

**THINGS LEFT UNSAID:  
OUR CONNECTIONS AND DISCONNECTIONS**

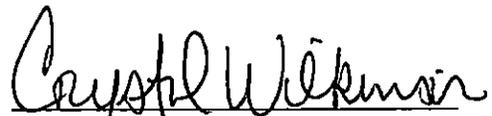
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**Submitted to the faculty of Morehead State University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree  
Bachelor of Fine Arts  
In the Department of English  
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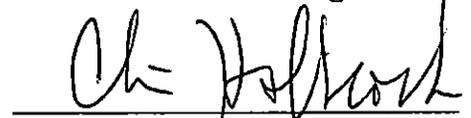
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## Introduction

Reading and writing have always been passions of mine. I was reading before I went into kindergarten and one of my favorite games when I was younger was to write and illustrate my own little stories. It was my mother who taught me to read and write and I can remember spending time with her and my sister, taking turns reading pages of Dr. Seuss books. Some of my most vivid memories of spending time with my parents have to do with reading as well. They were always reading aloud in the car on family trips to and from Kentucky. For me, reading what others have written is one of the things that connected the members of my family and it is one of the reasons that I have always loved to read and write.

When starting my thesis project, I really didn't know what I wanted to write or what topic I should focus on. All I knew is that I wanted to focus on the relationships between people. For me, that mostly meant relationships between family members. Over the course of the semester though, the idea evolved into writing about the things that bring people together and push them apart. Disconnections and connections between people became my main idea when writing these stories.

Ask most people and they'll probably say that their family is simultaneously their most important support system and biggest source of headaches. Family is something that everyone has and everyone writes about in some way. What makes these stories interesting is the interplay between the different members of the family

and the difference in the points of view of each of the different characters. One of the most important familial relationships that a person can form is with their siblings.

A person's brothers and sisters are the people they grow up playing with, share bathrooms with, and spend the majority of their time with until their teenage years when they gain more freedom to be mobile. For me, my sister has been one of my best friends although we are completely different people—she is an outgoing tomboy who loves video games and I am a rather quiet bookworm who spends too much time on the internet. But we are so close in age and share so much of our personal histories with each other that those things seem insignificant. My sister is someone I can talk to about almost anything and I know she'll always know what I'm talking about if I say, "Do you remember?"

This shared history is indicative of how tightly wound together our lives have been in the past. When I was eight we moved in with my mother's family, including a cousin who was five years younger than me who used to combine my nickname and my sister's into one as if we were one person. For him we were. I spent three quarters of my time not at school with my sister, so she has obviously been a huge impact on who I am as a person. Because of her I am overprotective and tend to worry about the people around me a little too much. But I've also learned from her how to love staying up late and that you don't necessarily have to talk or hug or have that Lifetime movie moment to be there for each other—it can be as simple as sitting there together.

With my relationship with my sister as inspiration, I began looking elsewhere for more direction. I found more insight about siblings in Barbara Kingsolver's novel, The Poisonwood Bible. This novel centers on a Christian missionary family which contains a set of twins. These twins are the middle daughters of the Price family, named Adah and Leah. Twins are especially known for being closer than other siblings. They're rumored to be alike in the way they behave, speak, dress, and even move.

Unexpectedly, these twins seem completely different before going to the Congo. Besides the physical differences with Adah being crippled, Adah is mute and her thoughts are sarcastic. She is merely spiritual in the face of her father's fanaticism. In opposition, Leah is talkative, sincere, and zealous about her religion. Although they shared the same womb for nine months, it is the events which transpire in the Congo that finally create the bond that twins are known for between them. This relationship is so different from mine with my own sister that I was really interested in putting myself in their shoes and examining other kinds of sibling relationships.

Another thing that I found really fascinating was the way that Kingsolver writes each chapter from a different sister's point of view. The differences in their life experiences became really clear this way, which is interesting since like my sister and me, Leah and Adah shared the bulk of their time and personal history with each other. Many of the same events happened to them, but this shaped them in completely

different ways. Two of my pieces focus mainly on the relationships between families, a pair of sisters in particular.

The first story is from the younger sister's point of view and the other is from the older sister's point of view. With the younger sister, you see the way that this family and these two sisters in general are disconnected from each other. They don't understand each other and there's a lot of emotional distrust going around. The other story which features this family is the third story in my thesis. This story shows the ways in which the sisters are connected to each other and in the end this helps them to repair their relationship.

The other story in my thesis is different from the two about the sisters. I wrote about two characters that used to share a strong connection, but then broke up and didn't see each other for several years. This created a relationship between them that was really interesting to write about. In the story they grapple with leftover feelings of love as well as the irritating things about each other that helped to force them apart the first time. This is an interesting situations since they are forced to deal with each other because they are stuck in an elevator and in their situation, there is nowhere for them to go. They have no way to avoid dealing with the conflicting feelings that they have for each other.

Another way that the middle story is different from the others is that it is more dialogue driven since there isn't that much action that can take place inside the confined space that an elevator provides. This was a real challenge for me when I

wrote the story, since I had to pay really close attention to what the characters say and how they say it and make sure that the dialogue moves the story along while being believable.

Connections that form between people and the things that disconnect a person from others are what writing is really all about. These links are what make up and break up relationships. You can find examples of these differences and similarities between people in any situation. This interplay between characters is what makes any story worth reading. All human relationships are complicated and it is the job of the writer to get those complications down on paper and examine them from every possible angle so that when you're done, you understand everything a little better.

### When it Gets Dark

We were riding in Todd's truck and it was a beautiful day for having the windows down. My sunglasses didn't quite keep all of the sun out as I tried to stealthily watch Todd drive. Nothing. He was driving normally, speeding a little, but that was to be expected from a teenage boy with a big engine and a straight stretch of road. We passed an old lady in a faded blue car. Suddenly I had a vision of Mom and Dad's old car—the family car from when we were still a family.

It was an older-than-dirt Chevy in metallic blue. Not navy or sky or aqua, but blue like the Kentucky Wildcats key-chain dangling from the ignition. Mom and Dad in the front seat red numbers glowing on the dash like a warning. Static classic rock radio covered up the start of the latest in a long line of arguments, "Mistakes happen." they told us.

Mistakes like the melted crayon mess in the backseat middle where none of us ever wanted to sit, but the waxy colors swirled together, a block, in their bubble topped plastic box creating something beautiful, unique, and absolutely useless. The cooler covered up the ruined upholstery and acted as a barrier between me and my older sister. The gas station lights were purple bruises through the lens of my dark tinted window. Andy fell asleep leaning precariously against the window cars flying by— time flying by.

The lights on the dash were monster's eyes watching in the darkness Mom and Dad together. I imagined that it would always be this way, we'd always be together. But three years later, just a week after my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, Dad moved out. Mom got a

new car, a pale sky imitation of what we'd had. And loaned the old one to a friend who drunk-drove it, and my childhood, into a tree. It wasn't that great a car anyway. The picture in my head dissolved in time for me to register two things—the blurry shape of the tree at the corner of Allen Road and Pinewood Drive getting closer and the harsh squawk of Todd's brakes.

The sound of the car drew them outside.

"Ms. Wright?" the police officer began as he got out of the car, "Jenna was in a bit of an accident. She's fine, and the paramedics released her, so I brought her home. I didn't want to leave her here without someone else in the house."

"An accident?" Mom asked watching me get out of the back of the police car, "Was anyone hurt?"

"Well ma'am, the driver's got a broken leg and his truck looks like a lost cause, but everyone else was fine, minor scratches mostly." He closed the door behind me as he explained, "They hit a tree out Allen Road."

"But everyone was ok. That's what matters." Mom said, putting an arm around me.

Jake, Mom's boyfriend of two years, just nodded as he said, "Thank you, Officer. We'll take it from here. I'm sorry for the trouble." When the police car rolled safely out of the driveway we all filed inside slowly. We only got as far as the living room before Jake turned to me and glared from behind crossed arms.

“Where have you been?” Jake asked with no attempt to sound like he wasn’t about to yell.

It was strange to hear a male voice reprimanding me. Dad hadn’t been around much even before my parents divorced three years ago. And I can’t ever remember him being the one to yell. Mostly he just ignored us.

I flipped my hair over my shoulder and said, “I was with Jess and some friends. We ran down to Wal-Mart to get some of the Easter candy on sale.”

He looked skeptical. “Easter candy?”

My sister scoffed as I answered, “We grabbed McDonalds after we left school. Then we went to the store. There was only one checkout open, so the line took forever. Then on the way back Todd lost control or something we ran into a tree.” I have all of the answers to the questions I won’t remember in the morning when light washes them away and my worries lie open to the air for all to see.

“Or you were trying to figure out how to make sure Mom didn’t see your latest report card.” Andy snapped. I could tell from the way her words were clipped short and deep lines between her eyes that my sister was more worried for me than angry. That didn’t stop me from hating her in that moment, “You’re failing almost everything.”

Jake looked at me like I was an alien. Mom turned red as a box of heart shaped Valentine’s candy. “What?” she shouted as I tried to come up with something to say.

Andy looked a little guilty as she said, "I found it in our bathroom trash last week."

She and I hadn't been getting along very well lately. We argued a lot about whose turn it was to watch the younger kids and using the second car after school. We split it between the two of us. With Andy working and my track practice, it was always complicated to work out who had priority. And I know she didn't like how much time I'd been spending with Todd. This time she helped me into more trouble than I knew what to do with. And I was an expert at getting out of trouble and blaming it on Andy, because I was mom's favorite.

As a kid I never thought about it, because what kid doesn't love getting out of trouble by blaming things on the older sister? Even the time I pushed Andy out of the tree house and she broke her arm, I got off easy. She was confined to our room for a weekend for not keeping a better eye on me. I could see Andy standing at our bedroom window watching me play in the yard. She still insists that I pushed her on purpose. I remember tripping over my own feet and we both went tumbling down.

Our dad had the tree house torn down.

Mom took a look around and took control of the situation, "All of you, the kitchen. Now. Except you, Wyatt. Take Meredith to her room." She sent my thirteen year old brother off with our half-sister. For once he didn't argue about taking care of the baby, I guessed it was so he didn't end up in trouble too.

"Ian, you can go too." Jake said to his son. Ian just nodded as he followed us.

It was silent around the dining room table. No one moved as we waited for someone to throw the first blow. Mom and Jake stood on the other side of the battered table looking at us like a principal about to punish delinquent students. Jake braced his himself against the table as he leaned over us, using his imposing height as a battering ram against my confidence. Jen and I sat in chairs designed to be so uncomfortable that you would rush through any meal just to get out of sitting in them any longer.

“Dad, Andy is right.” Jake’s son interrupted, surprising everyone. He didn’t usually get involved in our arguments. “I saw her at Dairy Queen the other day when she said she was at Jess’s studying for that big math test.”

My eyebrows disappeared into my hairline. Ian was the last one I expected to rat me out.

Ian just took a step forward to stand beside Andy, and I was disconcerted as I looked up from my chair at my fifteen year old almost-stepbrother and his suddenly commanding height.

Jake looked confused, like he didn’t know whose side to be on. He'd never been very good at dealing with me and my siblings. I think it was because as just the boyfriend, he didn't have any real authority over us. Mom just looked angry, “Can you still bring the grades up?” she asked me.

For a moment my stomach was in my throat and I wanted to bolt. I never meant for Mom to find out about the grades. Tara was supposed to tutor me and help me get the grades up before Mom ever saw a report card.

“Yes. At least, I think so.” I said, hugging my knees to my chest. Her shoulders sank and I hated it.

Before everything got crazy with Jake and the new baby, Mom and I had been best friends. Not in that cheesy day-time special way, but actually friends. I talked to her about everything and she talked to me too. Lately I’d been flying solo, figuring things out on my own so I wouldn’t have to bother her. I guessed things had just gotten out of hand.

“Why couldn’t you just tell us about the grades?” she asked, tapping fingers on the desk as she turned to the next important question, “And what were you doing instead of your homework?”

“I was out with my friends.” I admitted, dropping my feet to the ground. And Todd. He was the most amazing boy I’d ever met. I loved the way he smiled at me and the way he made me feel like anything was possible. He made me hope for more than this little town and my distinct lack of ambition had ever dared to dream. This hope is the rain on my window tapping on the metal roof and hammering at my heart. I can’t hear my heart beat.

“I meant to study for that math test, but Jess, Todd, Caleb, and me went to Dairy Queen after school and there was a party the night before that English paper was due.” We had celebrated him getting into college. That was the first time I had ever seen him drunk. But I tried not to think about it. About the beer scent on my neck as he whispered, *Jen, I love you.*

Jake broke in again then, looking at Andy he asked, “Where were you?”

“Like I’d go to that kind of party. I was at Alex’s, remember? And I’m not her keeper.” Andy said, pointing at me.

I could see the wheels turning; Mom and Jake would still rather pin it on anyone but me. “Why didn’t you tell us what kind of people she was hanging out with? You’re her big sister; you’re supposed to watch out for her.” He said.

Andy looked up at Mom, “I told you what Todd was like. He’s in classes with me, remember?” And I’d told Mom that Andy was just being a prude, and brought Todd over to meet her. He’d been on his best behavior. I’d never heard him call a lady ma’am before, but it sure sounded nice.

“Which brings us to the next question. Why were you in Todd’s truck when you should have been at home?” Jake asked as Mom frowned at him, “It’s a school night.”

I threw up my hands in frustration as I answered, “Like I told you, we went to get candy.”

Andy rolled her eyes. “If you went to get candy then why did your idiot boyfriend crash into a tree?” she asked.

“Well?” Jake prodded when I just stared at the ground, “Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

I looked up, putting my hands in the pocket of my sweatshirt. I finally said, “I think he’d had a couple of beers.”

“Jenna Lynne! You got in a car with someone who had been drinking?” Mom looked shocked. “Right.” Mom said as I saw her putting on her boss-lady face, it was

the one she used on the people at work when they were discussing the latest episode of American Idol instead of actually working. “Jenna Lynne, you are grounded. You go to school; you come straight home. No stops.”

“You’re not going see this kid Todd anymore.” Jake added.

I started crying again. Damn it. Why did I have to start crying at a time like this? I know getting in the car with him was stupid. It's the way Mom and Andy look so scared. I can't believe I was such an idiot. I need something to heal the cracks in my composure.

Mom patted me on the back and started to say, “I think that’s a little extreme. Todd is such a nice boy.”

“No.” Jake shook his head as he said, “She’s got to learn, Nora. It can’t be like this.”

“All the same, you don’t have the right to tell her who she can see.” Mom sounded calm, like she was discussing the weather or the price of bananas at the grocery. Andy and I looked at each other. “She is my daughter. Not yours.”

“I’ve been more of a father than Ben.”

And it’s true, my father was not very good at being fatherly at all.

“Girls. Go to your rooms,” Mom said, looking down at the table.

Andy looked reluctant and a little like she might say no. She has always been so protective of Mom and I knew that she didn’t want to leave Mom in there alone. But she got up and went into her room, the only one at that end of the house. I practically flew out of my chair, not bothering to push it back in as I retreated to my

room. Inside it was cool and dark. I lay down on my bed and studied the glow in the dark stars on my ceiling. They were still arguing about me and whether or not I can see Todd and if Jake has authority over us at all.

Then two different doors slammed shut and it was quiet.

### An Elevated Exchange

Audrey Grant closed her eyes, hoping desperately that when they re-opened she would find herself snug in bed and not late for her first day as the assistant director of public relations and certainly not trapped in a confined space with an uncomfortably familiar person.

She eyed the dark haired man wearily. Zachary James was someone she had not seen in a very long time. “Well, why are you here?” she asked, “What are you doing in this elevator? It’s only for employees.”

He shrugged as he watched her attempt to shrink into the opposite corner of the elevator, across from the useless numbered buttons, “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“I’m important around here. I deserve your respect, however reluctant you might be to give it.”

“Reluctant doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

“You know, I could have security throw you out.”

“Right.” he told her as he shrugged out of his jacket, “And if they could get in here to throw me out, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now.”

“This is insane. I need to get out of this elevator.”

“Please stop talking. If I have to be stuck in here with you, I shouldn’t also have to listen to you.”

After all these years she still wore her thoughts like war paint, clear across her face. She looked the same as she had years ago when they were in college, just like

the girl he'd loved. His gaze descended once more upon the tumultuous mass of curly red hair.

She was haughty as ever. God only knew why.

"You went missing for five years after college; I'm sorry to be surprised to see you show up here."

"I didn't know you cared." He feigned a swoon, "But I wasn't missing."

"Why did you come back?" she asked, ignoring his theatrics. A silence followed her question, "Zach?"

"Stop. Talking."

Silence reigned once. He hazarded a glance in her direction. She was nibbling, with increasing intensity, on her lower lip.

"You're doing it again."

"What?" She said, raising an eyebrow.

"Chewing your lip. You used to do it during exams." he reminded her, "You're nervous. Why?"

"I'm not nervous." She crossed her legs.

"You are."

"Zachary James, you have no idea what I'm feeling."

"Back to full names?" he asked with a quirk of an eyebrow. He smirked as he was rewarded with a frustrated sigh and blessed silence.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Stop that!” Audrey snapped with a glare at her fellow captive.

Zachary didn't blink. “Stop what? I'm not doing anything.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

She gritted her teeth, “Please stop that.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“No. I don't think I will.” He replied with an easy smile.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Bang!

“Damn! Grant, was that really necessary?” He massaged his arm, a large red mark forming under his fingers.

“Yes.” she replied, “Give me back my shoe.”

He stared at her for an astonished moment before complying.

“Thank you.” she acknowledged him.

“Now you're polite?” asked Zachary as he shook his head at her audacity.

She shrugged, knowing it would rile him up, “When was I rude?”

“Oh I don't know, Aud. Maybe when you threw the shoe at me?” He said, rolling his eyes, “Just like my three year old niece.”

She sputtered, “You- you're being childish!”

“Says the grown woman who just threw a shoe at me.” Zach grinned, leaning forward. He watched her face grow red as she tried to think of a retort.

Audrey stared at the small, blinking light, trying to ignore her ex-boyfriend's presence. His face was uncomfortably close.

Audrey tried to stay still, even as she could feel the gentle heat moving from his side to warm the skin of her arm. A shuddery breath left her and the corners of his mouth elevated in a slight smirk. Most people might have missed it. She didn't. Turning her head from his, she glanced at the wall wondering as she did so, how it had come to be that she was caught here with him of all people.

"Someone will be here soon." She said aloud as the elevator dropped down another few inches.

"You've been saying that for over an hour. Who are you trying to convince?"

"People will miss me. If you were on your own you'd either be left to die or until someone fixed this elevator. Considering it took a week for maintenance to fix the door to my office— I'm guessing it would be the first option."

"When did you become so cynical?" Zachary asked.

"I'm not cynical." She said, looking away from him.

He said, "Yes, you are."

"I'm happy!" Audrey said as she turned around. He just looked at her and she continued, "I am. I have everything."

"Do you really?" He raised that infuriating eyebrow again.

"Yes. I have my family; I have great friends and an amazing career."

"Right."

"And Brian. I have Brian."

He nodded once, "Sure."

"What does that mean?" She asked with a violent wave of her hand.

“I’m just basking in the glow of your overwhelming happiness.” He said, leaning back onto the wall of the elevator.

“I love him.” She declared, crossing her arms.

“Of course.”

She was here again, sparring with him as she had all through college. Clearly some things didn’t change. Audrey clenched her jaw as she distracted herself with thoughts of Brian. She loved him. She loved him. She loved him.

Feeling the heavy gaze of her unwanted companion upon her once more, she broke her chant as she asked, “What now?”

“I don’t think you do.” Zachary said with another shrug.

She rolled her eyes, “Don’t think I do what?”

“Love Brian.”

“Excuse me? What would you know about it?!”

“Everything. We all graduated together, didn’t we?”

“You don’t have the right to talk to me like that!”

“Whatever.” He replied as they fell into silence, staring at the unchanging silver doors. Listening to the clanking sounds of workmen coming to rescue them.

“Florida.”

“Excuse me?” Audrey said, coming out of her whirlpool of confusing thoughts.

“It took a week.”

Audrey continued, “So...”

“Do you have to know everything?”

“I was just attempting to make some conversation.” she huffed, turning away again as she pushed a stray curl out of her face. “Fine, we’ll just sit here in silence.”

“I met someone there.” he told her after a pause.

“Oh.” She shrank back.

“We got divorced last year.” The elevator dropped a few more inches, almost even with the second story.

“Oh.”

“Oh?” He repeated.

She didn’t know what to say to that. The silence was thick as her mother’s favorite wool sweater, and just as itchy.

“She left me for the gardener.” He continued without prompting, punctuating his sentence with a thump of his head back against the wall, “How clichéd can you get?”

After a pause Audrey asked, “Did you love her?”

“Would it make you feel worse if I had?”

“Zach!”

“Back to first names now?” He teased, “You never could make up your mind.”

“That’s not fair!”

His smile melted away, "Life's not fair, Aud."

She reached out and punched him in the shoulder, and he moved slightly.

He quipped, "Do you slap Brian around too?"

"He doesn't treat me the way you do." she sniffed.

"He wouldn't know how."

She poked him hard in the chest, "You bas-"

"Do that again and I'll snap it off." He interrupted, smacking away her hand.

"I hate you." she growled.

"No. You don't."

"Yes. I do." She argued, aware that their argument was getting a little juvenile.

He stepped closer into her corner. He had thought with increasing frequency about this moment, the moment when he would see her again. He just hadn't thought it would be on his first day back in town. And he certainly had not counted on an elevator malfunction.

He leaned in. Audrey froze, holding her breath. He placed one hand on the wall beside her and the other in her hair.

"No you don't."

The elevator chose that untimely moment to lurch violently, and he was thrown back from her. He glanced startled as the silver elevator doors began to push apart as people shouted from outside. As he straightened his clothes, he was flooded with irritation and not relief at the thought of his rescue.

“I do.” She said defiantly.

“That wasn’t always the case. You loved me once. That was quite a thing we had going back in college.” He said as he smoothed his shirtsleeves.

She picked up her purse saying, “That doesn’t change how I feel now.”

“Maybe you’re right. But as the new assistant marketing director, I’ll have plenty of time to test that theory.”

“What?!” she said as she lurched ungracefully out of the elevator, two hours late for her morning meeting.

He strode down the hall toward the cafeteria without looking back, “Save me a seat at the budget meeting, Grant.”

### Things Left Unsaid

The peach double-wide trailer across from the trailer park was a car-length way from the railroad tracks. Half dead grass covered over the old brick walkway. An old dog slept on the ground next to the porch, chain rattling as he moved in his sleep. The neighbor's riding lawn mower mixed with the oncoming train created a sound that smothered me as the vibrations shook the wind chimes hanging out front. The smell of burgers grilling next door mixed badly with the odor of the paint Mom had just used on the mailbox in an attempt to spruce it up a bit. It fell flat in the face of our faded pink-orange siding.

I didn't want to go inside.

Jenna was still in trouble for her grades and the incident with Todd. Mom and Jake were still fighting if you could call it that. They were violently polite; slinging pleases and thank yous back and forth as if daring the other to say something about it.

Yesterday, the day after Jenna's grounding, I had walked in to the living room to put away the vacuum as the door swung open and Jake came stumbling in, with a greasy brown sack of something that would probably pass for dinner.

"Damn I hate these eight to eight shifts." Jake said as he sank into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. I winced as the bits of drying mud on his boots scattered across the floor. I took the brown bag as the boys came running in the room and he continued, "Got the dishes done?"

I handed burgers out as I answered, "Yes. And the last load of laundry is in the dryer." And Mom would be home in a few hours to shower and go to bed. I hated waiting for her to come home and seeing if she would notice the time I did finish all of the chores rather than the times I didn't.

"Good. Where's your sister?" Jake asked, focused on the greasy cheeseburger in his hands.

I got the ketchup out of the fridge. "I don't know. Out, I think." Todd had called her an hour ago, begging her to meet him. I made a deal that I wouldn't say where she'd gone, but she was on her own after that.

"Out? Gone?" He looked up sharply, as I dug in the brown sack for my own sandwich, "It's Tuesday night. Where'd she go?"

"I don't know." I lifted the bun. Of course, onions again. I hoped that Jenna's talk with Todd was worth it. I had a bad feeling about the whole business.

"You don't know?"

I swallowed as I answered, "She didn't say. She just left."

"Damn it." He slammed his sandwich down on the table, "Your mom needs to stop letting her get away with that crap."

"Ok." I replied nervously, hoping that would be it.

Jake looked up and the clock, then threw away the wrapper as he headed for his room, "I'm meeting Luke in half an hour, heat up the other burger for Jenna when she gets back." With that piece of quasi-fatherly advice, he left me alone to finish my homework, or whatever else he thought I did at night.

I hadn't seen him or Mom yet today and I didn't want to go inside to more of that.

I'd rather go to work, where everything was so much calmer and the world makes more sense. I got the job at Phil's Diner three years ago and it's come in handy since. Phil's is owned by a woman named Helen, a chain smoker who only ever wore shirts with a pocket on the front for her Marlboro reds. Phil's Diner was the only twenty four hour place within a twenty minute drive that had decent coffee. Helen hired me on when I started spending four nights a week in the corner booth, riding my bike over so I had somewhere quiet and air conditioned to do my homework, "You stuck around here enough, Hon. I was bound to put you to work sooner or later." She said to me when I asked about it.

I supposed it was true enough.

"But why is it called Phil's Diner? Shouldn't it be Helen's Diner?" I asked after that.

Helen lit a cigarette as she answered, "Aren't you full of questions today. Once upon a time, my husband Phil helped me run the place."

"What happened?" I asked curiously, knowing I might not get an answer.

Helen laughed as she waved off my worries in a cloud of smoke, "Poor old Phil couldn't keep up. I fired him and sent him home to watch football and take care of the cat."

And I smiled too because at least they weren't divorced.

Before the divorce and the job at the diner I used to dream of a life like those on TV, where Mom and Dad were still married and happy and bought me a car and there weren't so many kids in the house. Now I know better. In the dark I watch the lights outside flicker with promises of safety. I cannot make myself sleep. My brain bulges with tomorrow's swollen worries.

Mom never let on, but there was never quite enough money. I started looking for little jobs to do at eleven. Raking leaves, walking the neighbor's dogs- it amounted to little more than twenty five dollars a week in dollar bills and loose change. She tried once or twice to get Dad to pay some sort of child support, but that never panned out. He was done with our family just as easy as flipping the channel to a station he liked better. Jenna took it hard and refused to see him. But he never did try to explain or make things work. But I guess he'd seen all along that I didn't need him; he'd said as much on his Wednesdays and every other weekend.

"You're such a trooper, Andy. I can't see how you manage everything so well." He said to me when I showed him a report card or a paper that had been handed back, "You're gonna get out of here. You're gonna go farther than any of us."

I guessed it was his way of saying to follow my dreams.

I never really paid attention to his rambles as I watched him throw down money to pay for his meal and my slice of chocolate cake. His specific words weren't important. I could have predicted the speech line by line always ending with promises to do things one day, "When I get promoted we'll..." Take a vacation, buy you a car, be a family again. Insert overly optimistic situation here.

My mind coming back to the front yard, its bare patches dry in the August heat, I thought about turning around and calling Mom later to say I'd picked up an extra shift. But then I heard one of my siblings screech through one of the windows left open to tempt in a breeze to cool down what undoubtedly felt like a big tin oven.

Inside is about what I expected with my brother Wyatt and Ian, Mom's boyfriend's son arguing over some video game and my baby sister crying as Mom danced around the kitchen, simultaneously fixing dinner before Jake got home and trying to stop the boys from destroying the recently cleaned living room. Jenna is texting under the table where her math homework waits for her to find the mythical x. The smoke of a burned casserole sets off the smoke detector, adding to the din. Mom's sigh was resigned as she handed little Meredith her bottle.

I picked up the phone to order pizza. Speed dial number three.

The diner was deserted when I got there. It was my day off, but the diner had a way of sucking you in even then. Plus it was quiet, away from the smell of greasy pizza and babies, and I had a to-do list a mile long.

"I was wondering when you'd drop in, Andy Lou." Helen greeted me from behind the counter, a cigarette burning itself out in the ashtray in front of her as she expertly rolled silverware, stacking it neatly in the big container beside her, "Thought you were off tonight."

I dropped my backpack on the floor as I sank onto one of the stools at the counter, "Yeah. The house was getting a little loud though."

"Your mama and Jake still fighting?" She asked, pushing a pile of napkins toward me. No idle hands allowed around Helen.

I just nodded as I mechanically started helping— stacking the fork and knife neatly together and rolling it up inside a white dinner napkin all snug and ready for some hungry person, "They've moved on to silence now though. The boys and the baby seem to be doing their best to make up for the lack of conversation."

She shrugged as she assured me, "It'll work itself out, Hon. Just you wait."

"I hope so." I replied.

In the meantime, I couldn't decide if I hoped Jenna brought her grades up soon or not. Tutoring her was the most fun we'd had together in a long time. It was the most we'd spoken about things that weren't chore or meal related in years. I'd been helping Jenna with her homework- not that she needed much help. Jenna was smart, but she was a daydreamer. Instead of solving the equations on the page she'd look up with a curious little line between her eyebrows and ask me, "Why is X always the variable?"

It reminded me of when we were younger. Mom was busy with baby Wyatt so I was the one who got to answer Jen's endless parade of questions. Why is the sky blue? Why do the stars only come out at night? Why Andy? Why? I could usually answer them, but when I couldn't, it was heartbreaking to see her disappointment. It was even worse when she stopped asking though. I really missed her and it frustrated me to no end that she was confiding in a loser like Todd. But I was the one who'd left, so to speak. I got more involved in school and work and she sort of drifted away.

She spent a lot of time with Mom for a while, which was good for both of them, but that was all over when Mom met Jake.

I hoped that Mom would patch things up with Jake soon. Whether or not she thought so, we needed him— and not just financially. Even with things being how they were, Jake was the one who could always make her smile. She needed to smile more. I didn't want to see her kick another boyfriend out of the house, his old t-shirts and ACDC albums thrown out on the lawn like fertilizer while Buddy barked at her. Someday I would tell my mother that I am afraid of the dark and touching raw chicken— of being alone like her.

We would sit down together again and have a civil conversation, like we had not had since I was fifteen. I wished I could tell her how much it hurt me to watch her go from guy to guy, always searching. She made it look so easy. I never saw her anymore. I wished I could tell her just how much I miss her. Someday I would tell my mother that she is the one who taught me how to leave.

Sheri, one of the waitresses working her way through college, called in sick right as the dinner rush started and I found myself drafted into working overtime. Soon enough I was caught up in the ebb and flow of customers and orders and ringing up checks. Conversations flew past me like raindrops in a bucket.

A tall guy in a basketball t-shirt stood up to his obnoxious buddies. “No I can’t come tonight. I said I’d take my kid sister to the movies. I’m not going to bail on her.”

The guy in the corner made his girlfriend really mad by saying, "Look, I can't go. I haven't stayed home in a few weekends. And my mom misses me, ok? Lay off."

Two girls sitting up at the bar, "Hold on, I've got a paper due Monday. I've got to work on it since I haven't started it yet."

And her brunette friend who I thought I'd seen with Jenna once or twice, "Just get one from the internet, it costs like five bucks."

"No, I won't get one from the internet. That's stupid. They can catch that, you know. But have fun at the party."

Her friend's reply was less than encouraging, "Yeah, I'm skipping class tomorrow because of it, so I'll need to borrow your notes. Most of my classes are pointless anyway. Everyone's going to be at this party."

These little snippets of other lives were so interesting in comparison with my own rather routine existence of chores, homework, and hours in a cold diner.

But they were like lives on TV so different from my own that they couldn't possibly be real. I was thinking about this as I cleared away the plates left from a party of four laughing old ladies. The diner was so quiet it was jarring.

"Andy Lou, seven is yours." Helen said indicating that I had a new table. She took the dishes out of my hands as she nodded to the section behind me.

"What?" I was confused, "That's Kathy's table."

"I said it's yours. Go on now." She insisted and I turned around.

There right by the door sat my sister, her short brown hair was a bit of a mess, but then mine probably was too. She never came into the diner unless I brought her. She looked a bit lost.

I walked over and sat down, "Hey." I said as she looked around.

"It's really cold in here." She said by way of a greeting. The red in her eyes and the way she sniffed told me she'd been crying.

She folded her arms against herself and I smiled, "Always is. What's up?"

"I..." Jenna said, "I just needed some help with my homework."

I nodded, "Kinda loud at home, huh?"

"Yeah." She shrugged and hesitated before she said, "Andy. Todd broke up with me."

I reached across the table to hug her awkwardly. It felt a little strange to be so close to each other, but that's what sisters are for. I talked to Helen and gave my four tables to the others. Then I shrugged on my coat against the chill of the diner's overworked air conditioning system. Kathy, a thirty something bleach blond who worked most Wednesdays with me brought over two cups of coffee. Settling into the booth next to her, we got out her chemistry book and started in on the latest assignment.

"Andy?" she asked as I smoothed out the page where she'd written down the questions, "I thought this was Helen's diner. Why is it called Phil's?"

I just rolled my eyes. “Ask Helen sometime. Now, what about these chemical equations—what do you remember?” I said pointing to her homework as Jenna put her hair up in a ponytail; she never could work with her hair in her face.

“One is a reactant and one is a product and it’s more stupid math.” She said with a grimace.

I nudged her with my shoulder and smiled as I told her, “But it’s just math. There’s good coffee and plenty of time. We’ve got this.”

“Okay.” She replied, looking hopeful as she picked up her pencil. We huddled close together over her textbook as I started to explain. Family, I decided, is like those equations. What you get out all depends on what you put in.