn't care anyway."

"I don't know what mine would do. I've never really gotten in trouble. I'm a good kid." I said with a smile.

"Right you are. If only they knew." Hayden joked. "What're we doing tonight?"

"I dunno. Guess we'll actually do something planned, something real."

"Yeah. Well, I have to go. Getting a ride with Kris."

"I see Barrett. I'll call you later," I said, getting back in my car. Hayden left and Barrett got in.

"Hi."

"Hi."

But that's all we said. I couldn't think of anything to say and, for some reason, it felt uncomfortable. Barrett and I have been best friends since about second grade. It's one of those Family channel friendships. You know, we live near each other and we tell each other everything. We were always so close. He'd been acting distant lately though and I guess it could have been

his grandma's condition. Ever since the stroke, he'd been off and on with me. One day he was laughing and smiling and the next, cold and quiet. This time, he wasn't telling me. We drove home in silence. I stopped in front of his house and let him out.

"I'll call you," he said.

My house is only five away from his. I pulled into the drive and noticed that both my parents were home. I figured it was because it was Friday. They just got off early.

When I went inside, throwing my keys on the table in the foyer, I saw my parents sitting in the living room. It was as if they were waiting for me. My dad eyed me strangely as I went towards my room to put my bag down.

"Kyra, can we talk?" Mom asked. I stopped and sat on the couch, looking at them as innocently as possible. They were hushed and I was really scared of what they wanted to talk about. But I started to have an idea.

"Were you out last night?" Dad questioned.

I didn't know whether it would be better to lie or be straight. So I said 'um'.

"Well we know you were out. You don't have to make excuses." Dad continued. "Just tell us where you were. We were worried."

"We know you know that you have a curfew and all, honey," Mom began. "So we aren't going to lecture you on that. We just worry because, well, because..."

My dad cut in then and said, "We know you hang out with those boys and we just worry when you're out, that's all." I started to get fidgety. I stared at the floral wallpaper. It was kind of a Chinese pattern and I imagined little geisha girls serving tea. I snapped out of my delusion and got back into the discussion.

"Those... boys," I said. "You mean, Barrett who I've known forever and Kris whose parents you play tennis with?" I asked, slowly and calmly.

"Well yes.... but, well, why don't you have any girl friends?" Mom asked.

Now, usually, my parents and I have a great relationship. It's based on mutual respect and trust. But at that moment, in that talk, I didn't feel like any of that mattered. They were implying things I didn't want to hear or explain to them.

"I do. They're just not close friends. We don't hang out."

"Kyra, I know how high school boys can be. Especially when they get together. I just feel uneasy about you going out with three boys," Dad said.

“I don’t know what to say.” I admitted this honestly. “I wish you could know my friends like I do so you wouldn’t think these things about them. Trust me, I know who’s ‘safe’ to hang out with and who’s not. You guys don’t have to worry.”

“We always worry,” Mom said, as she so often reminds me.

“Yeah well I don’t want you to.”

“That may be so and maybe we’ll try to give your friends a little more credit. But for now, you can’t go out this weekend. I can’t condone sneaking out.” Dad said. He was really putting his foot down this time. My dad never does the punishing. It’s usually mom and only for my brother. But twelve year olds are supposed to get in trouble. I was convinced that I wasn’t. I was really angry at them. They’d been pissing me off lately anyhow. Just getting on me about stupid things. Pushing me to do better, nagging at me not to forget my chores. I was just fed-up. And the whole Barrett thing was irking me more than ever.

“Fine,” I said. I got up and went in my room. I didn’t get upset in front of them. I just quietly shut my door and then threw a shoe at the wall.

House Arrest

I like my room. I have made it so that every aspect is comfy and homey enough to want to stay in there. But after five hours of puttering around in there on a Saturday night, I was ready to slash my wrists. I started to do constructive things. I rearranged all my posters. I moved the Star Wars ones to one wall and re-stuck the glow in the dark stars to go around them. My pictures of skaters and punk bands went above my closet doors. In between doing random things, I'd look down at the phone as if I had expected it to ring. But it wasn't going to happen. And it made me feel so uninvolved.

I had skate stickers on my mirrored closet doors but I decided to rip them all off and put them into an album in a sort of story telling collage with all my photos. I can't skate to save my life but I can photograph it like a pro. It became sort of a hobby of mine when Kris and I took Photo I and my teacher thought I had an eye for shots. And I was great at clear developing. But the more I looked at the photos of my friends, the angrier I became. I wasn't supposed to be grounded; I was well behaved. I was the one who could be trusted. I sat there and stewed, thinking about how unfair my parents were, how unfair the world was. I was so angry; it felt like the end of the world as I knew it, locked in there. It became a rage, a boiling anger rising within my body. And that's when it happened. I didn't expect it to. I certainly didn't think I had it in me. I reached back and let go, my fist clanging hard with the mirror. It cracked into a hundred little splinters, shattering the image of my face strained with tears. Blood trickled down my knuckles and I started to shiver and shake at the sight of my own fluid. My hand stung but I felt a tremendous burden lifted from me. But then I really started to cry, cupping my hand close to my chest and falling into a heap on the floor. I looked around at my room and hated everything about it.

Little Brothers

Stifling back some gulping and tears, I wrapped a bunch of Kleenex around my hand; after painfully picking out a few shards of glass. I was still trying to stop the tears when I heard someone knocking at my bedroom door. I knew it wasn't my mother because she does the mother knock. You know, two quick knocks and comes in. There's not even a second to think. I thought it might be my dad but when I said to come in, the door opened. My dad doesn't come in until I open the door for him. My brother peeked in my room meekly, asking,

“Are you ok? I heard something...”

“Yeah, I'm fine.” He just stood there until I said, “You can come in.”

Wesley opened the door and walked towards me in the corner by the bookshelf. He was in his pajamas; I guess I didn't realize how late it was. He wore black basketball shorts that were too big for him and no shirt. His blonde messy hair was even more tousled than usual.

“Did I wake you up?” I asked, Wesley sitting Indian style in front of me.

“Sorta. I wasn't really sleeping.”

“Can't?”

“Nah, been thinking.”

“Yeah? What about?”

Wesley took a glance down at my hand, furrowed his brow in worry, and then answered.

“Just stuff.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I could tell he did. But it seemed weird. Wes and I never really talk anymore. The five year difference between us makes communication virtually impossible. He reached out suddenly and turned my hand over, seeing the blood soaked tissue. Then he took my other hand and coaxed me to get up and go into the bathroom. I rinsed the dried blood off and bandaged the cuts. Wesley helped because I'd done it with my right hand so my left wasn't much use to me.

“Thank you,” I said between tears. This time I found myself crying because I was genuinely touched by my brother's kindness. I pulled him into me and hugged him.

“No problem,” he whispered. “Can we talk later? I'm kinda tired now.”

“Sure. Good night, Wesley.”

He smiled warmly. I ran my hand through his hair as he passed me and went into his room. I went back to mine and got changed. Inside a wooden box that used to case Jamaican beer, I lifted up Rolling Stone magazines and brought out my book. I have a journal that I keep but I also have my sacred book. In it I scrawl every thought I have, every image I think of. It's very dear to me and although I trust my family not to go reading it, I always hide it. It's funny though; I never hide my journal, even though I write personal things in there as well.

I flipped through it weakly with my left hand. I knew what I wanted to write but with my hand in the shape it was, I couldn't. And that frustrated me. So I flipped to the page I had set aside for that day – I date ahead so that I write something every day – and laid my bloody fist lightly upon the paper, making a large kind of fingerprint in blood. A testament to my stupidity and all the anger and... apprehension floating around inside me.

Recovering

That house-bound weekend lasted forever. So did the weeks that followed. Barrett's mother called to let me know about the death of his grandma and that he'd be missing school for a couple days. I got really depressed and started thinking about all kinds of things. I wasn't coping well with anything. After the funeral, when Barrett stopped calling, I started to feel like our friendship had deteriorated in one split second. Maybe it was the night on the football field when he got defensive about relationships or maybe it was just the family death. Either way, the very thought of him made me break down in tears, at home, at school, whenever.

Back on the last day of ninth grade...light feathered us from the moon and the fluorescent bulbs that lit the drive-through grocery pick up. Every night, Barrett and I sat on the curb while he took his fifteen minute break. He worked the night shift and I would go see him on my bicycle at 9:40. I would make it home in five minutes and my parents wouldn't fret because I would be home exactly at ten. Barrett and I would have officially known each other for seven years, because that is when we met; on the last day of second grade. I dropped my papier Mache elephant and he ran over it with his bike.

"Do you remember when I punched Derek Holden in fifth grade because I thought he liked you?" Barrett asked, inhaling his clove.

"Yeah. I was so embarrassed because then everyone thought you and I were 'going steady'. But anyway, Derek was such a nerd."

"Hah hah. Yeah. He really was."

We both sort of looked around at the empty parking lot, then hung our heads.

"Kyra, I'm not sure where the custom of giving someone you like something that is dear to you, but I feel compelled to do it." Barrett said shakily. He unclipped his Goodings name tag, which bore his nickname: Matty B (because his real name is Matthew Barrett), and placed it in the palm of his hand. He held it out to me. "It's not anything special to anyone but me. So I want to give it to you. Because that's what the rules of this ancient practice are." he said, chuckling and smiling awkwardly.

I took the tag and clipped it onto my shirt, on the pocket. And I knew then that Barrett and I were in it for the long haul. We would never stop being friends; not for any reason.

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After I got in trouble and my parents spread the word, Barrett and Kris got busted too. Only they both got two weeks punishment. I felt very sorry for them because it was my parents who had basically squealed on them. (And I was so mad about that.) But I guess I didn't do any real damage because at least they didn't find out about the fire. That remained sacred to our group.

I started hanging out with Hayden a lot while the two of them were banished from outside contact. Hayden is very much submersed in the skater culture. So I spent a lot of time watching him skate with his friends. It kind of bored me sometimes; at first anyway. I felt uncomfortable because I didn't know any of his friends. Then one night after they got run out by the cops from behind the mall, we all went to Denny's. The guys started to notice me, to talk to me like we were friends. I liked the atmosphere at their chosen restaurant too. There were always a lot of freaks at Denny's late at night. Not excluding the waiters. This one guy, Mike, looked like one of Madonna's dancers. Whenever he'd walk by we'd ask if he'd do a table dance for us. He would just grin and fix the collar on his flowered Denny's shirt. We went so much that we started to get the same waiter every time; Ryan.

"Hey guys. Coffee like always?"

"Please. And cream..." Ricky said, implying something sexual. Ricky was the one of Hayden's friends who was always like that. He was crude, completely ill mannered. But I liked him. He wasn't like my other friends. The other guys, Christian, Alex, and Bo, were all unique. Christian was the quiet poetic one. He liked emo music and was in love with his horn-rimmed glasses. Alex and Bo both loved punk and it showed. Alex had bright blue hair and a lip ring. Bo was not as outrageous but he did love his punk music. Something about them didn't seem true though. Not real. Ricky was the only one I felt I truly could connect with. The roughness was just a facade. I could see right through it.

"You!" he'd always say to get my attention. Then he'd laugh and say my name in a calmer tone. "Why don't you ever skate?"

"Ahh, I really can't. I think it's a proportion and balance thing."

"I bet you could... if you tried." He smiled; a toothy kind of grin; very boyish.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know.”

“I bet you could too.” Ryan interjected, bringing five coffees and a water for Alex, who is anti-caffeine.

“Yeah? What do you know?”

“I know you can skate. I bet you can do a lot of things.” Ryan smiled and sat down at our table. “I’m taking a break. Mind if I sit?”

We all nodded ‘no’ and chatted with Ryan.

Around midnight, we were all sick of coffee and the smell of smoke and we went our separate ways. “Ryan was so flirting with you.” Hayden commented, rolling down the window and sticking his arm out.

“He was not.” I insisted.

“Please. I’m not smart but I can see the obvious.” Hayden looked over at me like he was going to argue. But then he turned back to his arm resisting the wind as I sped up the hill to coast down it and fly over the intersection. The silence was a comfortable one as the cool air blew about the car and the street lights glared off the windows.

“Wouldn’t you like to date someone? Have someone who’s more than a friend?”

“I like alone,” I said as I turned into Hayden’s driveway.

“I know. But some of us don’t. See you tomorrow.” I watched Hayden walk to his door and made sure he was inside safely.

I found some kind of weird pleasure in driving alone. I’ve always liked driving. I like looking at peoples’ houses at night; light from a window, the blue glow of a TV from some insomniac. It makes me feel safe, secure, and free. I pulled into the drive and pressed the button on the garage door opener. A sharp pain pulsed through my hand and I remembered my wound, which was still healing. All the happiness I felt when driving was smashed away when I remembered how angry I’d been. I thought I was starting to feel better but I guess I hadn’t fully gotten back to my old self. But who was my old self? I couldn’t even remember.

Grandparents

My mother's parents are really the coolest old people I know. Having worked retail and encountering a lot of different people, I can tell you that most old people are bitter and angry towards teenagers. But not my grandparents. They are actually quite up with the times and fairly open minded. My Grammy likes to watch soap operas – her “stories” as she says – and she shouts expletives when a character does something she doesn't like. She knits but can only make dish cloths. And her favorite drink is gin, which I would oftentimes mistake for water, getting a disgusting surprise in the end! My grandpa is more reserved than her; he likes to read National Geographic and work in the garage fixing old radios and building bicycles. He's always interested in what I'm learning in school and wants to show me as much as he can. I feel like I learn a lot about past generations when I talk to him.

When Barrett's grandmother died, I called them on the phone. I told my Grammy that I appreciated her laugh and the way she says words that end in R like they end in H, because she was born in “Rho-d' island”. And I told my grandpa that I wanted to find out where I can hear a radio station like the one in his garage that always plays those old timey songs, the ones with all the trumpets.

This was September thirtieth and I will never forget that day for as long as I live. Even now that my grandparents are very old and we don't see each other with the frequency that we used to; that phone conversation echoes in my memories.

Music Theory

I saw this movie about a music store and one of the workers said to another, “Music is the glue of the world.” Sometimes, I think it’s all I have in life. Then and now. My musical tastes have changed a lot over the years but then, at seventeen, I mostly listened to Emo, Punk, and old rock like Fleetwood Mac. It was the lyrics I liked the best. Some Emo bands write the most beautiful lyrics. It makes me feel like there are other people out there that feel like me.

Every day that went by that Barrett didn’t call I listened to The Get Up Kids and thought about him. I just didn’t understand why he would just stop talking to me. How could he do this to me? Nothing was more cathartic than driving and listening to my music. It was late one night and I was driving around after dropping Hayden off. I’d been going onto my street from the forty-second avenue way instead of forty-fourth so I could avoid Barrett’s house completely. I had the Get up Kids in the CD player and I just started crying. I couldn’t help it. Emotion got the best of me. I hate when people don’t talk to me. I hate when Barrett doesn’t talk to me. But the again, I wasn’t making any effort either, was I?

The Player

His name was Rice, Rice Sutherin. The blond girl with the slutty blue eye shadow called him Ri, like rye bread, and it bothered me. It annoyed me so much that I would shut my eyes so tight I thought I'd pop a vein and spew blood. Which, on some days, sounded like an amusing thing to do if I could aim it at her ham and cheese sandwich in the cafeteria. But she and Rice and a bunch of other guys from the water polo team sat one table up and over from us and that's a pretty far distance to shoot any bodily fluid.

"You're doing it again." Hayden pointed out, eating three potato chips at a time.

"What? Doing what?"

"Grinding your teeth and shutting your eyes. Doesn't that give you a headache?"

"It's her. I hate her with all my being. Even moreso because he *likes* her. She's such a moron... listen to her talk; like, ohmigod." I rolled me eyes in disgust.

"She's good at trigonometry. She tutors the football players."

"No she doesn't. She uses it as an excuse to sleep with the football players; I guarantee."

"She might be really nice if you'd give her a chance." Hayden said optimistically.

"I don't want to get to know *her*..." I paused because Hayden didn't yet know my recent Rice obsession that had been forming since I first saw him three weeks prior. He flashed me a look though that said he was figuring it out. Hayden just nodded and winked, tossed his trash in the bin and waved goodbye. He was going to the parking lot to skate until lunch was over.

My taking to Rice was like any other teenage girl obsession: where I didn't so much want him to know I liked him or even know I existed. I just wanted to bask in the feeling of euphoria caused by figuring out his schedule as to see him in between classes and looking up previous yearbook pictures. I wanted the thrill and pleasure of liking him from a distance, where it was safe and I didn't have to deal with anything related to dating... or whether he liked me back.

My one and only true girl friend, Kami, caught up to me in the hall before third period. I was walking to English, which was in the two-hundreds section, a set of two concentric circles of rooms in the popular pod fashion, with wood paneling in the halls: brown on the inside circle, white on the outer where the classrooms were bigger. It was dizzying to walk around looking for a room and from time to time, still confused me. "Kyra, guess who just got dumped?"

“I dunno. You know I’m not into all that gossip stuff.”

“No, you’ll like it, trust me. Kim Brunell,” Kami said so matter-of-factly and yet, I had no idea who she was talking about and my face showed it. “Slut girl... blue eyed raccoon?”

“Ohhh! Nice...” I said, my mind reeling from the complications there. “I wonder why Rice ditched her.”

“Cheryl Quentin told me it was because she was cheating on him with like, the whole football team. But who knows when it’s from Cheryl.” Kami laughed to herself. She and I had been friends since our freshmen year but she still traveled in a different circle than I did.

“I heard Kim was crying and throwing up in the bathroom. What a riot. So, you gonna go for it with Rice?”

“Ha! Yeah right.” Inside I was trembling. Was it my time? Was I ready to actually flirt with a guy and get serious... like every other girl? Rice was thin but muscular; water polo requires you to work a different set of muscles and I knew what kind of training the team went through. He wore his dark brown hair very short but modest, like his clothing. Rice usually had on a solid color t-shirt, no pocket and not oversized like all the other boys. He wore jeans that fit; not tight like the new chic style and not baggy like the gangstas. His shoes were black Chucks but he wasn’t a skater. In fact, if it weren’t for the fact that he played a sport, he was almost uncategorizable. His friends were a motley crew: some from the team, some nerds that bordered on normal, and some Asian racer guys. Maybe that’s what drew me to him: his lack of a label, the way he exuded a feeling of acceptance and nonchalance. He wasn’t trying to impress the guys or the girls... he just played point man for the Lake Vision Buffalos.

I thought maybe I could try to approach him in some other way than to his face. So I made up an elaborate plan: I would write him a poem and put it in his locker. I could sign my initials so he’d know it was me and then maybe he’d notice me. I thought it was a good idea, a safe idea. And besides, he seemed to me like the kind of guy who’d like that sort of thing.

After I’d slipped the poem into the slats on Rice’s locker, between third and fourth period – when I knew he didn’t have to go there – I was nervous to say the least. Kami helped me by keeping any of his friends away while I was planting it. I wanted him to figure it out on his own, enjoy the note for what it was and be genuinely touched. Right after school, I waited around the corner from his locker, carefully hidden behind a column. First his combination – 36 – 14 – 28 – and he popped open the locker. I could see the interest on his face at the small blue envelope with

Rice penciled on it. He tore it open at the side and read, leaning back against the panel of lockers as kids raced by on their way home. It took him a while to read; it was only a haiku! I signed it – cheesily – with “your secret admirer, K.B.” Then I saw it: a genuine smile. A knowing smile. He put the note into his backpack, closed his locker and walked away.

Recycling, Baseballs

“You should join something,” My dad said through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“I am, Dad. I’m on the soccer team,” Wesley replied.

“No, I mean Kyra. You used to swim. How come you didn’t join the high school team?”

“I guess I just didn’t want to.” I shoved a large spoonful of green beans into my mouth, hoping he’d see I couldn’t talk.

“You know, clubs and sports look really good to colleges.”

“I know,” I said. “But I don’t really have time, you know? I’m always busy with other stuff.” Which wasn’t true. I had a lot of free time.

“Yeah but don’t you want to get into college? There’s not much time left,” my dad asked, getting a little defensive.

“James,” my mother chastised. “Kyra, it’s your decision.”

“Kyra, you know what we should do?” my friend Kami said, suddenly turning around in English.

“No, what?”

“We should join the Environmental club.”

“Why?” I asked, putting down my Gatsby and swiping a quick glance at the teacher.

“Cuz that’s where all the people like us go. It just seems... different from the other clubs.”

“Ok, let’s do it then. When’s the next meeting?”

“Today I think. In Mr. Cutler’s room.”

So I stayed after school and ventured into the undiscovered land of extracurricular activities. It was a little late in the game to join stuff but I didn’t care. I was actually quite surprised to see a lot of people I knew in there. In fact, this girl I knew from Creative Writing turned out to be the president. So I paid my dues and joined a club. Every Wednesday we collected the recycling bins from all over the school and took them to the big bin in the back. It wasn’t easy work though. No one in the school seemed to be able to read because there was more trash than aluminum cans in there. We had to sift through and extract all the hot dog buns and napkins and tests with bad grades.

On the weekends we'd all go down to the state park and canoe up the river. But we'd clean up trash along the way. I felt like I was doing a good thing and hey, I'd joined a club.

In computer class, my teacher was trying to set up an intramural softball team. I knew I didn't want to do that. But when she asked for volunteers, my hand involuntarily shot up. I surprised even myself. And then I was in. I was on the softball team. Practice was every day but it wasn't really practice since we never played anyone. We played each other. Autumn caught up with us. Leaves turned red, yellow, orange and the air was cool. It was just for fun. I played catcher and shortstop. I wasn't that great of a hitter but I wasn't the worst on the team. So I felt happy. This was another part of who I was. It added to the entity that was me. Kyra. Girl. Just sort of here. That's how I felt, even though I was always doing something. I guess the word is 'jaded'.

Halloween

Time passes and you can't hold on to it. Just when you think you've got it all right -things are going perfect - it disappears and it's a new season. The leaves begin to change – orange, yellow, brown – and then other things change. Your brother gets a girlfriend and you never had that talk. Your best friend still doesn't call and you stopped thinking about it because you couldn't figure out whether you cared or not. You saw him once with some guy you didn't know at the mall. You tried not to cry. A new person calls more and you talk for hours. You're changing and you don't know why.

“Are we going to Aaron Kellogg's party tomorrow night?” Kris asked as soon as I answered the phone.

“Yeah I guess. Are you dressing up?”

“I dunno. I still have that cow costume from two years ago. Guess I could resurrect that.”

“Heh heh. I don't know what I will be. But I'll see you tomorrow night.”

Halloween fell on a Saturday night so of course, we would want to stay out late. In the two months that I had drifted apart from the group, I'd managed to extend my curfew. It was rather easy. Bo and Alex both started to bring girls with them. As soon as my parents saw them, coming home later seemed OK. My curfew had been twelve. Then I started making it one, then two. My mother, in passing, stated that she would like to keep it at two. She flipped a pancake onto my plate at breakfast one morning and told me, “Two in the morning is such a wonderful time to go to bed, don't you think?”

Point made.

When I wasn't out with Hayden and friends, Kris and I were together. But he and I hardly ever went out. We usually stayed in and played board games like LIFE and Hotels, or listened to old records. We clicked in some unexplainable way. Things just flowed when we hung out. And we never argued. Which almost irked me in a way because how can something be perfect all the time?

Nine o'clock and the doorbell rang.

“Oh, they must be more Trick or Treaters!” My mother said, rushing to the door with a bowl of bite-size Butterfingers.

“Oh, hello... Kris?”

“Moo. Yes,” he answered, pulling back the head with the ears so my mother could see his hair.

“Oh you’re right!” my mother chuckled. “Kyra’s in the bathroom, I think.”

I had decided to be a cloud. Maybe it wasn’t a very creative-looking costume but I liked it because clouds are so elusive. They can just appear and disappear. I was fluffing my cotton when I noticed Kris in the mirror.

“Hey, uh, cloud. You ready?”

“Yeah I guess. Hey, you think Barrett will be there?”

“We’ll see, won’t we?” Kris grimaced.

“Yeah, it’s just that things have been really weird lately.”

“Yeah I know. I’m sorry,” he said. That didn’t make things better. We said good-bye to my mother, who was opening a new bag of mini Milky Ways and filling pillow cases for children.

Aaron and his sister, Erica, Kellogg were some of the most popular kids at school. They were both on the sports teams: baseball, softball (respectively) water polo and the swim team. The cool thing about them though was that they didn’t let their popularity, or their amazing physical achievements, go to their heads. They were nice to everyone and not faking it. They only lived a couple streets down, in a nicer gated community. Kris and I walked onto their street and were amazed by the sheer number of cars, parked all up and down the road. If we had driven we would have had to have walked an entire block before we reached their house. The Kelloggs had decorated their two story Florida style home in the best Halloween decorations ever. They had an entire cemetery set up in the front yard, complete with rubber hands reaching out from freshly dug tombs and cobwebs between headstones. The porch was blanketed in fake spider webbing and jack-o-lanterns with every imaginable set of eerily carved teeth and eyes sat on hay bales, porch railings, and randomly throughout the yard.

“Hey guys,” Hayden said, coming out the front door with Ricky and Bo as we approached, smoothing back his mussed brown curls. And then out came Barrett, standing behind him, red plastic cup in hand and dressed as a prisoner.

Mumbled greetings, stolen stares. It was an overall uncomfortable situation.

“I haven’t seen much of you lately, Barrett.” Kris dropped. “Where ya been?”

“You know. Around.”

“Yeah...”

We all kind of looked around. Kids in cooler costumes than ours walked by on the sidewalk with their parents, ogling us high school people; like we were animals in a zoo.

“Sorry I didn’t call you back last night,” Ricky finally said to me, coming over and wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “It was kinda late anyway.”

“It’s ok.” I spoke nervously. I could feel Barrett turn to stare at me, then shake his head. I felt sick to my stomach. I wanted to run home and hide forever. The sight of Barrett’s face, stricken with disappointment and sadness was overbearing. That’s when I knew what was really going on. He must have... how could I have been so blind?

“Well, we’re going to go inside, say hi to people and all.” I said, quickly. I’m sure I looked really stupid when I grabbed Kris by the arm and steamrolled past Barrett, making a beeline for anywhere other than there on the porch, where Barrett’s glare of disbelief bore right through my skull. I spent the rest of the Halloween party in a corner, eating Chips Ahoy cookies and watching for Barrett. Kris left long before me; I waited until most of the people had gone, the bobbing for apples trough was empty and one or more pumpkins were smashed to pieces before I dared to show my face and leave. Halloween truly sucked that year.

Church

I told Kami all about my horrible Halloween but she swore it wasn't worse than hers. She had gone to some other party where the police showed up because the older brother of the person throwing the party had been growing marijuana plants in the basement. All the underage drinkers got in trouble and it was right about the time the police came that the person's parents got home. What a disaster. Kami said she slipped out a side door and managed to climb over a fence before any police questioned her, which was fortunate because she apparently had been drinking a lot of beer. So in some ways, my brush with Barrett wasn't so awful. But she was positive I was right about the Barrett thing; that the reason he had been avoiding me was because he liked me and couldn't say it. Which is silly, I know. But it sure was confusing.

Everything was confusing. Ricky, Kris, Barrett, and Rice. School in general. The future. My brain was working overtime and I wished I could just turn it off, let it coast a while and find a simple pleasure in something. Even driving wasn't working anymore. I tried music but it was only a temporary reprieve. I wasn't sleeping well, my brain at max speed all night long. I took long, hot baths, reading book after book – for classes – and yet, lingering in the recesses of my mind was the oppressive feeling that I was losing everyone.

3:56 PM, Thursday afternoon. I'd left school and gone home but it was too quiet all alone. I sought refuge... I drove and drove. My car steered its way onto a road I knew very well, from years of Sundays and holidays here. Saint James Catholic Church reminded me of a Pizza Hut; it was brown and angular with a steep ninety degree triangle shaped roof in the front above massive oak doors. I parked under a shade tree and walked two aisles over, slipping in at a side entrance. I had never been in church when a mass wasn't or about to be in session. I was amazed at how quiet it could be, because even when the congregation is deep in prayer, somewhere a man clears his throat, a woman sneezes, a baby whines. The holy water bowls at the entrance were empty so I did the motion anyway, dry. Surprisingly, I was not the only person there. An elderly woman wearing a crocheted shawl was kneeled in front of the dedication candles, saying the rosary. As to not disturb her, I took a seat in the very back, far left corner. I was a little nervous and a little guilty. When I turned fifteen, I decided to take a break from regular Sunday church attendance. I made this choice based on two factors, both of which came from an immature adolescent mind.

One was that it angered me when the Pastor asked for money. I thought God gave you everything you needed; why did they need so much money from us? So the men's club could have golfing tournaments? Or so that angry old ladies could teach Sunday School to frightened, uninterested children? It just made me so mad that I couldn't handle seeing priests. The other reason was that I had begun to find one of the priests attractive. Which is wrong and sinful and totally uncalled for. Especially when my mind began to wander while in mass to what the priest looked like under those holy robes. He was very young and blond and in his homilies he always spoke of things he was doing when not in prayer or teaching or saying mass. And that made him more human, more apt to err, which is what we all want people of high moral standing to do... sometimes. So I explained to my mom that I had to find myself and what spiritual path was right for me. But I really just stopped going and began sleeping in on Sunday mornings.

A gold dish on the altar burned a small cone of incense. Whenever I smelled that I wondered if it was frankincense or myrrh, whatever those were. I always liked when, on certain holidays, the priest would walk up and down the aisles swinging the censer filled with incense, coating the patrons in an ancient and sacred scent. In fact, I really liked all the traditions of the Catholic mass. I prided myself on knowing the prayers and meaning it when I said them, in chorus with everyone else. I liked the motions: the sign of the cross and three small crosses – head, lips, heart - before the gospel reading. I know it's weird but I even liked how the kneelers hurt my knees when we had to get down on them. It was like suffering for the cause. I liked Communion too, the unleavened bread and how it stuck to the roof of my mouth. You aren't supposed to eat before receiving the Body of Christ but when I was a kid, my Grammy used to slip me a Velamint or two so I would stop being fidgety. When church was over and the priest had blessed us, sending us all out into the world, I always felt so new. So why then had I grown out of church?

As I sat in the red fabric covered pew, watching the old woman move her boney fingers from bead to bead, something inside me understood why I stopped coming. Something inside me said to try having a relationship with God, my God, without the crutch of an organized religion. Even though all the little details of mass made me happy, I felt happier knowing that God could talk to me even if I wasn't inside His house. I could be on the beach or in my bed or on the toilet and still have faith. With a renewed sense of self, I stepped out into the blinding brightness of late afternoon and went home.

Learning to Live

Kami sat on the other twin bed in my room, painting her toenails “Sheer Valor”. She was unusually quiet. I liken her to Six, from the Nineties TV show “Blossom”. She’s the talkative one, the girl whose constant dribble ends up getting her in trouble... and on peoples’ nerves. But for some reason, she concentrated on her nails and kept her lips shut tight.

“Ok, what is it you’re not telling me?” I finally questioned, putting down my magazine.

“Mmm... nothing.” But her tone told so much more.

“What? Come on, I can take it.” I had a feeling I knew what she knew. I’d been hounding her since the day I put the poem in Rice’s locker. I knew that she would find out anything before I did. I was worried ever since, thinking he didn’t want to say anything or couldn’t figure out who it was, or just flat out didn’t care. Which, in a small way, I hoped.

“Well...” she took in a long breath. “Your initials just happen to be the same as, well, you know who so they got back together I’m so sorry still friends?” Kami spewed out all in one breath/sentence.

My shoulders slumped and my heart sunk. I knew something was wrong...my plans weren’t concrete, not well thought out. The small shred of dream I had left me then. Did I think I ever had a shot? I don’t know. Too naive or not gutsy enough to pursue him. I was hurt, sure, but we all must learn to live with disappointment. That night, I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling in the darkness. As my eyes played tricks on me, it looked like the ceiling was slumping in, falling towards my face. I thought about Rice and Barrett. Maybe I wasn’t meant to be with Rice because Barrett was my soul mate. I wondered if soul mates existed, pondered about destiny and fate. Sometimes things happen for a reason, they say. But when was it going to happen for me?

Turkey Day

“How much longer?” my brother whined. He pawed at the window, faintly pointing at the fields of corn and cotton. That’s all there is on the way to South Carolina; any way you go.

“Not that much.” my mother answered.

The trip is six hours, door to door. It’s not that bad when I can sleep. I always made up stories in my head; stuff I’d be writing if I didn’t get car sick. I can’t read or write without getting completely ill. Sometimes my mom and dad switched places and he’d read the paper while my mother nervously manned the wheel.

Thanksgiving holiday consists of two grandparents, three aunts, three uncles, nine cousins, and massive amounts of rich Southern food. It always has. Ever since before I was born my father’s side of the family has gathered at this time and done whatever it is people do on this holiday. They eat and watch the Macy’s parade. They share hunting stories and boil peanuts in a big cast iron pot on the back porch. The kids run to the playground and collect fallen pecans in their sweatshirt pockets. The women peel potatoes and talk about their husbands’ jobs and their kids’ grades.

Thanksgiving sounds like football. Announcers and excitement, the cacophony of crowds, it is the soundtrack of the season in not only my home but all over the country. Maybe that’s why I like it so much: I know that families all over are doing the same thing, only in their own different quirky ways. They all have past holiday stories; I know we have ours. Like the year my uncle Bob decided he would volunteer to be the one who would go up in the crawl space to check out some faulty wiring in the speaker system. But my uncle Bob is about three hundred pounds and we knew it was a bad idea from the start. The moment he opened the door to the attic in my grandparent’s garage pantry, we all knew. But no one else wanted to brave the heat and claustrophobia. Long story short, uncle Bob ended up stepping in the wrong place, sending his stubby foot and meaty calf right through the ceiling, knocking sheetrock into the creamed corn my Mema worked so tirelessly upon. But most years weren’t that full of action.

I always liked to sit out under the grape trellis and watch. There’s something about people going about with tradition that always made me happy. I forget about how crappy I think my life is because I know in an hour or so, I’ll be eating chicken and dumplings, giblet gravy and

cornbread. And nothing - not college applications or school or arguments with my parents, or even friends - will matter.

Throwing Kisses to the Wind

When I got back from Thanksgiving break, Kris called immediately, as if he'd been waiting by the phone until four p.m. So after I'd unpacked he came over with a stack of old records he'd just gotten tucked under his arm.

"I think 'Landslide' is my favorite." Kris said, shifting in the bean bag chair. His clothes seemed to be strewn all over my room. His shoes by the door, socks by the other bed, jacket on the desk, and his parachute pants on the post of my bed. The weather had turned cool and you had to start layering. It never got cold enough for it to snow really bad; not enough for snow days. We get occasional got about three or four inches. Just enough to coat everything in white purity.

"Sarah' is mine. It's so... trance-like. You almost forget you're listening to it."

"Yeah, I like the words to that one."

"I do but they make me sad."

"You're always sad anymore, Kyra." Kris scoffed. I noticed that he kept staring out the window and playing with his earring.

"Are you nervous or anxious or something?" I asked.

"Uh, no. Why?"

"You just seem to be."

Getting up and coming over to my bed, Kris sat behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his head on my back. "No. I'm great."

"Kris? This isn't like you..." I began. Kris and I were physical all the time but this was a little too intimate. "I... don't..."

"Kyra, just let me hold you." he said. With slight hesitation and little thought (as there always is in such situations) I turned to gather my friend in my arms. He felt warm pressed so close to my body and I needed that closeness at that moment.

I thought about Barrett and how I wish it had been him in my arms; a thought which almost scared me to think; did I really feel that? Then I thought about Ricky. We talked all the time, hung out with the group, got close. He asked me out but I had to decline. He was so persistent though. I wasn't sure I wanted a relationship. I always just said that I liked alone. And now, I found my good close friend holding my hands, touching my face. Kris looked up at me with beautiful hazel eyes that expressed a question of uncertainty. Our faces were so close and I

could hear him breathing unsteadily. Then he pressed his lips to mine, softly and slowly at first, hardly any movement; just a connection. Then he deepened the kiss and I kissed back. I hadn't ever kissed anyone outside my family and certainly not like this. All the things I should have been thinking about doing it right, were all jumbled in my head. I just didn't know what was happening or if I wanted this. I loved Kris... as a friend. It felt right and wrong and nothing all at the same time.

I pulled away momentarily, our foreheads touching, and whispered, "Kris, please, do you think we should..."

"Shh," he pressed a finger to my lips, caressing them. "Just... it's fine..."

An uncomfortable void in my stomach grew and I couldn't help but push him away. "Kris, this doesn't feel right. I think you should go." I could feel my eyes welling up but I bit my lip to hold back. Kris was crying. Not sniffing and sobbing, just tearing and blinking to help stop it. He turned away from me, didn't look again until after he'd gathered his things and opened the door. He looked back in longing and disappointment - in us both I guess - and left. I sat up and looked at the window, watching him slowly walk away from me and out of sight.

Minutes later, Mom rapped at the door with her fingernails and asked,

"Honey, what's wrong with Kris?"

I held up a hand and said,

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You know, if you're depressed or having problems, we can always go the psychiatrist. I told you I'd take you."

"Mom!" I chastised. "No. Just go away."

"But Kyra - "

"No!" I yelled, getting up and slamming the door. God, I really hate when parents try to help. I didn't want help. I wanted to be depressed and I just wanted to die alone.

Words

Writing. It's all I did after the Rice thing, and the whole Kris situation compounded it. The last month of school before Christmas break was terrible. All I wanted to do was be invisible. In the halls, I did my best to avoid Hayden and Ricky. In class, I hid my sketch book behind the book we were really reading. I wrote everything; poetry, random words. I just wanted to tell a story, my story. Stuff about being alone and forgotten and people and how I never feel like all those other people look. Rice and how I still hadn't been able to talk to him, even though our lockers are only five feet apart. I was scribbling some stuff about how beautiful Kris had seemed when we were just friends when my English teacher, Mr. Armstrong, pulled the book off my desk.

"Uh..." I spurted, getting nervous.

"I've noticed you've been engrossed in this thing instead of my assignments."

"Well, no, I've done the reading," I said.

"Do you mind if I read this?" he asked, surprising me. I thought I was in trouble.

"Uh, I guess not. I mean, it's sort of personal - "

"All writing is, Kyra. If you really wouldn't mind, I would love to see your work. Your essays are always so good, so introspective, that I bet this would be too."

So I let him read it. By the end of class, he was done. I fidgeted the whole time. I felt like he'd taken advantage of me. After class let out, he asked me if I would like to submit some of my writing to the school literary magazine. I felt relief in some way.

"I don't know if I can, Mr. Armstrong. I mean, most of that is about people here at school and I don't know..."

"Kyra, this is such wonderful art that it can't be ignored. Please do this. For me."

I guess I couldn't resist. In a way, I wanted people to be able to read what I had written. It was what I wanted to do in college anyway; write. I wanted to get published in as many magazines as possible. Then someday I could be an editor.

The next week, Mr. Armstrong called my house. The phone rang while I was clearing the table and I tackled my brother to get it first. Who knew? It may have even been Barrett.

"Hello? Mr. Armstrong, hi. No, I'm not busy. A short story? Oh, a scene. About what? Uh, I guess so. By Wednesday? Yes, I suppose. Ok, bye."

That was the conversation. I guess I didn't have much choice. He wanted to publish a poem I wrote about Kris and he wanted a scene for the lit. Magazine. But about what? He wasn't specific. Just people, reactions, feelings. So I hung up the phone and left the kitchen. Wesley was left whining about doing the dishes. But I was bent on this assignment.

I grabbed my book and opened the glass door. I'd left the ladder up because I'd recently discovered that I write my best when up on the roof. Night time is the nicest time to sit there too. The moon filtered through tree branches and rustling leaves. It gave just enough light to see the empty pages of my book. After two hours, I had a completed scene; edited and re-edited to be good enough for me. And I was proud.

Snowflakes and Wrapping Paper

The first bit of real substantial snow came on the second day of Christmas Break. I woke up that morning and pressed my fingers to the window, leaving five dark circles. The grass was pristine white and snow had collected in neat little piles on the ends of tree branches. Everything was quiet too. A little too quiet. That eerie quiet. It was about nine and I just started to smell bacon. So I felt better knowing everyone was up. In the kitchen, my mother was cooking and Wes was waxing the bottom of his Arctic Circle saucer. I gave him an odd look - I wondered why he was doing such a thing at the table - and he said, "It'll go faster. Heh heh."

"Bacon." My mother stated, poking it around in the sizzling pan.

"Yes. Swine," I said back, just as matter-of-factly. My mother grimaced and remembered how I try to avoid meat. I'm mostly vegetarian; except for chicken. I would die without chicken. My dad came stomping into the house, shaking snow off his boots. "It's cold out there." he said. "But so beautiful."

My brother and I both looked at each other. He could be a real nerd sometimes, my dad. But I never really held it against him. Some kids would hate their parents to be like that. I kind of like it. Being nerdy and appreciating things like snowy days just gave him character, that's all.

"You guys going to do some sledding on the hill?" Dad asked, sitting at the table.

"I am!" Wes said, proudly displaying his sled.

"I have to go shopping," I told him. "And anyway, it's practically a hike up to the hill." There's a vacant lot that's got this awesome sledding hill. All the kids in the neighbourhood have kind of adopted it as their place so no one's built a house on it.

"But it's well worth it," Wes said. Mom served up breakfast - I had eggs and toast alone - and we all went our separate ways. I ended up driving Wes to the hill on my way to the mall. He basically begged me too and I felt bad for him. He looked so bulky in his whole get-up. I could just picture him tripping his way up the street.

The mall was packed, as it always is a week before Christmas. The worst is last-minute shopping. The sixteenth was last-minute enough for me. I meandered through department store fragrance counters and kiosks in the mall selling cheese and sausage baskets. You know, the ones you send to family members who you don't really care to get anything for but you feel you ought. It's like those letters you get from people you used to talk to. The ones where they re-cap their

entire year (like you care about their dog's haircut or the kid's tooth falling out in an apple) and send a picture of the family. We don't write those letters. We figure that if we know you, you know what happened. If we don't talk to you, you probably don't need to know it anyway.

I didn't know what to get anyone. Wes was easy though; he got a CD. For my dad, I found a car lock de-icer. He's always into those quirky gadgets. My mom was tough so I just waited on her. But then I started to think whether or not I should get anything for the guys. I hadn't talked to Kris since 'that day'. I stopped calling Hayden so he was on the outs. And you know what was up with Barrett. The last person I talked to was Ricky. So I picked up some generic gifts. They all got a Slinky, crayons, and a card. But I picked out individual cards for them each.

The mall always offers gift-wrapping but I never do it. Why would I when I can go home and do it for free? I was walking by the table and something caught my eye. In amongst the rows of bland boring wrapping paper, I spotted the most beautiful gold paper I'd ever seen. It sparkled in this magical way that called to me. I set my Slinkys down on the table and asked for the gold paper. It cost me almost my entire Christmas budget but it was worth it.

By the twenty-third I thought I might have heard from at least Hayden. But nothing. I wondered what kind of friends I really had, for them to not call, even at the holidays. But I was still a friend who cared so, on Christmas Eve I stopped by each of their houses and left the gifts on the front porch. I didn't want to have to give it in person. That's lousy of me, I know. But I couldn't bring myself to ring doorbells. And besides, I didn't want to interrupt their family gatherings. At Kris's house, the lights were all on and I was afraid they'd see me. So I was all sly and smooth as I placed the boxes on the welcome mat. Just as I reached my car at the street, the door opened and I heard Kris call my name. Ugh, I thought, my body freezing in mid-motion. I couldn't talk to him. It would be difficult, uncomfortable. I slowly turned, seeing Kris's darkened figure in front of the glow of the house lights.

"Hi, Kris. I, uh, was just dropping off your Christmas presents."

He was silent, didn't move. Then finally,

"Merry Christmas, Kyra."

I was relieved to here him say something pleasant. After all, he probably should have been mad at me. "Same to you," I said.

"It's good to see you. I kept meaning to call..."

"Yeah, me too."

“Well, I have to go, Kris. See you later.” I said, getting inside my car quickly and trying not to panic. I didn’t know what else to say to him. But then I smiled, because I knew that things were alright. I went home and sat on the couch, drinking hot chocolate with the little marshmallows and just looking at the Christmas tree. It’s so pretty when you squint your eyes just enough to blur the lights. I thought about a lot of things, a lot of people. But I was happy nevertheless. I heard a rustle and rubbed my eyes to see my mother walking down the hall in her heavy blue bathrobe.

“Cocoa?” she asked, and I handed her the mug.

“I love Christmas trees,” I mused

“Our tree is nice this year. Wes picked out a good one.”

“Definitely.” As the cocoa filled my belly, my eyes began to close. I leaned my head on my mom’s shoulder, feeling the warmth of her fuzzy bathrobe. And my mom and I sat there just admiring the tree until I was too sleepy and we both went to bed.

Part II: Springing Forward

End of Intermission

The snow was becoming old. It was nice while I was on break and could enjoy it. But going back to school in the sludge annoyed me. It made me depressed and melancholy. The first day back, I had almost forgotten that I was ignoring my friends. I only remembered when I walked through the halls and saw Ricky, Hayden and Alex standing by the Coke machine. I hid behind a big kid and slunk down the hall out of sight. Relief. But then, I felt really alone. And Kami was nowhere in sight. I sat under a tree at lunch, making myself invisible. Crunch crunch behind me. Slick army boots with crisp new laces stepped up and I strained my eyes in the glare of the sun on the snow to make out a face. A hand reached down and pulled me up then proceeded to shake it firmly.

“Todd. You were sitting alone. So now you’re not.” he said, with a silly grin on his face. Todd wore red and green plaid pants with a green Dropkick Murphys shirt and a brown coat with white fluffy trim on the collar. All in all, he didn’t really match. At least his black skull cap matched the boots. I was baffled as to why he was saying this or even cared enough to. So I meekly said, “ok.” and sat back down.

Todd sat down by me and pulled a Twix from his coat pocket.

“Meh?” he mumbled, offering me the other. I eyed him then asked,

“Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t know,” he answered, sounding almost confused. “I don’t like people to look lonely.” That was good enough for me. So I had someone to sit with at lunch. That day and the rest of the week. I looked for him in the halls between classes but I never saw him. I told Kami what he looked like but even she, walking in opposite realms of school, never caught sight of him. I didn’t even know much about him. We mostly talked about music and places. He’s traveled a lot since his dad was in the Navy. Todd told me about the beautiful mountains he’d seen in Switzerland and ‘Gay Square’ in Amsterdam. But I didn’t know where he lived or anything else for that matter.

I had new-found confidence, having made a new friend and rekindled my inner desire to be social and strong. On Saturday afternoon, while my mother tended to some plants in the yard and my father and Wes threw around the football, I gathered the nerve to telephone Kris. I had

not spoken to him since that night, right before Christmas. “Uh hey.” I said, shifting on my bed. And then, there went nothing. “I just, well, I want to tell you that the thing at Thanksgiving was... good. I mean, it was a good kiss and boy, is this hard but it’s all ok and I don’t want you to think I hate you... or anything.” I rambled this out so fast I wondered if he’d gotten it all.

“Well yeah,” Kris said, relief in his voice. “I know that... it’s ok.”

I wanted to tell him that I was sorry too. It was partly my fault. I let it happen. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. Words failed me then and I allowed a long silence.

“It’s cool, really. Still friends?” he asked.

“Of course. Always.”

And with that, he hung up, slowly so the click was barely audible. I knew he was smiling and his hand was shaking because he was so happy. It doesn’t take much for Kris. The relationship between Kris and I had been patched. But my life was all shook up. In some ways, I didn’t want things to be back the way they were. The prospect of knowing new people seemed more tangible than that of getting back with Hayden, Kris, and above all, Barrett. I was terribly confused. Feelings of inadequacy overtook me. I didn’t know how to get my best friends back. And I didn’t know if they wanted to take me back.

Brave New World

Todd and I sat at lunch together every day. I met his two best friends. I think his only friends actually. Ben was a junior and hung out with Todd because he wrote Ben's English essays. In return, Ben did Todd's math homework. I introduced them to Kami.

Molly and I got along instantly and I am not sure why. We just hit it off. Perhaps it was our first meeting. Todd and I drove to her house, where we found her in the front yard, watching the lawn guys. She looked up from her lounge chair in the grass and greeted us. Then she mused, "There's something so sexy about men in jeans doing manual labor, don't you think?" Todd grimaced but I thought she was funny. It sounded like something Kami would think.

* * * * *

Three weeks. We talked every night. All night. About everything.

... "Tell me something about you," Todd said with a hint of cute curiosity in his voice.

"What about me? I've told you things..." I smiled and turned the light off so even if my mom was stalking outside my room, she'd think I'd gone to sleep.

"Tell me something no one knows."

"Oh riiight! I can't do that. I barely know you."

"Yeah, but once you tell me something, I'll know you. So then you know me because we'll have an understanding."

"You're logic is off."

Todd chuckled then got really quiet. After a moment I asked,

"You really want to know something?"

"Yes..."

"When I was eight, my mother had a baby." I stopped for a second but Todd didn't say anything. "A girl. I was kind of happy because I had only known what it was like to have a brother. She was born and came home. It was really cool to have a little baby around. I don't know. But when she was seven months... well one night, I heard my screaming in the nursery."

Composure. Light turned back on.

"She had died. The doctors didn't even know what it was. She just... did."

"I'm so sorry."

* * * * *

Todd, Ben, Molly, Kami and I started going places together. Sometimes we'd watch movies and sometimes we'd say we were going to watch movies but would end up driving around. It was different than hanging out with the guys; we all connected in different ways but when we were together, everything was just fun.

"Ooh ooh!" Ben shouted, diving from the backseat and mashing the scan button for the radio to stop. "It's Fleetwood Mac." he explained. Of course we all knew who it was. Secretly it was hard for me not to think of Kris though, who had first introduced me to the band.

"You can go your own waaaayy..." we all sang, off key and obnoxiously. Those were some of the best times.

Sometimes on the way home from the coffee shop or the arcade, I'd think about Barrett, Hayden, and Kris. Everything had changed. Had I changed too? Or was I still the same person, just evolved? And my old friends just couldn't evolve with me. I usually just shook those thoughts from my head, felt happy that I had found new friends, and turned back to the passing streetlights, the life whizzing past.

Loving you
Isn't the right thing to do
How can I ever change things
That I feel

If I could
Maybe I'd give you my world
How can I
When you won't take it from me

You can go your own way
Go your own way
You can call it
Another lonely day
You can go your own way
Go your own way

* * * * *

... “So, tell me something about you,” I said after one of those phone pauses that denotes a change of subject.

“Nah, I don’t think we should talk about me,” Todd said uncomfortably.

“Oh that’s right. I already know everything there is to know about you. You’re just an army brat.” I joked. But when Todd got quiet, it didn’t seem so laughable.

“Things are never as they seem, are they Kyra?”

“What do you mean?” The tone had gotten very serious and I didn’t like it.

“I mean, you feel like you know someone. But how much can anyone really know?”

“Todd... what are you saying?”

“Did you know that my mom died? Yeah... five years ago. And they’ve been the worst years of my life. Really messed me up.” Todd was being very defensive in the way he spoke to me. I was almost too afraid to say anything.

“Well, I know an apology won’t make the hurt go away - “

“Nothing will,” he snapped. “Because my dad makes sure I keep feeling it; every day. He lets me know just how shitty it is...”

Flesh and Blood

I awoke disoriented in the dark, my ears picking up to the faint ring, from another room. No one was answering and it did not desist. I threw off the covers and searched out the phone. As I stumbled in the dim light of the living room, it occurred to me why no one else had answered the call; my parents and Wes had gone to visit my aunt. I had totally forgotten.

“Hello?” I questioned, still groggy.

“Kyra,” an exasperated voice breathed heavily. “Can you come...?”

“Todd?” No answer. “Todd, are you alright?”

“Just get here,” he told me, hanging up.

Panic. At first, I didn't know what to do with myself. The way he sounded just threw me all off. I was silent yet millions of thoughts raced through my head. Quickly, I got dressed and grabbed my keys. The drive to his house seemed like a thousand years of distress. I pulled into the driveway. Todd's car was there but his father's was not. I knocked at the back door, cautiously. When he didn't answer, I again began to panic. I tried the knob and the door flung open. I stepped into the darkness before me. I could not begin to describe how I felt at the next moment. In the corner of the kitchen, in a crumpled pile on the floor, was Todd. Battered and bloody, wheezing and holding his shirt tight within a fist.

“Todd!” I ran to his side. Afraid to touch him, I asked, “What happened?”

“My... my father,” he said. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a broken vase and knew, knew what had gone on.

“Don't try to move. Do you want me to get a cloth?”

Todd could only nod a reply so I ran a washcloth under cool water and applied it to the gash on his head. He also had bruises on his arms, small cuts and scrapes on his neck and chest.

“I'm so sorry,” he whispered as I cleaned his wounds. He pulled back sharply from the stinging pain.

“Don't be.”

“You don't understand.... how it is.”

“No, I do,” I told him. He suddenly grasped my hand the held it to his chest. He pressed it flat against the cool flesh and I felt his heart unsteadily beat within him.

“I need to you to feel this. To know what it’s like... to be me.” I wanted to cry. A small part of me wanted to run away. A larger part of me wanted to hold him so tight that neither of us could breathe. But I shifted my body to gather Todd loosely within my arms and held his head close into my neck.

“I’m here...”

For the longest time, in silence, we sat like that. I remember the smell of the kitchen; like fresh flowers and blood. And Todd’s sweat. A floodlight from the neighbour’s house shone through the curtained window and spread light along the countertops and table, covered in a pastel tablecloth. Everything seemed a remnant of his mother. There were harvest gold sugar and flour canisters by the toaster. A flowered apron hung on the oven handle. It was as if she was still there, after five years.

Todd stirred beneath me.

“I want to go to my bed.”

I helped him walk to the back of the house where I carefully sat him on the edge of his bed. I had to help him take his shoes and pants off because he was too injured to move his arms. I finally got him under the covers and safe.

“What if your father comes back?” I asked. I was truly worried for him. And at this time, I was willing to stay if I had to.

“He won’t bother me again. Go back to sleep.”

“He won’t?”

“I fought back,” Todd said weakly, yet grinning.

I smiled back at him, pushing a fallen spike of hair out of his face.

“So I’m going to go ok? But I am going to call you in the morning.”

“I felt like you were the only one I could turn to.”

“I know,” was all I could say. Why do we say that mostly when we don’t know at all?

Standing and turning the light off, I said,

“Goodnight, Todd.”

Confirmation

I had applied to three universities: Tulane in New Orleans, Florida State in Tallahassee, and the University of North Carolina. I didn't have a plan or even a preference. In my family it was just assumed that you would go to a University. College seemed a million years away but in reality, was only a few short months.

Also, it had been two weeks since the Todd incident with his father. We didn't really talk about it. He came to school with a bandage on his head and everyone left well enough alone. He caught up with me on my way to the parking lot after school.

"I never... thanked you. You know, for the other night," Todd said unsteadily.

"Oh it's no problem really. I didn't mind." And that was the truth. I kept thinking about how I probably should have stayed. Because I could have... and because he needed that.

"Well I owe you one," he said, knowing he sounded dorky. We had just gotten to my car and Todd - unexpectedly - wrapped his arms around me in a big hug. And for the first time in months, I felt loved.

"Kyra, you got mail," my mother announced, dropping it all into a pile on the dining room table. Wes scrambled from the floor where he'd been playing video games and tripped over me to get there first.

"Did I get something?" he asked eagerly.

"Expecting something?"

"No," he said defensively.

"Ok, then move," I ordered. I sifted through bills and missing children flyers to find two envelopes; one from Tulane, one from Florida State University. I have to admit, I was a little scared. Ok, I was a lot scared. I may be an eternal optimist for everyone else, but I always think the worst for myself. I opened the FSU one first. 'Dear Miss Blackburn we are pleased to announce that you have been accepted to our university.' My mouth dropped to the floor as the paper fell from my hands. I honestly could not believe it.

"Well?" my mom asked eagerly. I held up a finger in protest. I wanted to see the other one first. Slice of the envelope opener, rip the letter out. Same thing. I was accepted to two schools. This

was beyond what I'd ever hoped for. This was like winning something for the first time in my life. But then the conflict hit me... hard.

"Which is it going to be?" My asked.

"I don't know. It says I have a seventy-five percent scholarship to both. What do you think I should do?"

"It is your choice." My mother wasn't making me feel any better at this point.

"Well, what did you do when you found out what school you got into?" I asked her.

My mother sat at the table and began, "Well, I also got into two schools. My parents didn't want me to go to either of them. They wanted me to go to Duke like the rest of my family."

"That's not fair."

"Yes, it's not like them, is it? Well, I was accepted to UCLA and Sarah Lawrence."

"Isn't that a girls' school?"

"Yes."

"Gag." said Wes from the living room couch.

"Hey, it was an education."

"Well what made you decide to go to UCLA?"

"The war."

"Really? Why?"

"It was something I wanted to fight against. And you know how everyone was out there, protesting for what they believed in."

"That's so cool," I said. I really didn't know that much about my mom's college years. We never talked about it. In fact, we used to talk a lot, when I was younger. But not that much since I've been in high school. I wanted to though. Because when my mom and I weren't arguing, everything could be fine.

"The night that I made my decision, I played Jefferson Airplane's "Volunteers." It probably sounds cheesy to you but I was inspired I guess. We were a generation of motivated kids." My mother smiled and for a second, I think I understood where she was coming from. Looking back now, it's a special moment when you can connect with your parents and their generation; to know what it was like and know that it hasn't changed all that much.

"Well, I'll let you know. I have to think about it."

"Alright. Just remember what's important. College is a pretty big step up, you know."

That night, I rummaged through my mom's old records. All these albums - Cream, Rolling Stones, Peter, Paul, and Mary - probably meant so much to my mother. Songs that made her want to do something important, made her want to date my father, made her cry. I pulled out "The Worst of Jefferson Airplane" and found that song my mother told me about. The static from the needle scratched on the speakers in my room. I lay back on my bed, staring at the ceiling, and just listened. And in that couple of minutes, I decided what I was going to do; I made up my mind.

Jeep

I remember... but does he? I remember the phone call. It was the fifth time we'd gone anywhere alone; without Ben and Molly. Only this time, he asked like it was a date. I was a bit floored at first but as it sunk in, it seemed perfectly comfortable and timely. Rice who? Todd drove a Jeep because it was given to him. Not because he chose to. But I liked riding in it because of the thrill of having no doors or a roof. So he picked me up at nine. He met my mother for the third time, shook her hand, and briefly chatted about chocolate.

I remember the drive to the coffee shop. It was late-March and the snow was burning off. The air was cool and some trees had the beginning of new buds. I had an iced latte and Todd had some mochacino thing with gobs of whipped cream on top. Then we went to a party in some guy's basement. Todd told me it was a guy from school but I had never seen him before. Said guy answered the door and we were introduced. Jim. He was a bit intimidating and I was wary of the entire situation. Jim's basement was full of unfamiliar faces. Bright colored lights appeared dim through all the smoke. Todd and I found a corner and he told me to stay until he found a friend. While I waited, nervously, for him to get back, some girl approached me. Sandra. She handed me a double shot glass with layers of colored liquor. She said it would "do me good". I thought otherwise and knew I didn't take well to a lot of strong alcohol. But I knocked it back anyway. Tasted a lot like apple pie. And I liked it. And I asked for another. Todd hadn't come back in what seemed like ten or fifteen minutes. Sandra and I talked about something... I think her boyfriend. She seemed to divulge a lot of personal information to a stranger. But after my fourth shot, anything she said went in one ear and out the other. I kept nodding my head and agreeing. "Oh yeah, what a bastard. I am so sorry. That's too bad." But the words swam around in my head as my eyes slowly began to close.

I still want those twenty or so minutes of my life back. I don't remember what happened. Sandra told me she had to go find "the evil whore who stole my man" and then I passed out. Right there in Jim's basement on a lime green couch that reeked of mold. I came to consciousness when Todd was holding me up, helping me walk back to the car. He buckled me into the Jeep and I kept hearing him whispering sincere apologies. The only thought in my mind, as my eyes fluttered open to a world in spinning motion, was how much I wanted Todd to hold me. I grabbed his hand as he went to walk around to the driver's side. He squeezed mine in his,

and then pulled back. In the patchy darkness between streetlights, I tried to think of something to say.

The car came to a halt and the engine died. I had no concept of time or place. I only knew I was home because the sycamore tree on the swale loomed over my lethargic body. Todd eased me from the car and walked me to the porch. I remember clinging to him like he was my life source. Like if he let me go, I would be gone. At that moment, I would no longer exist. I placed light kisses on his neck, smelled his cologne and hugged his body. I question now if he remembers how I kept whispering his name. How I pressed my fingers to his lips, wondering what it would be like to kiss them. How I was falling in love. Then he took the keys from my pocket and quietly unlocked the door. He asked me if I was alright to go in by myself. By this time, I felt alright and able. I remember taking one last glance into his eyes. My mind raced and I wondered if he was going to take this opportunity, right now as I was so vulnerable. But he laid a light kiss upon my forehead and bid me good night. I wonder if he remembers...

Sea of stars

In early May, the fair came to Corinth. The Reithoffer Carnival sets up on the baseball field at the nearby Episcopal Church. The church sets up their games – like the clown dunk, ping pong fish bowl game, and the too small basketball hoops that no one can ever hit. I have always been intrigued by carnivals – the lights, neon and spinning all around like so many stars come down from their stations. Eating carnival food is one of my guilty pleasures too. I'll typically eat an Italian sausage with peppers and onions, a corndog, cotton candy and maybe, if there's room, a caramel apple too. But there's so much more I can never manage to ingest: the funnel cakes, lemonade, shish kabobs, corn on the cob, kettle corn, burgers, chicken, cheese fries - oh just speaking of such foods brings on a bout of indigestion. The smells of such fare alone send me reeling with delight. It's the most wonderful thing about May. Not springtime or the fact that in May my mother gets the pool ready for summer and my dad brings out his wide-brimmed sun hat to mow the lawn. Not the birds in the trees or the newly blooming flowers. Getting excited about it was the first time I truly felt happy since the beginning of the Senior Year. The fair tops all

I commissioned Todd to take me to the fair because I knew that, secretly, he liked the rides and the games almost as much as I. We got there around five so we could eat first and let it settle before getting on rides like the Gravitron and the Lightning Bolt, which spins you upside down. The evening looked cloudy, thunderous kind of clouds that forebode a downpour, so we were wary. First we played some games, knowing full well they were a hoax, impossible even for the carnies themselves. But a challenge is always amusing. We ran from barker to barker, spending money frivolously on games we couldn't win, but knew it was childish fun anyway.

.....

Running through the midway like two kids cranked up on candy, the rain began to pour down, soaking us right through. Todd reached back and grabbed my hand, yanking me underneath a dining tent. I fell into him, wet and laughing. As I tried to catch my breath, he leaned down and caught my mouth, lips pressing into mine. His mouth was warm and soft, just like I had daydreamed it would be. At that moment, it all felt right. The people all around us, huddling to stay dry, didn't even matter as Todd and I held our embrace. I smiled when we parted, dropped my hand to the back of his neck and leaned into his chest, listening to his heart.

"Look, it's letting up," he said. A slight bit of the almost set sun peeked through, glowing a deep maroon edged by orange. "Let's go then." And we stepped out into the drizzle.

“House of mirrors?” Todd questioned, eyebrow raised. I laughed and raced him to the entrance. After handing the carnies our tickets, we ran inside to begin the getting lost part of the mirrors. I was impressed; most carnival mirror houses are filled with cheap scratched glass that you can almost see through, defeating the purpose of losing yourself within. This one was better; cleaner. It lent well to accentuating that fear – although subtle – of being really lost, knowing all the while that you will find your way out eventually. I ran to and fro, gauging the distance between me and Todd and other people by the sounds of their feet on the steel plated floor. I turned corners, seeing only myself, backwards and forwards, always another turn where I was the only one on my left, right and all around. Finally I bumped into someone and leaned into the warmth, grabbing a hand, “Aha! I found you, Todd – “. I turned to see a familiar face, although distant then after so many months apart. And there, hiding behind the mirrors, was Barrett and a boy, about our age, holding hands, face to face. Was that it? All along I thought Barrett was avoiding me because he liked me but really, he couldn’t tell me the truth. It all came crashing down and my heart sank right through the floor. Out of fear or insecurity, I almost shoved my hand into my pocket, grasped my fingers around his Goodings nametag, and forced it back into his hand. But I had to hold onto it, no matter what.

Barrett and the boy had guilty looks on their faces, waved quickly, and ran away. As quickly as Barrett had appeared, he disappeared behind a mirror and was replaced by Todd.

“Been looking everywhere for you. I went out thinking you’d beat me then came back in. Where were you?” Todd sounded genuinely worried.

“Here. I was here. Just lost, that’s all.”

“OK... well, you wanna get some cotton candy and head out? It’s getting late now.”

“Sure.” And I took Todd’s hand, let him lead me to the exit, to the world outside the deception and misdirection of the house of mirrors, out into the warm night, filled with so many stars.

The end is near

There were four weeks of school left. I had been avoiding Todd at best, because I didn't want to start something, something so close to when I would have to leave. And then, Barrett. What was I going to do? My best friend of all these years couldn't tell me the truth about himself? I felt betrayed, lonely, scared. I was also struggling with Trigonometry so I had asked this Arthur kid in my class to tutor me. He was your basic dumb jock but he knew his Trig. We were sitting in the library, forging through some unbearably difficult problems when I just couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm having a breakdown!" I said, throwing my pencil at the book.

Arthur looked up at me and cocked his head.

"It's only math," he said consolingly.

"No, I mean... I mean why am I telling you this? You don't know me outside flippin' trig homework," I said, tripping over words because I was flustered. I'd had it with everything. The whole Todd thing and school and everything.

"You can tell me," he offered.

"Alright, Arthur. This is my story. This friend of mine, let's call him T, has recently felt like more than a friend. And since that time, I have not talked to him. Ok? Then this other friend of mine, who I have known since I was a kid - let's call him B - hasn't *really* talked to me since October. But now I know why..." I said.

Arthur nodded as I put the pieces of my life together right there for him in the school library.

"And I don't know what to do about my other two friends, H and K... and K, because I am a terrible person who can't keep friends and can't make decisions about people."

Arthur nodded as I put the pieces of my life together right there for him in the school library.

"And I don't know what to do about my other two friends, H and K... and K, because I am a terrible person who can't keep friends and can't make decisions about people."

"It doesn't sound that bad," he said. Arthur sounded so innocent and he made life seem so easy. "Just tell 'T' how you feel. Call 'B' and tell him you can't stand not talking to him. Just be honest."

"You really think that's going to do it? Just going to solve my problems - snap - like that?"

Arthur looked confused. "Yeah, I do."

As I sat there, looking at his simple gaze, I figured he was right. Why couldn't I just do that?

I was staring in the mirror as I went through the mundane routine of washing my face and brushing my teeth before bed. Two weeks of school left. I hadn't called anyone yet. I was going about life as if I were the only one on this world. I had pulled back into myself, away from the world. And I was making myself crazy; thinking about all of them, college, my family. I kept thinking there must be something else out there. Something that felt more important. But then I realized that those were the important things. It was everything else that didn't matter.

"I'm going to Tulane," I announced, walking into the living room where my whole family sat watching Jeopardy. I decided to finally break the news to them.

"Well that's great," my mom said.

"Where's that?" Wes asked.

"New Orleans," Dad answered. "We're real proud of you."

"Yeah, well I'm going for summer term," I told them, knowing the reaction I'd get.

"You're going to go so soon? I thought you'd stay the summer." I knew my mom would have a problem. She wasn't ready for me to go. On the other hand, I was all too ready to leave all of this. "Yeah well, I just think it's best. I can get ahead on some of my basic classes. And they have a school paper that I can join. The sooner I become a journalist, the sooner I can move up to editor."

With a sigh my mother said, "Well I guess you're going to have to do what you have to do right? I'm glad you're going. Really."

"You mean it?"

"Yes," she said, getting up and hugging me.

"Thanks, Mom.

* * * * *

"I'm leaving, Kyra," Todd's voice wavered over the sound of the Jeep's engine; we approached my house late after a movie. The abruptness of this statement jerked me from my sleepiness.

"Where are you going?"

"Dad's been restationed. He says I can't go on my own until I'm eighteen. Not 'til August." He grimaced and turned the radio off.

“Where are you going?” I asked again, still stunned. I had really begun to like Todd, for a friend, for someone to count on, my rock.

“Utah.”

“Oh the Mormons will love you,” I joked, but Todd didn’t laugh. He just put a hand on my thigh and squeezed lightly.

“I will miss you – more than anything.”

Trying not to cry, I reached out and rubbed his arm, “Yeah, I know.”

That night, I cried myself to sleep.

Graduation

Personally, I thought that maybe I could skip out on walking at Graduation. My mom didn't walk at her college graduation and heck, my dad didn't even stick around long enough to graduate. But they didn't give me much choice and on May sixteenth, I walked across the temporary stage in the civic center, shook my principal's hand, and grabbed my phony diploma. Everyone was there, sitting in the crowd of four hundred something seniors. I spotted Bo and Alex, who gave nods. There was Hayden, hair disheveled like always under his cap. Kris smiled at me genuinely; he had let his hair grow out and stay its natural color. Kami was right behind me, whispering things like, "I'm so happy and I love you." Ricky didn't show; that was just like him. And Barrett, he was there, two rows up and one seat over from me. During the long boring ceremony of speeches and names, he kept looking back discreetly, as if I wasn't supposed to know he was looking.

After the ceremony my family and I went back to the house for a big meal to celebrate my achievement. They had invited friends and friends of the family so it was a rather large gathering, with buffet style food and my mother's decorations. But I didn't feel like I had accomplished all that much. The only people who didn't graduate were the ones who had dropped out to join the work force or because they had gotten pregnant. Honestly, I was ready to move on, to move out, and to find out about new things in college. It was actually exciting to know that there was something out there... something different. It made my heart sing.

I walked around and said hi to the people I really care about: my grandparents from both sides, my Aunt Lucille, cousins Adam and Jeremy, and great Uncle Ansley.

"To Kyra," my dad began, holding up his champagne flute and quieting the crowd. "A daughter who has never failed to be kind-hearted and willful, determined and loyal." My face flushed and I felt as guilty as a Catholic. I wasn't loyal; I couldn't keep a friend if I tried. The crowd of people clapped then quieted again. But just then, a voice spoke out of the crowd. "Here here." It was Barrett. He cleared his throat and began. "To my best friend, who, though we may fall into our own lives and hide from those we love, will always finds her true self – and friends – in the end."

My face contorted into the “I’m just about to cry” look and I walked over to Barrett, hugging him as everyone joined in the harmony of “Awww”. It was then that I knew he and I had let everything go. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you’d be upset,” he said.

“I just want you to be happy. I just wanted you to talk to me! I was worried, and... “

“Hey, it’s ok now.”

Barrett hugged me and it was the last time we saw each other.

Epilogue

“Are you ready to go?”

“Be there in a minute, Rice,” I said, setting down my notebook and getting up from the bay window seat. The sun had set now so what I was waiting for was over. I was just about done telling my story too. All but the end. My mom and dad drove me to New Orleans on June twelfth, one week before the first summer session began. They helped me move my things into the Paterson House, where I was going to room with one other girl and share a connected bathroom with the two girls next door. My assigned roommate’s name was Jessie Mayfield and I was hoping she’d be really cool. When we walked into the dorm room for the first time, I was relieved to see that all her stuff looked pretty normal. I’d heard horror stories of bad freshman roommates who made peoples’ lives living hells.

College turned out to be all that I expected and more. And sometimes it was terrible. I majored in English, of course, and minored in Communications. I created some fabulous memories while in New Orleans but had a lot of tough times too. I roomed off-campus with a couple of girls I met my freshmen year and we ended up going our separate ways in the end, not speaking anymore. I kept in contact with most everyone I knew in high school – mostly through email, once that became big. Kami came to visit me often during college and even though she’s an environmental lobbyist in Virginia, we still talk on the phone once a week. Todd and his father moved to Utah one week before graduation. (They still sent him his diploma). We write a letter to each other once a month. Kris went to New York to pursue a career in Photography - we email every now and then - and Hayden got a contract with Vans to be a professional skateboarder. He’s living the life out in Cali. I think Bo and Alex live with him too. What brings me the most sorrow these days, when I reflect on high school, is that Barrett disappeared into oblivion. He had been accepted to the University of Washington and sometimes I think he was trying to get as far away from home as possible. I had been too young or too naive to realize that his parents ignored him for the most part and made his life suck. He earned a degree in pharmacology; at least, that’s what I read on the Lake Vision alumni board. I’ve tried connecting to him through there but never get a reply. I guess I just need to leave the past in the past.

The summer after I graduated, looking for a real job and paying the bills by pouring coffee at the Café du Monde, I ran into Rice. Turns out he had gone to LSU for basketball and

had recently moved to New Orleans. After all these years, we finally spoke. And here we are today: a one bedroom apartment in Metairie, two dogs, decent jobs – a small magazine editor and an IT guy – just trying to make it happen. This is home. Sometimes we sit on our balcony at sunset, splitting a beer between us and dogs at our feet. We talk about those days, trying to recover some shred of the feelings we had back then – about the world and people and what the future held. And I guess all I can really say is that you just have to let things happen, stay positive and remember that it's never as bad as it seems. It's always OK in the end and if it's not OK, then it's not the end.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Claire J. Whatley has spent her entire life in various parts of Florida. She attended Florida State University to receive her Bachelors in English and her Masters in Creative Writing. She resides here in Tallahassee.