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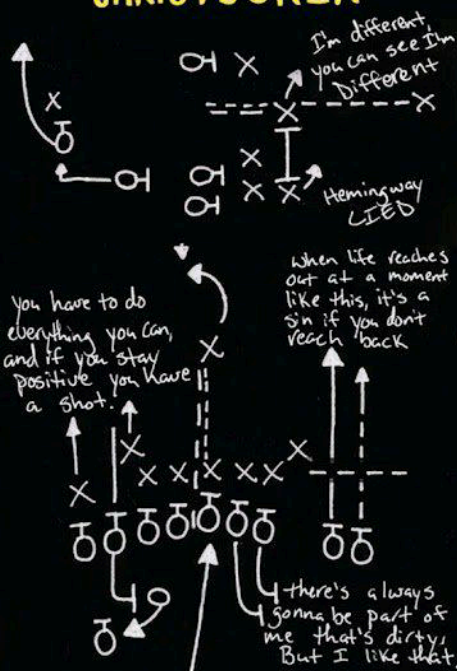
↓ BRADLEY COOPER

JENNIFER LAWRENCE

ROBERT DE NIRO

JACKI WEAVER

AND CHRIS TUCKER



SILVER LININGS

PLAYBOOK

A NOVEL

we're not liars like they are

TOO → You think that I'm crazier than you?

MATTHEW QUICK

"HEARTWARMING, HUMOROUS
AND SOUL-SATISFYING."
—NANCY PEARL, NPR

An Infinite Amount of Days Until My

Inevitable Reunion With Nikki

I don't have to look up to know Mom is making another surprise visit.

Her toenails are always pink during the summer months, and I recognize the flower design imprinted on her leather sandals; it's what Mom purchased the last time she signed me out of the bad place and took me to the mall.

Once again, Mother has found me in my bathrobe, exercising unattended in the courtyard, and I smile because I know she will yell at Dr. Timbers, asking him why I need to be locked up if I'm only going to be left alone all day.

"Just how many push-ups are you going to do, Pat?" Mom says when I start a second set of one hundred without speaking to her.

"Nikki - likes - a - man - with - a - developed - upper - body," I say, spitting out one word per push-up, tasting the salty sweat lines that are running into my mouth.

The August haze is thick, perfect for burning fat.

Mom just watches for a minute or so, and then she shocks me.

Her voice sort of quivers as she says, "Do you want to come home with me today?"

I stop doing push-ups, turn my face up toward Mother's, squint through the white noontime sun - and I can immediately tell she is serious, because she looks worried, as if she is making a mistake, and that's how Mom looks when she means something she has said and isn't just talking like she always does for hours on end whenever she's not upset or afraid.

"As long as you promise not to go looking for Nikki again," she adds,

"you can finally come home and live with me and your father until we find you a job and get you set up in an apartment."

I resume my push-up routine, keeping my eyes riveted to the shiny black ant scaling a blade of grass directly below my nose, but my peripheral vision catches the sweat beads leaping from my face to the ground below.

"Pat, just say you'll come home with me, and I'll cook for you and you can visit with your old friends and start to get on with your life finally.

Please. I need you to want this. If only for me, Pat. Please."

Double-time push-ups, my pecs ripping, growing - pain, heat, sweat, change.

I don't want to stay in the bad place, where no one believes in silver linings or love or happy endings, and where everyone tells me Nikki will not like my new body, nor will she even want to see me when apart time is over. But I am also afraid the people from my old life will not be as enthusiastic as I am now trying to be.

Even still, I need to get away from the depressing doctors and the ugly nurses - with their endless pills in paper cups - if I am ever going to get my thoughts straight, and since Mom will be much easier to trick than medical professionals, I jump up, find my feet, and say, "I'll come live with you just until apart time is over."

While Mom is signing legal papers, I take one last shower in my room and then fill my duffel bag with clothes and my framed picture of Nikki. I say goodbye to my roommate, Jackie, who just stares at me from his bed like he always does, drool running down off his chin like clear honey. Poor Jackie, with his random tufts of hair, oddly shaped head, and flabby body. What woman would ever love him?

He blinks at me. I take this for goodbye and good luck, so I blink back with both eyes - meaning double good luck to you, Jackie, which I figure he understands, since he grunts and bangs his shoulder against his ear like he does whenever he gets what you are trying to tell him.

My other friends are in music relaxation class, which I do not attend, because smooth jazz makes me angry sometimes. Thinking maybe I should say goodbye to the men who had my back while I was locked up, I look into the music-room window and see my boys sitting Indian style on purple yoga mats, their elbows resting on their knees, their palms pressed together in front of their faces, and their eyes closed.

Luckily, the glass of the window blocks the smooth jazz from entering my ears. My friends look really relaxed - at peace - so I decide not to interrupt their session. I hate goodbyes.

In his white coat, Dr. Timbers is waiting for me when I meet my mother in the lobby, where three palm trees lurk among the couches and lounge chairs, as if the bad place were in Orlando and not Baltimore. "Enjoy your life," he says to me - wearing that sober look of his - and shakes my hand.

"Just as soon as a part time ends," I say, and his face falls as if I said I was going to kill his wife, Natalie, and their three blond-haired daughters - Kristen, Jenny, and Becky - because that's just how much he does not believe in silver linings, making it his business to preach apathy and negativity and pessimism unceasingly.

But I make sure he understands that he has failed to infect me with his depressing life

philosophies - and that I will be looking forward to the end of part time. I say, "Picture me rollin'" to Dr. Timbers, which is exactly what Danny - my only black friend in the bad place - told me he was going to say to Dr. Timbers when Danny got out. I sort of feel bad about stealing Danny's exit line, but it works; I know because Dr.

Timbers squints as if I had punched him in the gut.

As my mother drives me out of Maryland and through Delaware, past all those fast-food places and strip malls, she explains that Dr.

Timbers did not want to let me out of the bad place, but with the help of a few lawyers and her girlfriend's therapist - the man who will be my new therapist - she waged a legal battle and managed to convince some judge that she could care for me at home, so I thank her.

On the Delaware Memorial Bridge, she looks over at me and asks if I want to get better, saying, "You do want to get better, Pat. Right?"

I nod. I say, "I do."

And then we are back in New Jersey, flying up 295.

As we drive down Haddon Avenue into the heart of Collingswood - my hometown - I see that the main drag looks different. So many new boutique stores, new expensive-looking restaurants, and well-dressed strangers walking the sidewalks that I wonder if this is really my hometown at all. I start to feel anxious, breathing heavily like I sometimes do.

Mom asks me what's wrong, and when I tell her, she again promises that my new therapist, Dr. Patel, will have me feeling normal in no time.

When we arrive home, I immediately go down into the basement, and it's like Christmas. I find the weight bench my mother had promised me so many times, along with the rack of weights, the stationary bike, dumbbells, and the Stomach Master 6000, which I had seen on late-night television and coveted for however long I was in the bad place.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I tell Mom, and give her a huge hug, picking her up off the ground and spinning her around once.

When I put her down, she smiles and says, "Welcome home, Pat."

Eagerly I go to work, alternating between sets of bench presses, curls, machine sit-ups on the Stomach Master 6000, leg lifts, squats, hours on the bike, hydration sessions (I try to drink four gallons of water every day, doing endless shots of H₂O from a shot glass for intensive hydration), and then there is my writing, which is mostly daily memoirs like this

one, so that Nikki will be able to read about my life and know exactly what I've been up to since apart time began. (My memory started to slip in the bad place because of the drugs, so I began writing down everything that happens to me, keeping track of what I will need to tell Nikki when apart time concludes, to catch her up on my life. But the doctors in the bad place confiscated everything I wrote before I came home, so I had to start over.) When I finally come out of the basement, I notice that all the pictures of Nikki and me have been removed from the walls and the mantel over the fireplace.

I ask my mother where these pictures went. She tells me our house was burglarized a few weeks before I came home and the pictures were stolen. I ask why a burglar would want pictures of Nikki and me, and my mother says she puts all of her pictures in very expensive frames. "Why didn't the burglar steal the rest of the family pictures?"

I ask. Mom says the burglar stole all the expensive frames, but she had the negatives for the family portraits and had them replaced.

"Why didn't you replace the pictures of Nikki and me?" I ask. Mom says she did not have the negatives for the pictures of Nikki and me, especially because Nikki's parents had paid for the wedding pictures and had only given my mother copies of the photos she liked. Nikki had given Mom the other non-wedding pictures of us, and well, we aren't in touch with Nikki or her family right now because it's apart time.

I tell my mother that if that burglar comes back, I'll break his kneecaps and beat him within an inch of his life, and she says, "I believe you would."

My father and I do not talk even once during the first week I am home, which is not all that surprising, as he is always working - he's the district manager for all the Big Foods in South Jersey. When Dad's not at work, he's in his study, reading historical fiction with the door shut, mostly novels about the Civil War. Mom says he needs time to get used to my living at home again, which I am happy to give him, especially since I am sort of afraid to talk with Dad anyway. I remember him yelling at me the only time he ever visited me in the bad place, and he said some pretty awful things about Nikki and silver linings in general. I see Dad in the hallways of our house, of course, but he doesn't look at me when we pass.

Nikki likes to read, and since she always wanted me to read literary books, I start, mainly so I will be able to participate in the dinner conversations I had remained silent through in the past - those conversations with Nikki's literary friends, all English teachers who think I'm an illiterate buffoon, which is actually a name Nikki's friend calls me whenever I tease him about being such a tiny man. "At least I'm not an illiterate buffoon," Phillip says to me, and Nikki laughs so hard.

My mom has a library card, and she checks out books for me now that I am home and allowed to read whatever I want without clearing the material with Dr. Timbers, who,

incidentally, is a fascist when it comes to book banning. I start with *The Great Gatsby*, which I finish in just three nights.

The best part is the introductory essay, which states that the novel is mostly about time and how you can never buy it back, which is exactly how I feel regarding my body and exercise - but then again, I also feel as if I have an infinite amount of days until my inevitable reunion with Nikki.

When I read the actual story - how Gatsby loves Daisy so much but can't ever be with her no matter how hard he tries - I feel like ripping the book in half and calling up Fitzgerald and telling him his book is all wrong, even though I know Fitzgerald is probably deceased. Especially when Gatsby is shot dead in his swimming pool the first time he goes for a swim all summer, Daisy doesn't even go to his funeral, Nick and Jordan part ways, and Daisy ends up sticking with racist Tom, whose need for sex basically murders an innocent woman, you can tell Fitzgerald never took the time to look up at clouds during sunset, because there's no silver lining at the end of that book, let me tell you.

I do see why Nikki likes the novel, as it's written so well. But her liking it makes me worry now that Nikki doesn't really believe in silver linings, because she says *The Great Gatsby* is the greatest novel ever written by an American, and yet it ends so sadly. One thing's for sure, Nikki is going to be very proud of me when I tell her I finally read her favorite book.

Here's another surprise: I'm going to read all the novels on her American literature class syllabus, just to make her proud, to let her know that I am really interested in what she loves and I am making a real effort to salvage our marriage, especially since I will now be able to converse with her swanky literary friends, saying things like, "I'm thirty. I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor," which Nick says toward the end of Fitzgerald's famous novel, but the line works for me too, because I am also thirty, so when I say it, I will sound really smart. We will probably be chatting over dinner, and the reference will make Nikki smile and laugh because she will be so surprised that I have actually read *The Great Gatsby*. That's part of my plan, anyway, to deliver that line real suave, when she least expects me to "drop knowledge" - to use another one of my black friend Danny's lines.

God, I can't wait.

He Does Not Preach Pessimism

My workout is interrupted midday, when Mom descends the basement stairs and says I have an appointment with Dr. Patel. I ask if I can go later that night, after I have completed my daily weights routine, but Mom says I'll have to go back to the bad place in Baltimore if I do not keep my appointments with Dr. Patel, and she even references the court ruling, telling me I can read the paperwork if I don't believe her.

So I shower, and then Mom drives me to Dr. Patel's office, which is the first floor of a big house in Voorhees, just off Haddonfield - Berlin Road.

When we arrive, I take a seat in the waiting room as Mom fills out some more paperwork. By now, ten trees must have been cut down just to document my mental health, which Nikki will hate hearing, as she is an avid environmentalist who gave me at least one tree in the rain forest every Christmas - which was really only a piece of paper stating I owned the tree - and I do feel bad now for making fun of those gifts and won't ever poke fun at the diminishing rain forest in the future when Nikki comes back.

As I sit there flipping through a Sports Illustrated, listening to the easy-listening station Dr. Patel pumps into his waiting room, suddenly I'm hearing sexy synthesizer chords, faint highhat taps, the kick drum thumping out an erotic heartbeat, the twinkling of fairy dust, and then the evil bright soprano saxophone. You know the title:

"Songbird." And I'm out of my seat, screaming, kicking chairs, flipping the coffee table, picking up piles of magazines and throwing them against the wall, yelling, "It's not fair! I won't tolerate any tricks! I'm not an emotional lab rat!"

And then a small Indian man - maybe only five feet tall, wearing a cable-knit sweater in August, suit pants, and shiny white tennis shoes

- is calmly asking me what's wrong.

"Turn off that music!" I yell. "Shut it off! Right now!"

The tiny man is Dr. Patel, I realize, because he tells his secretary to turn off the music, and when she obeys, Kenny G is out of my head and I stop yelling.

I cover my face with my hands so no one will see me crying, and after a minute or so, my mother begins rubbing my back.

So much silence - and then Dr. Patel asks me into his office. I follow him reluctantly as Mom helps the secretary clean up the mess I made.

His office is pleasantly strange.

Two leather recliners face each other, and spider-looking plants - long vines full of white-and-green leaves - hang down from the ceiling to frame the bay window that overlooks a stone birdbath and a garden of colorful flowers. But there is absolutely nothing else in the room except a box of tissues on the short length of floor between the recliners. The floor is a shiny yellow hardwood, and the ceiling and walls are painted to look like the sky - real-looking clouds float all around the office, which I take as a good omen, since I love clouds. A single light occupies the center of the ceiling, like a glowing upside-down vanilla-icing cake, but the ceiling around the light is painted to look like the sun. Friendly rays shoot out from the center.

I have to admit I feel calm as soon as I enter Dr. Patel's office and do not really mind anymore that I heard the Kenny G song.

Dr. Patel asks me which recliner I want to relax in. I pick the black over the brown and immediately regret my decision, thinking that choosing black makes me seem more depressed than if I had chosen brown, and really, I'm not depressed at all.

When Dr. Patel sits down, he pulls the lever on the side of his chair, which makes the footrest rise. He leans back and laces his fingers behind his tiny head, as if he were about to watch a ball game.

"Relax," he says. "And no Dr. Patel. Call me Cliff. I like to keep sessions informal. Friendly, right?"

He seems nice enough, so I pull my lever, lean back, and try to relax.

"So," he says. "The Kenny G song really got to you. I can't say I'm a fan either, but ..."

I close my eyes, hum a single note, and silently count to ten, blanking my mind.

When I open my eyes, he says, "You want to talk about Kenny G?"

I close my eyes, hum a single note, and silently count to ten, blanking my mind.

"Okay. Want to tell me about Nikki?"

"Why do you want to know about Nikki?" I say, too defensively, I admit.

"If I am going to help you, Pat, I need to know you, right? Your mother tells me you wish to be reunited with Nikki, that this is your biggest life goal- so I figure we best start there."

I begin to feel better because he does not say a reunion is out of the question, which seems

to imply that Dr. Patel feels as though reconciling with my wife is still possible.

"Nikki? She's great," I say, and then smile, feeling the warmth that fills my chest whenever I say her name, whenever I see her face in my mind. "She's the best thing that ever happened to me. I love her more than life itself. And I just can't wait until apart time is over."

"Apart time?"

"Yeah. Apart time."

"What is apart time?"

"A few months ago I agreed to give Nikki some space, and she agreed to come back to me when she felt like she had worked out her own issues enough so we could be together again. So we are sort of separated, but only temporarily."

"Why did you separate?"

"Mostly because I didn't appreciate her and was a workaholic -

chairing the Jefferson High School History Department and coaching three sports. I was never home, and she got lonely. Also I sort of let my appearance go, to the point where I was maybe ten to seventy pounds overweight, but I'm working on all that and am now more than willing to go into couples counseling like she wanted me to, because I'm a changed man."

"Did you set a date?"

"A date?"

"For the end of apart time."

"No."

"So apart time is something that will go on indefinitely?"

"Theoretically, I guess - yes. Especially since I'm not allowed to contact Nikki or her family."

"Why's that?"

"Umm ... I don't know, really. I mean - I love my in-laws as much as I love Nikki. But it doesn't matter, because I'm thinking that Nikki will be back sooner than later, and then

she'll straighten everything out with her parents."

"On what do you base your thinking?" he asks, but nicely, with a friendly smile on his face.

"I believe in happy endings," I tell him. "And it feels like this movie has gone on for the right amount of time."

"Movie?" Dr. Patel says, and I think he would look exactly like Gandhi if he had those wire-rim glasses and a shaved head, which is weird, especially since we are in leather recliners in such a bright, happy room and well, Gandhi is dead, right?

"Yeah," I say. "Haven't you ever noticed that life is like a series of movies?"

"No. Tell me."

"Well, you have adventures. All start out with troubles, but then you admit your problems and become a better person by working really hard, which is what fertilizes the happy ending and allows it to bloom

- just like the end of all the Rocky films, Rudy, The Karate Kid, the Star Wars and Indiana Jones trilogies, and The Goonies, which are my favorite films, even though I have sworn off movies until Nikki returns, because now my own life is the movie I will watch, and well, it's always on. Plus I know it's almost time for the happy ending, when Nikki will come back, because I have improved myself so very much through physical fitness and medication and therapy."

"Oh, I see." Dr. Patel smiles. "I like happy endings too, Pat."

"So you agree with me. You think my wife will come back soon?"

"Time will tell," Dr. Patel says, and I know right then that Cliff and I are going to get along, because he does not preach pessimism like Dr.

Timbers and the staff at the bad place; Cliff doesn't say I need to face what he thinks is my reality.

"It's funny, because all the other therapists I've seen said that Nikki wouldn't be back. Even after I told them about the life improvements I have been making, how I am bettering myself, they still were always

'hating on me,' which is an expression I learned from my black friend Danny."

"People can be cruel," he says with a sympathetic look that makes me trust him even more.

And right then I realize that he is not writing down all my words in a file, which I really appreciate, let me tell you.

I tell him I like the room, and we talk about my love of clouds and how most people lose the ability to see silver linings even though they are always there above us almost every day.

I ask him questions about his family, just to be nice, and it turns out he has a daughter whose high school field hockey team is ranked second in South Jersey. Also he has a son in elementary school who wants to be a ventriloquist and even practices nightly with a wooden dummy named Grover Cleveland, who, incidentally, was also the only U.S. president to serve two terms that were not back-to-back. I don't really get why Cliff's son named his wooden dummy after our twenty-second and twenty-fourth president, although I do not say so.

Next, Cliff says he has a wife named Sonja, who painted the room so beautifully, which leads to our discussion about how great women are and how it's important to treasure your woman while you have her because if you don't, you can lose her pretty quickly - as God really wants us to appreciate our women. I tell Cliff I hope he never has to experience apart time, and he says he hopes my apart time will end soon, which is a pretty nice thing to say.

Before I leave, Cliff says he will be changing my medication, which could lead to some unwanted side effects, and that I have to report any discomfort or sleeplessness or anxiety or anything else to my mother immediately - because it might take some time for him to find the right combination of drugs - and I promise him I will.

On the drive home I tell my mother I really like Dr. Cliff Patel and am feeling much more hopeful about my therapy. I thank her for getting me out of the bad place, saying Nikki is far more likely to come to Collingswood than to a mental institution, and when I say this, Mom starts to cry, which is so strange. She even pulls off the road, rests her head against the steering wheel, and with the engine running, she cries for a long time - sniffing and trembling and making crying noises. So I rub her back, like she did for me in Dr. Patel's office when that certain song came on, and after ten minutes or so, she simply stops crying and drives me home.

To make up for the hour I spent sitting around with Cliff, I work out until late in the evening, and when I go to bed, my father is still in his office with the door shut, so another day passes without my talking to Dad. I think it's strange to live in a house with someone you cannot talk to - especially when that someone is your father - and the thought makes me a little sad.

Since Mom has not been to the library yet, I have nothing to read. So I close my eyes and think about Nikki until she comes to be with me in my dreams - like always.

Orange Fire Enters My Skull

Yes, I really do believe in silver linings, mostly because I've been seeing them almost every day when I emerge from the basement, push my head and arms through a trash bag - so my torso will be wrapped in plastic and I will sweat more - and then go running. I always try to coordinate the ten-mile running portion of my ten-hour exercise routine with sunset, so I can finish by running west past the playing fields of Knight's Park, where, as a kid, I played baseball and soccer.

As I run through the park, I look up and see what the day has to offer in the way of divination.

If clouds are blocking the sun, there will always be a silver lining that reminds me to keep on trying, because I know that while things might seem dark now, my wife is coming back to me soon. Seeing the light outline those fluffy puffs of white and gray is electrifying. (And you can even re-create the effect by holding your hand a few inches away from a naked light bulb and tracing your handprint with your eyes until you go temporarily blind.) It hurts to look at the clouds, but it also helps, like most things that cause pain. So I need to run, and as my lungs burn and my back rebels with that stabbing knife feeling and my leg muscles harden and the half inch of loose skin around my waist jiggles, I feel as though my penance for the day is being done and that maybe God will be pleased enough to lend me some help, which I think is why He has been showing me interesting clouds for the past week.

Since my wife asked for some time apart, I've lost more than fifty pounds, and my mother says that soon I'll be at the weight I was when I played varsity soccer in high school, which is also the weight I was when I met Nikki, and I'm thinking maybe she was upset by the weight I gained during the five years we were married. Won't she be surprised to see me looking so muscular when apart time is over!

If there are no clouds at sunset - which happened yesterday - when I look up toward the sky, orange fire enters my skull, blinds me, and that's almost as good, because it burns too and makes everything look divine.

When I run, I always pretend I am running toward Nikki, and it makes me feel like I am decreasing the amount of time I have to wait until I see her again.

The Worst Ending Imaginable

Knowing that Nikki does a big unit on Hemingway every year, I ask for one of Hemingway's better novels. "One with a love story if possible, because I really need to study love - so I can be a better husband when Nikki comes back," I tell Mom.

When Mom returns from the library, she says that the librarian claims *A Farewell to Arms* is Hemingway's best love story. So I eagerly crack open the book and can feel myself getting smarter as I turn the first few pages.

As I read, I look for quotable lines so I can "drop knowledge" the next time Nikki and I are out with her literary friends - so I can say to that glasses-wearing Phillip, "Would an illiterate buffoon know this line?"

And then I will drop some Hemingway, real suave.

But the novel is nothing but a trick.

The whole time, you root for the narrator to survive the war and then for him to have a nice life with Catherine Barkley. He does survive all sorts of dangers - even getting blown up - and finally escapes to Switzerland with the pregnant Catherine, whom he loves so much.

They live in the mountains for a time, in love and living a good life.

Hemingway should have ended there, because that was the silver lining these people deserved after struggling to survive the gloomy war. But no.

Instead he thinks up the worst ending imaginable: Hemingway has Catherine die from hemorrhaging after their child is stillborn. It is the most torturous ending I have ever experienced and probably will ever experience in literature, movies, or even television.

I am crying so hard at the end, partly for the characters, yes, but also because Nikki actually teaches this book to children. I cannot imagine why anyone would want to expose impressionable teenagers to such a horrible ending. Why not just tell high school students that their struggle to improve themselves is all for nothing?

I have to admit that for the first time since apart time began, I am mad at Nikki for teaching such pessimism in her classroom. I will not be quoting Hemingway anytime soon, nor will I ever read another one of his books. And if he were still alive, I would write him a letter right now and threaten to strangle him dead with my bare hands just for being so glum. No wonder he put a gun to his head, like it says in the introductory essay.

Got Nothin' but Love for Ya

Dr. Patel's secretary turns off the radio as soon as she sees me walk into the waiting room, which makes me laugh because she tries to do it casually, as if I won't notice. She looks scared, turning the knob so gingerly - the way people do things after they have seen one of my episodes, as if I am no longer human, but some wild hulking animal.

After a brief wait, I meet with Cliff for my second session, like I will every Friday for the foreseeable future. I pick brown this time, and we sit in his leather recliners among the clouds, talking about how much we like women and "kicking it like we do," which is another one of Danny's sayings.

Cliff asks me if I like my new meds, and I tell him I do, even though I really have not noticed any effects at all and have only taken about half the pills my mother gave me last week - hiding a few under my tongue and spitting them into the toilet when she leaves me alone. He asks me if I have experienced any unwanted side effects - shortness of breath, loss of appetite, drowsiness, suicidal feelings, homicidal feelings, loss of virility, anxiety, itchiness, diarrhea - and I tell him I haven't.

"What about hallucinations?" he says, and then leans forward a little, squinting.

"Hallucinations?" I ask.

"Hallucinations."

I shrug, say I don't think I have hallucinated, and he tells me I would know if I had.

"Tell your mother if you see anything bizarre or horrifying," he says,

"but don't worry, because you probably will not hallucinate. Only a very small percentage of people hallucinate while taking this combination of meds."

I nod and promise I will report any hallucinations to my mother, but I do not really believe I will hallucinate no matter what type of drugs he gives me, especially since I know he will not be giving me LSD or anything like that. I figure weaker people probably complain about their drugs, but I am not weak and can control my mind pretty well.

I am in the basement doing shots of water, taking my three-minute break between crunches on the Stomach Master 6000 and leg lifts on the weight bench, when I smell the unmistakable buttery flavor of my mother's crabby snacks and I start to salivate unmercifully.

Because I love crabby snacks, I leave the basement, enter the kitchen, and see that my mother is not only baking crabby snacks, which are buttered crabmeat and orange cheese on English muffins, but she is also making her homemade three-meats pizza - hamburger,

sausage, and chicken - and those buffalo wings she gets from Big Foods.

"Why are you cooking crabby snacks?" I ask hopefully, because I know from past experience that she only cooks crabby snacks when we are having company.

Nikki loves crabby snacks and will eat a whole plate if you set it in front of her, and then she will complain later on the ride home, saying she is feeling fat because she has eaten too much. Back when I was emotionally abusive, I used to tell her that I did not want to hear her complaints every time she ate too much. But the next time Nikki eats too many crabby snacks, I am going to tell her she did not eat too much and that she looks too skinny anyway; I'll say she needs to gain a few pounds because I like my women looking like women and not like

"Ms. Six O'Clock - straight up, straight down," which is another term I learned from Danny.

And I do hope my mother's making crabby snacks signifies that apart time is over because Nikki is on her way to my parents' house, which seems like the best coming-home surprise my mother could cook up -

and as Mom is always trying to do nice things for me and my brother, I mentally prepare myself to be reunited with Nikki.

My heart pounds at least fifty times during the few seconds it takes for my mother to answer my question.

"The Eagles are playing the Steelers tonight in a preseason exhibition game," my mother says, which is weird because Mom has always hated sports and barely knows that football season is in the fall, let alone what teams are playing on a given day. "Your brother is coming over to watch the game with you and your father."

My heart starts beating even faster because I have not seen my brother since shortly after apart time began, and like my father, he said some really awful things about Nikki the last time we talked.

"Jake is looking forward to seeing you, and you know how much your father loves the Eagles. I can't wait to have all three of my men gathered around the couch again, just like old times." My mother smiles at me so hard I think she is going to break out in tears again, so I turn around and go back into the basement to do knuckle push-ups until my pecs burn and I can no longer feel my knuckles.

Knowing that I will probably not be allowed to go for my run later, because we are having a family night, I put on a trash bag and run early, passing my high school friends' homes;

passing St. Joseph's, which is the Catholic church I used to attend; passing Collingswood High School (class of 89 rules!) and the house my grandparents used to own by the park before they died.

My old best friend sees me when I run past his new house on Virginia Avenue. Ronnie is just getting home from work, walking from his car to his front door, when I pass him on the sidewalk. He looks me in the eyes, and after I have passed, he yells, "Pat Peoples? Is that you? Pat!

Hey!" I run even harder, because my brother, Jake, is coming to talk to me; Jake does not believe in happy endings, and I do not have the emotional wherewithal to deal with Ronnie right now, because he never once came to visit Nikki and me in Baltimore, although he promised so many times. Nikki used to call Ronnie "whipped," saying that his wife, Veronica, "keeps Ronnie's social calendar where she keeps his balls - in her purse."

Nikki told me that Ronnie would never visit me in Baltimore, and she was right.

He never visited me in the bad place either, but he used to write me letters about how great his daughter, Emily, was and I guess is, although I have not yet met Emily to verify the letters.

When I return home, Jake's car is there - a fancy silver BMW, which sort of implies that my brother is doing well now when it comes to

"pockets getting fatter," as Danny says. So I sneak in the back door and run up the steps to the shower. After I wash and put on clean clothes, I take a deep breath and follow the sound of conversation to the living room.

Jake stands when he sees me. He has on fancy pants, lined with charcoal pinstripes, and a robin's-egg blue polo shirt that is formfitting enough to show that he is still pretty fit. He is also wearing a watch with diamonds all over the face, which Danny would call Jake's bling-bling. My brother's hair has thinned a little too, but his head is gelled and looks swanky.

"Pat?" he says.

"Didn't I say you wouldn't recognize him?" Mom says.

"You look like Arnold Schwarzenegger." He feels my bicep, which I absolutely hate because I don't like to be touched by anyone except Nikki. Since he's my brother, I don't say anything. "You're frickin'

ripped," he adds.

I look at the floor, because I remember what he said about Nikki - I am still mad about that - and yet I am also happy to see my brother after not seeing him for what feels like forever.

"Listen, Pat. I should have come to see you more in Baltimore, but those places freak me out and I ... I ... I just couldn't see you like that, okay? Are you mad at me?"

I am sort of still mad at Jake, but suddenly I remember another one of Danny's lines that is too appropriate to leave unsaid, so I say, "Got nothin' but love for ya."

Jake looks at me for a second as if I had punched him in the gut. He blinks a few times almost as if he is going to cry, and then he hugs me with both arms. "I'm sorry," he says, and holds me for longer than I like, which isn't very long - unless it's Nikki hugging me.

When he lets go, Jake says, "I got a present for you." He pulls an Eagles jersey out of a plastic bag and tosses it to me. I hold it up and see it's number 84, which I recognize as a wide receiver's number, but I do not know the name. Isn't that young receiver Freddie Mitchell number 84?

I think but do not say, because I don't want to insult my brother, who was nice enough to buy me a present.

"Who's Baskett?" I ask, which is the name on the jersey.

"Undrafted rookie sensation Hank Baskett? He's the preseason story.

These jerseys are hot on the streets of Philadelphia. And now you have one to wear to the games this year."

"Wear to the games?"

"Now that you're home, you're gonna want your old seat back, right?"

"At the Vet?"

"The Vet?" Jake laughs and looks at my mother. My mother looks scared. "No - at Lincoln Financial Field."

"What's Lincoln Financial Field?"

"Didn't they let you watch TV in that place? It's the home of the Eagles, the stadium your team's played three seasons in now."

I know Jake is lying to me, but I don't say anything.

"Anyway, you got a seat right next to mine and Scott's. Season tickets, bro. Are you psyched, or what?"

"I don't have any money for season tickets," I say, because I let Nikki have the house and the cars and the bank accounts when apart time began.

"I got your back." Jake punches me in the arm. "I might not have been a good brother for the past few years, but I'm gonna make up for all that now that you're home."

I thank my brother, and then Mom starts crying again. She cries so hard that she has to leave the room, which is weird, since Jake and I are making up and season tickets to the Eagles are quite a nice present - not to mention the jersey.

"Put on your Baskett jersey, bro."

I put it on, and it feels good to be wearing Eagles green, especially a jersey that Jake picked out special for me.

"You wait and see how good your boy Baskett is going to be this year,"

Jake says in a strange way, as if my future were somehow linked to the Eagles' rookie wide receiver - Hank Baskett.

The Concrete Doughnut

I notice that my father waits until the game is just about to begin before he comes into the family room. It is only preseason, so we do not engage in any of the regular-season game-day rituals, but Dad has put on his number 5 McNabb jersey and now sits on the edge of the couch, ready to jump out of his seat. He nods at my brother solemnly but completely ignores me, even after I heard my mother say, "Please, just try to talk to Pat" when they were arguing in the kitchen. Mom puts the food on folding tables, takes a seat next to Jake, and we all start to eat.

The food is excellent, but I am the only one to say so. Mom seems happy to get the compliment, saying, "Are you sure it's all right?" like she does, because she is modest when it comes to cooking, even though she is a great cook.

"What do you think the Birds will do this year, Dad?" Jake asks.

"Eight and eight," my dad answers pessimistically, like he always does at the beginning of every NFL season.

"Eleven and five," my brother says, to which my father shakes his head and blows air through his teeth. "Eleven and five?" my brother asks me, and I nod because I am optimistic, and winning eleven games would most likely put the Eagles in the play-offs. Since we have season tickets, I know we are assured play-off tickets should the Birds earn a home game, and there's nothing better than an Eagles play-off game.

Now, I admit that I have not been keeping up with the Birds in the off-season, but when the starting lineups are announced, I am really surprised that many of my favorite players are no longer on the team.

Duce Staley. Hugh Douglas. James Thrash. Corey Simon. All gone. I want to ask, "When? Why?" but don't, fearing my father and brother will think I am not a true fan anymore, which they said would happen when I first moved to Baltimore with Nikki and gave up my season ticket.

To my surprise, the Birds are also not playing in Veterans Stadium, but at Lincoln Financial Field, just like Jake had said. Somehow they have built an entire stadium since last season, and I must have missed all the hype because I was stuck in the bad place. Still, something does not really seem right to me.

"Where is Lincoln Financial Field?" I try to ask nonchalantly when the commercials come on after the first series.

My father turns his head and stares at me but does not answer my question. He hates me.

He looks repulsed, like it is a chore to sit in the family room watching the game with his mentally messed-up son.

"It's in South Philadelphia, just like all the other stadiums," my brother says too quickly. "Good crabby snacks, Mom."

"Can you see Lincoln Financial Field from the Vet?" I ask.

"The Vet's gone," Jake says.

"Gone?" I ask. "What do you mean, gone?"

"March 21, 2004. Seven a.m. It fell like a house of cards," my father says without looking at me, just before sucking an orange piece of meat from a chicken bone. "Over two years ago."

"What? I was at the Vet just last ..." I pause because I start to feel a little dizzy and nauseous. "What year did you just say?"

My father opens his mouth to speak, but my mother cuts him off, saying, "A lot has changed since you were away."

Still, I refuse to believe the Vet is gone, even after Jake retrieves his laptop from his car and shows me a downloaded video of the Vet being imploded. Veterans Stadium - which we used to call the concrete doughnut - falls like a circle of dominoes, gray dust fills the screen, and it breaks my heart to see that place crumble, even though I suspect that what I am viewing is a computergenerated trick.

When I was a boy, my father took me to many Phillies games at the Vet, and of course there were all of the Eagles games with Jake, so it is hard to believe such a big monument to my childhood could be destroyed while I was in the bad place. The video ends, and I ask my mother if I can talk to her in the other room.

"What's wrong?" she says when we reach the kitchen.

"Dr. Patel said that my new medication might make me hallucinate."

"Okay."

"I think I just saw Veterans Stadium demolished on Jake's computer."

"Honey, you did. It was demolished over two years ago."

"What year is it?"

She hesitates, and then says, "Two thousand and six."

That would make me thirty-four. Apart time would have been in progress for four years. Impossible, I think. "How do I know I am not hallucinating right now? How do I know you're not a hallucination?"

"You're all hallucinations! All of you!" I realize I am screaming, but I can't help it.

Mom shakes her head, tries to touch my cheek, but I swat her hand away and she starts crying again.

"How long was I in the bad place? How long? Tell me!"

"What's going on in there?" my father yells. "We're trying to watch the game!"

"Shhhh!" my mother says through tears.

"How long?" I yell.

"Tell him, Jeanie! Go ahead! He's going to find out sooner or later!" my father yells from the family room. "Tell him!"

I grab my mother's shoulders, shake her so her head wobbles all over, and yell, "How long?"

"Almost four years," Jake says. I look back over my shoulder, and my brother is in the kitchen doorway. "Now let go of Mom."

"Four years?" I laugh and let go of my mother's shoulders. She covers her mouth with her hands, and her eyes are full of pity and tears.

"Why are you guys playing jokes on - "

I hear my mother scream, I feel the back of my head hit the refrigerator, and then my mind goes blank.

I Fear Him More Than Any

Other Human Being

After I returned to New Jersey, I thought I was safe, because I did not think Kenny G could leave the bad place, which I realize is silly now -

because Kenny G is extremely talented and resourceful and a powerful force to be reckoned with.

I have been sleeping in the attic because it is so ferociously hot up here. After my parents go to bed, I climb the stairs, turn off the ventilation fan, slip into my old winter sleeping bag, zipper it up so only my face is exposed, and then sweat away the pounds. Without the ventilation fan running, the temperature climbs quickly, and soon my sleeping bag is drenched with perspiration and I can feel myself getting thinner. I had done this for several nights, and nothing strange or unusual happened at all.

But in the attic tonight I'm sweating and sweating and sweating, and through the darkness, suddenly I hear the sexy synthesizer chords. I keep my eyes closed, hum a single note, and silently count to ten, knowing that I am only hallucinating like Dr. Patel said I might, but Kenny slaps me across the face, and when I open my eyes, there he is in my parents' attic, his curly mane of hair haloed like Jesus. The perfectly tanned forehead, that nose, that eternal five o'clock shadow and sharp jawline. The top three buttons of his shirt are undone so that you can see a little chest hair. Mr. G might not seem evil, but I fear him more than any other human being.

"How? How did you find me?" I ask him.

Kenny G winks at me and then puts his gleaming soprano sax to his lips.

I shiver, even though I am drenched in sweat. "Please," I beg him, "just leave me alone!"

But he takes a deep breath and his soprano sax starts to sing the bright notes of "Songbird" - and immediately I'm upright in my sleeping bag, repetitively slamming the heel of my right hand into the little white scar above my right eyebrow, trying to make the music stop - Kenny G's hips are swaying right before my eyes - with every brain jolt I'm yelling, "Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!" - the end of his instrument is in my face, pounding me with smooth jazz - I feel the blood rushing up into my forehead - Kenny G's solo has reached a climax - bang, bang, bang, bang -

And then my mother and father are trying to restrain my arms, but I'm screaming, "Stop playing that song! Just stop! Please!"

When my mother gets knocked to the floor, my father kicks me hard in the stomach - which makes Kenny G vanish and kills the music - and when I fall back gasping for air,

Dad jumps on my chest and punches me in the cheek, and suddenly my mom is trying to pull Dad off me and I'm sobbing like a baby; my mother is screaming at my father, telling him to stop hitting me, and then he's off me and she's telling me everything is going to be okay even after my father has punched me in the face as hard as he could.

"That's it, Jeanie. He's going back to that hospital in the morning. First thing," my father says, and then stomps down the stairs.

I can hardly think, I'm sobbing so loudly.

My mother sits down next to me and says, "It's okay, Pat. I'm here."

I put my head in my mother's lap and cry myself to sleep as Mom strokes my hair.

When I open my eyes, the ventilation fan is back on, sun is streaming through the screen in the nearest window, and Mom is still stroking my hair.

"How did you sleep?" she asks me, forcing a smile. Her eyes are red and her cheeks are streaked with tears.

For a second it feels nice to be lying next to my mom, the weight of her small hand on my head, her soft voice lingering in my ear, but soon the memory of what happened the night before forces me to sit up - and then my heart is pounding and a wave of dread courses through my limbs. "Don't send me back to the bad place. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please," I beg her, pleading with everything I have, because that's how much I hate the bad place and pessimistic Dr. Timbers.

"You're staying right here with us," Mom says - looking me in the eyes like she does when she is telling the truth - and then she kisses me on the cheek.

We go down to the kitchen, where she cooks me some delicious eggs scrambled with cheese and tomatoes, and I actually swallow all of my pills because I feel I owe it to Mom after knocking her down and upsetting my father.

I am shocked when I look at the clock and see it is already 11:00 a.m. So I start my workout as soon as my plate is clean, double-timing everything just to keep up with my routine.

The Dress-up Dinner

Ronnie finally comes to visit me in my basement and says, "I'm on my way home, so I only have a few minutes."

As I finish my set of bench presses, I smirk because I know what that statement means. Veronica does not know he has come to see me, and Ronnie needs to keep it quick if he does not want to get caught doing something without Veronica's permission - something like saying hello to his best friend, whom he has not seen for a long time.

When I sit up, he says, "What happened to your face?"

I touch my forehead. "My hands slipped yesterday, and I dropped the bar on myself."

"And it made your cheek all puffy like that?"

I shrug because I do not really want to tell him my father punched me.

"Man, you really have trimmed down and bulked up. I like your gym,"

he says, eyeballing my weight bench and Stomach Master 6000, and then he sticks out his hand. "Think I could come over and work out with you?"

I stand, shake his hand, and say, "Sure," knowing the question is only yet another one of Ronnie's false promises.

"Listen, I'm sorry I never came to see you when you were in Baltimore, but we had Emily, and well, you know how it is. But I felt like the letters kept us close. And now that you're home, we can hang out all the time, right?"

"As if - ," I start to say, but then bite my tongue.

"As if - what?"

"Nothing."

"You still think Veronica hates you?"

I keep my mouth shut.

He smiles and says, "Well, if she hated you, would she be inviting you over for dinner tomorrow night?"

I look at Ronnie, trying to gauge whether he is serious or not.

"Veronica's making a big meal to welcome you home. So are you coming, or what?"

"Sure," I say, still not believing my ears, because Ronnie's promises usually do not come with specific words like "tomorrow" attached.

"Great. Be at my house at seven o'clock for drinks. Dinner's at eight, and it's going to be one of the wife's formal candlelit three-course meals, so wear something nice, okay? You know how Veronica is about her dress-up dinners," he says, and then hugs sweaty me, which I tolerate only because I am so shocked by Veronica's invitation. With a hand on my shoulder, Ronnie looks me in the eye and says, "Man, it's good to have you home, Pat."

As I watch him jog up the stairs, I think about how much trash Nikki and I would talk about Ronnie and Veronica if apart time were over and Nikki was going to the dress-up dinner with me.

"Dress-up dinner," Nikki would say. "Are we in elementary school?"

God, Nikki hates Veronica.

If I Backslide

Knowing that if I wear the wrong thing, Veronica will say I have ruined her night - the way she did that one time when I wore Bermuda shorts and sandals to a dress-up dinner - I can't stop thinking about what I am going to wear to her dinner party, so much that I don't even remember it's Friday, and therefore, time to see Dr. Patel, until Mom calls down in the middle of my workout, saying, "We're leaving in fifteen minutes. Hit the shower!"

In the cloud room, I pick the brown chair. We recline, and Cliff says,

"Your mother tells me you've had quite a week. Want to talk about it?"

So I tell him about Veronica's dress-up party and how my old dress clothes don't fit because I have lost so much weight, and I have no swanky clothes other than the shirt my brother has recently given me, and I am pretty stressed out about going to a dinner party and wish I could just spend some time alone with Ronnie lifting weights, so that I would not have to see Veronica, who even Nikki says is a mean person.

Dr. Patel nods a few times like he does, and then says, "Do you like the new shirt your brother gave you? Do you feel comfortable wearing it?"

I tell him I absolutely love my new shirt.

"So wear that one to the dress-up dinner, and I'm sure Veronica will like it too."

"Are you sure?" I ask. "Because Veronica is really particular about what you should wear to dinner parties."

"I'm sure," he says, which makes me feel a whole lot better.

"What about pants?"

"What's wrong with the pants you have on now?"

I look down at the tan khakis my mom purchased for me at the Gap the other day because she says I shouldn't wear sweatpants to my doctor's appointments, and even though the pants are not as swanky as my new Eagles jersey, they do look okay, so I shrug and stop worrying about what to wear to Veronica's dinner party.

Cliff tries to get me to talk about Kenny G, but I only close my eyes, hum a single note, and silently count to ten every time he says Mr. G's name.

Then Cliff says he knows that I have been rough with my mother, shaking her in the

kitchen and knocking her down in the attic, which makes me really sad because I love my mom so much and she rescued me from the bad place and has even signed all those legal documents

- and yet I cannot rightly deny what Cliff has said. My chest heats up with guilt until I can't take it. Truth be told, I break down and cry -

sobbing - for at least five minutes.

"Your mother is risking a lot, because she believes in you."

His words make me cry even harder.

"You want to be a good person, don't you, Pat?"

I nod. I cry. I do want to be a good person. I really do.

"I'm going to up your meds," Dr. Patel tells me. "You might feel a little sluggish, but it should help to curb your violent outbursts. You need to know it's your actions that will make you a good person, not desire.

And if you have any more episodes, I might have to recommend that you go back to the neural health facility for more intensive treatments, which - "

"No. Please. I'll be good," I say quickly, knowing that Nikki is less likely to return if I backslide into the bad place. "Trust me."

"I do," Dr. Patel replies with a smile.

I Don't Know How This Works

After some more lifting in the basement, I put on my trash bag and run my ten miles. Afterward, I shower, spray some of my father's cologne, and walk into the mist - just like Mom taught me to do back in high school. I roll on some underarm deodorant and then don my new khakis and my Hank Baskett jersey.

When I ask my mother how I look, she says, "Very handsome. So handsome. But do you really think you should wear your Eagles jersey to a dinner party? You can wear one of the Gap shirts I bought you, or you can borrow one of your father's polo shirts."

"It's okay," I say, and smile confidently. "Dr. Patel said wearing this shirt was a good idea."

"Did he?" my mom says with a laugh, and then she removes an arrangement of flowers

and a bottle of white wine from the refrigerator.

"What's this?"

"Give these to Veronica and tell her I said thanks. Ronnie's been a good friend to you." And then Mom looks like she is going to cry again.

I kiss her goodbye, and with my hands full of flowers and wine, I walk down the street and across Knight's Park to Ronnie's house.

Ronnie answers the door wearing a shirt and tie, which makes me feel like Dr. Patel was wrong after all and I am underdressed. But Ronnie looks at my new jersey, checks the name on the back - probably to make sure I am not wearing an outdated Freddie Mitchell jersey - and says, "Hank Baskett is the man! Where did you get that jersey this early in the season? It's great!" which makes me feel so much better.

We follow the meaty aroma through their swanky living room and their swanky dining room to the kitchen, where Veronica is feeding Emily, whom I am surprised to see looking much older than a newborn baby.

"Hank Baskett's in the house," Ronnie says.

"Who?" Veronica answers, but she smiles when she sees the flowers and the wine. "Pour moi?"

She stares at my puffy cheek for a second, but doesn't mention it, which I appreciate. I hand her what my mother has sent, and Veronica kisses me on my un-puffy cheek.

"Welcome home, Pat," she says, which surprises me because she sounds sincere. "I hope you don't mind, but I've invited someone else to dinner," Veronica adds. She winks at me and then lifts the lid off the single pot on the stove, releasing a warm tomato and basil aroma.

"Who?" I ask.

"You'll see," she says without looking up from stirring her sauce.

Before I can say more, Ronnie is lifting Emily from her high chair, saying, "Meet Uncle Pat," which sounds strange until I realize he is talking about me. "Say hello to Uncle Pat, Emily."

She waves her little hand at me, and then I have Emily in my arms. Her dark eyes examine my face, and she smiles as though she approves.

"Pap," she says, pointing at my nose.

"See how smart my girl is, Uncle Pat," Ronnie says, petting the silky black hair on Emily's head. "She already knows your name."

Emily smells like the mashed carrots that coat her cheeks until Ronnie wipes them clean with a wet napkin. I have to admit that Emily is a cute kid, and I instantly understand why Ronnie has written me so many letters about his daughter - why he loves her so much. I start to think about having children with Nikki someday and I become so happy that I give little Emily a kiss on the forehead, as if she were Nikki's baby and I was her father. And then I kiss Emily's forehead again and again, until she giggles.

"Beer?" Ronnie says.

"I'm not really supposed to drink, because I'm on medications and - "

"Beer," Ronnie says, and then we are drinking beers on his deck as Emily sits in her father's lap and sucks on a bottle filled with watered-down apple juice.

"It's good to have a beer with you," Ronnie says, just before clinking his Yuengling Lager bottle against mine.

"Who's coming over for dinner?"

"Veronica's sister, Tiffany."

"Tiffany and Tommy?" I say, remembering Tiffany's husband from Ronnie and Veronica's wedding.

"Just Tiffany."

"Where's Tommy?"

Ronnie takes a long swig of his beer, looks up at the setting sun, and says, "Tommy died some time ago."

"What?" I say, because I hadn't heard. "God, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Just make sure you don't bring up Tommy tonight, okay?"

"Sure," I say, and then drink a few large gulps of my beer. "So how did he die?"

"How did who die?" says a woman's voice.

"Hi, Tiffany," Ronnie says, and suddenly she is standing with us on the porch. Tiffany's wearing a black evening dress, heels, and a diamond necklace, and her makeup and hair look too perfect to me - as if she is trying too hard to look attractive, like old ladies sometimes do. "You remember Pat, right?"

I stand, and as we shake hands, the way Tiffany looks into my eyes makes me feel really funny.

We move back into the house, and after some small talk, Tiffany and I are left alone on opposite ends of the living-room couch as Veronica finishes cooking the meal and Ronnie puts Emily to bed.

"You look very pretty tonight," I say when the silence grows awkward.

Before apart time began, I never ever complimented Nikki on her looks, and I think this really hurt her self-esteem. I figure I can now practice complimenting women on their looks so it will come naturally to me when Nikki returns, although Tiffany really does look pretty, even if she is trying too hard with the makeup. She is a few years older than me, but has a fit body and long, silky black hair.

"What happened to your cheek?" Tiffany asks without looking at me.

"Weight-lifting accident."

She just stares at her hands, which are folded in her lap. Her nails have been recently painted a blood red.

"So where are you working now?" I say, thinking this is a safe question.

Her nose crinkles, as if I had farted. "I got fired from my job a few months ago."

"Why?"

"Does it really matter?" she says, then stands and walks into the kitchen.

I down the remainder of my second beer and wait for Ronnie to come back.

Dinner is elegant, with candles going and fancy plates and special silverware, but awkward, as Tiffany and I are completely silent while Veronica and Ronnie talk about us as if we aren't there.

"Pat is a big history buff. He knows everything about every single U.S.

president. Go ahead. Ask him anything," Ronnie says.

When Tiffany fails to look up from her food, Veronica says, "My sister is a modern dancer and has a recital in two months. You should see her dance, Pat. So beautiful. My God, I wish I could dance like my sister. If she allows us this year, we're all going to her recital, and you should definitely come with us."

I nod carefully when Tiffany looks up for my response, thinking I'll go just so I can practice being kind. Also, Nikki would probably want to go to a dance recital, and I want to do the things Nikki likes from now on.

"Pat and I are going to work out together," Ronnie says. "Look how fit my buddy is. He puts me to shame. I need to get in that basement with you, Pat."

"Tiffany loves the shore, don't you, Tiff? The four of us should take Emily to the beach one weekend in September after the crowds have left. We could have a picnic. Do you like picnics, Pat? Tiffany loves picnics. Don't you, Tiff?"

Ronnie and Veronica trade facts about their guests for almost fifteen minutes straight, and then finally there's a lull, so I ask if any of them knows anything about the Vet being imploded, and to my surprise Ronnie and Veronica both confirm that it was demolished years ago, just like my father said, which worries me tremendously because I have no memory of this or the years that have supposedly transpired since. I think about asking how long ago Emily was born, because I remember getting a letter and picture from Ronnie soon after her birth, but I get scared and do not ask.

"I hate football," Tiffany offers. "More than anything in the world."

And then we all eat without saying anything for a while.

The three courses Ronnie had promised turn out to be beer, lasagna garnished with baked asparagus, and key lime pie. All three are great, and I tell Veronica as much - practicing again for when Nikki comes back - to which Veronica replies, "Did you think my food would be bad?"

I know she means it as a joke, but Nikki would have used the question to prove just how witchy Veronica can be. I think about how if Nikki were here, after we went home, we'd stay up talking in bed like we used to when we were both a little drunk - and sitting now at Ronnie's dinner table, the thought makes me feel sad and happy at the same time.

When we finish our pie, Tiffany stands and says, "I'm tired."

"But we've hardly finished eating," Veronica says, "and we have Trivial Pursuit to - "

"I said I'm tired."

There is a silence.

"Well," Tiffany finally says, "are you going to walk me home or what?"

It takes me a second to realize that Tiffany is talking to me, but I quickly say, "Sure."

Since I am practicing being kind now, what else could I have said -
right?

It is a warm night, but not too sticky. Tiffany and I walk a block before I ask where she lives.

"With my parents, okay?" she says without looking at me.

"Oh." I realize we are only about four blocks from Mr. and Mrs.

Webster's house.

"You live with your parents too, right?"

"Yeah."

"So no big whoop."

It is dark, and I guess it's about 9:30 p.m. With her arms crossing her chest, Tiffany walks pretty quickly in her clicky heels, and soon we are standing in front of her parents' house.

When she turns to face me, I think she is simply going to say good night, but she says, "Look, I haven't dated since college, so I don't know how this works."

"How what works?"

"I've seen the way you've been looking at me. Don't bullshit me, Pat. I live in the addition around back, which is completely separate from the house, so there's no chance of my parents walking in on us. I hate the fact that you wore a football jersey to dinner, but you can fuck me as long as we turn the lights out first. Okay?"

I'm too shocked to speak, and for a long time we just stand there.

"Or not," Tiffany adds just before she starts crying.

I'm so confused that I'm speaking and thinking and worrying all at the same time, not really knowing what to do or say. "Look, I enjoyed spending time with you, and I think you're

really pretty, but I'm married," I say, and lift up my wedding ring as proof.

"So am I," she says, and holds up the diamond on her left hand.

I remember what Ronnie told me about her husband having passed away, which makes her a widow and not married, but I do not say anything about that, because I am practicing being kind instead of right, which I learned in therapy and Nikki will like.

It makes me really sad to see that Tiffany is still wearing her wedding ring.

And then suddenly Tiffany is hugging me so that her face is between my pecs, and she's crying her makeup onto my new Hank Baskett jersey. I don't like to be touched by anyone except Nikki, and I really do not want Tiffany to get makeup on the jersey my brother was nice enough to give me - a jersey with real stitched on letters and numbers

- but I surprise myself by hugging Tiffany back. I rest my chin on top of her shiny black hair, scent her perfume, and suddenly I am crying too, which scares me a lot. Our bodies shudder together, and we are all waterworks. We cry together for at least ten minutes, and then she lets go and runs around to the back of her parents' house.

When I arrive home, my father is watching television. The Eagles are playing the Jets in a preseason game I did not know was on. He does not even look at me, probably because I am such a lousy Eagles fan now. My mother tells me that Ronnie called, saying it's important and I should call him back immediately.

"What happened? What's on your jersey? Is that makeup?" my mother asks, and when I do not answer, she says, "You better call Ronnie back."

But I only lie down in my bed and stare at the ceiling of my bedroom until the sun comes up.

Filled with Molten Lava

The picture I have of Nikki is a head shot, and I wish I had told her how much I liked it.

She paid a professional photographer to take the photo, and she actually had her hair and makeup done at the local salon before going to the shoot; plus she also went to the tanning booths the week before the picture was taken, since my birthday is in late December and the picture was my twenty-eighth-birthday present.

Nikki's head is turned so you see more of her left cheek than you do her right, which is outlined by her strawberry blond curly hair. You can see her left ear, and she is wearing the dangling diamond earrings I gave her for our first wedding anniversary. She had gone to the tanning booths just to bring out the freckles on her nose, which I love and miss every winter. You can see the little freckles clearly in the shot, and Nikki said this was the main idea and she even told the photographer to make the freckles the focal point because I love her seasonal freckles best. Her face is sort of like an upside-down triangle, as her chin is sort of pointy. Her nose is like the nose of a lioness, long and regal-looking, and her eyes are the color of grass. In the picture she is making that pouting face I love - not quite a smile, not quite a smirk - and her lips are so glossy that I can't resist kissing the picture every time I look at it.

So I kiss the picture again, feeling the cold flatness of the glass, leaving a kiss-shaped smudge, which I wipe away with my shirt.

"God, I miss you so much, Nikki," I say, but the picture is silent, like always. "I'm sorry that I did not originally like this picture, because you would not believe how much I like it now. I know that I told you this was not such a great present, back before I started practicing being kind rather than right. Yes, I had specifically asked for a new barbecue, but I'm glad that I have the picture now, because it helped me get through all that time in the bad place and made me want to be a better person, and I'm changed now, so I not only realize but appreciate that you put a lot of thought and effort into this present.

It's the only likeness I have of you since some bad person stole all the pictures of us that were in my mother's house - because the pictures were in expensive frames, and - "

Suddenly, for some reason, I remember that there's a video of our wedding, and in this video Nikki is walking and dancing and speaking, and there's even this one part where Nikki talks directly into the camera as if she were talking to me, and she says, "I love you, Pat Peoples, you sexy stud muffin," which made me laugh so hard the first time we watched the video with her parents.

I knock on my parents' bedroom door, and then I knock again.

"Pat?" my mom says.

"I have to work in the morning, you know?" my father says, but I ignore him.

"Mom?" I say to the door.

"What is it?"

"Where's my wedding video?"

There is a silence.

"You remember my wedding video, right?"

Still, she does not say anything.

"Is it in the cardboard box in the family-room closet with all the other videos?"

Through the door I hear her and my father whispering, and then my mother says, "I think we gave you our copy of the video, honey. It must be in your old house. Sorry."

"What? No, it's downstairs in the family-room closet. Never mind, I'll find it myself. Good night," I say, but when I get to the family-room closet and go through the box of videos, it's not there. I turn around and see that my mother has followed me down into the family room.

She is in her nightgown. She is biting her nails. "Where is it?"

"We gave it to - "

"Don't lie to me!"

"We must have misplaced it, but it's sure to turn up sooner or later."

"Misplaced it? It's irreplaceable!" It's just a videocassette, but I can't help feeling angry, which I realize is one of my problems. "How could you lose it when you know how important it is to me? How?"

"Calm down, Pat." My mother raises her palms so they are both in front of her chest and then takes a careful step toward me, as if she is trying to sneak up on a rabid dog. "Relax, Pat. Just relax."

But I can feel myself getting more and more angry, so before I say or do anything dumb, I remember that I am close to being sent back to the bad place, where Nikki will never find

me. I storm past my mother, go down into the basement, and do five hundred sit-ups on the Stomach Master 6000. When I finish, I am still angry, so I ride the stationary bike for forty-five minutes and then do shots of water until I feel hydrated enough to attempt five hundred push-ups. Only when my pecs feel like they are filled with molten lava do I deem myself calm enough to sleep.

When I go upstairs, all is quiet and no light is leaking out from under my parents' bedroom door, so I grab my framed picture of Nikki, take her upstairs to the attic, turn off the ventilation fan, slip into my sleeping bag, set up Nikki next to my head, kiss her good night - and then begin to sweat away some more pounds.

I haven't been up in the attic since the last time Kenny G visited me. I am afraid he will come back, but I also feel sort of fat. I close my eyes, hum a single note, silently count to ten over and over again, and the next morning I wake up unscathed.

Failing Like Dimmesdale Did

Maybe Puritans were simply dumber than modern people, but I cannot believe how long it took those seventeenth-century Bostonians to figure out that their spiritual leader knocked up the local hussy. I had the mystery solved in chapter eight, when Hester turns to Dimmesdale and says, "Speak thou for me!" I know we were assigned Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* back in high school, and if I had known the book was filled with so much sex and espionage, I might have read it when I was sixteen. God, I can't wait to ask Nikki if she hypes up the racy stuff in her class, because I know teenagers would actually read the book if she did.

I didn't care much for Dimmesdale, because he had such a great woman and he denied himself a life with her. Now, I understand that it would not have been easy for him to explain how he knocked up another man's teenage wife, especially since he was a man of the cloth, but if there's one theme Hawthorne hammers home, it's that time heals all wounds, which Dimmesdale learns, but too late. Plus, I'm thinking God would have wanted Pearl to have had a father, and probably counted Dimmesdale's disregard for his daughter as a greater sin than having sex with another man's wife.

Now, I sympathize with Chillingworth - a lot. I mean, he sends his young bride over to the New World, trying to give her a better life, and she ends up pregnant by another man, which is the ultimate slap in the face, right? But he was so old and nasty and really had no business marrying a young girl anyway. When he began to psychologically torture Dimmesdale, giving him all those strange roots and herbs, Chillingworth reminded me of Dr. Timbers and his staff. I realized then that Chillingworth was not ever going to practice being kind, so I gave up hope for him.

But I absolutely loved Hester, because she believed in silver linings.

Even when that nasty throng of bearded men in hats and fat women were against her, saying she should be branded on the forehead even, she stuck to her guns and sewed and helped people when she could and tried her best to raise her daughter - even when Pearl proved to be somewhat of a demonic child.

Even though Hester did not get to be with Dimmesdale in the end -

which is a flaw, if you ask me - I felt like she lived a fulfilled life and got to see her daughter grow up and marry well, which was kind of nice.

But I did realize that no one really appreciated Hester for who she was until it was too late. When she needed help most, she was abandoned

- and only when she offered help to others was she beloved. This sort of suggests that it is

important to appreciate the good women in your life before it is too late, which is a pretty good message to give high school kids. I wish my high school teacher had taught me that lesson, because I certainly would have treated Nikki differently when we were first married. Then again, maybe this is the sort of thing you have to learn by living your life - failing like Dimmesdale did, and I guess like I did too.

That scene when Dimmesdale and Hester finally stand together in town for the first time made me wish apart time was over already so I could stand with Nikki in some public place and apologize for being such a jerk in the past. Then I would tell her my thoughts about Hawthorne's classic, which would make her happy for sure. God, she is going to be so impressed that I actually read a book written in old-fashioned English.

Do You Like Foreign Films?

Cliff asks about Veronica's dinner party in a way that lets me know my mother has already discussed it with him - probably in an effort to get me to wear the collared shirts she bought me at the Gap, which Mom loves and I do not love. As soon as I sit down in the brown recliner, Cliff broaches the subject, pinching his chin the way he does every time he asks me a question my mother has already answered.

Even though I now recognize Cliff's tell, I am excited to let him know he was right about wearing the shirt my brother had given me.

Surprisingly, he does not want to talk about what clothes I wore; he wants to talk about Tiffany, and he keeps asking what I thought about her, how she made me feel, and if I enjoyed her company.

At first I am polite and answer by saying that Tiffany was nice and well dressed and had a pretty good body, but Cliff keeps pushing for the truth like therapists do, because they all have some sort of psychic ability that allows them to see through your lies, and therefore they know you will eventually tire of the talking game and will offer up the truth.

Finally I say, "Well, the thing is - and I don't like saying this - but Tiffany is kind of slutty."

"What do you mean?" Cliff asks me.

"I mean she's sort of a whore."

Cliff sits forward a little. He looks surprised, and uncomfortable enough to make me feel uncomfortable. "On what do you base your observation? Did she dress provocatively?"

"No. I told you already. She wore a nice dress. But as soon as we finished our dessert, she asked me to walk her home."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. But at the end of the walk she asked me to have sexual intercourse with her, and not in those words."

Cliff removes his fingers from his chin, sits back, and says, "Oh."

"I know. It shocked me too, especially because she knows I'm married."

"So did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Have sexual intercourse with Tiffany?"

At first Cliff's words don't register, but when they do, I become angry.

"No!"

"Why not?"

I cannot believe Cliff has actually asked me such a question, especially since he is a happily married man himself, but I dignify the inquiry with an answer anyway. "Because I love my wife! That's why!"

"That's what I thought," he says, which makes me feel a little better.

He is only testing my morals, which is perfectly understandable, because people outside of mental institutions need to have good morals so that the world will continue to work without any major interruptions - and happy endings will flourish.

Then I say, "I don't even know why Tiffany would ask me to have sex with her anyway. I mean, I'm not even an attractive guy; she's pretty and could do a lot better than me for sure. So I'm thinking now that maybe she's a nymphomaniac. What do you think?"

"I don't know whether she is a nymphomaniac or not," he says. "But I do know that sometimes people say and do what they think others want them to. Maybe Tiffany really did not want to have sex with you, but only offered something she thought you would find valuable, so you would value her."

I think about his explanation for a second and then say, "So you're saying that Tiffany thought I wanted to have sex with her?"

"Not necessarily." He grabs his chin again. "Your mother told me you came home with

makeup on your shirt. Do you mind if I ask how that happened?"

Reluctantly, because I don't like to gossip, I tell him about Tiffany's wearing her wedding ring even after her husband died, and the hugging and the crying we did in front of her parents' house.

Cliff nods and says, "It seems like Tiffany really needs a friend, and that she thought having sex with you would make you want to be her friend. But tell me again how you handled the situation."

So I tell him exactly what led us to the hug and how I let her get makeup on my Hank Baskett jersey and -

"Where did you get a Hank Baskett jersey?" he asks me.

"I told you. My brother gave it to me."

"That's what you wore to the dinner party?"

"Yeah, just like you told me to."

He smiles and even chuckles, which surprises me. Then he adds, "What did your friends say?"

"Ronnie said that Hank Baskett is the man."

"Hank Baskett is the man. I bet he catches at least seven touchdowns this season."

"Cliff, you're an Eagles fan?"

He does the Eagles chant - "E!-A!-G!-ll!-E!-S! EAGLES!" - which makes me laugh because he is my therapist and I did not know therapists could like NFL football.

"Well, now that I know you too bleed green, we'll have to talk Birds off the clock," Cliff says. "So you really let Tiffany cry her makeup onto your brand-new Hank Baskett jersey?"

"Yeah, and it's one with stitched-on numbers, not the cheap iron-ons."

"Authentic Hank Baskett jersey!" he says. "That was certainly very kind of you, Pat. It sounds like Tiffany only really needed a hug, which you gave her because you are a nice guy."

I can't help smiling, because I really am trying hard to be a nice guy.

"Yeah, I know, but now she's always following me all over town."

"What do you mean?"

So I tell Cliff that since the dinner party, whenever I put on a trash bag and leave my house for a run, Tiffany is always waiting outside in her little running outfit and pink headband. "Very politely, I told her that I do not like running with other people and asked her to leave me alone, but she ignored my request and simply jogged five feet behind me for my entire run. The next day, she did the same thing, and she keeps on doing it. Somehow she's figured out my schedule, and she's always there when I leave my house an hour before sunset - ready to shadow me wherever I jog. I run fast, and she stays with me. I run on dangerous streets, and she follows. She never tires out either - and just keeps running down the street when I finally stop in front of my house. She doesn't even say hello or goodbye."

"Why don't you want her to follow you?" Cliff asks.

So I ask him how his wife, Sonja, would feel if some hot woman shadowed him every time he went for a run.

He smiles the way guys do when they are alone and talking about women in a sexual way, and then he says, "So you think Tiffany is hot?" This surprises me because I did not know therapists were allowed to talk like guys do when they are buddies, and I wonder if this means that Cliff thinks of me as his buddy now.

"Sure, she's hot," I say. "But I'm married."

He grabs his chin and says, "How long has it been since you've seen Nikki?"

I tell him I don't know. "Maybe a couple of months," I say.

"Do you really believe that?" he asks, grabbing his chin again.

When I say I do, I hear the yelling in my voice and even allow the f-word to slip out. Immediately I feel bad because Cliff was talking to me like a friend, and sane people should not yell and curse at their buddies.

"I'm sorry," I say when Cliff starts to look scared.

"It's okay," he says, and forces a smile. "I should believe that you really mean what you tell me." He scratches his head for a second and then says, "My wife loves foreign films. Do you like foreign films?"

"With subtitles?"

"Yes."

"I hate those types of films."

"Me too," Cliff says. "Mostly because - "

"No happy endings."

"Exactly," Cliff says, pointing a brown finger at my face. "So depressing most of the time."

I nod wholeheartedly in agreement, even though I haven't been to see any movies for a long time, and won't until Nikki returns, because I am now watching the movie of my life as I live it.

"My wife used to beg me to take her to see these foreign films with subtitles all the time," Cliff says. "It seemed like every day she would ask me if we might go to see a foreign film, until I broke down and started taking her. Every Wednesday night we'd go to the Ritz movie theater and see some depressing movie. And you know what?"

"What?"

"After a year we simply stopped going."

"Why?"

"She stopped asking."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But maybe if you take an interest in Tiffany, ask her to run with you and maybe to go out to dinner a few times - maybe after a few weeks, she will grow tired of the chase and leave you alone. Let her get what she wants, and maybe she will not want it anymore.

Understand?"

I do understand, but cannot help asking, "Do you think that will really work?"

And Cliff shrugs in a way that makes me believe it will.

I Can Share Raisin Bran

On the drive home from Cliff's office I ask my mom if she thinks asking Tiffany on a date is the best way to get rid of her once and for all, and Mom says, "You shouldn't be trying to get rid of anyone. You need friends, Pat. Everyone does."

I don't say anything in response. I'm afraid Mom is rooting for me to fall in love with Tiffany, because whenever she calls Tiffany my

"friend," she says the word with a smile on her face and a hopeful look in her eye, which bothers me tremendously because Mom is the only person in my family who does not hate Nikki. Also, I know Mom looks out the window when I go on my runs, because she will tease me, saying "I see your friend showed up again" when I return from a jog.

Mom pulls into the driveway, shuts off the car engine, and says, "I can loan you money should you ever want to take your friend to dinner,"

and again, the way she says "friend" makes me feel tingly in a bad way.

I say nothing in response, and my mother does the strangest thing -

she giggles.

I finish my weight training for the day and put on a trash bag, and as I begin stretching on the front lawn, I see that Tiffany is jogging up and down the length of my parents' block, waiting for me to begin running. I tell myself to ask her out to dinner so I can end this madness and get back to being alone on my runs, but instead I simply start running, and Tiffany follows.

I go past the high school, down Collings Avenue to the Black Horse Pike, make a left and then another left into Oaklyn, run down Kendall Boulevard to the Oaklyn Public School, up past the Manor Bar to the White Horse Pike, make a right and then a left onto Cuthbert, and I run into Westmont. When I get to the Crystal Lake Diner, I turn and jog in place. Tiffany jogs in place and stares at her feet.

"Hey," I say to her. "You want to have dinner with me at this diner?"

"Tonight?" she says without looking up at me.

"Yeah."

"What time?"

"We have to walk here because I'm not allowed to drive."

"What time?"

"I'll be in front of your house at seven-thirty."

Next, the most amazing thing happens: Tiffany simply jogs away from me, and I cannot believe I finally got her to leave me alone. I am so happy I alter my route and run at least fifteen miles instead of ten, and when the sun sets, the clouds in the west are all lined with electricity, which I know is a good omen.

At home, I tell my mother I need some money so I can take Tiffany out to dinner. My mother tries to hide her smile as she retrieves her purse from the kitchen table. "Where are you taking her?"

"The Crystal Lake Diner."

"You shouldn't need more than forty dollars then, right?"

"I guess."

"It'll be on the counter when you come down."

I shower, apply underarm deodorant, use my father's cologne, and put on my khakis and the dark green button-down shirt Mom bought me at the Gap just yesterday. For some reason, my mother is systematically buying an entire wardrobe for me - and every piece is from the Gap. When I go downstairs, my mom tells me I need to tuck in my shirt and wear a belt.

"Why?" I ask, because I do not really care if I look respectable or not. I only want to get rid of Tiffany once and for all.

But when Mom says, "Please," I remember that I am trying to be kind instead of right - and I also owe Mom because she rescued me from the bad place - so I go upstairs and put on the brown leather belt she purchased for me earlier in the week.

Mom comes into my room with a shoe box and says, "Put on some dress socks and try these on." I open the box, and these swanky-looking brown leather loafers are inside. "Jake said these are what men your age wear casually," Mom says. When I slip the loafers on and look in the mirror, I see how thin my waistline appears, and I think I look almost as swanky as my little brother.

With forty bucks in my pocket, I walk across Knight's Park to Tiffany's parents' house. She

is outside, waiting for me on the sidewalk, but I see her mother peeking out the window. Mrs. Webster ducks behind the blinds when we make eye contact. Tiffany does not say hello, but begins walking before I can stop. She is wearing a pink knee-length skirt and a black summer sweater. Her platform sandals make her look taller, and her hair is sort of puffed out around the ears, hanging down to her shoulders. Her eyeliner is a little heavy, and her lips are so pink, but I have to admit she looks great, which I tell her, saying,

"Wow, you look really nice tonight."

"I like your shoes," she says in response, and then we walk for thirty minutes without saying another word.

We get a booth at the diner, and the server gives us glasses of water.

Tiffany orders tea, and I say that water is fine for me. As I read the menu, I worry that I won't have enough money, which is silly, I know, because I have two twenties on me and most of the entrees are under ten bucks, but I do not know what Tiffany will order, and maybe she will want dessert, and then there's the tip.

Nikki taught me to overtip; she says waitresses work too hard for such a little bit of money. Nikki knows this because she was a waitress all through college - when we were at La Salle - so I always overtip when I go out to eat now, just to make up for the times in the past when I fought with Nikki over a few dollars, saying fifteen percent was more than enough, because no one tipped me regardless of whether I did my job well or not. Now I am a believer in overtipping, because I am practicing being kind rather than right - and as I am reading the diner menu, I think, What if I do not have enough money left over for a generous tip?

I am worrying about all of this so much that I must have missed Tiffany's order, because suddenly the waitress is saying, "Sir?"

When I put my menu down, both Tiffany and the waitress are staring at me, as if they are concerned. So I say, "Raisin bran," because I remember reading that cereal is only \$2.25.

"Milk?"

"How much is milk?"

"Seventy-five cents."

I figure I can afford it, so I say, "Please," and then hand my menu back to the waitress.

"That's it?"

I nod, and the waitress sighs audibly before leaving us alone.

"What did you order? I didn't catch it," I say to Tiffany, trying to sound polite but secretly worrying that I will not have enough money left over for a good tip.

"Just tea," she says, and then we both look out the window at the cars in the parking lot.

When the raisin bran comes, I open the little single-serving box and pour the cereal into the bowl the diner provides free of charge. The milk comes in a miniature pitcher; I pour it over the brown flakes and sugared raisins. I push the bowl to the middle of the table and ask Tiffany if she would like to help me eat the cereal. "Are you sure?" she says, and when I nod, she picks up her spoon and we eat.

When we get the bill, it is for \$4.59. I hand our waitress the two twenties, and the woman laughs, shakes her head, and says,

"Change?" When I say, "No, thank you" - thinking Nikki would want me to overtip - the waitress says to Tiffany, "Honey, I had him all wrong.

You two come back real soon. Okay?" And I can tell the woman is satisfied with her tip because she sort of skips her way to the register.

Tiffany doesn't say anything on the walk home, so I don't either. When we get to her house, I tell her I had a great time. "Thanks," I say, and then offer a handshake, just so Tiffany will not get the wrong idea.

She looks at my hand and then up at me, but she doesn't shake. For a second I think she is going to start crying again, but instead she says,

"Remember when I said you could fuck me?"

I nod slowly because I wish I did not remember it so vividly.

"I don't want you to fuck me, Pat. Okay?"

"Okay," I say.

She walks around her parents' house, and then I am alone again.

When I arrive home, my mom excitedly asks me what we had for dinner, and when I tell her raisin bran, she laughs and says, "Really, what did you have?" I ignore her, go to my room, and lock the door.

Lying down on my bed, I pick up the picture of Nikki and tell her all about my date and

how I gave the waitress a nice tip and how sad Tiffany seems and how much I can't wait for apart time to end so Nikki and I can share raisin bran at some diner and walk through the cool early September air - and then I am crying again.

I bury my face and sob into my pillow so my parents will not hear.

Sing and Spell and Chant

I get up at 4:30 a.m. and start lifting so I will be done with my workout by kickoff, and when I finally come up from the basement, the house smells like crabby snacks, three-meats pizza, and buffalo wings.

"Smells good," I say to my mom while I put on my trash bag, and then I'm out the door for a ten-mile run.

I am shocked to see that Tiffany is jogging up and down the block, because she did not run behind me yesterday, and also, I am running in the a.m., which is not my regular time to run.

I jog toward Knight's Park, and when I look over my shoulder, I see she's following me again. "How did you know that I would be running early?" I say, but she keeps her head down and only follows silently.

We run our ten miles, and when I return to my house, Tiffany runs on without saying anything, as if we had never even eaten raisin bran together at the diner and nothing has changed.

I see my brother's silver BMW parked in front of my parents' house, so I sneak in the back door, run up the stairs, and jump into the shower.

When I finish showering, I put on my Hank Baskett jersey - which my mother has laundered, getting the makeup off the numbers - and then follow the sound of the pregame show to the family room, ready to root on the Birds.

My best friend, Ronnie, is seated next to my brother, which surprises me. Both of them are wearing green away jerseys with the number 18

and the name Stallworth on the back - Ronnie's is a cheap replica jersey with iron-on numbers, but Jake's is authentic. Dad is in his chair, wearing his number 5 McNabb replica jersey.

When I say, "Go Birds!" my brother stands, turns to face me, puts both hands in the air, and says "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" until Ronnie and my dad also stand, face me, raise their hands in the air, and say

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" When I raise my hands in the air and say

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" all four of us do the chant, rapidly spelling the letters with our arms and bodies - "E!-A!-G!-ll!-E!-S! EAGLES!" - shooting out two arms and a leg to make an

E, touching our fingertips high above our heads to make an A, and so forth.

When we finish, my brother makes his way around the couch, puts an arm around my shoulders, and starts to sing the fight song, which I remember and sing with him. "Fly, Eagles, fly! On the road to victory!"

I'm so happy to be singing with my brother I do not even get mad at him for putting his arm around me. We walk around the couch as we sing, "Fight, Eagles, fight! Score a touchdown, one, two, three!" I look at my dad, and he does not look away, but only starts singing with more enthusiasm. Ronnie throws his arm around me, and then I am in between my brother and my best friend. "Hit 'em low. Hit 'em high.

And watch our Eagles fly!" I see that my mom has come in to watch, and she has her hand over her mouth again like she does whenever she is about to laugh or cry - her eyes look happy, so I know she is laughing under her hands. "Fly, Eagles, fly! On the road to victory!" And then Ronnie and Jake remove their arms from my neck so they can make the letters again with their bodies. "E!-A!-G!-ll!-E!-S! EAGLES!"

We're all red-faced, and my father is breathing heavy, but everyone is so happy, and for the first time I really feel like I am home.

My mom sets up the food on TV trays, and the game begins. "I'm not supposed to drink," I say when Mom distributes the bottles of Budweiser, but my father says, "You can drink beer during Eagles games." Mom shrugs and smiles as she hands me a cold beer. I ask my brother and Ronnie why they aren't also wearing Baskett jerseys, since Baskett is the man, and they tell me the Eagles were able to trade for Donte Stallworth, and that Donte Stallworth is now the man. Because I am wearing my Baskett jersey, I insist that Baskett is the man, to which my father blows air through his teeth, and my cocky brother says, "We'll see soon," which is a weird thing for him to say, considering he was the one who gave me the Baskett jersey in the first place and just two weeks ago assured me that Baskett was really the man.

My mother watches the game nervously, like she always does, because she knows that if the Eagles lose, my father will be in a bad mood for an entire week and will yell at her a lot. Ronnie and Jake trade facts about different players and check the screens on their cell phones for updates on other games and players, because they both play fantasy football, which is a computer game that gives you points for picking players who score touchdowns and gain yardage. And I glance over at my father from time to time, making sure he sees me cheering, because I know he is only willing to sit in the same room with his mentally deranged son as long as I am rooting for the Birds with everything I got. I have to admit that it feels good to sit in the same room with my father, even though he hates me and I still have not forgiven him a hundred percent for kicking me in the attic and punching me in the face.

The Houston Texans score first, and Dad starts cursing pretty loudly, so much that my mother leaves the room, saying she will bring us new beers, and Ronnie stares at the television, pretending he has not heard what my father has said, which is, "Play some fucking defense, you piece-of-shit overpaid secondary! This is the Texans, not the Dallas Cowgirls. The fucking Texans! Jesus fucking Christ!"

"Relax, Dad," Jake says. "We got this."

Mom distributes the beers, and Dad sips quietly for a while, but when McNabb throws an interception, my father starts pointing his finger at the television and cursing even louder, saying things about McNabb that would make my friend Danny go wild, because Danny says only black people can use the n-word.

Luckily, Donte Stallworth is indeed the man, because when McNabb starts throwing to him, the Eagles build a lead and Dad stops cursing and starts to smile again.

At halftime, Jake talks my dad into joining us outside for a catch, and then the four of us are throwing a football around on our street. One of our neighbors comes out with his son, and we let them join in. The kid is only maybe ten, and he cannot really reach us from his yard, but since he is wearing a green jersey, we throw it to him again and again.

He drops every pass, but we cheer for him anyway; the kid smiles wildly, and his dad nods appreciatively at us whenever one of us catches his eye.

Jake and I are the farthest apart, and we send each other long passes down the street and often have to run even farther to catch the throws. Neither of us drops a single pass, because we are excellent athletes.

My dad mostly just stands around sipping his beer, but we throw him some easy balls, which he catches with one hand and then tosses the football underhand to Ronnie, who is standing closest to him. Ronnie has a weak arm, but neither Jake nor I point this out, because he is our friend and we are all wearing green and the sun is shining and the Eagles are winning and we are so full of good hot food and ice-cold beer it doesn't really matter that Ronnie's athletic ability is not equal to ours.

When Mom announces that halftime is almost over, Jake runs over to the little kid; my brother puts his hands in the air and yells

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" until the kid's dad does the same thing. The little guy catches on after only a second, puts his hands in the air, yells "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" and then we all do the Eagles chant - spelling the letters out with our arms and legs - before running back into our respective family rooms.

Donte Stallworth continues to be the man in the second half, gaining almost 150 yards and a TD, while Baskett does not even get a decent ball thrown to him and fails to record a single catch. I'm not all that upset about this, because a funny thing happens at the end of the game.

When the Eagles win 24 - 10, we all stand to sing the Eagles fight song together like we always do whenever the Birds win a regular season game. My brother throws his arms around Ronnie and me and says,

"Come on, Dad." My dad is a little drunk from all the beer and so happy about the Eagles victory - and the fact that McNabb threw for more than 300 yards - that he lines up with us and throws his arm around my shoulders, which shocks me at first, not because I don't like being touched, but because my father has not put his arm around me in many years. The weight and warmth of his arm makes me feel good, and as we sing the fight song and do the chant afterward, I catch my mother looking at us from the kitchen, where she is washing dishes.

She smiles at me even though she is crying again, and I wonder why as I sing and spell and chant.

Jake asks Ronnie if he needs a ride home, and my best friend says, "No, thanks. Hank Baskett is walking me home."

"I am?" I say, because Hank Baskett is the name Ronnie and Jake called me all throughout the game - so I know he really means me.

"Yep," he says, and we grab the football on the way out.

When we get to Knight's Park, we throw the football back and forth, standing only twenty feet away from each other because Ronnie has a weak arm, and after a few catches my best friend asks me what I think about Tiffany.

"Nothing," I say. "I don't think anything about her at all. Why?"

"Veronica told me that Tiffany follows you when you run. True?"

I catch a wobbly pass, say, "Yeah. It's sort of weird. She knows my schedule and everything," and throw a perfect spiral just over Ronnie's right shoulder so he can catch it on the run.

He doesn't turn.

He doesn't run.

The ball goes over his head.

Ronnie retrieves the ball, jogs back into his range, and says, "Tiffany is a little odd. Do you understand what I mean by odd, Pat?"

I catch his even more wobbly pass just before it reaches my right kneecap, and say, "I guess." I understand that Tiffany is different from most girls, but I also understand what it is like to be separated from your spouse, which is something Ronnie does not understand. So I ask, "Odd how? Odd like me?"

His face drops, and then he says, "No. I didn't mean ... It's just that Tiffany is seeing a therapist - "

"So am I."

"I know, but - "

"So seeing a therapist makes me odd?"

"No. Just listen to me for a second. I'm trying to be your friend. Okay?"

I look down at the grass as Ronnie walks over to me. I don't really want to hear Ronnie talk his way out of this one, because Ronnie is the only friend I have, now that I am out of the bad place, and we have had such a great day, and the Eagles have won, and my father put his arm around me, and -

"I know Tiffany and you went out to dinner, which is great. You both could probably use a friend who understands loss."

I don't like the way he collectively uses the word "loss," as if I have lost Nikki - as in forever - because I am still riding out apart time and I have not lost her yet. But I don't say anything, and let him continue.

"Listen," Ronnie says. "I want to tell you why Tiffany was fired from her job."

"That's none of my business."

"It is if you are going to have dinners with her. Listen, you need to know that ..."

Ronnie tells me what he believes is the story of how Tiffany lost her job, but the way he tells it proves he is biased. He tells it just like Dr.

Timbers would, stating what he would call "facts," with no regard for what was going on in Tiffany's head. He tells me what coworkers wrote in their reports, he tells me what her

boss told her parents and what the therapist has since said to Veronica - who is Tiffany's designated support buddy and therefore has weekly phone conversations with Tiffany's therapist - but he never once tells me what Tiffany thinks or what is going on in her heart: the awful feelings, the conflicting impulses, the needs, the desperation, everything that makes her different from Ronnie and Veronica, who have each other and their daughter, Emily, and a good income and a house and everything else that keeps people from calling them "odd." What amazes me is that Ronnie is telling me all this in a friendly manner, as if he is trying to save me from Tiffany's ways, as if he knows more about these sorts of things than I do, as if I had not spent the last few months in a mental institution. He does not understand Tiffany, and he sure as hell doesn't understand me, but I do not hold it against Ronnie, because I am practicing being kind rather than right, so Nikki will be able to love me again when apart time is over.

"So I'm not telling you to be mean or to gossip about her - just protect yourself, okay?" Ronnie says, and I nod. "Well, I better be getting home to Veronica. Maybe I'll drop in this week for a lifting session? Cool?"

I nod again and watch him jog away from me, the bouncy steps suggesting that he thinks his mission is accomplished. It is obvious he was only allowed to watch the game because Veronica wanted him to talk to me about Tiffany, probably because Veronica thought I might take advantage of her nymphomaniac sister, which makes me very mad, and before I know it, I'm ringing the Websters' doorbell.

"Hello?" Tiffany's mom says to me when the door opens. She is older-looking, with gray hair and a heavy sweater-coat, even though it is only September and she is inside.

"May I speak with Tiffany?"

"You're Ronnie's friend, right? Pat Peoples?"

I only nod, because I know Mrs. Webster knows who I am.

"Do you mind if I ask what you want with our daughter?"

"Who's there?" I hear Tiffany's father call from the other room.

"It's just Ronnie's friend, Pat Peoples!" Mrs. Webster yells. To me she says, "So what do you want with our Tiffany?"

I look down at the football in my hand and say, "I want to have a catch. It's a beautiful afternoon. Maybe she would like to get some fresh air in the park?"

"Just a catch?" Mrs. Webster says.

I hold up my wedding ring to prove I do not want to have sex with her daughter, and say, "Listen, I'm married. I just want to be Tiffany's friend, okay?"

Mrs. Webster looks a little surprised by my answer, which is odd because I was sure that was the answer she wanted to hear. But after a moment she says, "Go around back and knock on the door."

So I knock on the back door, but no one answers.

I knock three more times and then leave.

I'm halfway through the park when I hear a swishy sound behind me.

When I turn around, Tiffany is speed walking toward me, wearing a pink tracksuit made from a material that swishes when one pant leg rubs against the other. When she is about five feet away, I throw her a light, girly pass, but she steps aside and the football falls to the ground.

"What do you want?" she says.

"Want to have a catch?"

"I hate football. I told you this, no?"

Since she doesn't want to have a catch, I decide I'll just ask her my question: "Why do you follow me when I run?"

"Honestly?"

"Yeah," I say.

She squints her eyes and makes her face look mean. "I'm scouting you."

"What?"

"I said I'm scouting you."

"Why?"

"To see if you are fit enough."

"Fit enough for what?"

But instead of answering my question, she says, "I'm also scouting your work ethic, your

endurance, the way you deal with mental strain, your ability to persevere when you are unsure of what is happening around you, and - "

"Why?"

"I can't tell you yet," she says.

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't finished scouting you."

When she walks away, I follow her past the pond, over the footbridge, and out of the park. But neither of us speaks again.

She leads me to Haddon Avenue, and we walk by the new stores and swanky restaurants, passing lots of other pedestrians, kids on skateboards, and men who raise their fists in the air and say, "Go Eagles!" when they see my Hank Baskett jersey.

Tiffany turns off Haddon Avenue and weaves through residential blocks until we are in front of my parents' house, where she stops, looks at me, and - after almost an hour of silence - says, "Did your team win?"

I nod. "Twenty-four to ten."

"Lucky you," Tiffany says, and then walks away.

The Best Therapist in the Entire World

The Monday morning after the Eagles beat the Texans, a funny thing happens. I'm doing some initial stretching in the basement, when my father comes down for the first time since I have been home.

"Pat?" he says.

I stop stretching, stand up, and face him. He's on the last step, stopped as if he is afraid to set a foot down on my territory.

"Dad?"

"You certainly got a lot of equipment down here."

I don't say anything, because I know he is probably mad at my mother for buying me a gym.

"There's pretty good Eagles coverage in the papers today," he says, and then extends the sports sections of the Courier-Post and The Philadelphia Inquirer to me. "I got up early and finished reading both so that you could keep up with the team. By your comments yesterday during the game, I could tell you don't know all of the players, and I thought maybe you'd like to follow along this season now that you're home and - well, I'll just leave them on the top step from now on."

I'm too shocked to speak or move, because my father has taken the sports pages with him to work ever since Jake and I were little kids.

Jake used to fight with Dad all the time about this, asking him to at least bring home the sports sections after work so we could read the articles after we finished our homework. But Dad always left with the papers before we were out of bed, and he never brought the sports sections home for us ever, saying he forgot or lost them at work. Jake finally subscribed himself when he got his first job stocking shelves at the local Big Foods, and this was when we started reading the daily sports pages together every morning before school. He was twelve; I was thirteen.

I do three hundred sit-ups on the Stomach Master 6000 before I allow myself to pick up the paper from the bottom step. As my stomach muscles crunch and burn, I worry that my father is only playing a mean trick on me and that the papers will be the entertainment or food sections, but when I finish the sit-ups and make my way to the steps, I see that Dad really did leave me the sports sections of both papers.

When it is time for me to take my a.m. pills, I find my mom in the kitchen cooking eggs. My plate is set at the breakfast bar, and my five morning pills are laid out in a line on a napkin.

"Look," I say, and hold up what my father gave me.

"Sports pages, eh?" Mom says over the sound of frying eggs.

"Yeah." I sit down and pop all five pills into my mouth, trying to decide how many I will swallow today. "But why?"

Mom scrapes the eggs from the pan and onto my plate with her spatula. She smiles and says, "Your father is trying, Pat. But I wouldn't ask too many questions if I were you. Take what he gives you and be happy - that's what we do, right?"

She smiles at me hopefully, and right then I decide to swallow all five pills, so I take a sip of water and do just that.

Every day that week, I hear the basement door open and close, and when I check the top

step, I find the sports sections, which I read from cover to cover while I eat breakfast with Mom.

The big news is the upcoming Giants game, which everyone thinks will be the key to winning the NFC East, especially since the Giants have already lost to the Indianapolis Colts in game one. A loss will put them at 0 - 2 and the Eagles at 2 - 0. The game is being hyped as a big one, and I have a ticket, thanks to Jake, which makes me really excited.

Each night, I wait for my dad to come home from work, hoping he might want to talk about the upcoming game with me - so I can use the current players' names and prove to him that I am a real fan again

- but he always takes his dinner into his study and locks the door. A few times I actually go to his study and raise a fist to knock, but I chicken out every night. Mom says, "Give him time."

Sitting in the brown recliner, I talk about my dad with Dr. Cliff during my Friday appointment. I tell him how Dad is leaving me the sports sections now, and how I know this is a huge deal for Dad, but I wish he would talk to me more. Cliff listens, but says little about my father.

Instead he keeps bringing up Tiffany, which is sort of annoying because she has only been following me when I run, and that's about it.

"Your mother says you are going to the beach with Tiffany tomorrow,"

Cliff says, and then smiles like men sometimes do when they are talking about women and sex.

"I'm going with Ronnie and Veronica and baby Emily too. The whole point is to take Emily to the beach because she did not get to go much this summer and it will be cold soon. Little kids love the beach, Cliff."

"Are you excited about going?"

"Sure. I guess. I mean, I'll have to get up super early to get a good workout in and finish when we come home, but - "

"What about seeing Tiffany in a bathing suit?"

I blink several times before I grasp what he has said to me.

"You said before that she has a nice body," Cliff adds. "Are you looking forward to seeing

it? Maybe she will wear a bikini. What do you think?"

I feel mad for a second - because my therapist is sort of being disrespectful- but then I realize Cliff is testing my morals again, making sure I am fit to be out of the mental institution, so I smile, nod, and say, "Cliff, I'm married, remember?"

He nods back wisely and winks, making me feel like I passed the test.

We talk a little more about how I made it through a whole week without having an episode, which is evidence that the drugs are working, according to Cliff - because he doesn't know I spit at least half of the pills into the toilet - and when it is time for me to go, Cliff says, "I just have one more thing to say to you."

"What?"

He shocks me by jumping to his feet, throwing both hands in the air, and yelling "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

So I jump to my feet, throw both hands in the air, and yell

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" too.

"E!-A!-G!-H!-E!-S! EAGLES!" we chant in unison, spelling the letters with our arms and legs, and suddenly I am so happy.

Cliff predicts a 21 - 14 Eagles victory as he walks me out of his office, and after I agree with his prognosis, we enter the waiting room and my mother says, "Were you two just doing the Eagles chant?"

Cliff raises his eyebrows and shrugs his shoulders at my mother, but when he turns to walk back into his office, he begins whistling "Fly, Eagles, Fly," at which point I know that I am seeing the best therapist in the entire world.

On the drive home, my mother asks me if Cliff and I talked about anything other than Eagles football during the therapy session, and instead of answering her question, I say, "Do you think that Dad will start talking to me at night if the Eagles beat the Giants?"

Mom frowns, grips the steering wheel a little harder. "The sad reality is he might, Pat. He really might," she says, and I start to get my hopes up.

Tiffany's Head Floating over the Waves

When Ronnie picks me up in his minivan - which has three rows of seats - Tiffany is already buckled in next to Emily's car seat, so I climb into the very back, carrying the

football and the bag my mother packed me, which contains a towel, a change of clothes, and a bagged lunch, even though I told Mom that Ronnie was bringing hoagies from the local deli.

Of course my mother feels the need to stand on the front porch and wave, as if I were five years old. Veronica, who is riding in the front passenger's seat, leans over Ronnie and yells to my mother. "Thanks for the wine and flowers!" My mother takes this as an invitation to walk to the minivan and have a conversation.

"How do you like the outfit I bought for Pat?" my mom says when she reaches Ronnie's window. She ducks down and takes a long look at Tiffany, but Tiffany has already turned her head away from my mother and is looking out the window at the house across the street.

The outfit I am wearing is ridiculous: a bright orange polo shirt, bright green swimming shorts, and flip-flops. I did not want to wear any of this, but I knew Veronica was likely to make a fuss if I wore one of my cutoff T-shirts and a pair of workout shorts. Since Veronica and my mother have pretty much the same taste, I allowed my mother to dress me - plus, it makes Mom really happy.

"He looks great, Mrs. Peoples," Veronica says, and Ronnie nods in agreement.

"Hello, Tiffany," my mother says, sticking her head into the car a little more, but Tiffany ignores her.

"Tiffany?" Veronica says, but Tiffany continues to stare out the window.

"Have you met Emily yet?" Ronnie asks, and then he is out of the car and Emily is unbuckled from her car seat and placed in my mother's arms. Mom's voice gets all funny as she talks to Emily, and standing next to Mom, Veronica and Ronnie are all smiles.

This goes on for a few minutes, until Tiffany turns her head and says,

"I thought we were going to the beach today."

"Sorry, Mrs. Peoples," Veronica says. "My sister can be a little blunt sometimes, but we probably should get going so we can have lunch on the beach."

My mother quickly nods and says, "Have a good time, Pat," as Ronnie buckles Emily back into her car seat. Again I feel like I am five.

On the way to the shore, Ronnie and Veronica talk to Tiffany and me the same way they talk to Emily - as if they are not really expecting a response, saying things that really don't

need to be said at all. "Can't wait to get on the beach." "We're going to have such a good time."

"What should we do first - swim, walk the beach, or throw the football?" "Such a nice day." "Are you guys having fun?" "Can't wait to eat those hoagies!"

After twenty minutes of non-talk, Tiffany says, "Can we please have some quiet time?" and we ride the rest of the way listening to the yelling noises Emily makes - what her parents claim is singing.

We drive through Ocean City and over a bridge to a beach I do not know. "Little less crowded down here," Ronnie explains.

When we park, Emily is put into what looks like a cross between a stroller and a 4x4 vehicle, which Veronica pushes. Tiffany carries the umbrella. Ronnie and I carry the cooler, each of us grabbing a handle.

We take a wooden walkway over a sand dune covered with sea oats and find that we have the beach all to ourselves.

Not another person anywhere to be seen.

After a brief discussion about whether the tide is coming in or out, Veronica picks a dry patch and tries to spread out the blanket while Ronnie begins digging the umbrella spike into the sand. But there is a breeze, and Veronica has some trouble, as the wind keeps folding the blanket over.

If it were anyone but Veronica, I would grab a corner and help, but I do not want to get yelled at, so I wait for instructions before I do anything. Tiffany does the same, but Veronica fails to ask for help.

Maybe some sand gets kicked up or something, because Emily starts screaming and rubbing her eyes.

"Nice," Tiffany says.

Veronica immediately attends to Emily, telling her to blink, demonstrating what to do, but Emily only screams even louder.

"I can't take a crying baby right now," Tiffany adds. "Make her stop crying. Veronica, would you please make her - "

"Remember what Dr. Lily said? What did we talk about this morning?"

Veronica says over her shoulder, shooting Tiffany a serious look before turning her attention back to Emily.

"So now we're talking about my therapist in front of Pat? You fucking bitch," Tiffany says, shaking her head, and then she is walking away from us quickly.

"Christ," Veronica says. "Ronnie, can you handle Emily?"

Ronnie nods solemnly, and then Veronica is running after Tiffany, saying, "Tiff? Come back. Come on. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Ronnie flushes Emily's eyes with bottled water, and after ten minutes or so, she stops crying. We get the blanket spread out under the shade of the umbrella, weighting the corners down with the cooler, our flip-flops and sandals, and Emily's super stroller - but Veronica and Tiffany do not come back.

After every inch of Emily's skin is coated with sunscreen, Ronnie and I play with her down at the water's edge. She likes running after the waves as they recede. She likes digging in the sand, and we have to watch to make sure she does not eat the sand, which seems weird to me, because why would anyone want to eat sand? Ronnie carries Emily out into the ocean, and we all float over the waves for a time.

I ask if we should be worried about Veronica and Tiffany, and Ronnie says, "No. They're just having a therapy session somewhere on the beach. They'll be back soon."

I don't like the way he emphasizes the word "therapy," as if therapy were some sort of ridiculous idea, but I don't say anything.

After we dry off, we all lie down on the blanket - Ronnie and Emily in the shade, and me in the sun. I doze off pretty quickly.

When I open my eyes, Ronnie's face is next to mine; he's sleeping. I feel a tap on my shoulder, and when I roll over, I see that Emily has walked around the blanket. She smiles at me and says, "Pap."

"Let Daddy sleep," I whisper, and then pick her up and carry her down to the water.

For a while we sit and dig a small hole in the wet sand with our hands, but then Emily stands and chases the foam of a receding wave, laughing and pointing.

"Want to go swimming?" I ask her, and she nods once, so I scoop her up into my arms and begin to wade out into the water.

The surf has picked up some and the waves have a lot more height, so I quickly walk past the breakers to where the water is up to my chest.

Emily and I begin to float over the swells. As the waves grow in size, I have to jump and kick really hard to keep both of our heads above water, but Emily loves it and begins squealing and laughing and clapping her hands every time we float up. This goes on for a good ten minutes, and I am so happy; I kiss her chubby cheeks over and over.

Something about Emily makes me want to float over waves with her for the rest of my life, and I decide that when apart time is done, I will make a daughter with Nikki ASAP, because nothing has made me even close to this happy since apart time began.

The swells get even bigger. I lift Emily up and put her on my shoulders so she will not have her face splashed by the waves, and her squeals seem to suggest that she likes being so high in the air.

We float up.

We float down.

We are so happy.

We are so, so happy.

But then I hear someone screaming.

"Pat! Pat! Paaaaaaat!"

I turn and see that Veronica is running very quickly down the beach, with Tiffany trailing far behind. I worry that maybe something is wrong, so I start to make my way in.

The waves are pretty big now, and I have to take Emily down from my shoulders and hold her against my chest to ensure her safety, but soon we are able to negotiate our way back to Veronica, who is now running into the surf.

When I get closer, Veronica seems to be very upset. Emily starts to scream and reach for her mother.

"What the hell are you doing?" Veronica says to me when I hand Emily over to her.

"I'm just swimming with Emily," I say.

Veronica's screaming must have woken up Ronnie, because he has run down to meet us.

"What happened?"

"You let Pat take Emily out into the ocean?" Veronica says, and by the way she says my name, it's obvious she does not want Emily to be left alone with me, because she thinks I am going to hurt Emily somehow, which is unfair - especially since Emily only started crying when she heard Veronica screaming, so really Veronica was the one who upset her own daughter.

"What did you do to her?" Ronnie says to me.

"Nothing," I say. "We were only swimming."

"What were you doing?" Veronica says to Ronnie.

"I must of fallen asleep, and - "

"Jesus Christ, Ronnie. You left Emily alone with him?"

The way Veronica says "him," Emily crying, Ronnie accusing me of doing something awful to his daughter, the sun burning my bare chest and back, Tiffany watching now - suddenly I feel as though I might explode. I definitely feel an episode coming on, so before I blow up, I do the only thing I can think of: I start running down the beach away from Veronica and Ronnie and Emily and the crying and the accusations. I run as fast as I can, and suddenly I realize that now I am crying, probably because I was only swimming with Emily and it felt so right and I was trying to be good and thought I was being good and I let my best friend down and Veronica screamed at me and it's not fair because I have been trying so hard and how long can this fucking movie last and how much more do I need to improve myself and -

Tiffany passes me.

She runs by me like a blur.

Suddenly, only one thing matters: I need to pass her.

I start running faster and catch up to her, but she picks up her speed and we run side by side for a time until I find that gear women do not have, and I blow by her and maintain my man speed for a minute or so before I slow down and allow her to catch up with me. We jog side by side on the beach for a long time, neither of us saying a word.

What feels like an hour passes before we turn around, and what feels like another hour passes before we see Ronnie and Veronica's umbrella, but before we reach them, Tiffany veers into the ocean.

I follow her - running directly into the waves - and the salt water feels so cool on my skin

after a long run. Soon we are in too deep to stand, and Tiffany's head is floating over the waves, which have calmed down considerably. Her face is a little tan and her hair hangs dark and wet and natural and I see freckles on her nose that were not there earlier that morning - so I swim over to her.

A wave lifts me up, and when I come down over the other side, I am surprised that our faces are very close. For a second Tiffany reminds me so much of Nikki, I worry we might accidentally kiss, but Tiffany swims a few feet away from me before this happens, and I am thankful.

Her toes come up out of the water, and she begins to float, facing the horizon.

I lean back, stare at the line where sky meets water, allow my toes to rise, and float next to Tiffany for a long time, neither of us saying anything.

When we walk back to the blanket, Emily is sleeping with a fist in her mouth, and Veronica and Ronnie are lying down, holding hands in the shade. When we stand over them, they squint and smile at us like nothing bad had happened earlier.

"How was your run?" Ronnie asks.

"We want to go home now," Tiffany says.

"Why?" Ronnie says, sitting up. "We haven't even eaten our lunch. Pat, you really want to go home?"

Veronica says nothing.

I look up at the sky. No clouds at all. Nothing but blue. "Yeah, I do," I tell him, and then we are in the minivan driving back to Collingswood.

A Hive Full of Green Bees

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

I sit up, my heart pounding. When my eyes focus, I see my dad standing at my bedside with his hands above his head; he's wearing his number 5 McNabb jersey.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" he continues to scream, until I get out of bed, raise my hands, and say "Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

We do the chant, spelling the letters with our arms and legs.

"E!-A!-G!-ll!-E!-S! EAGLES!" When we finish, instead of saying good morning or