

THIS IS A CONTEST TO SEE WHO IS THE BRAVEST: A MEMOIR

BY

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## Introduction

My story did not just change me — it changed the people around me. The people in this memoir are real, but they are also characters, thus, this memoir is a combination of memory and imagination. Some of the people I was able to talk to about how they were feeling during this time. Others I was only able to guess. We lived through an episode together, and now our lives are different.

Now, after my illness, my face looks different than it did before. I walk differently and talk differently. I can't run, or shake someone's hand properly. I doubt I will ever wear high-heeled shoes. The other characters in this book, the other real people, are changed too, but on the inside. No stranger meeting them on the street would ask, what happened? as a person does to me sometimes. No one asks them what went wrong.

In this book, I can see the characters looking at me and trying to do something. They are doing whatever they can. Over the characters' shoulders, I can see what the true story was.

## Part One: The Event

## Chapter One: Janet

When Janet's daughter was in the fourth grade, she collapsed at a Civil War site in Alabama. They were coming back from a family vacation in the Gulf Shores, famous for the squeaky sand. They had stayed in a high-rise condominium and swum in salty water for a week, and were now crowded in the buttermilk station wagon again, pushing up north to their home in Michigan. This was before the divorce. Janet and Warner both wore gold rings and took turns driving. The children, Louise, Tom, and the baby, Michael, were sunburnt, and tiredly sipping apple juice from small tin cans. Warner had wanted to take a break and see a battlefield and so they had stopped at sunset. The air outside was so hot it made them pink, then pale, and their stomachs and scalps stung with sweat. Then, right there in a rolling, unmarked graveyard, nine-year-old Louise fell and balled up on the scratchy yellow grass. She said she saw double and had a headache so bad she couldn't move. For a second, Janet thought Louise was psychic, feeling the pains of those killed beneath her. Then she saw that Louise's left eye had turned toward her nose, and her walk was wobbly, weaving, as Warner guided her to the car. Janet followed, carrying Michael and holding Tom's sticky hand, he was five, silent and staring. Janet could do nothing.

The doctors thought Louise had a brain tumor. Then they said it was a clot of blood pressing down on her brainstem. A genetic irregularity. Their prescription was complete bed rest so that the blood would reabsorb into her brain. After three months of staying in her room and missing the last of fourth grade, Louise's symptoms went away. Her eye rolled back to the center and locked there, and she could walk on a balance

beam. She was that much better. Tests showed that the blood was gone, and Louise went to summer camp with her friends. The doctors said she should abstain from “contact sports” just to be safe, and so she ran track and joined the swim team instead of playing soccer and softball.

Not much was mentioned about it in the family again, except that every so often someone would say how strange it all had been.

## Chapter Two: Claude

As they are leaving the outdoor theater, Louise falls back into her chair and bumps into the line of annoyed women behind her. Claude stops and waits as she takes off a spiky shoe and wiggles her toes. “I can’t feel anything,” she says. Claude and Louise, a couple for almost one year now, are at a movie premiere. They live in California, and it is outdoors and night. Palm trees rattle, lit up by moving spotlights.

They have been sitting and watching the giant screen for two hours, and they are trying to walk, along with everyone else, to the parking garage. Louise drags her foot as if she is lugging a child who is hanging onto her leg. People stare. Claude thinks this is a bit much.

He and Louise agree that she must have sat the wrong way through the movie, produced by a local billionaire. Claude has to write an article about it for work. This is not a good time for difficulty. Tomorrow is Louise’s first day at her first real job. Louise will be a “Lifestyles” reporter at a newspaper. This means she will report on gardening, weddings, and pets. Louise and Claude drive back to their apartment, make a frozen pizza, and go to bed quickly, hoping the trouble will go away.

In the morning, though, Louise says that the noise of the shower water is too loud against the plastic stall for her to get in. She says she feels dizzy and hangs onto the thin metal towel rack, which Claude thinks will snap. Her foot is still numb, and she has a headache. She says she is coming down with something. Claude brings her to their small beach-town hospital’s emergency room. Louise says the traffic noises seem deafening

and she plugs her ears. I hope what is happening is not what I think is happening, she says.

\*

Claude and Louise are both twenty-two. They have lived in California for only a little while but have already done a lot of California things. They have walked on the beach in their bathing suits in front of everybody. Claude felt too naked, but Louise said she felt fine in her black bikini. They have seen celebrities, done drugs. Louise has lightened her long hair so it is even blonder, and she has gotten tan. They both wear sunglasses and fearlessly turn their faces towards the sky.

Louise calls her new editor as she and Claude sit in the waiting room of the hospital. She tells the editor that she won't be able to come in today, won't be able to cover the story, which is on Japanese exchange students surfing for the first time. She says that she has a flu bug.

Louise hangs up and says that the story is happening right now. She is supposed to be out there on the sand with a tape recorder. The teenagers are on the beach, shivering in their stiff wetsuits. They have to jump in and paddle out to the deep water, then somehow stand up on their boards. They will be terrified. They will have to get their heads wet. They are Californians now!

Claude leaves Louise in the waiting room and goes to work. He is late. He has a job with the town newsletter. The newsletter is free, available in metal containers around the town, by the bakery or gelato shop. The town calls itself a village. It is on the coast with mansions, gates, and golf carts. The inventor of Beanie Babies lives there, as do Oprah and Michael Douglas. Claude writes about neighborhood-watch programs and

charity functions. New clubhouse rules, etc. He opens the many letters-to-the-editor for his boss, who trusts Claude to read each one and tell him whether it is worthy of a response. The letters are written mostly by men, and are usually about how the village needs more security guards. Claude can't ever really get fired. His boss, who used to be involved in the pornography business in New York, is his best friend's father. His best friend now lives in Montana, in a new cabin his father bought. His friend has two Mastiffs, and is chubby. He smokes and watches the news most of the day, the channels where white men yell and interrupt each other. This is what most twenty-something guys in the Montana are up to, Claude thinks.

Claude wears button-down shirts and leaves the top two buttons open. He also rolls the sleeves up. He has dark chest hair and soft skin. He has been told he looks like various actors. Louise is tall and has long blond hair and a little nose, big eyes. They like to be photographed and frame those pictures, put them up on the fridge. People look at them.

Claude's parents met in France at a dinner party and got married soon after. They are still very much in love, they say frequently, without prompting.

Claude's parents now live in Atlanta. He and Louise went to visit them for Thanksgiving. Their house was heavily scented and new, with pink sweeping curtains and white carpet. His father cooked king crab. They picked the meat out of the claws with small, gold forks, and dipped the chunks into pots of butter.

His mother, a beautiful French woman with black hair, ate only crackers and said she wanted to be rich. Both were her usual routine. She allowed Claude's father to smoke cigarettes everywhere in the house except the master bedroom, where she kept a

large jar of miniature candy bars on the bedside table. At the end of their stay, Claude's father made a show out of giving Louise his old computer, a laptop, because hers had broken. In California, Claude opened it and found that the keys were choked with ashes and the machine was basically ruined.

Once, influenced by a strawberry margarita, the only alcoholic drink he really liked, Claude told Louise that his father cheated on his mother, just a single time. His father had told him. It had been on a train in Germany. Claude knew that his mother did not know, because if she did she would leave his father forever. He then always regretted telling Louise this because he sensed it made Louise think less of his father, and maybe less of him.

Claude and Louise met in college. They were both journalism majors and spent most of their time in a small stone building, working on the student newspaper. Because of his mother Claude spoke French, which helped him always have one sort of girlfriend or another. After flirting with him for months, Louise invited him over to her house for dinner. She was bronzed from a spring break trip to Jamaica and had just broken up with her boyfriend, an older guy named Davy who had quit his good job to be in a band. Claude liked Louise, but did not want to send a message that he would be an easy, good boyfriend. He had seen these boyfriends, picking their girlfriends up from class, trailing behind them in the grocery store, choosing nothing to put in the cart, letting the girls toss in plastic bags of dried fruit and packages of cookies. So he acted like he might not show up at Louise's by saying maybe. He did not offer to bring anything. Louise gave him her phone number to call in case he got lost, he did not give her his.

Louise shared a soggy bungalow with two friends, and when he walked in, an hour late, it smelled like incense and floor cleaner and the friends were not there. Louise was making sushi, and the rolls she had finished were big and lumpy. She had set out some egg rolls that he left untouched. Claude asked for just water when she handed him a beer. He paced the kitchen, talked on his cell phone. Louise kept looking sideways at him and assembled the rest of the meal alone, slicing and arranging a warm, white mess. She was used to someone who would walk right up to her and cup her small face in his hands. A guy who made her mixed CDs.

Claude waited until they finished eating and both went to a movie. He finally kissed her when he dropped her off. From then on, she spent every night at his apartment, where they stayed mostly in the bedroom, watching movies and leafing through the magazines he subscribed to, current event ones that they both acted interested in. Louise showed him websites of her journalism heroes, all women with talk shows. Sometimes they went out to clubs with her girlfriends. When they went out like that, Louise and her friends would buy outrageous green or blue drinks in shallow glasses and dance, crudely. Claude hated those nights and was glad when he graduated and moved after the semester's end. He could write long love-emails to Louise and get them in return within an hour. Louise had taken longer to get her degree, and followed him out to California a semester later.

\*

And now Claude is stuck in late-morning traffic on the highway. He looks over to the ocean and thinks about how much he likes Louise, and how much he hopes that

nothing is seriously wrong with her, because he has never, really, helped anyone through anything. Most people haven't, he guesses.

### Chapter Three: Me

I start to cry when telling the nurses my symptoms. I cannot stop it while talking to anybody, not the nurse who cradles me for a second while lifting me onto a bed, not the doctor who orders the scans. But I think, also, that I will surely be home soon, out of this place, an emergency room I have never seen. After all, it is a sunny Monday outside. Maybe this dizziness and numbness is a side effect from what happened last week. Claude and I had smoked pot to celebrate my new job at the newspaper, and a few hours later I got a call from the receptionist, telling me that I had to take a drug test before I started work, did she forget to mention that? For two days I drank family-size bottles of cranberry juice to flush the resin of the drug out of my body. I passed the test. So maybe this is a side-effect? Or a karma thing? I swing my legs back and forth off of the hospital bed. I hope it makes me look carefree.

Since I got to California I have not been feeling very carefree. This is on purpose. I have been trying to be very important and very serious because I am a college graduate now and I am beginning my life. I have been feeling like every moment is crucial. I applied for real jobs. I bought a form-fitting striped pantsuit for my interview at the newspaper. I wore brown crocodile stilettos to meet the editor in a bar and grill for a sit-down question and answer. On the way, I stopped for a latte and a business magazine

and I felt smart and adult. I had memorized my answers for the job interview and they came out of my mouth like someone had pressed a button. The editor had sports analogies for me. He wanted a reporter who would hit home runs. I said I could. I had spent one hundred dollars on makeup after getting a new look on a department store stool and it was worth it.

\*

Claude and I have been doing well. Last week I cooked a lentil soup with sausage, the recipe was complicated and out of a magazine. I also did yoga on the balcony. I got excited about the fancy movie premiere and bought a new outfit, a lacy top and low-slung pants, all black. I gawked at celebrities. I have been doing that since I got out here, especially at coffee shops and on sidewalks. I saw a few when I went with Claude to write an article on an expensive kindergarten's holiday parade. All the mothers were glamorous in low-cut hooded sweatshirts and lip gloss.

\*

My uncle is here in the emergency room. I have called him because Claude had to go to work and this uncle lives close by. The rest of my family is a plane ride away. He is in a dove-colored suit. He has a smooth blue tie that is cool to the touch. I feel it when we hug lightly. He covers his small, well-shaped nose at the smell of the hospital, at the odor coming from the other side of the curtain where someone is screaming. He says we should get out of here. He says this as he looks up and around for an alternate exit. But we wait to get called into the doctor's small office. He turns off the lights and shows the results from my MRI on a lit screen. He points to a marble-sized white spot at the base of my brain, near the neck. The white spot is blood, he says.

He says it is from what I had when I was nine: a cavernous angioma (said like Angie-O-MA), which is a thinly-walled blood vessel made up of little bubbles (caverns) filled with blood. It is in the pons region of my brainstem and is interwoven among the bundles of nerve cell bodies right in the middle of the pons. These nerve cells control functions like swallowing and breathing.

The doctor says that this cavernous angioma probably looks like a raspberry, and it has recently burst and thus bled. When I was nine, he says, it had healed and repaired itself, but now it has happened again. The doctors did not do anything about it when I was a child because they did not think it would ever reoccur, this doctor guesses.

So this is why I seem to be shutting down. Why I am having trouble standing without falling over, why my hearing is amplified and my right foot feels numb and tingly, why there was the vertigo in the shower. The blood is pressing on the nerves that control these functions. It is crowding out the space they need to work normally. But there is a reason I have not died, the doctor says: the cavernous angioma has only bled a little bit, about the size a golf ball. Not enough to stop my functions totally.

Everything may reabsorb again, he says. And there are other options to fixing this, but they are risky. Who knows, he says, I could wake up tomorrow and feel all better. He refers me to a team of doctors in a Los Angeles hospital that I can call. For now, he says, I should just go home. He gives me some painkillers from his pocket.

My uncle and I go to the hospital's cafeteria before we leave. I eat a carrot salad and he has a sandwich. We make fun of the doctor. My uncle says he will call my father and I say I will call my mother, and we both speak on the phone to my aunt. I am feeling calm from the pills. My uncle drives me home in his elegant car and we get rear-ended

while in rush hour on Highway 101. The car that hits us is old, white, and full of teenagers. It wasn't our fault! they shout through open windows. My uncle salutes them and says nothing. We continue towards the apartment, the ocean on our right the whole way.

The next day everything is worse. I try to get ready for work in a new beige suit, but the numbness has spread to my right hand and the headache is stronger. An ambulance takes me to Los Angeles.

This has been manageable until now, in the ambulance. It was manageable when I was with my uncle, the doctors, and Claude. I was able to be calm and only a little worried. But now a man puts a tube close to my nose and tells me to breathe in, and I know something bad is happening. I know something wrong is going on.

I start seeing double in L.A. I hate telling the nurses about the double vision because this makes my case much more serious. I know my left eye has turned inward and I feel ashamed. I lie back and close both of my eyes as much as possible, even when a nurse speaks to me, or pricks me to take some blood.

The doctors here do more tests and tell me that the cavernous angioma should be cut out of my brain by way of an operation, but the operation, called a craniotomy, is very dangerous. There is no other way, though. The cavernous angioma cannot be shrunk by radiation because that simply can't be done to the pons. It cannot be cut out by a gamma knife, because any error of the laser could kill me or come close to it. And it cannot be left alone, because now that it has bled there is a great chance that it could bleed again, and no one knows how much or when. Another bleed could kill me, too. Surgery is the only option.

I start moaning like the other patients around me. I am hungry and thirsty and I get a shot of something that makes me start clawing at my skin and try to leave the room, dragging all of my tubes along. Nurses hold me down, though.

My mother arrives and lies under the sheets with me, still smelling like plane. She is small and fits well. She lives in Kansas and wears practical clothes, leather sandals with socks, jeans, and T-shirts. She has a boyfriend. She leaves the hot, dim room only to find things like a wet washcloth for my face. My mother is the publisher of her small town's newspaper and so is the boss of some people. When I was growing up, she was one of the best players on our town's tennis team.

After two days of my mother and I lying in the bed and watching the mounted T.V., the hospital's most-famous neurosurgeon returns from a conference in Sweden and says he does not want to perform the craniotomy, at least not right away. He is not sure when he wants to do it, but he wants to consult some other specialists. He does not want to do damage and get blamed for it. I am told to wait for a phone call. It will take about a week.

Claude picks us up. I am in a wheelchair. I can't really walk now, my entire right leg feels numb. My balance is worse, and my right arm is numb, too. I can stagger to the bathroom when I need to. Claude leaves the engine running. He has brought the supplies that my mom has told him to. My double vision makes me nauseated and sensitive to light and so my mom puts sunglasses on me. The non-noise of the car is too loud, and I wear sound-proof headphones. I cannot keep myself in a sitting position and am propped up with pillows. I do not know if my mother and Claude talk to each other or not. I

know that we are driving up, out of Los Angeles, and along the coast back to the apartment, and that every minute is getting worse.

## Chapter Four: Claude's Bird Shop Trip

Down the street from Claude and Louise's apartment is an exotic bird shop. On one of their first days in the apartment, he and Louise walked over. Claude thought it would be fun. There was a sign on the door that said "Bird Owner's Brunch Today." The inside was painted pink and the walls were lined with cages full of small birds, but Claude wanted to see the back courtyard, where the wire crates on stilts were kept. People walked slowly and drank juice from plastic goblets, their pets' claws gripping their shoulders. The birds screamed and nipped at each other — feathers floated everywhere — but their owners ignored them. Beaks stuck through honeycombed mesh and pecked at Claude. Muffins, fruit, and bowls of seeds covered a card table that the birds trampled on. Claude stood in a corner, eyes watchful for dangerous ones. There were too many around and out of their cages. Ladies in expensive knits stroked them. The creatures climbed to the top of the women's salon-sprayed heads, using the ears as steps. Their heavy gold earrings swung. A tan man in a Hawaiian shirt had Louise make a bridge with him, by their holding each other's elbows, and a parrot walked across, bobbing its head with each careful step. It tasted the tip of Louise's nose with its dry, thick tongue. Claude moved close to Louise, ready to strike, but the bird just licked. Then it quick turned and snapped Claude's sunglasses with one pinch of its beak and crunched. Louise had laughed about it for the rest of the day, but Claude felt hurt and cheated by those birds.

## Chapter Five: Why Janet and Claude Think This Is Happening

Janet thinks she should have worried about Louise more. She hadn't even called Louise for a week after she moved out to California with Claude, she had wanted Louise to feel like a grown-up. Janet knows she has done something wrong. Maybe she fed Louise bad foods when she was a baby?

Claude is thinking that this has happened because he has bad luck. He thinks this because he always misses flights, wrecks cars, and loses things. He got picked-on in grade school, and is short. He has a string of ex-girlfriends who hate him.

## Chapter Six: My Eye Patch

It comes in a small, square box, from a pharmacy shelf that has bandages for sprained ankles. With it on, I look nothing like the male model on the box's photo. He seems like he is wearing it as a costume or an accessory, his thick yellow hair molded smoothly over the elastic band that holds it around his head. The male model is smiling. My hair gets a crimp from the elastic band, and my blue-purple eye skin sweats under the black patch. The patch is cupped a little so it doesn't lie flat against the eye and it is too big, so I stuff the gap where light still comes in with folded-up tissues. It looks like I have a bandage underneath, like what is covered is a goopy wound.

Without the patch, with both eyes looking, I see double, and double is worthless.

If I see two doorknobs, I cannot tell which one is real, so I often reach for the wrong one. Everyone is twins. I can hold a glass under running water coming from a faucet, but it will not fill up. I will be inches off.

Claude calls me Captain Hook. He is trying to be funny, make things around here a little lighthearted, he says. My mother buys patches in pink, blue, and beige, but I never wear them.

## Chapter Seven: The Week

Janet watches Louise sleep. Janet is thinking that she must not stop looking at Louise. Before this, she had thought she would come out to see Louise at Easter, maybe. Maybe she would have flown out to California for kind of a vacation, seen her daughter all grown up, living in a glamorous place with a handsome boyfriend. But she is here now instead, in the bedroom of Claude and Louise's apartment. Janet likes Claude. She has met him only a few times before, back when Louise and Claude were in college, for lunches in busy breweries loud with chit-chat. Janet thought it was romantic that he spoke French, that he *was* French. Part, anyway. Janet told the story of Louise and Claude moving to California to people at work. California! she would say.

Janet leaves the apartment to buy a vacuum cleaner. The apartment's carpet has a lot of sand in it from the beach, she thinks. The apartment building is on a steep, dirt hill overlooking the four lanes of speeding cars, and then there is the water and sand. Claude and Louise have pinned a large piece of tie-dyed fabric over the bedroom window in place of a curtain. The apartment building is designed like a motel, with the bedroom window looking directly onto a walkway and the parking lot, so privacy is needed.

Janet drives on the freeway that runs alongside the ocean and then turns into something called Wagon Wheel Circle. She goes fast, around and around the wagon wheel, until she sees her exit. She speaks aloud in the vacuum aisle of the superstore, observing the qualities of one device, then another. She buys the best vacuum. She is thinking of what else she can bring back for Louise. What would her daughter like? She picks up a little picture frame, a cinnamon candle.

For dinner, Janet steams three artichokes and beats butter, eggs and hot pepper sauce in a bowl. She warms the mixture over the tiny electric stove. She has bought a double-boiler for this at the same store where she bought the vacuum. Artichokes and hollandaise sauce has been Louise's favorite meal since she was small. At home, Janet is so busy that she eats mainly cereal and bananas, cold cuts, cheese, and shrimp with cocktail sauce. That is what she likes.

Janet and Claude get Louise out of bed. The sedatives the hospital provided have made her spacey and somber. Janet and Claude have to be a team, and they work together quietly, pushing and pulling Louise gently. Janet thinks Claude is holding up well. He has been helpful by going to the grocery store and picking up around the apartment. It is decided that Claude will help Louise take a bath before they eat; it has been since before the movie premiere that she has been cleaned.

Don't look, Louise says to them as they are sliding her off of the bed when her pants bunch down and gap, exposing her underwear. The sheets are expensive-looking purple ones, a gift from Claude's mom. The mattress is just a few weeks old, one of Louise and Claude's first big joint purchases. Now Louise clings to it, she doesn't want to go anywhere, she says, and Janet and Claude soothe her with promises of hot water and washcloths. Janet feels like she is assisting her grandmother at her nursing home, Louise is that lost, that scared.

Once Louise and Claude are in the bathroom, Janet waits on the balcony, watching the water and cars.

\*

Claude tries to shave Louise's legs but gives up after a few strokes, it is too dangerous. Louise is heavier than he thought, and she is scaring him as she sits in the water with her deep slouch. He is embarrassed to see that her stomach has rolls. She has never smelled like this before, like an animal. She says she wants him to wash her face, and her cleanser feels like sand, like it will take her skin right off. Louise is crying silently, and complaining, in jumbled words, that water is getting into her eyes. She covers her face. Claude spots moles on her body that he has never known about, and her hair looks like a wig, stiff and rough. He gently pushes Louise's head back to get it wet, she resists and yells a little and so he uses his hands to wet it, and soaps. She keeps repeating for him to hurry, hurry, that she is cold. Claude heaves Louise out of the tub, gets her on the toilet, wraps her hair in a towel like a turban, and guides her into clean underwear.

The three of them dip the artichoke leaves into yellow sauce and scrape them with their teeth. Claude and Louise had bought the table and chairs in a box set from a furniture warehouse. The chairs are small and splintery. Claude remembers their first night in this apartment just over one month ago, when Louise had graduated and arrived here. They slept on the floor in sleeping bags, all of their boxes still packed around them.

After Louise is put to bed, Claude wants to read his current events magazine, but Janet is in a nightgown and brushing her teeth in the kitchen sink, getting ready to sleep on the couch. Claude takes his magazine out to his car but doesn't open it. He calls his sister.

"Why don't you two watch some T.V. with each other, something funny, maybe it will take your mind off of things?" she says.

But he can't concentrate on his sister's suggestions. He can only hold the phone to his ear and hear the pauses, throat clearings and punctuations of a voice he has known all his life. He calls his parents next. He closes his eyes while they talk, his father first, then his mother. Claude is reluctant to hang up. He wants to listen to people who know him.

\*

The next morning, when Janet wakes up on the couch, Claude is just feet away at the table, typing on his laptop. She quickly carries her clothes and plastic bag of toiletries into the bathroom.

Claude goes to work, and for most of the morning, Janet and Louise sit in the living room, looking out at the highway. It is all Louise has the energy to do.

Janet buys items off an online luxury cosmetics site, something she has never done before. She and Louise troll through the pages for an hour and add items to a little shopping cart symbol. They choose to express-ship. This is a time to pamper ourselves, Janet says to Louise. Janet does not usually wear makeup, and she has said multiple times that she thinks acrylic nails are stupid, even once at a dinner party where one woman who wore them was within earshot. The products Janet orders come in small boxes the next day, and she rubs the buttery creams that smell like frosting all over her and Louise's faces, into the cracks between their fingers, and over their elbows. She says, let's go all out, and paints Louise's toenails a bright red, putting cotton balls between each toe. She does her own, too, but she gets the polish outside the nail bed and, getting up too soon to do something, smudges hers on the carpet. They look so ugly that she takes all the color off.

Janet picks Louise out clean clothes and puts socks on her daughter's feet. She fastens a fresh bra on Louise in what she hopes is a no-nonsense, brisk way. Janet moves her limbs in a way that signals there is nothing wrong with putting a bra on your daughter, that it is no big deal.

Janet and Claude decide to take Louise with them to the grocery store, so they push her feet in tennis shoes and each take one of her elbows. Outside in the brightness, the three of them look at the three flights of stairs that lead down to the parking lot, and Louise starts to whine. Janet decides that she should walk down the stairs in front of Louise and backward, and she holds Louise's hands while doing this, coaching her to plant one foot down, then the next. Claude stands behind Louise and holds under her armpits, sort of lifting her down each stair. It takes a while. A man waits for them to get all the way down before he runs up the stairs two at a time. Claude sees a woman open her door, see their progress, and shut it again.

The next day, Louise can walk around the apartment as long as her good arm is holding onto a wall or something else steady. As she makes her way from the bedroom to the bathroom, taking a step, stopping, her body making a thump against the wall, Janet pretends not to look. The right side of Louise's body sags a bit, and her right hand is useless. Her hearing has changed, too. Now she cannot hear unless Janet speaks loudly and clearly. Louise cries often.

One of Janet's friends says taking up a hobby will help the wait for the doctor's news, so Janet drives to a crafts store. She buys needles and wool and a book that will teach them how to make a scarf. They start to work on it right away. Janet reads the steps slowly, and Louise moves the needles this way and that as best she can. It is

difficult to do with her right hand the way it is. The yarn does not go into any sort of pattern. It becomes a tangled mess. Louise gets hysterical, hiding her face in her lap and squeezing her hands on her scalp. Janet remembers it might be different because Louise is left-handed, and she flips through the instruction book, looking for the section about left-handers and what they are supposed to do, but finds nothing. They give up and watch a DVD, the volume on mute. Any electronic sound is fuzz to her daughter's ears. No one knows why.

\*

Claude joins an online baseball team and stays at his office until late into the night to play in it. He and other players bet money on which teams will win or lose. He puts his credit card number in the computer. He wakes Janet up by accident when he comes back to the apartment. It is the bathroom's whirring fan.

Claude, Janet, and Louise sit on a grey log close to the bottom of a public beach stairway. Louise is feeling well enough to go out today. It is the end of the week, the waiting should be over soon — they all agree. A floppy orange hat hides her eye patch a little. Claude notices that everyone at the beach has a dog and can't control it. The dogs fight each other, the animals grabbing each other's throats in the sand and the people tugging on the pieces of fabric or leather that tie them. They leave the beach and drive down the village's main street and park the car to people watch. A woman raps on Louise's window. Claude sees it is Danica, a waitress from the fancy Spanish place where Louise worked nights. Claude's boss lunches there often. Fresh flowers and tasteful cleavage are the place's trademarks.

Louise came home after her first night of working there and reported the rules to Claude. The door stays open all the time so people walking by can see in, she said. The goal was to have everyone look at the employees and the pretty place. Louise had to wear all black, and put callers on hold for longer than necessary. She was to always act like she couldn't find people's reservations for a minute or so. Then they'd be grateful, Louise had said, as if this was a brilliant realization.

Now, Danica is bending through the car window, holding Louise by the shoulders and air-kissing her. Danica says all of the staff have signed a card. Louise says she'll come by and get it. Or I could get it sometime, Claude says. Or me, says Janet. Nobody gets the card, though, after all, and Claude never hears from the restaurant about it, even when he begins to eat there with his boss after a while. He doesn't know why.

The good will between Janet and Claude is going away. They have each walked into a room where the other was crying, trying to be alone. Once, for privacy, Claude was sitting in his car. Janet knocked on his window, startling him so much so that he cried out. She mouthed, What are you doing? She was bringing in groceries, doing things.

\*

Claude spends more and more time at his office playing fantasy baseball on the computer. When he gets home, Janet goes into the bathroom and stays there for extra minutes after she is done using it, he is certain. He knows she thinks he is not doing the right things for Louise. He knows that Janet wants him to take time off work and be with them during the day, watching T.V. and waiting for the phone to ring.

When Claude is home, he finds himself holding Louise's face in his hands, wiping her nose, and hugging her for stretches of hours.

\*

Janet thinks Claude's cologne is effeminate, and that his condiments in the refrigerator, such as spicy mustard, are frivolous, just like his hair products inside the medicine cabinet.

At the end of the week, they get the call from the hospital. The neurologist says he can do nothing and has no recommendations. Janet calls Louise's father and her ex-husband, Warner.

\*

Claude and Louise had fun when they used to go to the wholesale warehouse store. They were moving into their apartment and needed everything. Their membership card to the place was platinum. Inside, they shook their heads at the barrels of fortune cookies, hampers of frozen chicken wings, or table-sized aluminum trays of Caesar salad; barrels of mayonnaise and buckets of mixed nuts. Who would need all that? they said to each other. What kind of people need so much?

## Chapter Eight: My Feelings

I let my mother hug me and we cry together. I cry with Claude, too, mostly when we are waking up in the morning and realizing everything again. It is unsettling to cry with someone, there is no one to do the job of comforting.

## Chapter Nine: Why Warner Thinks This Is Happening

Warner knows that science is the reason. There is no one to blame, no mystery. Except. He wonders if he had misheard what the doctors said back when Louise had her episode in the Alabama graveyard. Should Louise have been on a longer bed rest? Should the doctors have done more tests? What about the divorce — stress? Did Louise stay out late at night? Did she sleep enough? What about alcohol, cigarettes? Warner does not think that he is the right sort of father for this situation at all.

## Chapter Ten: Warner

Warner is not sure how to begin this, how to take Louise, carry her somewhere else, how to guide them someplace. Should he stand closer? Sit next to Louise on the bed? She is sleeping on her stomach.

Warner and his daughter see each other on holidays, mostly. Tom and Michael, too. His sons. It was the agreement in the divorce that these visits would take place, and it has remained, even now that Louise and Tom are of age to choose some other arrangement. Michael is still a teen. Now Warner and his wife, Elizabeth, conduct what seem like interviews when the children visit, pulling answer after answer out of the kids' throats as they all sit across from each other in quiet restaurants, with glasses of ice water and cloth napkins between them.

Warner is at Louise's apartment to take over for Janet — he asked if he could. And what could she say? Janet is not the only parent. But now that she is gone, after a brief conversation in the apartment parking lot, he is afraid to see Louise open her eyes, to see if her left one is really crossed and her right side actually weakened, like a stroke victim. Janet had said this was true. But he doesn't need Janet to tell him, to remind him, what this looks like. He was the one who drove the whole way home after Louise folded into her little nine year-old self in Alabama. He had put her in the car himself. He had been in charge.

He remembers telling Louise not to move to southern California just a few months ago. It's a terminus, he'd said to her over the phone, and he thinks of what he's just seen on his ride up from the airport: the endless, bland beaches, the Italian cars, the groups of spoiled women in jogging suits. Warner is an artist, a painter. He does

landscapes, sometimes works from photographs taken from planes. Crops, rivers, and subdivisions make interesting designs, he thinks. He has an MFA from University of Chicago, he has taught college, but he is happier just working alone. When Louise was in the fourth grade, after she had gotten sick, she spent time with him in his studio he'd had in the basement. He was a businessman then, and didn't have much time to paint but he did a little at night. Together they would sometimes watch operas he had taped from some special channel. *The Marriage of Figaro* or *The Magic Flute*.

Now Louise turns on her side and sees him, but he says nothing. He keeps standing in the doorway. One of them should say the other's name, make a move, but instead they both stay still and look.

\*

After just a few minutes, Warner decides he will take Louise to his favorite brother's house up in the valley. This is the same uncle who rescued her in the beach-town hospital. It is quiet at this uncle's house, unlike here, the screams of cars always in the background. Warner talks to Louise in a soft voice, bending over the bed. He can smell her medicine breath. She is not calm about his plan. She cry-yells, turning on her side. Claude comes in the apartment handling cigarettes and a fast-food drink. It is the first time he and Warner have ever met. Warner wishes Claude would button up his shirt a bit more.

They give Louise Xanax. Claude makes sure she has all the necessary gear to travel, he is used to this now. Warner is glad Claude knows about these things and he takes back his earlier thoughts about Claude's shirt buttons. Claude gets in the passenger's seat and asks Warner questions about his art. He asks them as if he is using

Warner for an article and Warner answers as best he can, winding the car through the canyon. Louise is muffled, looking out the window with her patch-less eye. Warner's favorite brother opens the door as they pull up to the house, a big and stucco one with white pillars. It is ten minutes away from Michael Jackson's former home, the Neverland Ranch.

\*

Louise rests in a bedroom until after dark, and when she calls down the stone hallway, Warner hears. Claude has driven back to the office to catch up on work. Warner and his brother and his brother's wife had been drinking wine on the patio. But he hears Louise shout. He jogs to her bed where she sits, eye patch off, one eye crossed. He looks. Louise says she is feeling a bit better, and so he carries her outside. Her right side is so weak it is useless to try and walk. Small white lights are strung up around some chairs, and a fountain trickles. The night is cool. Warner gets Louise a blanket and wraps it around her twice. He wonders about his daughter. On the evening of The Event, for example, when her foot was numb in its shoe, was she warm enough? Had she brought along a sweater? A shawl? Did she know as much as to always bring something for when the sun went down? Warner has no clue if Louise reads magazines or watches the news. He doesn't know who her friends are, and if they are smart. He can't remember if Janet is a good mother, and if she is, then what exactly she is good at. Warner, for his part, can't remember telling Louise anything of importance. He doesn't recall showing his children how to do anything much. He wonders what they think of him. He has no clue what he has missed.

\*

Warner's idea is that they will stay here until they hear from all the surgeons they have contacted, until they have made appointments and have scheduled flights. He has called all of the best clinics and he has researched Louise's condition late at night on the Internet. He has found one neurosurgeon in Phoenix who has written a book on all of the amazing surgeries he has done. The neurosurgeon listens to heavy metal rock music while he operates. Warner has four big books on diseases of the brain and is reading them simultaneously. His brother and his brother's wife help him. They have two teenage children who also help. They spend time sitting with Louise, trying to distract her. They have made the coffee table into a place for sticky notes and a mailing center. They all talk of nothing but Louise's health.

Warner cannot help but feel that he is alone in all of this, and he knows that it is his own fault. He should be better with his wife, Elizabeth, maybe. He should call more often, talk longer. He knows she is worried, and he was distant during their last phone conversation. She wants to come to California, to help, but Warner says that he can do it. Or maybe it's his brother, maybe they should bond more somehow, go on walks. Maybe tomorrow afternoon they should. When Warner is sitting up at night he wonders if he could go knock on Louise's door and see what she is doing, but knows that he would have nothing to say. How can he tell her anything?

\*

Warner and Janet email. This is the kindest communication between them since the divorce. He had moved out and into a rental, and on the kids' first night over the potatoes had exploded in the oven and the toilet clogged. Louise had helped him pick out new dishes and bedspreads. She had been twelve. Five years ago, Janet had moved

to another state ten hours away to take over the newspaper from her father, and took Tom and Michael with her. Louise had been in college already. The boys visited Warner on spring and summer breaks.

Warner begins his emails with: Hi Janet, and she with Hi Warner. They end with Best.

\*

Warner and Louise go for daily walks in the backyard. Vineyards, with shuttle buses, can be seen from a distance. Warner and Louise step once and then she stops to get her balance, hanging tightly onto his arm. They move again, taking the path that runs through the garden and around the pool. Next door is a horse pasture.

Warner knows that Louise waits up in a dark bedroom for Claude to return each night from work. She needs him to shower her, since she cannot stand stable long enough to do it herself and will let no one else, not even her aunt, help her. Only Claude. Warner knows Louise and Claude set an alarm that goes off every two hours during the night so that he can give her pills for her headaches, anxiety, and sleeplessness. He can hear the alarm go off in their room that is right below him. Sometimes he can hear rummaging, sometimes a voice.

\*

Claude's commute to his job is at least an hour now, and he drives hunched over the steering wheel, his sleeves rolled up tighter than ever, his chest hair coiling. He hates doing this, hates waking up early and tiptoeing out of the huge house to avoid waking anyone. He tries to be as quiet as possible when wetting down his hair in the bathroom sink. If Louise wakes up she will start to cry, and attending to that will make him late.

He cannot be late for work. It would affect the way his boss thinks of him, and he likes the way things are going at the office. His boss has told him he is smart and has potential. He stops by Claude's desk sometimes and talks about the national news or sports. He assigns Claude an interview with the golf club president and prints the whole thing verbatim on the front page with Claude's byline large. Claude makes sure never to leave work before his boss, and he is always serious, unless, of course, he needs to laugh at a joke, or make one.

More and more, Claude dreads giving Louise her showers. Her aunt and uncle have a large stall, all glass, that he can stand in and not get wet while Louise sits on a stool and under the nozzle. He has gotten lax at shampooing her hair, sudsing it with loose fingers and tries to get her to hold the bar of soap with her good, left hand so she can lather herself. Her hair, which she brushes but then ruins by lying down while it is damp and turning every which way throughout the night, has weird waves. Her face has burst into thousands of pimples.

Claude begins to suggest to Louise that this cavernous angioma might be partly her fault. The blood part, he means. Why did it burst now, of all times? Maybe it was triggered by stress, he says. Like a hernia, or a stroke. She did have anxiety when she had first moved out to California over things like finding a job, furnishing the apartment, knowing her way to the nearest supermarket. Remember? he says to her as they lie in bed. Claude has heard Warner, Janet, and the doctors cite their evidence. They say that cavernous angiomas bleed on their own clock. There was no reason, they say. Claude does not believe this, though. Everyone at his job asks about Louise, word is all around the village, too. They all ask, what happened to your pretty girlfriend? What was the

cause? How did it all start? Why? Why? Everyone tells their own stories of relatives and friends who had brain tumors and aneurisms because of lack of sleep or unclean air. So what can Claude say? Shrug his shoulders, palms towards the sky? People do not become like Louise because of nothing. Everyone hurts themselves somehow, on purpose or not.

\*

Warner takes Louise for an awful car ride. He thinks it will be good for her. He rolls down the windows and takes it slow, but she cries into her hands and tells him to stop. She says her eyes do not know where to look or how to focus, even with the left one patched. The light and the car sounds are painful to her, and she covers her ears and presses her head to her knees. Warner is scared. She is getting worse, he thinks. He drives back to the house.

This isn't a contest to see who is the bravest, he says to her as they are sitting in the driveway. You can always tell me what you don't want, what you fear. You can tell me what you'd rather do. Would you like to go sit on the couch? Your eye pillow, the one filled with lavender buds? How about that? Some soda?

What he means is that he is a comforting, sensitive dad. What he means is that he is sorry for the car ride, for Louise's pain. He has a scary vision of himself being like his father, asking Warner why he wore sunglasses: Did the sun hurt his precious eyes?

\*

On Valentine's Day Claude brings Louise flowers and takeout Italian food, but her big present is from her aunt: a cane with a red bow tied on it. They all laugh about the cane, which has a four-pronged base for extra stability. Rubber grips! It helps her

from hanging onto furniture, walls, and people for support. The cane is the winner, and Louise carries it with her everywhere. They have been here for two weeks now, and Warner has heard no news. He and Janet decide it would be best to send Louise to Janet's house in Kansas while they both continue the doctor search.

\*

No one else is at the house as Claude helps Louise get packed up to leave. Louise clomps around, using her cane but still knocking into things a little, and Claude loads the car. They will go back to their apartment and Warner will come and drive Louise to the airport the next morning. Louise wants to sleep in her own bed, she says. By the time they get there it is dark out, but Claude gets his keys and says he is going to the office. He needs to work, needs to transcribe some interviews from his digital recorder, needs to edit some stories. People are counting on him big time, he says. He has taken the afternoon off to drive Louise here, so she can lie under a blanket, just like she would do anywhere. Louise sits up on the couch. Her voice gets high. But what about food? she says. A shower? We were supposed to spend time talking! Claude starts yelling and gets close to her neck, screaming that he has had enough. She is a bloodsucker. She can make a sandwich. He is no nurse. He cannot sit on the couch and do nothing for another stupid second. She shouts back, maybe throws something at the door he slams. He drives away, zooms to work as if on rocket fuel, and lands there, safe. Everyone else from the office has gone home. Louise is calling his phone, but he does not answer. He goes over to his boss' desk, sits down in the black, netted chair, and switches on the computer. He stays there all night.

## Chapter Eleven: Flying

My father walks me to my gate and talks to a flight attendant. She takes me through the tunnel and then to my seat. My cane goes in the overhead compartment. After the flight, another attendant walks me off the plane, through a tunnel again, and to the terminal where my mother is waiting for me. I need an escort because I have to hold onto someone's arm, an upper arm preferably.

In airport security, though, I cannot hold onto anyone's arm or use my cane. The guards will not allow it, so I go under the plastic security arch and am very unsteady. I start to fall and have no choice but to grab onto the arch and it goes wild with beeping. The guards run the cane through the x-ray belt.

## Chapter Twelve: Janet's House

The main industry in Janet's town is a chocolate candy factory. There is also a defunct rubber plant.

When Janet sees Louise helped off the plane by an attendant, she is surprised to see she still has her eye patch on. She can't believe that Louise's limp is the same, maybe even worse. She feels how her daughter fumbles under a hug, how weak her squeeze is. Sure, it has only been two weeks, but Janet thought something would change for the better somehow. Louise shows how she can't even snap her right fingers together anymore. Janet feels guilty. Her own collared shirt is crisp, her shoes un-scuffed. Janet's dark brown hair is curled under and held back with a band. She rarely gets sick. She lifts her daughter's body up and carries her to the car. There is little luggage. What could Louise bring from California?

At home, Janet shows Louise the gifts people around town have been bringing for her: a stuffed toy lamb, a poem in a frame, a sign to hang over a doorknob about staying strong. Louise calls them all stupid and makes her way to the T.V.

\*

Claude calls Louise, but not as often as he knows he should. She can't hear that well, so he keeps having to repeat: I miss you. I love you. How are you feeling. Louise says all she wants is for him to call twice daily, but he knows she really wants him to leave California and be with her in Janet's house, which is old, three-stories, and wooden. Claude and Louise fight for long periods of time on the phone, a half-hour, an hour. Claude hangs up feeling tired and hungry. Louise sends him long emails that he can

hardly read, huge blocks of rageful text with almost every word misspelled; the result of her typing with one hand and the drowsing effects of the medication, he guesses. She says he should send more letters and packages, that he should buy one of those video cameras he can hook up to his computer. She says he should answer his cell phone no matter what. What could be more important? she asks. Louise sends him song lyrics that remind her of them as a couple. These disturb Claude the most. He would never expect such a dumb thing from her. In short emails or in loud, clearly executed sentences over the phone, he sticks to his mantra: he has to work, earn his boss' respect, prove himself successful at this new job.

The sleek people on the village council are beginning to like him, to invite him to play tennis and go on fundraising beach walks. A woman named J' Ayme (pronounced "Jamie" he tells Louise) Brenner, a powerful realtor, asks him to brunch one Sunday and tells him of three celebrities who will be moving to the area, one of whom gardens. Photo op! J' Ayme winks. The apartment is turning into more and more Claude's. He is smoking inside, and leaving open bags of corn chips around. One night soon he thinks he will invite some guys from the office over to watch a basketball game. They'll have beers, and they might order a pizza.

## Chapter Thirteen: What I Do Here

When I search “cavernous angioma” on the Internet, what comes up scares me. There are message boards that have posts from relatives of those who have died from what I have, or who have severe brain damage from the craniotomy it takes to remove it. There are is something called “Angioma Alliance,” with conferences all over the country, and I imagine my family attending one, seeing hundreds of people who look just as tired as we do, crowding up a hotel, reading pamphlets and listening raptly to doctors’ speeches, straining to hear a sentence that we can hope on. There are statistics, percentages I memorize without wanting to. Sometimes I email friends, and sometimes they call, but hearing over the phone is frustrating and so I rarely answer. I cut bathing down to twice a week; it is too much trouble. I begin to smell humid. Everything’s oily.

Mainly I watch T.V. shows. My favorite is a drama about wealthy California teenagers.

If I stand up too quickly, I get so dizzy I fall, and the floor in my mother’s house is waxed oak. It is filled with heavy dark furniture from grandparents, and my mattress rests in a giant, carved maple frame. It takes twenty minutes to put on a clean set of clothes. My arms and legs are shrinking from lack of use. They are all bruised - little round bursts of brown or black are sprinkled everywhere - and my hip bones are colored too, from doorways and wall corners.

In my bedroom there are stacks of photo albums filled with me me me. I try to look through one. I don’t know who I am expecting, but I look nothing like that girl there, with a beer in her hand and a pea coat on, or there, arms linked around other girls’

waists, all of us wearing tight, bright going-out shirts. Here I am, hands around the neck of a boy at a high-school dance, his hands almost on my satin behind. There are pages of a college semester in Italy, and in many of these photos I am standing alone in front of some statue, grinning at nothing.

## Chapter Fourteen: Janet's Ideas

Janet tucks Louise into bed at night. Sometimes she and Louise go to the video store to try and have fun, but they never seem to like anything they rent. They don't talk much. She washes Louise's clothes: sweatpants and old T-shirts from Tom and Michael's drawers. She knows it would be better if Tom was here, but he can only call from college. Michael, in his senior year of high school now, is hardly ever around, spending most of his time at friends' houses where the atmospheres are happier, Janet guesses. The last time Michael brought a friend over, Louise stayed in her room the whole night out of embarrassment, Janet is sure. Janet's boyfriend can't visit. He lives far away and has a lot to do — he has children too, and a new grandbaby. So mostly it is just Janet and Louise. Janet stacks the dishes in the dishwasher. There is not much else for her to do.

She takes Louise to a physical therapist. No one has told her to do this, really. Janet just does it. The gym is a white, cinder-block building off the old highway. Weights, blocks and bands sit in bins, and televisions take up corners. The physical therapist looks like a college kid, but he says he is married with three children. Janet explains about the cavernous angioma in Louise's brain. Janet is hopeful, she has always had confidence in athletics, movement, and sweat. The physical therapist gives them a worn, laminated spiral-bound packet of illustrated exercises. The first three are noted to especially help patients with a rotator cuff injury.

Louise starts the routine. She steps up a set of wooden stairs built into the wall, then down. She curls weights, touches her toes, does a set of wall sits. The physical therapist stands and watches the T.V.

In the parking lot, a group of high-school boys that would have made something out of a girl Louise's age look away.

They don't bother going back.

## Chapter Fifteen: Claude's Rise to Success

Claude gets invited to a party at J'Ayme Brenner's house. It is on the ocean, a shingled-wood arrangement with an infinity pool. The kitchen looks like it came out of a pioneer cabin, but expensive. It is where J'Ayme makes Claude a plate of cheese and olives and watches him eat it. He is still hungry, but there is no more food around that he can see. His boss is out by the pool, making a group of women laugh. There are lots of people from the village here, many who know who Claude is, J'Ayme says. And like magic, a man in linen comes up and shakes Claude's hand, telling him how much he liked his article on the new iced-coffee cart that has been installed on the square.

Claude is feeling good for once.

He guesses J'Ayme is about forty-years old (on a wall he sees a professional photo of her with two almost-teens), but she dresses much younger. Her hair is long, straight, and tiger-striped. Her nails, coppery. Shoes too. J'Ayme asks him about Louise and hears the sad story. They go to her computer, and he shows her some of Louise's craziest emails to him. They take up screen after screen. He replays some of Louise's voicemails into J'Ayme's ear. They are filled with her swearing and crying. He tells J'Ayme what Louise wants him to do: give up everything he has worked for and go be with her. He tells J'Ayme that Louise wants him to have no life because hers is gone, too. He tells J'Ayme he is helping Louise as much as he can.

## Chapter Sixteen: Janet's Explanations

Janet gets tired of explaining to people that Louise had a cavernous angioma in her brainstem that bled. No one knows what this means. People ask her about Louise while breathing on her in a too-small hallway at the office, or at the grocery store, where she is aching from cold in the dairy section, just wanting a jug of milk. So Janet starts saying that Louise had something like a stroke. It is true. Both conditions involve the brain, blood, damage, and surgery. It is not false. Everyone knows someone who has had a stroke, usually a great-grandmother. Sometimes Janet just says to the person (it could be someone from the church potlucks, or somebody on the city commission or county seat, and always the parents, some mother) that Louise had a blood clot in her brain that had to be removed. People know what a blood clot is because the elderly get them all the time, especially in their legs. If someone hears about Louise from another person, they usually hear she had a brain aneurism, which is just about impossible because those are typically deadly, but Janet doesn't bother to correct people about even that. There have been too many questions, and who knows how many more questions there will be? Janet wishes she could talk about her daughter in other ways, like other mothers. Other mothers complain about their daughters' boyfriends or husbands or credit card spending, and some women her age are even starting to display pictures of their daughters' children on their desks at the office.

## Chapter Seventeen: Janet Has Another Idea

One of Janet's co-workers is having a makeup party. The woman says it's the kind of makeup you can't buy in drug or department stores: you need a representative with a sticker on her car. Janet considers this woman's short, spiky-stiff hair and jingly charm bracelets, but she decides to bring Louise to the party anyway.

She balances a wax-papered plate of cookies on her knees as she drives them to this woman's house. "Isn't it fun, being a girl?" she says to Louise. Louise stays silent, pulls at the drawstring of her pink stretch pants.

The kitchen is full of brownies and women. The representative and her daughter, both in sparkly blusher and eye shadow, take charge at the head of the table. The daughter is around Louise's age, and has dyed-dark hair that flips. She sips a gigantic to-go soda and shakes the cup with a diamonded-ringed hand, sloshing the ice cubes. The daughter says she and her husband are trying to get pregnant and asks if she, Janet, will pray about it. Janet nods. She knows she should tell her congratulations on this stage in life, on everything, her life in general. But she can't get her mouth to say it.

At each place setting is a small bag filled with products and a hand mirror. They are to remove their makeup with wipes. Women look lackluster without their compact cream or penciled brows. In place of foundation, they all get tubes of Shimmer Glimmer. Janet thinks she looks greasy, and she sees Louise is applying the stuff without a mirror, putting too much on so that her entire face looks slippery.

Next comes hair, and this requires individual counseling. The mother and daughter-team go from woman to woman, talking strategy. They get to Louise and pull

out her ponytail, try getting the hair out from under the elastic band of the patch. The daughter makes fluffing, fluttering motions with her hands, arranging and rearranging the hair around the eye patch-band. Her fake nails click. Janet pretends not to look.

Janet remembers getting a phone call from Louise when she had first moved out to California. Louise had been sitting in a chair at Lazlo's Salon and Spa, getting her hair done by Lazlo himself! Lazlo cuts the hair of rich people. Famous. Someone Claude knew had cancelled an appointment and Louise had gotten their spot. Louise was getting a full set of foils, a deep conditioning treatment, and a cut and style. It had taken three hours so far, she told Janet. Janet had rolled her eyes at the time, thought her daughter a bit silly, frivolous, and maybe she had even been a little jealous.

## Chapter Eighteen: Claude's Decision

As soon as Louise tells him that Janet and Warner have found a surgeon who will operate on her brain, Claude decides that he will not go. This is not a boyfriend-like choice, he knows, but nothing about he or Louise is very boyfriend or girlfriend-like anymore. There is no sex, has been no sex since The Event. There is no romance: They don't use their secret nicknames for each other, and in the weeks before Louise had flown away, they had stopped brushing their teeth to kiss each other, thus they had tasted each other's foody breath. There was no conversation about work, or politicians, or possible pets (she had wanted a kitten). No, he and Louise are attached by only the title of boyfriend and girlfriend, by the duty of it all, but that is it as far as Claude can see.

Claude gels his hair extra so it shines in the sun. At night he plays tennis by himself against a wall at a country club called Coral Gables — he is a complimentary member now, a gift from the director in response to a story on his success as a businessman. Claude does a lot of these types of pieces. Achievement is in abundance around here. Everyone has made something of themselves. Disappointments are few. Failures live elsewhere. Claude hits the ball against the wall of the tennis court, and his hair remains motionless and coiffed under the bright lights.

He tells Louise he will not come to her surgery during one of their discouraging phone conversations. The time difference means that he, in California, is three hours earlier than she; three more hours are on his side automatically, in every way, he thinks. She has already watched her fill of T.V. for the day, eaten, and is in bed. He is still full of energy.

Louise tells Claude that the surgeon is famous, that he is on Wikipedia. Claude has looked up the clinic on the Internet too. It is huge, and is in Minnesota.

Louise hangs up on him and calls him back again. She calls him horrible names, and he mostly stays silent. He has become so used to her being miserable that he cannot be greatly affected by it anymore. He can't really remember her ever being in a good mood. On the night of The Event, his main memory is of them fighting in the car on the way to the movie premiere. He had been late coming home from work, and she slammed the car door as she got in the car and gave him the silent treatment the whole way to the screening site. Louise had had a toothpaste stain on her shirt, and she had been frowning.

Claude has been realizing that Louise's strange looks: the crossed eye, the unusable weak right side, and the trouble walking, are not going to go away soon, not at all. He knows that if he goes to the clinic and sits in waiting rooms with Janet and the rest of Louise's family, if he stays in a hotel room next to Warner (or maybe even has to share one), if he eats lunch in a booth with her tall, bearded brother Tom and teenage Michael, that he will be a good boyfriend in their eyes. He will have stuck with her, they will tell themselves. And then he will have to stick with her for a lot longer. He imagines himself sitting by her hospital bed for months.

Claude likes how his co-workers have begun to invite him to beach volleyball games and trivia nights at bars. He impresses them with his French-speaking when they ask for it. He likes talking to his boss because his boss is a very smart man, a man who knows lots of statistics.

His best friend text messages him with invitations that say "come to the mountains my dad will let u."

Claude thinks that he might. A visit, anyway.

So after he gets off the phone with Louise, who has taken her sedatives so that she can calm down and go to sleep, Claude watches a crime-scene show, eats the tacos he picked up from his favorite place, and goes to bed. He has a day at work to rest up for. He is good at his job.

## Part Two: The Surgeries

## Chapter Nineteen: The Clinic

Things in the brain move around like prizes in a Jell-O salad. This is the analogy that the surgeon gives Janet, Warner, Elizabeth, Louise, Tom, and Michael as he is explaining the difficulties of the upcoming operation. It is the day before the surgery, and they are all crammed in a small examining room. The surgeon draws diagrams on a notepad that illustrate how he is planning on entering the base of Louise's skull. Louise, cheerful now that things are happening, is watching the surgeon scribble, her eye-patch on, cane in hand. Everyone else but Janet watches the surgeon too, they ooh and aah and are squinting in concentration as the surgeon speaks. Janet cannot engage. She cannot think of her daughter's brain as Jell-O salad. She thinks about containers of it in the grocery store, next to the hummus and cheeses. The salad is the rainbow-layered kind that comes in a clear plastic mold, and its flavors must be like fruit. It is the stuff at picnics that nobody eats, she thinks. Janet never made it for her children. She made cookies sometimes, and brown birthday cakes. She made crisps and cobblers.

Janet doesn't like the idea of food prizes, either. She has heard of marriage proposals that happen at restaurants where the ring is in the center of a Crème brûlée, or at the bottom of a bubbling champagne glass. But Janet always thinks of what could go wrong in situations like that. The ring could be swallowed, worst case scenario, or bitten on, breaking a tooth. But even if it isn't, even if the woman finds the jewel in her dessert or in the bottom of her drink, it will be covered with some sort of sugary goo, or sticky with alcohol. It will have to be rinsed off and cleaned before it is put on the finger. Janet cannot see the fun in that.

\*

Janet is getting tired of hearing from the doctors that Louise's cavernous angioma is in the worst possible place it could be. The surgeon said it three times during his visit today. This is not helpful, she thinks, to be scaring them all like this. They are already scared enough, walking around this hospital in circles, getting lost everywhere. Too many times already she has gotten off the elevator looking for the street exit, or an ATM, or a gift shop, only to find herself on some unlabeled, silent floor. This cavernous angioma is causing family members to buy things like travel pillows so that they can sleep in chairs. It has brought them here, to a world-famous clinic with a brain surgeon who says he can get it out of Louise's brain so that no one will ever have to worry about it bleeding again.

\*

Janet hates Claude by now. She also hates her own boyfriend for saying he can't come either. She broke up with him shortly after he said this, on her cell phone in some corner of the hospital lounge. Janet does not feel depressed by the breakup. She feels like she is able to do things easily, cleanly, and induce no pain on herself whatsoever. She is like a worker at the clinic now, maybe sweeping up a pile of dirt, organizing paperwork, wheeling a coffee cart. She does not remember there being a fight with her boyfriend during their final conversation, saying unkind words or crying. No, to her it feels like the ending took place in just a matter of seconds, like calling to cancel a catalogue order.

\*

The morning of the surgery, Janet, Louise, and the rest of the family get up so early

it is still dark out and walk across the street from the hotel to the clinic. It is a commanding place, a huge block of red. They are all together, being quiet and carrying water bottles and books.

Before they leave the hotel, Janet looks at the mini-soaps in the shower. She thinks about how at her house, Louise was beginning to get used to her loss of balance and had been able to bathe without help, bracing herself against the sides of the stall. Janet knows that Louise will be in bad shape for a while. The surgeon has told them all this. She will be worse than she is now, but then she will probably get much better. That is the point, but there are no guarantees, of course. Now, at least, she is able to do most things “unassisted.” This may change, the surgeon had said. She might not be able to swallow, for example. That would mean that she would have to be fed through a tube forever. And then there is the respirator. If she cannot breathe on her own, if those nerve connectors are damaged, she will have to be hooked up to a machine that will push the breath in her and suck it out again. It will inflate and deflate her lungs somehow, and it will be plugged into an electrical outlet. She will have to stay in a bed, or a chair, all the time, connected by a cord that comes out of a wall, whereas now she can go around, up and down stairs. Louise can cut cheese and shake some crackers out of a bag and feed herself. She is wobbly, bumbly because she has lost so much balance, but still.

The tube will probably not happen, though, the surgeon says. Or the respirator. It is almost certain that swallowing will be no problem, his assistants say. She will breathe on her own. The operation will be worth it.

\*

After a few elevators, the family goes to a small, steel room and a woman has them

sign papers that say what to do in case of Louise's death. Everyone except Janet must leave Louise and go to a waiting room.

Janet helps Louise change into a pilly hospital gown and realizes she has nowhere to put Louise's regular clothes. She stuffs them in her purse. Janet puts the supplied socks over Louise's feet. The socks have non-skid rubber stripes on the bottoms. She helps Louise with the hair net, the texture of a dryer sheet. They are told to go to Pre-Op. There, Louise lies in a gurney in a large, white room and Janet stands close. Louise looks at the ceiling squares, eyes wide, and holds Janet's hand hard, gripping with her thin fingers. Louise's face is motionless and her mouth is closed. Her body tenses up, then relaxes when Janet bends over and rests her cheek on Louise's forehead. There are many others lying here, too, probably fifty of them waiting to be wheeled off to some surgery. They are in rows with blankets covering their legs. Nurses quietly ask questions and consult clipboards. No one else talks. There is nothing to say. The surgeon comes by. He has on red fleece socks and leather sandals that buckle. He has a mask over his mouth. He writes on Louise's forehead what he plans to do: Craniotomy.

\*

The surgeon and his assistants use a saw to open Louise's skull. They want to find the cavernous angioma and cut it out, and then they want to seal the veins together again so there is no more bleeding. But they can't find it. They take a tiny camera inside and see all healthy brain. All they see is Jell-O. No prize.

They sew her skull back up, wait a day, and go in again. It is April 1, April Fool's Day. A tornado passes through the town where the clinic is. It is small, there is minimal damage. Shingles come off roofs, wild branches whirl in streets. No plans are changed

for Louise's surgery, since all of the operating rooms are in the basement. This time, the surgeon and his assistants cut open a different place on Louise's head, a bit higher, and then they see the cavernous angioma there, oozing. They remove the dark ball of tangled veins and save it to show to the family for proof. They sew and staple her skull back together and wrap it tight. They unscrew her head from the vise that held her head straight, face down, like a metal massage chair.

## Chapter Twenty: What Everyone Does During the Surgeries

Janet finishes a needlepoint pillow cover during the two days in the waiting room, which she then throws away.

Warner has brought a stack of books to read but opens none. Instead, he walks laps around the hospital. The place is huge, and if he adds a visit to the gift shop and ducks into the chapel he can keep moving for about an hour.

Tom is trying to keep Janet from crying. He gets her paper cups of water and makes her come with him to the cafeteria, where they move through a hot-food line like grade-school kids. He tells her stories about his friends at school that he hopes are funny. Then he feels awful when she gives a smile that turns into a sob.

Elizabeth tries to keep an eye on Warner, to talk to him when he returns from one of his walks so she can find out what he is thinking. She gets out her laptop and answers some emails, but that only takes seconds.

Claude is sure that the surgery will go fine. He is glad that something is finally getting done.

## Chapter Twenty-One: After the Surgeries

When Louise is brought to a room, Janet spends most of her time sitting by Louise's bed, watching the nurses. They think they are so great, being loud with their fast walking and personalizing their scrubs with prints of soccer balls or lipstick kisses. But the nurses don't seem to be around when Janet has a question, even when she sticks her head out of Louise's recovery room and looks down the hall. Janet wants to ask them: when will my daughter feel like eating, or talking, or even keeping her eyes open wide? When will she be able to walk around, stretch, and say let's get out of here? When will she roll her eyes at me, or talk on the phone to that imbecile, Claude? When will she look like herself again, like a cute girl with friends, a job, a car, a nice-sized life, instead of this bandaged person who just lies there?

When Louise's surgeon enters the room, Janet stands up and grins without knowing it. He is handsome. Sexy, she thinks, with his trimmed brown beard and short curly hair. She knows his outfits by now: sometimes he is wearing his white doctor's coat over khakis, sometimes he is dressed in a blue wool suit with a pocket-square, and sometimes he is in his blue-green operating outfit, mask hanging around his neck.

Janet is always changing the ice packs behind Louise's neck and lower skull — they help with the swelling, she thinks. She manages to beat the nurses to this task. She is good for something. Once she feels the pack getting watery, she hurries down the hall to the ice machine and fills her lifted-out shirtfront with more cubes. She empties the old ice on the bathroom sink and seals the new cubes in the plastic.

The surgeon injects a shot of some numbing agent into Louise's eyeball so that he can sew a corner of it shut to prevent the cornea from drying out. They are finding out that the eyelid, along with the rest of the left side of Louise's face, is paralyzed, a result of the surgery. Things were damaged in the brain. Not surprising, the surgeon says, after I had to go in so deep. There are always bound to be a few unpredicted debilitations. Remember I said this in our talk? the surgeon says to the family. The family shrugs. Louise cries out from the eyeball shot and so does Janet, in her chair across the room.

\*

The steroids Louise is getting to keep the swelling of her brain down are making her psychotic. Warner cannot handle this, seeing his daughter talk to walls and laugh at chairs. She has refused to eat anything for two days, and Elizabeth sits beside her bed, begging her to eat a baby carrot. Right now, Louise thinks she is a supermodel, and that her stepmother is trying to sabotage her diet. Elizabeth tells Louise the carrot has zero calories, and Louise eats half. Warner keeps trying to remind himself that Louise's actions are nothing more than a body's responses to chemicals, that it is all about numbers, levels, and that Louise's episodes are normal and expected by professionals who know what they are doing. This does not help. He is nudged out of the room by a group of nurses. He can hear her screaming from the hallway, screeching that she already has her bikini-line waxed.

\*

Tom tries to feed Louise some Cream of Chicken soup, beige in a Styrofoam cup, and she throws up green. She hugs him, hugs all of them. She remembers them, and Tom is shocked at how relieved he is. He smiles and stands by her and they say some

words, but mostly she sleeps. Michael pulls a blanket messily over Louise's legs.

## Chapter Twenty-Two: I Hide My Cell Phone Under the Pillow

When I throw up in my hospital bed, there is a way to clean it up. It involves rolling. In the days after the surgeries, I throw up a watery mix of chemical smells. This creates a mess that I cannot wipe away. I can't lift my head — or any part of me — and so two nurses roll me from one side of the bed to the next to remove the bottom and top sheets with vomit on them. The nurses replace my gown, rolling me again to tie the back strings, and while I am on my side, they put on a clean bottom sheet, folding the extra material under the thin plastic mattress. They position me back in the center of the bed and cover me with more clean things. I throw up about once an hour, so often because of the pain drugs, they say. One night, my mother asks me to eat a granola bar. There are no nurses in the room. The windows show black. My mother is going back to her hotel room for the night, but before she leaves she asks if I could please eat it? I must be so hungry, she says. It's been days. I am not hungry, but I take a bite and I throw it up right after she leaves, and the nurses roll me some more.

\*

Wiping my face, a nurse tells me I look like a model, just like one she saw on a magazine cover the other day. Oh no wait, she says, it is an actress. The girl is the mermaid in that movie, the one with Tom Hanks. The nurse says she saw it on a rerun station. I look like a young version of her. And I, with a turban of bandages, believe it. The gauze wrapping is holding, packing, protecting a suture, a suture that is keeping together an opening made with a surgeon's knife, or maybe it was a laser. The bandages are changed sometimes, the used-up ones unwound off of me in circles, and then clean

white padding wrapped around and around my head again. I have not seen this for myself, there are no mirrors around this bed. I think I must look sort of different, but I cannot imagine how, exactly.

\*

The worst is over, everyone keeps saying. You did it. It's all easy street from here. Everything's a breeze now. You were a great patient, the surgeon tells me. I am very proud.

\*

I do not think about why my speech is slurred. I do not think about why I still have an eye patch on. That was supposed to be taken care of. Part of the point of the surgeries. It feels good to have people checking on me all the time, helpful strangers giving me tablets or cups of liquid to swallow. The one-second stab of a needle in my stomach and the rush of cold that follows (something to soften my stool) reminds me that someone knows how things work.

I will not see my reflection until later but I do realize that I am now really a sick person instead of a normal girl. The surgeries have made that very clear. The shaved strip down the back of my head. The bathroom issues. The puking. When life was normal, Claude and I did things like smoke cigarettes on the sand in the early evening, still wearing our bathing suits. We did this before eating drive-thru hamburgers to continue the mood of happiness. We moved new furniture in through the windows of our apartment because the doorway was so narrow.

\*

Claude. Where is he? I manage to get my phone and call him. It is horrible. He is

at work in California. For some reason I thought that he was here. There is a scene, some commotion, and I get a shot that calms me. Everyone's main concern is: How did I get that phone? It is not allowed in here.

\*

A woman from physical rehabilitation wants me to get out of bed and walk down the hall. I throw up on her. Priests stop by, and I wave them off. I am moved out of my private room, out of Intensive Care to Rehabilitation. Yay, Louise, my family says.

\*

Nurses measure my urine and poop in a cup and track it. After a few days, someone wheels me to the bathroom, and I hold the cup myself.

I have to go every five hours, and if I don't a nurse calls the Catheter Team. Three women wheel in equipment and get to work fast. They are unfazed by lifting up my gown, pinching the catheter where it needs to go, and watching the liquid from my bladder go through a tube and into a plastic bag. It is a drainage system.

\*

I start out crawling. My physical therapist, who is handsome and Scottish, lifts me out of the wheelchair and onto the rehab gym's mat. He helps me get into position, and gets on his hands and knees beside me. I mimic him and move one hand and then the other across the mat, knees too. We go back and forth. My family is watching from folding chairs. They are glad there did not have to be a feeding tube.

The surgeon says to my family that because the stem of the brain, as well as other parts, were disturbed by the surgery, I will have to teach myself basic and fine motor

skills again. This will take time, so he tells them to remind me to be patient. We will, they say, we will.

\*

You have to stand up, the physical therapist tells me. We must teach my legs how to work again. To help, he straps on a safety belt: a thick nylon strap with a metal buckle. It is fastened around my waist, and he holds the strap taut with both hands. He tugs me up, and I rise for a moment and then tip sideways onto the mat. With my father gripping me on one side and the physical therapist on the other, I start to take steps. We have distance-markers, like down the hallway or to the courtyard. Sometimes it is just ten seconds of being upright.

To test my hand-eye coordination, I sit in front of a peg-board full of tiny lights, like the kind that go on Christmas trees. As soon as one lights up, I am to touch it, and then it goes out. Then I touch the next light that comes up, and so on. The physical therapist times me. He counts the seconds it takes for me to get to the little bulbs. Sometimes I miss, and my finger will touch a spot an inch or two from the light. I get faster every day, but I still cannot tie my shoes or put my hair in a ponytail. My fingers are stiff and my hands do not move and flex fluidly. My mother helps me clean myself with soap from the dispenser.

\*

I am well enough to have a roommate. She is very old and has lost control of her hands completely. Her hands cannot be still. They spasm and shake. Certain fingers wiggle. She cannot feed or clean herself. All she can do is watch the T.V., which she keeps on all the time. Two young-ish people have come to visit her: her son and his wife.

They sit by the door, stuffed into chairs. The son holds a bouquet of red plastic flowers. He has brought her these instead of the real ones so they won't die, he says. They leave soon, and she tries to cradle the bouquet. It rattles in her arms.

\*

My mother and I are in love with the physical therapist. He comes to my room to get me twice a day. I wear sporty outfits my mom buys at the local department store; anything I had before the surgery is too big for me now. These are bright, matchy affairs of nylon and hoods. When we know the physical therapist is coming, my mom helps me pull my hair over the shaved strip where the suture is. We know the physical therapist is newly-married, but still I imagine myself as his wife. He and I do this exercise where I get on my hands and knees and raise one leg behind me and then the other, like a donkey. This is for strength. The physical therapist holds my hips firmly while I'm doing this, and we watch my movement in the mirror.

\*

At 6 a.m. each day, a nurse flips on the light and watches me get dressed and brush my teeth. Notes are taken on how well I do. Another nurse brings my breakfast, and then I sit in my chair until my physical therapist comes to get me at 9 a.m. The time goes surprisingly fast.

In the afternoon, I nap. Once, I wake up and see the surgeon sitting close to me, watching. I never see him again.

\*

The ticket to leaving the clinic is passing the Home Evaluation — a series of tests to see if you are able to function at your own house, alone. After three weeks, the

physical therapist says I am ready to try. The test begins in a room that has been outfitted to look like an apartment. It has a double bed with a chenille spread, a kitchenette with a two-burner stove, and a bathroom. But the windows look out to a helipad, and the floors are the same flecked-yellow linoleum as the rest of the building. The shower chair is depressing, large and plastic. It is the hardest part.

My mother has been showering me in the stall connected to my room. I leave my underwear on for modesty. She uses a detachable showerhead to get my hair soaked. She wears galoshes. It is a freezing experience.

Now, five staff members crowd into the evaluation bathroom to watch me. They are all part of the evaluation team, and the physical therapist is the leader. He has had me practice getting in and out of the shower chair over and over. A specific sequence of steps has to be executed. This is called a transfer. He has showed me again and again, and even given me a sheet with the method typed out. I have to push myself out of the wheelchair, swing around to the chair that is sitting in the shower, and heave my legs over the edge of the tub. I get ready to go. Everyone moves in closer. Someone drops a pencil by my feet. It takes about ten minutes for one transfer. Everyone claps. We move on to the kitchen so I can mix up some powdered soup and slice cookie dough out of a tube. I bake, and the team eats the cookies up.

There is an old car in the rehab gym that I get in and out of. I fasten and undo the seatbelt. I pass that section. I pass them all.

\*

A firm rule here is that cell phones are not allowed in the rooms. The signals they receive and send can mess up the machines, the nurses say. But I must call people. I

hide mine under my pillow and wait until the lights are off for the night, then call Claude. I am on all sorts of medicines and so my calls are unpredictable. Sometimes I talk to him about sex, and sometimes I tell him he has another girlfriend. Sometimes I accuse or am angry, and sometimes I laugh. I never remember what he says. Once I call my mother. She is across the street in her hotel room and she answers. I ask her questions that don't make any sense to her and she has to hang up on me. I call friends, and people I haven't spoken to in a long time – whoever is in my phone's address book. I do not think that this will disturb them, but later I will find out that they were, in fact, scared. Even though I am talking on the phone and my door is open to a florescent hallway, no one ever comes in and takes the phone or asks me not to use it. My roommate never wakes up. There is a nurse stationed at a desk right outside and she does not come in when I am talking. Sometimes I make calls for hours, but for some reason I am always off the phone and it is hidden beneath my pillow by the time a nurse comes in to do her nightly check-ups. Actually, it is not always a female nurse. Sometimes it is a male, with spiky hair and brightly-printed scrubs. He asks if everything is fine and if we, my roommate and I, need anything.

\*

The day before I leave, a resident comes to take out the staples that run down the back of my scalp. They itch. I don't know what kind of tool the resident uses, but the process doesn't hurt. The staples are put in a plastic bag for me to take home. They look like regular metal ones used for paper.

It is decided that I will go to my father's house in Michigan. The city there, which I grew up in, has better outpatient therapy options than my mother's small town. I

will be eight hours away from her. My mother cries into my neck. On the day that I leave, my father and stepmother fold up the wheelchair and put it in the trunk. The chair is new, they had to buy it at a store in the clinic.

## Chapter Twenty-Three: Eyewear at the Clinic

At the clinic, my physical therapist gives me a pair of sunglasses with the left lens covered with opaque medical tape. Since the left side of my face is paralyzed because of the surgeries, and the eyelid cannot squint, I am ultra-sensitive to light. These glasses solve that problem and are much more comfortable and less strange-looking.

## Part Three: The Treatment

## Chapter Twenty-Four: Claude's Visit to Michigan

Claude and Louise sit in the shady, quiet living room reading magazines. They are at Warner and Elizabeth's house in Michigan. This is uncomfortable for Claude.

He has not seen Louise since before her surgeries and stay at the clinic, which ended three weeks ago. He flew into Michigan this morning, where Louise waited in the car as Warner met him by the baggage claim. Through the windshield, he could see that Louise looked worse than he had expected, one side of her practically limp, slumped in the car seat. Her sunglasses had tape over one lens to cover up her crossed eye that was still so horribly wrong. Claude immediately wished he hadn't come. Louise gave an ugly half grin when he opened the car door to greet her. He cried silently, surprising himself, as he sat in the backseat, her hand reaching back and resting on his knee the whole way home.

As they sit now, Louise has been wheeled close to the couch and is reaching for his hand again. All day she has been wanting to touch him, to hold onto his sleeve or stroke his hair. Claude does not want to give his hand to her anymore, so he shakes her off. He thinks that he should not be kind to her because he knows that he has to end it soon. This is why he did not come to the clinic for her surgeries. He did not send her flowers. He waited days to respond to her emails, and cut all of their phone conversations short. But here he is in Michigan anyway. He has let himself be kept, somehow, even though Claude knows he can't have Louise as his girlfriend. What would they do? Would she move back to California? How long will she have to be in that

wheelchair? Will they have to build a ramp up to their third-floor apartment? Can you rent ramps?

But he can't break up with her in her father's house, with a bandage still on the scar on the back of her head. He can't be the guy who ended it like this. What a story for the next girlfriend to hear from someone. So Claude waits.

Louise invites friends from high school to drop by the house and meet Claude. The girls, teachers and hairstylists, all blonde and pretty, sit around Louise and coo, seemingly ignoring Claude. They stroke her partly-shorn head. Claude cannot listen very well. He is glad when they leave, though he sees them eyeing him through their goodbye hugs. In bed, he cannot do more than peck at Louise. Her mouth feels strange. One side moves, the other side doesn't. She smells like a disinfectant spray. She is skinny — he can see all of her ribs — and her hip-bones stick out when she leans against the bedroom wall and shows him the new underwear that she has worn especially for him. It is pink and triangular. Terrifying. Louise talks with her half-moving face about how much she has missed him. He can see red dots on the insides of her elbows and wrists where needles have been. He says having sex would be dangerous.

## Chapter Twenty-Five: Guilt

The reason this is happening is I cheated on Claude. It happened while I was still in school, and he had already moved to California. It was when I lived with the opera-singer roommate who was tall like a lumberjack. He had curly blond hair and credit-card debt. We lived together because we were both friends with our other roommate, a short girl with a loud dog. I don't remember why the opera singer and I were out drinking together. We had separate sets of friends, and he had a girlfriend — an Asian girl who went to a salon to get her nails done. She was an opera singer, too. They practiced and drank on the porch sometimes, and I thought they were stupid.

But I remember very clearly how it felt to kiss the opera singer because he had a beard and it felt good. Unlike Claude's face, which is very smooth and soft, softer than mine. We came home from the bar and had sex in his bedroom, which was nicer than most people's our age because it was filled with stolen furniture. He drove a delivery truck for a Danish store downtown and would sometimes deliver things to himself. He had a headboard, a dresser, a desk, and a set of matching bedside tables, all painted white and handle-less. Our other roommate might have been home.

I never told Claude, but the first night we spent at our new California apartment, on the floor squeezed into a single sleeping bag, all I could think about was that opera-singer roommate.

## Chapter Twenty-Six: Eyewear in Michigan

I get a pair of regular frames with plastic, un-magnified lenses and put gift-wrap tape over the left one. These are by far the best yet. Only my good eye shows, and anyone can see it works perfectly. With my bad eye covered, it is like it was with the eye patch: all objects are singular, so I can read or use the computer without every line being blurred into the next, without getting dizzy. The doctors say the double vision could go away at any time, that I could wake up and it could be gone. Just like that. But there is no way of knowing if this might happen for sure. All I can do is wait.

I also have Nystagmus now, damage from the surgeries. Nystagmus is a form of involuntary eye movement. One eye is moving back and forth one way at a certain pace, and the other eye is following movement in a more normal way. The result is that everything is bouncy. My eye movements are vertical, making whatever objects I look at seem like they are moving up and down about twice a second. This worsens in darkness and with alcohol consumption.

The covered eye is a mystery to people. Some people might think I have just had an eye surgery or some kind of temporary injury, and then they will look somewhere else. They will not stare or wonder. If they do not see me try to smile, or walk, if they just see me sitting in a car, they will just think I am a girl with a vision problem, nothing more.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven: Warner's House

When Louise has to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, she calls Warner on the phone. Elizabeth and he sleep upstairs. Louise is in a room that was hers until she moved away to college, and then it became the guest bedroom. Now it is hers again. It still has the small dresser and bedside tables, the gauzy curtains, the pictures of France on the walls. To call for Warner in the night, Louise presses the page button on the receiver of her cordless phone, and the one that he keeps under his pillow beeps. Warner wears striped pajamas. He goes down to Louise's room where she is usually sitting on the bed, waiting, and she hangs on to his shoulder as they walk the three feet to the bathroom door. When she is done, he is out in the hall, waiting, and he escorts her back to bed. This is their system, Warner's idea. Louise's balance is worse at night and in the dark, and he fears that if she does not call him she may fall and hurt herself.

Warner has a Zen rock garden that he combs with a special rake he made. The rake has widely-spaced teeth. He makes dinner and does most of the grocery shopping. His painting studio is above a drugstore on their town's main street. It used to be a lawyer's office. A hospital bought one of his pieces. A hotel in the city bought another.

Elizabeth is a financial analyst and works in the city. She cooks very well, too, but specializes in desserts. She and Warner ride bikes together most Saturdays. She has a personal trainer that comes two mornings a week at 6 a.m. She takes Louise to her hairdresser, who gently massages Louise's head, even the scarred part, in one of those special sinks full of warm water. They decide to cut the hair to a blunt, chin-length bob. It is soft and golden, and with all the layered ends cut off it looks like a child's haircut.

Elizabeth takes Louise to get pedicures, manicures. She rents movies she thinks Louise might like, buys her bright pajamas, cozy slippers, and special ice cream that comes in small cartons.

\*

This is what Warner learns: an occupational therapist will help Louise learn to complete daily tasks, such as using the bathroom, getting dressed, brushing her hair and teeth, buttoning clothes, tying shoes. A physical therapist will help Louise with the bigger things, such as walking and sitting. She already can do these things, but she can do none of them well.

Louise will do outpatient therapy at a special rehab center every morning for three hours. She will have a team of occupational and physical therapists and a hearing-and-speech therapist. After the surgeries, she lost some of the hearing in her left ear, and because of the facial paralysis, some words are difficult for her to say, especially anything beginning with a “p” or “th.” Warner notices it is hard for her to open her mouth wide enough to take a bite out of a sandwich because the right side of her facial muscles don’t work. Therefore, nothing can pull her lips back from her teeth so she can take a good, bite out of something, like an apple. When she chews, no muscles can move the food from one side of her mouth to the other, so she has to move the food from her cheek with her finger.

\*

Warner worries constantly about Louise. Every day after her physical therapy appointments she eats a small lunch with him and then she goes down into the T.V. room in the basement. She watches show after show until dinner. Sometimes he can hear her

crying down there, or he and Elizabeth can hear her from her bedroom, at night, when she is on the phone with Claude or just alone. Sometimes, while he is cooking or reading, Louise will come around and turn pages of a newspaper or do something on the computer. Sometimes they will talk about how she is feeling, and he is encouraging. He brings out articles he has carefully clipped from neurological journals, or shows her websites he has found on support groups for patients of brain surgery or for people with physical disabilities. He will talk about foods he can prepare that are supposed to help her body recover faster and better. Beets are one. He will talk about what he has heard about the power of thinking positive thoughts. He buys her a meditation cushion.

The wheelchair is put away, folded up in a closet. Warner does not think they will have to use it anymore.

But he fears her face will always be a problem. Half-paralyzed, left eye crossed, it is not changing. The doctors say it could, that anything's a possibility, that the stagnation is nerve damage caused by the surgeries and it can get better sometimes. Sometimes not. There is no way to test what can be done, no injection to be given, no pill to take.

Warner has heard her call herself a freak.

\*

On Louise's first morning of rehab, Warner is nervous. He stands up fast when Louise's name is called. The young woman who meets them in the waiting room is named Amber. She is a high-school friend of Louise's, she says. The two girls hug and use high-pitched voices that end on the upswing, like a question. He vaguely remembers this Amber and the two girls tell him that their high-school boyfriends were friends, too.

The three of them stand in the front of the waiting room, the girls remembering things like dances and clothing trends. Amber is wearing blue scrubs and is tan and blonde. Warner feels embarrassed. Amber finally takes Louise's arm and leads her back. Warner starts to sit back down, but he is allowed to watch, a nurse tells him, and he hurries back, afraid.

\*

Amber has to see about Louise's weak right arm — what she needs to work on — so Amber gives Louise tests. She takes notes as Louise puts wooden pegs into a board, makes a paper clip chain, and circles words in a word search. Louise bounces a rubber ball and catches it on the table top over and over. Amber talks throughout these tests, she says she never left the area and is friends with many people who went to their high school. She is engaged and is moving to Indiana after she is married. Louise and Amber discuss Claude. Warner concentrates on not saying anything. He wants Louise to enjoy her time doing something different than being at home with him and Elizabeth.

Then they meet another occupational therapist: a tall woman with many earrings who laughs a lot. She gives Louise many depth-perception tests, using an eye chart with letters on it and asking Louise to reach for objects she holds in front of her. Most of the time where Louise reaches is air, missing the object by a few inches. They do other tests that evaluate Louise's sensory damage. This involves pricking her with a safety pin. Louise has to say what the scale of pain is on a scale from one to ten. When the occupational therapist pricks the tips of Louise's right fingers, or her right heel or toes, she says the feeling is a three. When on the left side of her body in those same places, it is a nine, a full-blown feeling.

At Warner's house, Louise gets around by hanging on from surface to surface, the kitchen counter to a chair, pressing her fingers on the wall until she reaches the couch. But this is not okay. This is not safe, the therapists say, and she cannot do this if she wants to live by herself. So they do exercises. The physical therapists ask Louise to walk in a straight line down a hallway. She cannot keep straight for more than two steps. She veers one way or the other. The therapists ask her to turn her head from side to side while she moves. Doing this, she lurches and bumps into the walls. She says she wants to look down at her feet. They take Louise into the yard to have her try to walk on grass, which she says feels uneven and spongy. They have her practice stepping up, and then down, from the curb. At Warner's, she sits and scoots to get up or down the stairs. She can get away with it there.

\*

Some of the things Louise does at the rehab clinic:

- Stretching on a giant rubber ball
- Tug-of-war with a therapist
- Table tennis
- Playing the game Connect Four
- Playing cards
- Building towers of blocks

\*

Everyone thought Louise's double vision was temporary and would go away with, or soon after, the surgeries. But it didn't. So.

Amber dumps a bucket of screws on the table and Louise sorts them, then works them into holes on a board. She has Louise squeeze little balloons full of sand. They are trying to improve her dexterity, her ability to grab. They play the game where they touch their thumbs to each of their remaining fingers as fast as they can: pointer, middle, index, thumb. Louise does this all day. Warner can watch her fingers move while she is sitting eating lunch. She can only eat with her left hand anyway. She misses her mouth if she holds her food with the right.

Louise does small tests all around the house each day to see if she is getting better. She counts how many steps she can descend before looking down (three) and tries to empty the dishwasher using only her right hand. This does not last more than two days. It is too difficult, and she keeps chipping the dishes. It is like the left side of her body is conducted by puppet strings, each movement is sudden and jerky.

At Amber's urging, Warner buys Louise thick workbooks of exercises like "What's Wrong With This Picture?" and easy word searches, where the word could be hidden diagonally, or even backwards! These games are meant to help Louise rely on her vision more, and her eyes hurt her often now. She rubs them and uses drops. Overload, Amber says. It will go away, and she twists her engagement ring around, as Warner has noticed is her habit.

\*

After three months, she walks down all the halls in the rehab center without resting, or falling. Her left foot has foot drop, where the toes drag because the dorsiflex muscle is too weak, still, to pull the toes up to the shin properly, and so she trips on the

carpet a few times but she makes it. All of the therapists, except Amber, who is married and gone by now, cheer her on.

One day Louise discovers that her right hand fingers will snap. Warner tries to get excited, but he can't. This is just not enough to smile about, he thinks. Louise seems happy, and snaps her hand on and off for the rest of the afternoon. But the next day it is as if she has forgotten about her recent progress and doesn't snap once, doesn't even mention it. Warner feels again as if they have really been doing nothing this whole time, nothing at all.

Each day at 11:00 Warner picks Louise up from therapy. Some days, she walks all the way to his waiting car in the parking lot, grinning. Others, he comes to the door of the building and she leans on his arm.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight: Janet Misses Louise

Janet calls Louise every day. She flew up to visit Louise once already and bought her lots of clothes. They stayed the night at a borrowed beach house, but Louise didn't even go outside.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine: Hobbies

I think a lot about what things will be like once I am better. My favorite idea is that I will be an employee of some kind, maybe a receptionist or a researcher, in the clinic where my surgeries were. I will also be a doctor's girlfriend. The scene that I imagine the most is one where I am at my own apartment, putting away groceries after a long day at work, and my boyfriend the doctor walks in the door and smiles at the sight of me. That's it. I just like picturing it, varying what he's wearing (scrubs or a suit? a white coat?) again and again. I never think about what I'll look like. Or sometimes I am at a coffee shop, reading at a small table and my boyfriend the doctor comes up and covers my eyes from behind, like in the movies.

Getting ready for bed is the worst. I wash my face and brush my teeth. I don't look in the mirror. I brush my short hair and wear real pajamas: flannel button-downs, nightgowns, short-sets. Many people have sent them to me. I rub on hand lotion. I turn out the bedside light. I pull the cover over. I am rarely tired.

All of my clothes are "gym" clothes. I have grey and black sweatpants and some nylon shorts. V-neck T-shirts. All my socks are short and white and I have one pair of shoes, the tennis shoes I wear to rehab. What else do I need?

I remember an outfit I wore at least once a week in college: an Oxford-style shirtdress and gold-lamè flip-flops.

People have tried to get me started on some hobbies that will help pass the time between physical therapy and meals. I have made a scrapbook of all of the get-well cards I received over the months. There have been hundreds, some from people I've never met,

like Elizabeth's co-workers, or members of my mother's church. One old woman sends me a card every week, always signed by herself and her Scottie dog, Heidi. Claude's parents have only sent me one, and they have never called.

I find an old deck of Tarot cards in the basement. I learn how to do readings by using websites, and I also buy a book: *The Everything Tarot Book: Discover Your Past, Present and Future: It's in the Cards!* I get pretty good at different spreads: the Immediate-Situation-Three-Card spread, the Practical-Advice-Five-Card spread, and my favorite, the General-Life-Conditions spread. I practice these spreads on myself over and over on my bed, and on my father and Elizabeth every so often. But mostly I just do myself. There doesn't have to be a specific question going into the readings, the book says, but I always do. Sometimes it is more precise, but it is always some version of what should I do?

In the fifth month of my stay at my father's, he and Elizabeth go away for two days. For the first time since The Event, I make coffee for myself. I do my own laundry. I make sandwiches. At night, I lock up the house. This is supposed to be a step. This teaches independence and instills confidence, everyone says. I wash the dishes carefully, one at a time, soaping up each glass and plate and spoon and setting them all on a towel to dry.

## Chapter Thirty: Face-Shock Kit

The Michigan rehab team gives me a face-shock kit. It comes in a black zippered carrying case in two parts. The gun-like part holds D-Volt batteries, and there is a thin piece of plastic extending from it that the therapists call a wand. It looks like a toilet-paper tube with a pencil sticking out of it. The wand has a black fabric-covered tip. The second piece is a box with a lever, which adjusts the voltage from one to ten. The two pieces are connected by a cord.

The idea is to touch the wand to the parts of my face that are paralyzed and to shock them into movement, out of stillness and into strength. Once the muscles are shocked enough and have moved enough by force, they will remember how to do it on their own. That is the theory, anyway. Right now they are atrophied, the surgeon in the clinic had said. The surgeries damaged some of the facial nerves that control, among other things, movement. I still have feeling on the paralyzed side of my face, which one of the therapists says is lucky. Her husband has movement but no feeling, so he cannot tell if he has food on his cheek or is drooling. I envy him because he at least looks normal.

It hurts when I pull the small trigger on the gun as the tip is pressed to a point on my face, like the corner of my mouth or my forehead. Volts of electricity make the muscles move for a second, and then it's over. The spasms can't simulate a small smile, or a line of concern on a forehead. The muscular twitch that the shock creates is a motion too quick to be an expression. Sometimes there's a flash of light behind my eyes if the tool is amped up too high.

I shock myself in ten-minute sessions, usually starting at level three and ending at eight. The tip must be wet under a faucet. Without moisture, the shock can't travel. My routine, mornings before rehab and right before I go to bed, is to stand at the bathroom sink with the faucet running, dipping the tip under the water and shocking myself. I have to look into the mirror to do it, the act of watching my frozen face move for half a second is supposed to be good for me somehow. It is supposed to be encouraging. After more than six months of using the kit without change, I send it back to the company it was rented from. No one talks about other methods to fix my face, there are no more ideas. I will not be talked into smiling for pictures — the asymmetry is so awful that I refuse. The way I tolerate being in a photo is to put sunglasses on so that the tape on the left lens doesn't show, and to stare expressionlessly at the camera, my mouth a straight line, waiting for it all to be over.

## Chapter Thirty-One: Nystagmus

The surgeon says that it is a damage from the surgeries. Nystagmus is a form of involuntary eye movement. One eye is moving back and forth one way at a certain pace, and the other eye is following movement in a more normal way. The result is that everything is bouncy. My eye movements are vertical, making whatever objects I look at seem like they are moving up and down about twice a second. This, along with double vision, makes seeing anything an effort. It worsens in darkness and with alcohol consumption.

## Chapter Thirty-Two: Tom Visits

Tom visits Warner's house. He is on summer vacation from school and wants to stay for a while, to help. He drives Louise to the beach and they stick their plastic chairs in the sand. Louise says all she wants is to tan, so they sit there, despite the high winds and tiny blowing grains. It is hard for Tom to talk to Louise these days because she is in such a bad mood. She has actually been hard to be around since The Event, which was understandable for a while, but Tom had assumed that after the surgeries Louise would be different. But she is always mean, sarcastic and cynical. Bitter. She is jealous of everyone; her friends are succeeding in their careers, getting engaged or at least in real relationships, moving into nicer and nicer apartments. Plus, they are all beautiful, every one of them, she says.

Tom is a tall, thin college student who volunteers and rides his bike whenever possible. When he and Louise were at the same college at the same time, he used to tutor her in math. This only happened twice, really. Louise would become frustrated, yell, and slam the math textbook shut. Tom almost never yells. Tom has been careful not to raise his voice to Louise in any manner since The Event. Sometimes, feeling brave, he asks Louise softly to please be a little pleasant.

Turning towards him, Louise says she wants to start driving again. She hasn't driven since The Event. How can someone with her vision do it? But now she says that if she passes a special driver's education program for disabled people, she can get her license back. Paraplegics drive, she says. I could get a handicapped pass and park anywhere I want.

Tom does not know if she should be thinking about handicapped passes.

\*

Tom is ready to go back home now. Louise does not ask any questions, ever, about his life. He would like to tell her about his new girlfriend or his new house-mates. But all Louise talks about are her therapists and her eternal problems with Claude and her therapists some more. Tom was hoping he could have some good times with Louise, that he could distract her from her unhappiness, but instead, he is the one who is being eaten by the feeling. Warner walks around silently in socks, Louise watches the T.V. screen, and Elizabeth tries to help by baking pear tarts, taking them to the movies, and bringing home gifts, but nothing helps much.

Everyone agrees that Louise should get a cat, so they pick out a kitten at the local shelter. Louise is responsible for feeding and watering him and scooping the small litter box. Warner takes a lot of photos of Louise and her new cat and in each one she holds the animal over the motionless half of her face, her taped glasses.

### Chapter Thirty-Three: How to Do a Super Eight

Claude has flown to visit Louise, who is staying with Warner and Elizabeth in their vacation home in the North Carolina mountains. He's here just for the weekend. Taken off work special, not easy when you have his boss. Slave driver! He says these things with a smile. Claude wants to see how Louise is doing, how she looks now that she's had some time to recover.

\*

I suggest the pool because it has steam rooms and saunas. Good towels and even a smoothie bar. Nice extras. People like them. I will float in the water without a cane or someone's arm to steady me, and Claude can see what it is like, how hard I am working. I bring the Aquatic Exercises binder that has been made for me at the rehab center. Written instructions on technique accompany drawings of a figure in different stages of movement. My favorites are the Snow Angel, the Butterfly Flutter, and best of all, the Super Eight. I get better at it every day, know the instructions. Stand in deep water, shoulder high. To start, glide a leg to one side of the body then the next, tracing the giant number waist-high, then back down again. One hand can hang on to the pool gutter or a strong partner for help, they have told me, although the sketched figure in the binder does not hang on to anything.

\*

Claude says Louise should start without him. He sees the pool, greenish and still, through the door's window. All around them are echoes of people yelling, but the lobby is empty.

I just want to play a quick game of racquetball, he says. He walks backwards

toward the hallway with the courts. Louise says that he doesn't have a racquet. Claude holds up a silver money clip, and waves it, flag-like.

But I have this binder, she says.

Five minutes. Ten minutes, he says.

He jogs toward the courts, warming up.

## Chapter Thirty-Four: An Email From Claude

Louise,

I refuse to give up on you, despite what you say about me abandoning you when things get rough. I'm still here and I still want to be a part of your life. I think you and I both get along when we're not selfish. It sucks that we've had to endure all of this during such as a watershed period in our lives. When you say that I've changed, you're god damn right I have. I had to. I hope that you one day understand the plight of having to sacrifice many priorities for the sake of a job. All this has made me feel very low about myself and made me question where I'm going.

But along came a time when I had to grow up. I've considered many times quitting this job and moving out to be with you and help you recover. That would have eased our pains, I'm sure. But the desired effect would have only been ephemeral. After a while I would have regretted the decision. I would have undoubtedly resented you, wrongly, for my having to leave my life. I hoped that you would accept what my life had become and somehow value the idea of putting work first sometimes. Through work, love is paid for.

I still cherish the idea of you coming back here one day and we can actually seek out the life we once planned for ourselves. We never went to San Francisco and Seattle together. We never went to Vancouver. We never went hiking. I wanted to.

## Chapter Thirty-Five: Books

Books Louise has bought or been given:

*How to Heal a Broken Heart in 20 Days*

*The Purpose-Driven Life*

*I Had Brain Surgery, What's Your Excuse?*

*A Whole New Life, An Illness and a Healing*

*Another Day In the Frontal Lobe: A Brain Surgeon Exposes Life On the Inside*

*Don't Leave Me This Way, Or When I Get Back On My Feet You'll Be Sorry*

## Chapter Thirty-Six: Trip

Once I am strong enough to walk with my cane for a good amount of time, I take a trip to San Francisco with two friends from college. I haven't broken up with Claude. The trip is supposed to increase my confidence in myself and my independence. There are so many hills and so much walking. I feel slow and stupid, and my friends encourage me, but I am so tired at the end of each day, unwilling to do much of anything, to go to any museum, Alcatraz, to take a photo, even. We are supposed to be having a grand adventure, but instead we head back to bed early each night. We should be bonding like crazy, braiding each other's hair, but it does not feel like that. I call Claude in the dark. We are still furious at each other and we fight, trying to hurt one another however we can. I pretend like I am having a great time, and he tells me about his recent trip to Montana, his raise at work, his new car. I realize that I feel ugly all the time.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven: Moving In

Louise decides to move back to the Kansas town where she went to college, where Tom lives. It is October, six months since the craniotomies. The whole family spends the day moving her into her apartment. Warner, Elizabeth, and Louise have rented a van and driven down from Michigan. Janet and her new boyfriend are here, and of course, Tom. Michael has started college in Minnesota. The moving part doesn't take long. Louise has few things: a friend's couch, a lamp, some dishes with roses on them. The van is full of items Elizabeth pulled from the basement: towels, framed pictures, rugs. She made a bedspread from fabric Louise picked out. Elizabeth puts on rubber gloves and cleans under the kitchen sink. Of course she finds mice and cockroaches.

No one wants to leave. They stand around in the little main room and talk, their voices echoing off the walls.

As Janet gives her goodbye hug, she asks Louise if she has any food. We just ate, Louise says. In the cupboards, Janet says, and then she opens each one. They are all empty. So she goes to the grocery store with her daughter, buying her organic everything, cartons of eggs and bags of bright fruit. Once she is back and everything is put away Janet has no choice but to go. Her new boyfriend tries to comfort her on the way back to their small town, but Janet just presses her cheek to the window. She keeps thinking of Louise sleeping in that place tonight and having to get up in it in the morning.

\*

Warner spends most of the moving day putting up blinds, caulking the bathroom, checking the smoke alarm. He walks around the place with a level, making sure all the

pictures hang right. He sees that Louise seems to be happy in this apartment, and he hopes that it works out. He tried to get her to live with him and Elizabeth for a little longer, but she said that she was ready to move on. He and Louise had this talk quite a few times back in Michigan, he always asking the questions quietly and calmly, and she insisting she was ready to go. She had a list of reasons written down, including: Friends and Future. But he still doesn't understand what she will do, really, and how she will do it. He feels as if Louise is a teenager leaving home for the first time. He has bought her a self-budgeting workbook, pamphlets on home repair and personal safety. Warner does not really remember the first time Louise left home for college. It seemed like she suddenly was just gone and he never had worried about her at all, not about drinking or smoking or grades or boys. And when he and Elizabeth drive away, when there is nothing else they can do in that apartment, it is dark outside. Pulling slowly away, they can only see the outline of the sagging apartment building and through a window they see Louise, bent over a box, looking for something. And Warner feels he is doing the wrong thing but keeps on driving away. He does not know what else to do.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight: Tom's Efforts

Tom is glad that Louise moved back to this town. He can help her here. Already Louise has her own apartment and a cat. Her apartment is a little link of rooms in a wooden-shingled tower crammed with college kids years younger than she. Tom's scholarship house is a five-minute walk away. He often rides his bike to see her, propping it on the porch where her door is, a porch that's trashed by watery puke stains and soggy fast-food paper bags. Girls in skinny jeans and pastel polar fleeces are always slamming their doors and running up and down the stairs, which go down the outside center of the building like a fire escape. Last weekend, a few guys without shirts on grilled hot dogs and drank beer in the small dead yard, a football game loud on the radio.

Tom remembers one time about two years ago when Louise invited him over for dinner at her old apartment. This was before Claude, California, or The Event. It was Tom's first semester, and he wasn't living in the scholarship house yet, but on a skyscraper-like dormitory — full of guys who did things like blow their pot smoke through dryer sheets to get rid of the smell. He wasn't making many friends because he didn't like the taste of alcohol. His roommate had a girlfriend, and they always were in the bunk bed and under the covers together, watching movies. Louise rarely called Tom, but one night she invited him over to her place for dinner the next night. Tom was so happy that he did his homework in his room undistracted by the sounds of sex.

Because of a long Spanish Club meeting he was late to Louise's, and knocked on her door several times with no answer. He tried the door and found it open, and he ran up the stairs with his contribution to the meal, some apples from his dining hall, calling out

that he was sorry. But the place was empty. Louise and three other roommates had lived in the entire top floor of an old house and had painted almost all of the walls yellow, red or blue. The largest room had a pool table, bright overhead fluorescent lights and a black-and-white checkered floor. Tom saw gorged dishes of food on top of the stove and a note: went out – you shouldn't have been late! It had only been fifteen minutes.

Once Louise had a party and invited him. The apartment was crammed, humid, and Louise was wearing a sparkly tank top and lots of makeup. When she handed him a drink, he said no thanks and she shook her head. You'll never make any friends, she had said.

\*

Now, Louise has been here two weeks and says she wants to go back to school, volunteer somewhere, and get a part-time job. But as far as Tom can tell, she has been spending her time playing with her cat and looking out of her windows at the students walking by. She can drive during daylight hours and walk short distances without her cane, and she wears her taped glasses everywhere. She limps. She has trouble talking on the phone or conversing in public places where there is background noise.

Everyone is concerned. Janet and Warner call Tom early in the mornings to get the Louise report when he is still under his Mexican blanket, the room a dreamy dark. They mail him checks written out for amounts for dinners he and Louise can have at tablecloth restaurants, with enough leftover for a trip to the movie theater. They each want to come visit and see how things are going. Janet mentions she bought an air mattress for a weekend trip up. Tom isn't used to all this attention, all these things, all this contact with his parents. He tells them there's no need to visit. He has it under control. But he does

enjoy their phone calls and responds at length to the emails. He sends forwards. He likes the idea of being a large part of their thoughts. But no, they should not come. He is Louise's brother. He was there when she crumpled on the grass in Alabama. He can help now.

\*

Tom takes Louise to the grocery store. She doesn't look out of the car window as they drive, not at the fraternity and sorority mansions with Olympian pillars, not at the man on a street corner meditating on a bed of nails, not even to see the people next to their car at any stop light. She keeps her eyes on her hands. Tom notices that Louise now always wears clothes that could be pajamas. Sweatpants, bright T-shirts. Stretchy shorts. He wonders where all her real clothes went.

\*

On his regular walk to her place for dinner, Tom usually sees his sister out by the house's big metal mailbox. She is typically leaning against a fencepost, waiting for him and whatever food he will bring. Tom always brings something.

\*

Tom's girlfriend wants to meet Louise. Tom's girlfriend is a short, motivated girl who is teaching assistant for a human sexuality class. She and Tom are both members of an experimental Christian church called the Center. It is close to downtown in an old community rec center. Tom's girlfriend has cropped hair and does not wear bras or use deodorant. Tom has always liked how sweet his girlfriend is, how she gives everyone hugs and cheek kisses and remembers birthdays, but he is not sure she should meet Louise. Louise does not like to smile because she says when she does her face's

paralyzed side is more noticeable, which Tom guesses is true. Let me hang out with her. We could watch a movie and make some goals, write them on a marker board, his girlfriend says. We could get ice cream. Tom doesn't think this would be a good idea.

\*

Tom lugs over bags of vegetable juices, vitamins, and essential oils that his girlfriend has helped him put together for Louise. She ignores them. He asks Louise to join the Center. It's just what you need, he says to her. Louise comes with him to the next meeting, where a roomful of people watch a video about the evils of Wal-Mart and then discuss.

He is anxious about Louise living in this apartment alone, talking all the time now about getting back together with one of her old boyfriends, Davy. It seems they've been emailing. Tom remembers them dating, remembers that Louise broke up with Davy right before getting together with Claude. He wonders what Louise does all day, asks her. She vaguely mentions seeing friends he has never met and reading books he has never heard of or seen around. She doesn't ever do things he thinks she should, healing things like writing in a journal or drawing in a sketchbook. Mostly Louise talks about this Davy guy. She says she thinks they will get back together, that they had a good thing going, and that it was her mistake to end it. I was young and stupid, she says. Tom feels scared for her, doesn't want to see her make a fool of herself.

You don't have any responsibilities, he says to her. You need something. Take on a project, that's what you should do. Work for my scholarship house. You need some light busy-work until you feel up to more. You can sweep the house kitchen after meals, maybe wipe down the counters.

Louise calls Tom's house a pathetic commune and says the Center is a cult. Tom leaves, the dinner plate of rice and beans that he brought over hardly touched.

Tom's girlfriend calls him a pushover when he says he doesn't care what they play for House Game Night. He participates in Pictionary, even though he dislikes it, and he hopes this pleases his girlfriend, but instead she laughs at him. He has said before to his girlfriend that he prefers Uno, and she remembers this. Ask for what you want once in a while, she says. And why didn't you stay longer at your sister's? Are you letting her ruin things for you? Are you letting her bring you down? Tom, you need to take charge. Let me talk to her. I bet I know what to do. Tom doesn't know if his girlfriend realizes she's cracking her knuckles while saying this.

\*

Tom takes Louise to the public indoor pool, which she hates. He knows this, but she at least goes — she won't go anywhere else to work out. Janet and Warner keep telling him that Louise needs to exercise every day, but she says walking outside on the sidewalk is humiliating, the gym is crowded, yoga class is too quiet. But at the pool Tom doesn't think she tries hard enough. She gets stiff and impossible after a few minutes and sinks to the bottom if he tells her to lie back and float. Her arms are thin but flabby, her tummy soft. She needs muscle, Janet and Warner say. Make her build it. It's the only way her walking is going to get better, the only way she'll get rid of that cane. Tom tries to show Louise the strengthening moves that are illustrated in her physical therapy binder, the strokes. His limbs are smooth and slow, as if swimming through gel. He demonstrates a Soccer Kick, a Bicycle, a Mermaid. He does the Boxing Punch. Louise's swimsuit — bright blue with skinny straps — looks bad. It was last used on a

spring-break vacation to Jamaica where she paraded down the beach with her girlfriends. Now it sags and puckers. She holds a kickboard across her chest like it is a stuffed animal and sits on the gutter. Tom swims back and forth down the lane, hoping he is being a positive role model.

\*

Tom finally gives into his girlfriend's requests and brings her to Louise's one night. His girlfriend lights some candles and asks Louise lots of questions that embarrass Tom, such as how Louise feels about her body, etc. Louise looks at Tom, and Tom looks away.

\*

Tom tells Louise he has been seeing a therapist. Louise gets angry, her voice rising to shrill. She mocks him. She is seeing a therapist, too, she says. For real reasons.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine: Me and Davy

My first week in town, Tom takes me to an acupuncturist. He says he has heard that my facial nerves might regenerate and my crossed eye could heal at an unbelievable speed if the right spot is stimulated, if a needle pokes, hits, and worries it just right. The acupuncturist's office is in a renovated Victorian house and smells like leaves. The waiting area has miniature rock gardens on the magazine tables that Tom rakes with a comb. In his examination room, the acupuncturist has me strip to my underwear and puts little T-shaped needles in places from my earlobes to my pinkie toes. I feel a buzz. After 30 minutes, he takes the needles out and says he'll see me next week.

After the acupuncture, Tom and I sometimes get coffee. The appointments are in the early morning, and we are usually both feeling good about the productive start we have on our days, so we are cheerful. Tom talks about opportunities I should take: job openings, classes that are starting soon, etc. I say that I will look into all these things, but think instead about my old times in this town. I think about my old boyfriend, Davy, who still lives here. Before I do much of anything, I think, I need to see who still loves me. Davy might. He once had said being with me felt like being with a movie star.

Before getting in the shower one morning, I look in the mirror. I have been to an appointment, and then on a coffee trip with Tom. Tiny trails of blood have dried to my face from insertions in the hairline, the nostrils, and the mouth-corners. I see a glint and look closer. A needle sticks out of my eyebrow. It is thin like a fishbone. I pluck the needle and drop it in the little plastic trash can under the sink.

At the end of the tenth session, the acupuncturist sits me down. He is always well-

dressed in pleated pants and a shirt and tie, but never shoes. Hundreds of needles are stuck in foam blocks and stacked along the wall. The acupuncturist tells me that our sessions are over as I am putting on my socks. He says he will not be able to help me. I sit in my cold car and look through my cell phone for someone to call, but find no one. It is a long time before I am calm enough to drive home.

At home, I do lunges across the apartment, back and forth, as advised by the physical therapists back in Michigan. I step wide and low across the living room, planting my feet in the proper position with each thundering step. I lose my balance, and the floor shakes in a crash as I topple, and I think about the people in the apartment below, if they wonder.

\*

I call Davy. He doesn't answer and I hear some sort of voicemail prompt, so I speak something. I blare the music Davy used to listen to, wearing headphones so that I can get the gist of it. Tom visits, but when he leaves I turn up the volume even more to get the sound that is screaming. I sit on the floor, lean against the wall, and feel nothing new.

\*

Davy gets back to me. He feels bad, I know, by the kind tones he uses. Why else would he talk this way to a girl who dumped him? He says he'll take me to one of his guitar-playing gigs, that he'll come and pick me up in the camper. It's my all-the-time car now, Davy says.

\*

It had been his dad's — we'd gone to get it the summer we were together. It was parked among four-wheelers and a wooden swing-set that benefited his dad's new, second round of children.

I get nervous and put on some real clothes: fresh jeans that hide the tops of my orthopedic shoes. I wear my hair down so that the scar that runs down my scalp to the nape of my neck doesn't show. I wait on my building's steps.

I used to drive the camper. The steering wheel was the size of a pizza and the seat was huge and leather, a captain's chair. We controlled a spaceship. On weekend trips to Missouri or Arkansas, through national parks and hill country, we slept on the second story, the cubby above the front seats. Extravagant, we left the air-conditioning on all night. Once, we visited some friends of his in Little Rock, a married pair. They lived in a trailer with quilts and clipped coupons tacked on the walls. The baked chicken she served was bloody, bright pink inside.

\*

I shouldn't be drinking yet, Tom would say, but I need this can. I am at the gig Davy is playing at, the first party I have been to since The Event. Davy makes the living room of this apartment his stage and moves his body the way guitar players do, thrashing. He and the other guys in the band make jokes into the microphone, exchanging smiles and drank from the same bottle.

Now we stand outside, and I use his arm instead of my cane, which I threw in the grass. Davy smiles at me. He maybe wants to get away, but he won't let himself, I know. He is a good person, with clothes that are purposefully a little too small. I am concerned about how my face looks in this street-light, if the paralysis sags. He says I

look very thin. The thin is because I am depressed. Two years ago with him I was twenty pounds heavier and had an office job. He says I am a poor thing, waves to someone going inside the party. He pushes his yellow hair around. I want to touch it but can't because of the cups we hold and the rule about touching an ex. Let them touch you first, unless that never happens.

\*

That one summer with Davy, I grew a Magic Garden, a shoebox-sized display of paper cutouts that grew crystals when liquid was added. It became an upright scene of trees and flowers overnight. The texture was like prickly tissue paper. Davy and I left the window open one morning and when we returned that night, only skeletons of the trees remained. The tiny colored leaves and petals were scattered on the floor like real ones would have been after a storm. But I didn't care, not even when a thing so beautiful was ruined.

I don't remember exactly how it ended with Davy. Soon afterward, I went on a tropical vacation with some girls from school, started a new semester, and began dating Claude. I remember that he sent me a birthday card in the mail a few months after we broke up. Then I moved to California. Then I got sick. But I can't remember why it ended with us. A failed ski trip? Different schedules? A botched dinner? Did one of us cheat? Was it small or big? How much did it hurt?

\*

Now it's after the party and I'm in the camper with Davy. The wallpaper's peeling all over, and it smells like cheese snacks. I set my special glasses on the widow ledge and settle, comfortable in the dark. I have some great feelings. I've cleared the

couch, but Davy is up in the passenger seat. I ask him to remember a great time that we had. He says nothing, so I say something about a karaoke night, how we made the whole audience cheer. I think that happened, anyway. I ask him to remember a time we had in this camper. I name a few to get him going. They are my best thoughts. But he doesn't leave his seat, doesn't take his feet off the dashboard. It is getting a little light out. It is getting pretty bad. I see his head is on his drawn-up knees. I kneel down beside the passenger seat and wait. He says this will never happen. He says he's sorry.

## Chapter Forty: The Tornados

Tom sees Louise has made a big pot of spaghetti with meat sauce. It is the first thing she has cooked, as far as he's seen. It's Davy's favorite, she says. She tells Tom that she and Davy hung out a few weeks ago and she hasn't talked to him since. I've already called too many times, she says, smooshing the sauce with a wooden spoon. Tom gets them both bowls of food and glasses of grape juice, which she sloshes on the rug while raising it with a shaky hand. She toasts to Davy. Tom suggests she make some plans. He tells her his: tomorrow he has seven appointments and sixteen things to do. One of them is taking a friend's baby to the park, then he will wash the house's sheets. Another is driving a vanful of people to the roller rink.

\*

Two tornadoes tear apart the town this morning. It hails, and small balls of ice break windowpanes and dent cars. Tom comes to Louise's door after the first one. He isn't supposed to be outside, but he guesses that Louise hasn't hidden herself, and he's right: she's standing in the main room, watching the weather. They run to his car, and for a few moments, it is just them in the street, the sky a yellow-green. Everyone else is already underground. It is noiseless, windless, they could hear anything. Then the sirens sound. Tom drives them to the Center, where they sit in the basement.

The next day they go for a drive and pass Davy's house, the second story just a shell and the rest boarded up already. They see the camper: it's in the yard, under a fallen tree and hacked in half. Ruined, like someone did it on purpose.

## Chapter Forty-One: Claude's Idea

On a cross-country drive to visit his parents, Claude passes through the Kansas town where Louise has moved back to, where they met. He wonders what she looks like now. He calls Louise and asks her to meet him for coffee, or dinner, a drink maybe. Maybe she still likes vodka and juice, still crumples one after another of those little square bar napkins. Maybe she still has that brown bag, the one with metal studs all over it. They were in some design he could never decipher. That big leather pouch was the size of a grocery sack. Maybe they can just have a talk in a driveway, her driveway, wherever that is. He can swing by, stand with his car door still open, even, engine on, bell ding, one leg on the gravel and one still inside on the rug. It could be casual. Over the phone Louise says yes, they can meet. Then she calls back and says no, and says no several more times when he wheedles. Fine, no big deal, he says. He calls his dad to pass the time while on the highway. He stops in the town anyway, he needs to move his legs.

He parks and gets out, his rumpled shirt open at the collar, jeans dark and stiff, sneakers blue. Claude walks the downtown sidewalks exactly twice, buys nothing, doesn't recognize a face.

## Chapter Forty-Two: What Everyone Thinks That Louise Should Do Now

Janet would like Louise to move back in with her for a while. The apartment experience has been okay, but really. She could sleep in a big bed, eat healthfully, and get strong! There are places in Janet's town where Louise could volunteer. That would be good. Louise needs to see people who are more unfortunate than she is, she needs to exercise some empathy. Janet would never tell Louise this, but she thinks that if Louise thought a little less about herself and a little more about others, she would not be so unhappy and tear-stained all the time.

Janet's new boyfriend is a doctor, so he makes sure all of Louise's sleeping, depression, and anti-anxiety prescriptions are filled. He hopes that Louise will start being friendly and talk to him soon.

Warner emails Louise the link to the Myers-Briggs personality test. He sets her up with someone who finds her aptitude for certain careers. A librarian or a sort of nurse are jobs that come to his mind. He, Elizabeth and Janet make sure Louise has plenty of money. They will always make sure of that. It is the least they can do. Warner encourages her when she talks of going to graduate school, seeing new physical therapists, starting a part-time job. He imagines her doing light clerical work, something that keeps her mind occupied, makes her feel productive. But he doesn't want to pressure her, doesn't want her to think she's not already succeeding. He tries not to email her too many self-help articles or vitamins. He waits for her phone calls and tries to be enthusiastic about whatever she's done that day.

Elizabeth mails Louise packages of inspirational books about women overcoming obstacles. She gets on the line with Warner when Louise calls and makes sure she feels included in the latest family news, such as who adopted a baby or whose birthday is coming up. She invites Louise on vacations, quick weekend trips where she and Warner will take her around cities, eat at the best restaurants, and see fine museum exhibits. Elizabeth wants to help Louise enjoy things.

Claude thinks that Louise should go back to being a newspaper journalist, when things get better, of course. She just needs to heal for another six months, a year, maybe, and go back to that job she had in California. He wants her to have fun like she used to. She used to be a wild girl. He would see her flirting with strangers in bars late at night – it used to make him jealous. He doesn't see why she is so dramatic about everything anyway. Her whole life does not have to change. She can go back.

Tom just wants Louise to get out of her apartment. This much time alone is not healthy. He, for example, never has a minute to think, a minute to get down on himself. Look at him! Louise should move into an apartment in the Center. Plenty of people he knows do that for a while when they need to get themselves together. She would be really great working in the Center's garden, spending mornings out there concentrating on getting every weed out from the pepper plants. He doesn't like it when he comes to Louise's for dinner and he can tell that she has been in there all day. He can smell the wasted life once he walks in the door.

## Chapter Forty-Three: Recreational Therapy

Here I am at the town hospital. The automatic doors won't stop opening.

A recreational-therapy test's results said I needed to re-socialize myself. The test was really just a packet of quizzes given to me by someone at the rehab center. The test was titled Recreation Is Where You Find It. The directions were to check boxes marked Frequently, Occasionally, or Never, next to statements. One section was called Social Interaction:

-I invite friends to visit my home

-I seek new friends

-I write letters

-I attend parties

-I attend club meetings

-I go to parades

-I argue

-I make social telephone calls

I never go to parades, I thought. The test results said that I needed to volunteer somewhere. There was a packet. I chose a hospital off the list. Others choices were: the zoo, meals-on-wheels van, a church daycare, or homes of shut-ins.

I think another hospital, one I'm not a patient in, might snap me out of something. I want it to sting. But mostly the volunteer director here just tells me to wheel people from one room to the other. The patients don't look sick, just tired and dry.

I get to wear latex gloves for lab deliveries, my other duty. Volunteers are told to take the stairs when carrying lab specimens. Patients don't want to see fluids in containers and vials, especially when labeled with words like "CAUTION" and "HUMAN WASTE." They don't want to see urine, sometimes a dark, frightening color and sometimes as clear as water, sloshing around in jars with color-coded lids.

\*

Another quiz is titled Spectator Appreciation (again, check Frequently, Occasionally or Never):

- I watch television
- I attend movies
- I watch children play
- I travel or go sightseeing
- I go to a ball game
- I watch car racing
- I people watch
- I see stage plays
- I notice changes in buildings and landscapes

\*

Some therapist at the rehab center told me to look in the mirror every morning and smile ten times. Your brain and body need to learn to communicate with each other again, he said. A third quiz is called, Do These Prevent You From Enjoying Life?

- Often I don't feel like doing anything
- Work is the main priority

- I don't think leisure is important
- There won't be enough money for me to do what I want
- I won't have the physical skills
- I won't have enough free time
- I don't know what is going on or what is available
- There is no one to do things with
- Following through on my intentions is difficult
- Social situations are awkward for me
- I never feel well enough

\*

The packet had a list of activities organized into categories such as: Nature (appreciative), e.g. yard work, organized wilderness trips, county, state and federal parks; or, Nature (sportsman), e.g. fishing (lake, stream,) ice fishing, bow hunting, hunting, chartering a fishing boat, or taxidermy: You'll never know until you try it!

Dating is under the Informal Gatherings category. I am already thinking about dating. I am trying to figure out who would want me now.

\*

Conversation topics are easy for volunteers because they are restricted to the weather or sports. This is under the supervisor's instructions. She wrote it on the marker board in orientation. Other topics that may seem harmless might upset patients. I always start out with the weather: what it has been like, what it is likely to be like, what it is like somewhere else. If I mention that I am originally from Michigan, the news is met with

surprise, pleasure, and many more questions: What is it like where you come from?

Why are you here? Will you ever go back?

## Chapter Forty-Four: If I Can't Find Them

If I can't find my glasses it is a big deal, and I must search until I do. I have never lost them, though. The glasses are now just for cosmetic reasons, the lenses only plastic. I am embarrassed about my left eye being off-center, its droopy lid, and the glasses cover that up. I have two back-up pairs, one in the glove compartment of my car, and one in my purse. The left lenses on those pairs are always taped, because for the best vision I do not use my left eye. I also have two pairs of sunglasses for driving and walking outside. There have been many times where I was unexpectedly outside, and I did not have my sunglasses, and I was upset, because the experience, whether it was a walk downtown or a car ride, would have been so much better with the sunglasses on. My left eye cannot squint because that side of my face is paralyzed, so it is sensitive and lets all light in unless I pull the lid closed with a finger. I do not read at coffee shops or bookstores because then I would have to use my taped glasses, and that is embarrassing. I read at home on the couch, next to the window.

## Chapter Forty-Five: What It Feels Like

That main thing is to think about getting spun around blindfolded, and then having the cloth lifted from your eyes and trying to walk, while cross-eyed. That is sort of it. Or it's kind of like being very drunk, or like a baby, trying to walk. It is not a natural human's place in the world. It is not safe.

## Chapter Forty-Six: Janet's Romance

Janet has fallen in love with her boyfriend, the doctor, and he wants to marry her. They go to pick out her engagement ring, a band of blue diamonds, quite rare. They arrange a dinner with Louise, Tom, and Michael a few days before Christmas. They have been dating for four months; Louise got sick last February. Janet and the doctor stand up and announce their plans and then Louise hugs the doctor. Janet is surprised at Louise's niceness. Louise says she is expecting a call from some guy, and she keeps checking her phone at the table. Janet and the doctor talk of their wedding plans, choosing songs and cakes already. They will serve an untraditional cheesecake, they proclaim. Janet is happy, but she wishes Louise would stop waiting for this phone call, because every minute that goes by without Louise's phone ringing, Janet hurts a little more. Who could Louise be waiting for? Is it a friend? Some kind of date? Who can Louise date? Can she, even? What would the doctors say? Her therapist?

Janet wonders if she should have a talk with Louise about all of this and find out what Louise is thinking. But any sort of conversation about it seems ridiculous because Janet does not have any advice for Louise. None at all. She just thinks that Louise should slow down, get herself more together. She should become less "sick" before starting to concern herself with love.

Every time Louise sees Janet, whether it is for a shopping trip or a doctor's appointment, Louise makes Janet follow behind her by a few feet on the sidewalk. How does my walk look? Louise always asks, even if it has only been two days since Janet saw her last. Janet always answers with, better! Much better! but in truth it is hard to

tell. Louise cannot walk in a straight line, and her limp is still significant. But is it as bad as when she first moved into her own apartment, months ago? Janet is not sure. Janet wonders if Louise asks her friends how her walk is when she is out with them. Louise says she has a few good ones now, enough that she had a little party at her place last weekend.

Towards dessert, Louise's phone rings, and she ends up smiling. I have a date! she says after hanging up. Janet is relieved to see that her daughter is so excited. But she is also very scared. She wonders what this guy is like. What is he thinking? Why Louise? Who, besides them, her family, can be good enough to her? Who knows how to treat her?

## Chapter Forty-Seven: What I Really Want

I would like to add numbers to my cell phone in a popular bar, given to me by attractive men whom I won't call. Horns should honk as I'm walking, and I won't look. Maybe a yeah baby! could be said through a car window for me to ignore. I want to be able to survey my choices, and then refuse. But when you end up with a face that is crooked and limbs that are stiff and jerky, it's over. I can't want the same things now, things I took for granted before The Event, but I have a new friend who can. Janey. She has eyes that people look into and welcome teeth. She talks to whomever she wants without a thought. These are things I envy, that I know I will never have again.

I just started college classes again. I am getting another degree, one that will let me teach, which I am terrified to do. But if I can do it at the college-level, my students won't laugh at my face or let me hear them insult me. Adults can pretend to understand. Graduate school seems like a good idea, anyway. I can be a student. I will pay. Now when I think of a career, I have to take in how I look. Being a journalist, once my plan, doesn't seem like such a good idea anymore. Face-to-face interviews would not work. Broadcast journalism is out, too.

## Chapter Forty-Eight: Hat Guy

I have had a few men. Right now there is the Hat Guy. I met him in class and he said that we should hang out. I have heard he plays poker for money, hangs out at kitchen tables, in smoky living rooms where people's animals are on chains in the side yard. I don't know much else about him, only that he skateboards and always wears a baseball hat. I'm not sure if I like him, but I can't afford to be picky. I've spent so much time in hospitals or beds, seeing doctors, and sitting at home. Almost a year has gone by, been wasted, and I have to catch up however I can. No matter what anybody says, I am as bad as I think. Probably worse.

Hat Guy and I have a date. We go out to dinner, and even though I hardly know him, I use his arm for balance. I have to, but he holds it strong. Our waitress looks surprised to see us sitting together, like she is trying to explain it to herself, doing a silent logical equation. Maybe she thinks we are related, or he is my young husband, who has seen me through something huge. The waitress speaks loud and slow, until I say my order and she realizes I am okay that way.

We have a good time. He doesn't take off the hat during dinner, or on the couch at his apartment, or in his bed. He goes to the bathroom and throws up from too much beer after we have sex. As he is trying to sleep, I cry into the back of his cap. I am so relieved to have had another success that I sob for half an hour. I tell him I am sorry he has to listen. He thinks I am sad. He is nice, squeezes my shoulder and tells me I have womanly curves. I tell him that makes me feel better. We drink soda from a two-liter the next morning, and he asks me to meet his friends.

He takes me to a place with air hockey. When we get back to his apartment, he throws up again. With his baseball cap still on, he comes out of the bathroom and gets into bed. He calls me babe, and lets me take off the hat. He is bald underneath, with a fringe of hair around the bottom. But his friends loved me. I impressed them with my good mood and optimistic outlook.

## Chapter Forty-Nine: Hot Lunch

Last week, I was walking carefully down a campus building's stairs with my hot lunch in one hand and the other on the railing. I saw a blind woman coming up with a guide dog. They were taking the steps quickly. I started to move over, shuffling sideways across the concrete until I could get a hand on the wall and out of their way, but before I could make it, the dog, a wolfish one, knocked me down, and both the dog and the woman silently stepped on me and over me and went on up the stairs. The dog did not bark, its tags just clinked. It happened fast and no one else saw. My food spilled on my shirt, something hot and cheesy, and I wanted to say something. They were almost out of my sight. What could I say?

I still think about the feeling of the hot lunch on me. It was below my collarbone, burning me a little, and it stained the cloth of my top. I had to spend the rest of the afternoon like that, with a grease spot on my front. The blind woman must take classes in the same building as I do because I see her and her dog in the halls, and one time in the south parking lot.

Sometimes I wait until it is around lunchtime and go into that same stairwell. I stand in the corner, and sure enough, close to noon, I see them coming up, fast as usual. The dog's tongue is out. I imagine myself hurrying to lie down in their path, horizontal, making my body pencil-straight so I fit on a single stair. The dog's paws would punch over my stomach and a foot of the woman's plant on my chest. Then they are gone, and I am still in the corner. I would let them do it again. Maybe I would wait for who comes next.

## Chapter Fifty: Janey's Mom

I tell Janey the stairs story, and she laughs so that takeout coffee explodes out of her mouth and all over the dashboard of my car. She pees her pants, too, which leaves a spot on my seat. That's how crazy she is. We are in a parking lot, watching a new tattoo on my wrist dry. I have taken the bandage off, and blood beads keep seeping through the ink.

My mom could use your sense of humor, she says, re-doing her high ponytail in the visor mirror. Janey's mom is in the serious stages of Multiple Sclerosis and does not tell funny life stories. She lives halfway across the country, gets morphine shots every day and is in a wheelchair. Her hair and teeth are almost gone. I found this out on the day when Janey and I became friends. We are both taking a class on how to write a professional book review. At first we didn't talk, but then we signed up to take turns bringing a snack. On my day, I showed up early with bags of bagels. But there was a note on the door, the professor was sick and the classroom was empty except for Janey, crying on a wooden desk. We left, and went out for brunch at a fancy place downtown. We had many Bloody Mary's, fought over the check. God, you're amazing, she said. I think you're gorgeous. I can see it.

She is always digging her phone out of her purse. Hey lady, she says to the person on the other end, holding the phone chin-to-shoulder. My mom, she mouths to me. Wanna talk to her? She'll try to pass it.

I can't, I always say, and hand it back. I have never spoken to her. I don't want to hear what that kind of sad sounds like.

Janey calls me late at night to sleep on my couch. She does this more and more. She asks for some of my prescription pain pills leftover from the surgeries, and one night, her on my floor, crying about her mom, I give her more than I should. It is all I know how to offer. We have morphed from girlfriends to something like family members: there is no more charming or convincing each other of likeability or goodness. No more compliments or caring conversation. She seems to expect me to answer the phone or the door and I always do.

I start making up excuses when Janey asks to sleep over. I say I can't afford her suggested shopping trips, blaming my physical therapist and classes for sucking away my time and money. I am scared of what is going to happen next. Her mom will die. Then she will only have me. At restaurants she orders too many appetizers and expensive wine and pays for it all. She buys me gifts, one, a necklace of a stone hanging on a thin gold chain that I tangle. She lends me piles of books and clothes I might like. She kidnaps me: picks me up for a quick cup of coffee and turns it into a five-hour scavenger hunt for the perfect pair of jeans at the mall or a drive by some of her ex-boyfriends' houses. I don't know what good I am doing her.

## Chapter Fifty-One: Other Surgeries

There are other operations. Nerves from the tip of my tongue are spliced and fused with ones in my left cheek. The idea is for me to push my tongue against the roof of my mouth to make that side smile, to un-paralyze it for a few seconds. Practice any time you are alone, my surgeon tells me. Make faces. Daily. No, twenty times a day! The corner of the paralyzed side of my mouth moves up slightly on command. When I try to match the other side of my face to that, it doesn't work. I look confused. Get ready for pictures again! my surgeon says.

A gold weight the size of a pinkie nail is sewn into my top left eyelid so that it can be closed at night if pulled down by a finger. You have some real jewelry and you're not even married! says my surgeon. And there is Botox. The surgeon puts four injections in a row across the moveable half of my forehead. He gives me a chilled gold spoon the size of an ice-cream scoop for numbing. The plan is to get the weak half to move by stilling the strong. This way, the little guys have to do the job, the surgeon said. It hasn't been working. When the Botox kicks in after a few days, everything stopped moving above my eyes. The weak half did nothing.

My left eye is operated on twice, the goal is to pull the pupil towards the center, to make the eye straighter. The ultimate dream is to get both of my eyes to gaze at the same thing. Each time, some muscles on one side of the eye are cut shorter and I have to wait a few days for the stitches to dissolve to see if the surgery has worked. I test myself. I lie on my bed and look at my ceiling fan. I watch the yellow lines on the highway as my mother drives me back to the hospital for a check-up. Everything is still double, but the

pupil does look closer to the center, it looks less crossed. Maybe next time, my surgeon always says. This operation can be done every two years.

## Chapter Fifty-Two: Tattoo

I did the tattoo because I want to be a girl who says why not? about things. It is wings, like the kind on angels. I found the design on a necklace. The tattoo is crooked. It is like someone placed a stamp on my wrist in a hurry. I had wanted to be the kind of person who had tattoos and didn't regret them. But I do regret the wings. The crookedness shames me.

## Chapter Fifty-Three: Halloween Guy

It is Halloween, and some guy I've never seen before is driving my friend Kelly and me home from a party. We were there with a big group and somehow it ended up this way, we needed a sober driver and he volunteered. Tonight Kelly is an eighties girl, and I am dressed as nothing. This guy is not wearing a costume either. He must be dressed as himself, in a shaved-head-handsome sort of way. It turns out he is the older brother of one of another friend's boyfriend. We drive through smashed-pumpkin streets. I like his thermal shirt and his voice, which is soft. He gets out and opens the car door for me. I ask him not to watch as I walk up my building's stairs. It will take me a while. He shakes my hand goodnight. He does it, he drives off to his home so I can walk up shakily in the dark and unembarrassed. Kelly follows, and she makes sure I do not fall.

I see the Halloween guy again, then it becomes a regular thing.

Dropping me off one night, the Halloween guy walks me to my front door, and then I invite him inside. Earlier, at a bar, we kissed for the first time. Now inside, I think that I have found someone good who has one arm around my back and the other in my hair. His fingers comb through the back of it and hit my scar, raised and bumpy down the back of my skull. Ouch, I say, reflexively. But it is not tender anymore. There has been enough time, and it has healed as much as it ever will.

## Chapter Fifty-Four: What You Can Do For You

My hair is blond and nice again. Through all that has happened I always made appointments to take care of it, to trim it and wrap it in foils to keep it light-colored. There is always someone who will do that for you. There is always someone who will ring up new clothes you have to buy, cash your check, or point to the line where you sign and lease. There are people who will bring you food and clear away your dirty plates. You can pay someone to counsel you on your self-esteem, on your self-abuse. An eating, drinking, smoking, or sex problem. You can hire someone to help you exercise, or shop. You can have someone come in your house and organize your kitchen cupboards and bedroom closet. There are places that will take all of your old clothes and other things and give them to other people. You do not have to throw them away yourself. If you call a certain number, someone will tell you directions to anywhere, and if you look on the computer, you can see your apartment from a camera that shoots from space. You can go online and find people who are compatible with you through dating websites. You can see their pictures. You can know their personalities, their weaknesses, even. But that is as far as it goes.

## Chapter Fifty-Five: Appointments

Janet drives Louise to all of her surgeries and appointments. Each surgery requires about four doctor's visits and there are other ones just to discuss what else could be done about Louise's physical situation. Janet takes out a small, digital tape recorder to document the visits, an idea that her new husband, a doctor himself, gave her. She does not want to miss one bit of information, and frequently holds the recorder close to the doctor's mouth to catch the words more clearly.

Sometimes Janet and Louise go out to lunch and do some shopping before or after an appointment. Sometimes they do not. If they shop, Janet buys Louise almost whatever she wants. Janet knows that this is not good for Louise — it can't be, how could it be — but she does it anyway. How much she buys varies. Sometimes just a shirt, a sweater. Sometimes a fridgeful of groceries. It depends on whether the doctor had good news or bad news.

Janet does not know how to make Louise happy. On her 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, she gets Louise four special wine glasses — the stemless kind that she had seen Louise exclaim at one day while they were shopping. Now, when Louise opens her birthday gift, she says, that's it? This is my present?

## Chapter Fifty-Six: Nick

The talk afterward is funny and glasses of water are drunk, and there's sleep. The next morning, we are the same together. He has a bowl of cereal, my cereal, and he rinses out the bowl in the sink, my sink. He says nice things about my lips, my hair, and I say nice things about his eyes, his hands. It goes on. We arrive at places together and leave together, too. We befriend each other's friends. We share rides, meals, carry things and shut doors for each other. We turn keys, lock the door at night.

## Chapter Fifty-Seven: When I Stopped Feeling Sick

When did I get better? I would like to say I got back to normal on my own, but I didn't. I thought that Claude had been my last chance for a boyfriend and was certain that for the rest of my life I would be single, and that scared me more than anything. After The Event I felt invisible to men.

So it wasn't until I started dating Nick that I didn't feel like a sick person anymore.

I don't know if this was healthy, though. I don't know if I did this right. It seems wrong for a sick person to feel better only once they're with somebody else. It doesn't sound good. But that's how it was. When you don't look the same, talk the same, hear, see, or move the same, maybe you need somebody else.

## Chapter Fifty-Eight: When People Ask, When People Don't Ask

I meet Nick's old college friends at a wedding, and pretend not to notice confused glances at me, then at him and at me again. Once I explain why I look the way I do, things always go better. I have told my story, my disclaimer, so many times that it comes out of my mouth smoothly, no stumbles. I used to feel like I was going to cry talking about it. Now I feel no pause. I tell my story to my students. I tell it to potential friends. It's like a bedtime tale, one meant to lull minds into a belief, meant to rock away worries and fears.

## Chapter Fifty-Nine: It Started With Friends

Friends from college came and visited me in Kansas before the craniotomies. I had the eye patch, the cane, and had lost at least fifteen pounds. They brought over pizza and DVDs, even the bridesmaid dress that I was to wear in one of their weddings. We had a sleep-over, once.

After the craniotomies, I got a three-hour leave pass from a nurse. Two of the same friends wheeled me out of the clinic, across the snowy streets and into a restaurant. I ate from a huge plate of club sandwiches with lots of bacon and mayonnaise and shiny French fries. When they brought me back in the clinic, I showed them the crafts room and the gym on my floor and they helped me into my bed.

In Michigan, three friends I have known since childhood were with me often. They took me to lunch, or shopping, or a movie. The left side of my face was so weak that I often had to hold my lips together with my fingers so that I could chew and swallow without showing everyone my food. No one ever said anything. On the weekends, or on days when they were not working, these same friends and I sat outside by one of their parents' pools and tanned in our bathing suits. When we felt ourselves burning, we went inside and watched T.V. The same shows were on that we watched in high school. It was like we were back in time, except that we had all made special arrangements to be there.

Two friends flew out to California with me and helped me pack up my things from my and Claude's apartment. When we got out of the rental car and up the stairs and opened the door, we found that Claude had shoveled all of my belongings into a pile in

the middle of the room. Tampons were mixed in with T-shirts and picture frames. One of my friends found me in the bedroom closet and stopped me from pulling all of the buttons off Claude's shirts.

On my first night in my Kansas apartment, I could think of no one to call but a guy I knew in college who almost died from a bacterial infection. He had lost almost all of his fingers and toes and had prosthetics. In his specially-outfitted car, we drove downtown to a bar and met up with some of his friends. We talked about how hard life was for us. We never met up again, maybe because we depressed each other, maybe because we never had that much in common.

An old roommate worked nights at a coffee shop, and I sat there and talked to her in between customers. I would help her clean up after the shop closed so we could leave faster. We drank cheap white wine at our apartments, and smoked cigarettes. I tried to talk her through a bad haircut she gave herself with clippers.

I reunited with another old college friend. She and her fiancé invited me over for dinner, and then she invited me to join her book club. I did. There, I met a girl who became a very good friend.

But there was still the question, who would want me now?

And, after all, someone did, and it wasn't just a wanting.

It had really happened.

## Chapter Sixty: Britney

Claude knew someone who knew the West Coast editor of “US” magazine, and gave me the editor’s email. Celebrities were always coming up from L.A. to vacation at the luxurious resorts and so the editor said she might have some work for me sometime. Two weeks before The Event I got a call: Britney Spears, her husband, and stepkids were on their way. I was to meet a reporter from the magazine, Evan, in the Four Seasons resort in an hour.

I wore a red dress, and Evan said wow when I walked up to him. He told me the plan as we sat at the hotel bar. I would get paid \$300 a day, \$500 a day on weekends. I would be an advantage because I was a pretty girl and a unknown face. Evan had been covering Britney for years, and he couldn’t get very close because he would be recognized. My job was to follow her around and not get caught. I was to find out any information on her that I could. Was she pregnant? Did she smoke? What did she eat? Cellulite? Etc.

Evan and I stood in the lawn underneath the lit window of her suite. We could see the blue light from a T.V. They’re probably fucking. See you tomorrow, he said.

Early the next morning I was back at the hotel with everything Evan had told me to bring: a few changes of clothes so I would minimize getting recognized throughout the day, sunglasses, a bathing suit, and a notepad and pen. I was excited that things were finally happening to me. This was big, and I was lucky. I was nervous, more nervous than I’d ever been. I was talking to myself during the drive there, coaching myself. Or maybe I just wanted to hear it said out loud that I had got this chance?

I went to the salon where Britney had received a pedicure the afternoon before and got one too. I acted like a star-struck fan who had heard Britney was around and pumped the manicurist for gossip but got nothing but a talk into an eyebrow wax.

Britney and a friend were in a nearby wig shop, and so I ran there and saw her trying them on, then buying one. I found myself sneaking into the resort's pool and stretching out on a towel several cabanas away from Britney, watching her not read a little red Kaballah book. My triumph was sitting a table over from her at lunch: I saw her eat a salad with ranch dressing, smoke many cigarettes, and drink six lemonades. I watched as a waiter had to ask her to put on a shirt over her bikini top. I watched her talk on the phone and belch loudly. Evan ran back and forth across the street on the sidewalk giving me a thumb's up.

I had Claude meet me at the resort's restaurant for a \$100 dinner, hoping Britney would show up. She didn't. In my car I followed Evan, who was tailing her as she drove her signature white Lexus to Starbucks, and I watched her drink from a straw. I sat on a bench as she and her posse loaded up in a S.U.V. and went back to L.A., losing the nerve to shout a single question, or run up and tug on her ponytail to see if it came off. Later, I typed out all of my notes and emailed them to the magazine editor. I never got paid but my name is there, in the February 7 edition, tiny, practically invisible, at the end.

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Obviously, this would not be possible now. Is that why I told this story? To show what I had been like — what I had been able to do — and to compare it to what I am like now?

Maybe it is the opposite.

What I have lost through this experience is nothing compared to what has remained the same in me. I am still the same kind of person. I want to watch and to be watched. To admire and to be admired. To be necessary. To be of use. I don't know what else there is. It is true that illness changes some people, but it also showed me, I think, who I really was all along.