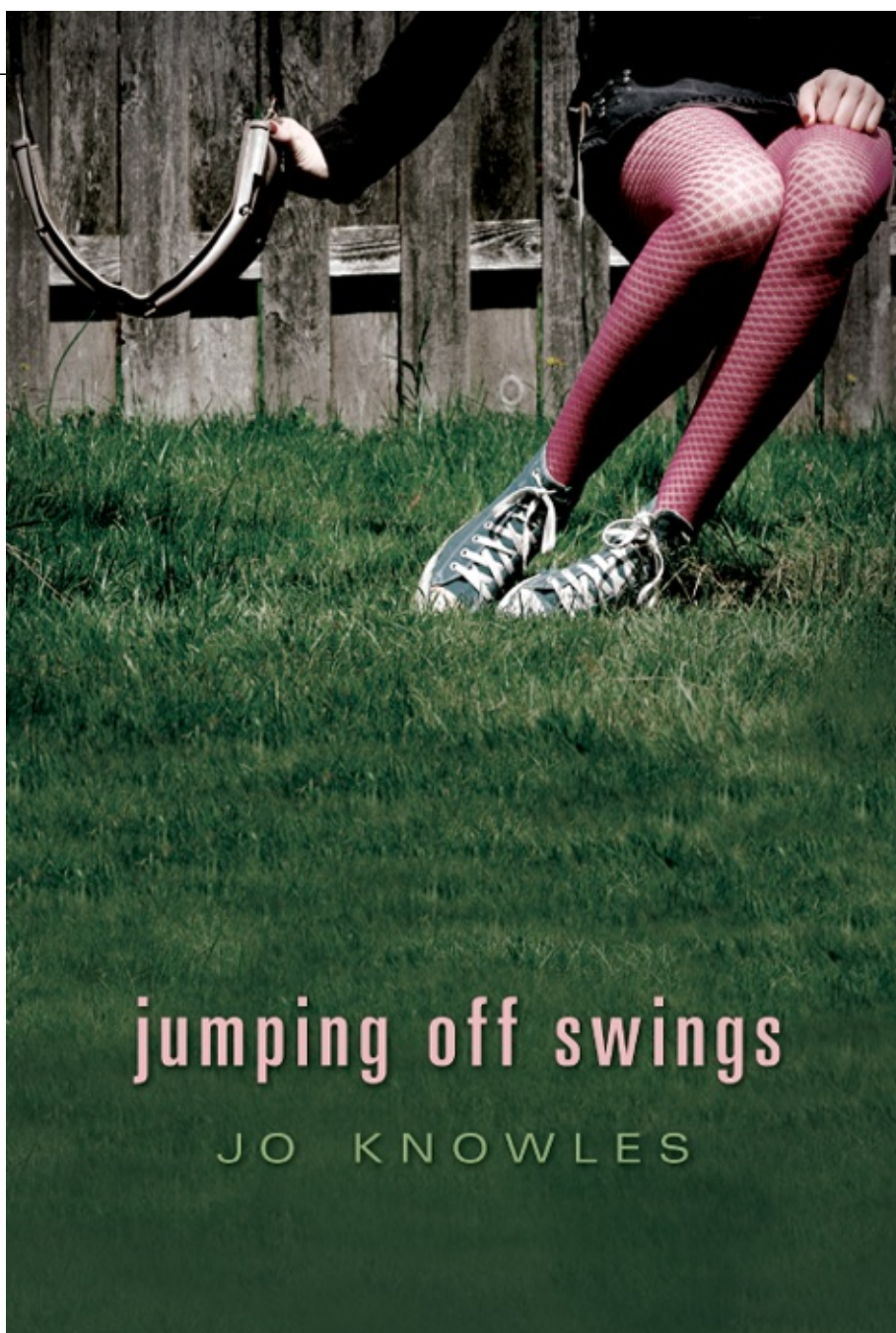




jumping off swings

JO KNOWLES



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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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For Debbi Michiko Florence and Cindy Faughnan—

writing partners, friends, sisters.

In our next lives, I hope we go to the same high school.

I CAN STILL FEEL A TRACE of his warm lips against mine as he slips away from me and fumbles for the door to his father's van. I stay lying under the scratchy wool blanket on the backseat, wishing he'd stay. When he slides the door open, the ceiling light blinks on and exposes our faces to each other. His hair is ruffled. His brown eyes avoid mine.

"Thanks, Ellie. See you inside?"

I nod.

He slides the door shut and leaves me in the dark.

Thanks, Ellie.

I sit up and reach under my shirt to reclip my bra as his shadow makes its way across the lawn and back to the house. He doesn't turn around.

I find my own way to the door handle and slide the heavy door open again. When the light comes on, I see the crumpled-up wool blanket on the backseat. It's covered with dog hair, and so is my shirt. I try to brush off the hairs, but they cling to the cotton. I climb out and adjust my clothes in the light, then slide the door shut. I lean against the cool metal and breathe in the clean night air.

Up at the house, indoor lights make the rooms look like they're glowing. Party noises echo across the lawn. Through the large picture window in the living room, I see him standing with a group of guys. Someone hands him a beer. They throw their heads back, laughing. He joins them. Someone grabs his hand and smells it. He pulls his hand back, but the others try to grab and smell it, too.

I squeeze my legs together.

He pushes his friends away and walks to the window. His face is suddenly serious, looking out into the dark, not seeing me.

I slide my body along the side of the van and hide behind it just in case.

"Ellie?" Corinne's footsteps hurry down the driveway. "Ellie?" she calls again.

"Over here," I say quietly.

"There you are! I was worried when you didn't come in with — Ellie? Are you OK?"

"I don't feel so well," I say, making my way to a nearby tree.

She follows. "Do you need to get sick?"

"I think so —" I am already bending over, retching.

Corinne instinctively pulls my hair back.

I retch and retch, but nothing comes out.

When I finally stop, Corinne helps me fix my hair and we find her car.

"You are the only person I know who can throw up without throwing anything up," she says as she starts the engine. "Jeez. How many drinks did you have, anyway?"

I shrug.

None.

"I keep telling you you've got to pace yourself."

"I know," I say quietly.

We drive a minute in silence.

"So . . ." She taps her fingers on the steering wheel. "How was it?"

I feel his hand in mine, leading me outside. See his brown eyes staring back at me, then closing.

as he leans in to kiss me.

“OK.”

“Just OK? But Josh is so cute! I nearly died of jealousy when I saw you disappearing with him. Come on, give me some juice.”

I feel his warm, wet whisper in my ear.

Ellie. Oh, Ellie.

“It was nice at first.”

I lick my lips, remembering how his mouth felt pressed against mine. How his hands rubbed me back.

Your skin is so soft.

My stomach melted at his touch.

“So what happened?”

Let me touch you.

I feel his fingers reaching under my panties and pressing inside me.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Come on! Far? Farther? Or farthest?” She’s smiling as she concentrates on the road.

Thanks, Ellie.

I cross my legs.

“That’s between me and him,” I say.

“You never tell me anything! It’s not fair.”

I look out the window and watch the dark trees on the side of the road. My reflection in the glass stares back at me.

“Are you going to see him again?”

I turn away from my reflection and concentrate on the yellow lines disappearing into the blackness in front of us.

“No,” I say. “It was just a one-time thing.”

“SO, WAS SHE TOTALLY INTO IT?” Kyle asks.

“What do you think?” Josh smirks at us as if his new status has elevated him from virgin geek to ultrastud.

My best friend has officially become an asshole.

“Dude, way to hook up on the first try!” Dave high-fives Josh, then gives me a sympathetic look like “Too bad you’re still a loser, buddy.”

My second best friend has officially joined my best friend in the Asshole Club.

My hands close into fists. If they weren’t talking about Ellie, maybe I wouldn’t mind so much. Maybe that makes me an asshole, too.

“Easy come, easy go,” Josh says.

Dave laughs and elbows Josh. “Cum. Get it?”

They both crack up. Some other guys start to laugh, too.

The locker room is steamy from the showers and smells like a battle is going on between sweaty smelly feet, and wet soap. The soap is losing. I feel like I’m trapped in a lame locker room scene from some made-for-TV movie where all the guys are a bunch of stereotypical pricks.

“Told ya she was a sure thing,” Ben says as he sprays a cloud of deodorant under his arms.

“Yup, all you have to do is get her alone.” Kyle grins and closes his eyes, as if he’s remembering.

“Now we just have to find someone for Special Cay, here,” Dave says, like he’s so experienced. “Maybe you could hook up with her at the next party. She’s obviously not picky if she’d do it with these losers.”

They all laugh, even though the joke is about them. And Ellie. God, I can’t believe it. Ellie with Ben? And Kyle? And *Josh*? I imagine how good it would feel to beat the crap out of all of them, but I’m obviously outnumbered. Some of them probably have more muscle in one arm than I have in my entire body.

“No, thanks,” I kind of mumble. I start shoving my stuff in my bag.

Dave shrugs and throws his backpack over his shoulder. “See you girls later.”

“Hey, wait up. Can you drop me off?” Josh grabs his bag. He struts after Dave in his new I’m-not-a-virgin-anymore walk.

The rest of the guys follow, leaving me alone in their stench.

I’ve had a crush on Ellie since first grade, when she gave me her red toy Porsche. The door opened, and you could move the seats back and forth. I still have it on the top shelf of my bookcase behind the set of Narnia books my dad sent me for my sixth birthday. In the card, he promised we’d have a long visit some summer and he’d read the whole series to me. Four years later, I gave up waiting and read them myself.

I shake my head and pick up my bag. I should have known I had about as much of a chance with Ellie as I had of my dad actually fulfilling one of his promises. Why would she pick the pasty scrawny guy who trips at the sight of her when she could have . . . anyone else?

“I THOUGHT HE WAS DIFFERENT,” Ellie says quietly.

I have to lie down on my bed for this phone conversation. Judging from how it’s going so far, it’ll be hard not to suffocate myself with my pillow. Not to be insensitive, but this is like the fourth time this has happened, and it’s getting old. I should have known it would turn out like this. It always does. Ellie acts like hooking up is no big deal, then a few days later calls me in tears.

“How would you know if he was different?” I ask. “You hooked up with him as soon as he smiled at you.”

“That’s not what happened!”

“Then how *did* it happen?”

I want to tell her that from my point of view, it seems like all a guy has to do is give her a compliment and she’ll disappear with him to some back room.

But she’s really crying now.

“El, I’m sorry. I’m just trying to help you. You keep getting hurt.”

“He was so sweet to me at the party. He held my hand and acted like we were a couple! I thought maybe he really wanted more than just sex.”

“Then why didn’t you stop him when things started going too far?”

“Because I didn’t realize until after he left me!”

“Ellie! You could have *asked* first. That’s how it works!”

“How would *you* know?”

Right. She has me there. I’m not exactly the authority on sex. Not that she’s been any help in that department. I mean if *I* had sex, I’m sure I’d tell Ellie every detail. And to be honest? I had expected the same from her, which was a huge disappointment. But I’ve heard enough through my sister’s bedroom wall when my parents aren’t home to know that sex *can* involve talking. Ava’s number-one rule: “If you’re gonna be with a guy, you need to make sure right off the bat that *you* are the one calling the shots. You say what you want and what you don’t want. Period.” She’s been with her boyfriend for two years. She must know what she’s talking about because that guy adores her. And like I said, judging from the noises they make, they are *both* having a good time.

But Ellie’s not the type of person to ever put herself first. It’s just not who she is.

I listen to her quiet crying and try to think of something to say that could possibly help. Poor Ellie has this romantic idea in her head that is just so fairy-tale, despite what keeps happening. It makes me want to cry.

“That bastard. I’m sorry, El. Has he called you?”

“No. He won’t.”

“Guys are jerks. You can’t trust any of them.”

“I thought he would be different,” Ellie tells me again. “But then he just left me there. He went back inside and —”

“And what?”

She’s crying again.

“What did he do?”

“Nothing,” she says, all quiet.

I don't know why she gets into these messes. She's supposed to be the innocent one. But look at us. I'm Miss Horny Forever Virgin and Ellie's, well, not.

"Hey," I say. "Want to meet somewhere? We could go to the mall or something."

"The park?"

"I'll meet you there in twenty minutes," I tell her. "At the swings. And Ellie? Cheer up. It's a loss. I mean it."

I hang up and grab a wrinkled sweatshirt from the end of my bed. I put on my baseball hat and pull it down low. When I check myself in the mirror, I notice the strip of black-and-white photos Ellie and I took in a photo booth at the beginning of the summer. I'm sticking out my tongue and crossing my eyes. Ellie's laughing because she can't manage to cross her own eyes without putting her finger in front of her nose. We laughed so hard that day. School had just gotten out, and we'd gone to the beach to celebrate our freedom. We hung out at the arcade and ate French fries and bought cheap matching earrings from a vendor on the boardwalk.

I step closer and look again at our happy faces. I'd give anything for us to feel like that again.

“HAND ME THAT WRENCH, BUD.”

My dad’s huge callused hand reaches out from under the hood of his van. The lines in his palm are black with grease.

“I wonder if the rings are burned out. Didn’t I just change the oil two weeks ago?”

I shrug, then remember he can’t see me.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and pull out the backseat for me. I told Mikey I’d pick up the speakers for the show tonight.”

I roll my eyes and head for the back of the van. My dad playing at the local Legion Club with a bunch of his old high-school buddies doesn’t actually count as a “show” in my book, but whatever.

I open the back of the van and reach for the locks to unhitch the backseat. When I tip the seat back to pull it out, Rosie’s rumpled blanket slides across my arms.

I swear I smell Ellie’s perfume on it.

I cringe at the memory and try to shake it out of my head. I toss the blanket over my shoulder and finish pulling the seat out. As I carry the seat to the back wall of the garage, the blanket slips to the floor. I trip on it and drop the seat.

“Nice play, Shakespeare,” my dad says, poking his head out from under the hood of the van.

My dad the comedian. I lean the seat against the wall, then pick up the blanket. The memory flashes in front of me again. I throw the blanket back in the van and slam the door, but it’s too late. I’ve seen her. The way she looked at me as I left her, as if she wanted something. I don’t know what. Or maybe I do. But I was so embarrassed by the whole thing, I just wanted to get the hell out of there.

All the guys said how great it would be. How into it Ellie was. No strings, just a good time. They never mentioned how she’d look after. Maybe they didn’t notice.

My dad slams the hood of the van. “Come on, I need a beer.”

I follow his hulky body through the garage and into the kitchen. Rosie, our mangy-looking mutt that my dad says is a black Lab, drags her fat body up off the garage floor and follows us.

If my mom was home, no way would Dad be slinging one back yet. Not before five o’clock. That’s Mom’s rule. But she’s at work, as usual. And when there’s no Mom, there’re no rules.

My dad reaches into the fridge and pulls out two cans, handing one to me.

“To Saturdays,” he says, touching his can to mine.

The beer is cold in my hand. I crack it open and take a long swig as my dad tilts his own head back and lets the beer empty down his throat. His Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he swallows.

When the phone rings, my dad answers in his friendly manner. “Yeah?” He turns his back to me and looks out the window.

“Mikey! How’s it goin’? You ready for the gig tonight? Katie *did* forgive you for getting home so late last time, right?” He pauses and takes another swig while he listens to Mike — that’s his best friend, and Dave’s dad. They’ve known each other since grade school, just like me and Dave. Or moms, too.

This is the usual routine. Our dads call each other the morning of “the show” and reminisce about last week’s performance. Then they talk about their “playlist” like they are a real band and like the li-

actually changes from week to week. Then they complain about our moms and how they give the such a hard time about staying out too late and drinking too much.

“Well, you’ll just have to put your foot down!” my dad says.

Clearly, Dave’s mom hasn’t quite forgiven his dad yet. I have to laugh at my dad’s advice. Like he ever stands up to my mom. Actually, they pretty much just ignore each other.

I take another long drink of my beer while my dad does his usual ramble with Mike. He laughs about something Mike says, then swigs. When he finishes his beer, he tosses the can in the sink and opens the fridge for another. I finish my own and drop it in the sink so it hits his.

“Where you going?” he asks me, cupping the mouthpiece on the phone with his hand.

I shrug and head for the door.

“Be good!” he calls after me. I turn around to fire a comeback, but he waves me away and goes back to talking with Mike.

It’s warm and sunny outside. The leaves are starting to change color. It smells like fall, and for some reason it reminds me of the day I learned to ride my bike. My dad was sleeping one off, and my mom was determined to teach me on her own — Dad’s punishment for getting wasted again.

I was happy to have her to myself, even though he was the one who had promised to teach me.

“You can do it, Joshy, if you just try,” she kept saying. She hung on to the back of the seat and wouldn’t let me fall. It must have been three hours, maybe longer, till I finally went forward without her. I wobbled all the way to the end of the driveway, then slowly turned back toward her outstretched arms. Her face was all sweaty, and her hair was falling out of her ponytail. She had a huge grin on her face. I swear that’s the last time I saw her look genuinely happy.

Now I’m lucky to see her at all. She practically lives at the nursing home, changing old people’s diapers and putting their teeth in. Like that is preferable to being at her real home with us. If she’s not at work, she’s doing some volunteer project with Dave’s mom. She used to make my dad and me go with her to the local soup kitchen every Sunday afternoon, but eventually she got tired of complaining. Plus I think she was embarrassed to bring my dad, who was usually hungover.

I walk to the end of the driveway and look back at the house. The blue vinyl siding is faded and cracked, and the white gutters are overflowing with muck. A few years ago, my mom would have flipped over that. Now nothing around here seems to matter to her. Including us.

I head down the street toward Dave’s house. Judging from my dad’s side of the phone conversation, Dave’ll be wanting to get as far away from his parents as possible. When they fight, it’s not pretty. But at least they still acknowledge each other’s existence.

I take a left onto Dave’s street and look down toward the end, where his house is. Figures. He’s already walking toward me.

THE METAL CHAINS above me creak as I swing.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

I pump my legs like I did in first grade. My stomach does a familiar hop each time I swing backward.

When I see Corinne coming toward me, I stop pumping. When she reaches me, she stands so close I almost kick her with my feet. She doesn't say anything, just nods hello. She gets on the swing next to me and swings sideways so we almost collide. We used to call it bumper cars when we were little. Only then we used to smash into each other. This time she seems careful not to touch me.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out with Josh." She sees me notice the pity in her eyes and turns away. She starts to swing the right way. She smiles at the breeze and then at me.

I start to pump again, until we are in perfect rhythm. Higher and higher. Our feet point toward the sky.

"Remember how we used to think we could swing right up over the bar?" Corinne asks. "I always thought I could do it if I just pumped hard enough."

We both laugh a little, remembering. We stop pumping at the same time, letting ourselves glide back and forth together. The wind blows my hair forward, then back. Forward, then back.

Corinne used to jump off the swings when we were kids. Just let go of the chains and take flight without a trace of fear. I'd watch her jump, wishing I could be that brave. But I'd always hang on, waiting to slow down first, always mindful of my mother's warning: *You'll break a leg if you're not careful!* But now I don't care.

I send myself jetting into the air. Corinne shrieks in surprise. I'm flying. Just for a second. But I'm flying.

When I land hard on my feet, the sting goes all the way up to my teeth.

Corinne lands heavily beside me and falls to the ground. I fall down next to her. We laugh out loud and roll around, pretending to be injured. It feels so good. My stomach muscles ache from not being used to laughing.

But then Corinne stops. And I think, Don't stop now. Don't stop. Keep laughing. I don't want this to end.

But she's looking behind me, into the distance. She stops smiling. And I know by the look on her face. I know before I turn around. He's here.

“PASS ME THAT PAINTBRUSH next to the blue bottle, would you, hon? I need a rougher bristle.”

I find the brush and hand it to my mom.

“Tell me what you learned this week.”

I shrug. It’s the same thing she’s said to me since I was in first grade. It’s our Saturday-morning in-the-studio thing. Shrugging or answering “nothing” is not allowed. She’ll wait.

“Josh is an asshole,” I finally tell her.

“Hmm.” She studies a neat row of three cobalt-blue bottles sitting on a paint-spattered step stool. On her canvas are three sort-of ovals of various shades of blue. They look more like giant lava-lamp blobs than bottles, but my mom isn’t the type of artist who paints by numbers.

Finally she looks up at me. “Are you going to tell me why?”

“You don’t want to know.”

She raises her eyebrows, then turns back to her paints. She knows I’ll tell her eventually.

She squeezes some more dark-blue paint out of the tube onto an old, chipped plate. It makes a familiar squirry sound, which she used to say “Pardon me” after, to make me laugh. She winks at me but I’m not in the mood.

I pick up another paintbrush and stroke the dry bristles across my hand.

She stops mashing her brush into the paint. “Are you going to tell me what’s up, or what?”

I sigh. “Josh lost his virginity.”

She puts her hands on her knees. “And?”

It’s true. Technically, this would not actually qualify Josh as an asshole.

“It was with someone I know,” I say.

She goes back to mixing her blues. “You mean someone you care about. Or — someone you wanted to have sex with?”

“No! I mean — maybe. I mean — *no!*”

She waits.

“It was Ellie.”

“Oh.” My mom knows I’ve had a crush on Ellie since I knew what one was. “Did Josh know about your feelings for her?”

“I dunno. Maybe.”

“Did you ever tell him?”

“Not exactly.”

“And he’s still an asshole?”

“If you heard him talk about her, yeah! They were talking about Ellie like she’ll hook up with *anyone*. I thought Ellie was different. I really thought she was special.”

My mom adds more dark blue to a bottle. “So tell me.” She dabs at the canvas with hard strokes that make the easel shake. “Since when does having sex make someone less special?”

“It’s not that. It’s just — I never thought Josh would be the type to brag about who he’s been with. And I never thought Ellie would be the type to — you know — hook up with so many people.”

She adds black to the bottle, turning its insides midnight blue. “Maybe there’s a reason for why she’s doing.”

“You’d have to have a pretty messed-up reason to hook up with those losers, if you ask me.”

She shrugs. “What about Josh?”

“What about him?”

“What do you think his reason was?”

“To get laid so the guys will get off his back?”

“You really believe that?”

“I don’t know anymore. Maybe? Josh used to tell me he wouldn’t do it with just anyone. But he never say that in front of the guys. It’s like, when the two of us hang out alone, he’s different. He’s not all, ‘Look at me. I’m such a stud.’ He’s cool. Same with Dave, mostly. But at school they both totally change.”

She steps back from her work and studies my face. “Think about what you just said.”

“What?”

“When they’re with you, they’re different.”

“And?”

“It’s *you*. You help them be themselves when the three of you are together. Not everyone can do that.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I am right. You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

I sink back into my chair and watch her paint. She pushes the brush against the blue, making darker and darker.

I would like to believe that Josh wouldn’t have hooked up with Ellie if he knew about my thing for her, but I don’t know. Maybe it’s my fault for not trusting him enough to tell him in the first place. Maybe I don’t give *him* enough credit, either.

“OH, SHIT. LET’S GET OUTTA HERE,” I say. But Dave is already charging ahead.

Ellie’s sitting on the ground next to Corinne. For some reason, they’re covered in dry grass. Corinne gives me the evil eye while Ellie turns away. I try to grab Dave’s arm and steer him in the other direction, but he takes a step forward out of my reach.

“Going for a roll in the hay?” Dave asks them, like he’s suddenly the wittiest bastard around.

“Ha, ha,” Corinne says, brushing the brown grass off of her. “Would that turn you on?”

Dave smirks and gives Ellie this “I know what you did” look, but she doesn’t see because she’s still looking away from us.

“Would you *like* it if it turned me on?” Dave asks.

Corinne rolls her eyes. “Uh — *no*?” She stands up and brushes the grass off her jeans, then nudges Ellie with her knee to get up, too.

Ellie pushes herself up but doesn’t bother to brush herself off. She fixes her eyes on the ground under her feet, anywhere but on us.

Dave elbows me and gestures for me to say something to her.

“Um, great party the other night,” I say.

Dave gives an amused grunt. Corinne glares at me. She looks like she wants to kill me as badly as I want to kill Dave.

“Um, I mean —” I start to say.

Ellie finally looks up and meets my eyes for a split second. I recognize something there, but I’m not sure what. All I know is that look makes me feel like crap.

Corinne takes hold of Ellie’s arm, and they head for the parking lot without saying a word. As they leave, Corinne shakes her head at us, as if to say, “See ya, assholes.”

“Those two need to lighten up,” Dave says.

I’m sure they can hear him, but they don’t turn around.

Dave. God, he’s so clueless that you can’t help but feel sorry for him.

“Women,” I say, like I’m joking. But I see Ellie’s face in the light of the van. And I see me, just leaving her there.

Dave elbows me under the ribs. “Look at you, Mr. Heartbreaker.” He cracks up.

I fight the urge to beat the shit out of him.

“Let’s just get out of here.” I start walking back the way we came. Fast. Dave practically has to jog to keep up.

“What’s your problem?” he asks, finally getting that this isn’t a joke. “You gonna let them own the park? They don’t own the fucking park! This is *our* place.”

“Shut up,” I say. It’s like I’m talking to a five-year-old.

“What the hell?”

“Just shut up. Seriously.”

Dave follows me out of the park. We walk for a while down the streets of our neighborhood. But there’s nowhere to go, so we end up back at my house.

As soon as I open the door, Rosie runs over to us, her nails clicking on the wood floor. I call out

to my dad but he doesn't answer, and when we walk by the couch in the living room, we see him sacked out on the sofa. His shirt is all grimy from working on the van. It stretches out around his gut making it look like a big, smooth stone. A Budweiser sits on his guitar case next to the couch. He doesn't like to practice when I'm home. He used to play in front of me when I was little, even sang to me, but not anymore.

Dave snickers as we sneak past him and into the kitchen. I want to punch him because I don't think it's funny and probably his dad is doing the same thing at their house. Instead, I take two beers out of a Bud Suitcase and toss one to Dave. He catches the can and smiles like he's a freakin' dog getting a treat. I pat him on the head as a joke, but he just looks confused. We head to my room.

"What's Ellie's problem, anyway?" Dave asks me after we've had a few swigs. "I thought you two hooked up? Something go wrong?" He's sitting on my bed with his legs stretched out, crossed at his feet. I want to tell him to get his smelly shoes off my bed, but I don't have the energy.

"I don't know," I say. "It wasn't exactly, you know, like the guys said it would be."

"What do you mean?" He actually looks concerned, which is kind of surprising for Dave.

"It was — just forget it. It doesn't matter. It's over. Who cares?"

He shrugs. "I'll drink to that," he says, and downs the rest of his beer.

So much for his concern.

I chug the rest of my beer, too.

I sit on the floor and lean back against the wall. When I close my eyes, I feel her all over again. Her skin was warm, like a flannel shirt. Her hair smelled clean and sweet. Her arms around me holding me, made me feel real. I had no idea what I was doing, but it felt so good.

Then it was over — way too fast. Like, embarrassingly fast. I knew I shouldn't have taken off right after, but I felt like such an idiot.

I open my eyes and catch Dave squeezing a zit. "Stubborn fucker," he says.

I shake my head to let him know I think he's a pig and close my eyes again. But as soon as I do, I see her face. The way she looked at me when I left her. Like she knew I wasn't just going back to the party. Like I was deserting her.

And that's when I realize why that look is familiar. I've seen it before. On my mom's face. It's the look she used to carry around every Sunday morning when my dad started coming home later and later from his "shows" with Mikey. She'd say how she'd been waiting up for him, worried, and he'd get all mad at her. Like how dare *she* be mad at *him* for having a little fun after working his ass off all week? How the shows were paid gigs and why shouldn't he be able to relax with a few drinks afterward? He really knew how to turn things around.

My mom would look at him with this questioning expression like, *What happened to you?* And that would piss him off more. Then she'd tell me to go outside. I'd sit on the concrete step by the front door and listen.

Why are you doing this to yourself?

I'm not doing anything. Just having a little fun after a long week.

What kind of message do you think you're giving Josh?

What the hell are you talking about?

You have a problem.

Yeah, a nagging wife who doesn't appreciate me or my music.

It was always the same. My mom would end up crying, and my dad would go into their bedroom and slam the door.

I'd take off and meet up with Dave, whose own parents no doubt had sent him out of the house

too. We'd wander around, like today, always ending up at the park. We thought of it as *our* park.

~~Sometimes we'd catch Caleb there, too. The first time we saw him, we must have been about eight, and definitely the only kids our age at the park without some adoring parent telling us some bullshit about how good we were at throwing a ball or running or whatever. Whenever the three of us needed someplace to go, we went to the park.~~

But not now. Not if I might run into Ellie.

The guys were full of shit. There were plenty of strings attached; they just didn't stick around to see them. And, asshole that I am, I saw them and didn't stick around, either.

AFTER I WALK ELLIE TO HER HOUSE, we go to her room and hang out. Every time I try to get her to talk about Josh, she shakes her head and changes the music on her stereo. After a while, her mom calls us downstairs for an early dinner. We sit at the kitchen table while her mom heats up macaroni and cheese — the real kind with cracker crumbs on the top and everything.

“Thanks. This looks delicious!” I say when she puts a heaping plate in front of me.

She smiles and puts a matching plate next to Ellie. Ellie’s mom isn’t a big talker. She’s more like a server. It’s kind of weird. Also, I’ve always had the impression that she doesn’t like me very much. Probably because of my sister’s “reputation.” News of the abortion she had last year spread around town, and I guess people think that kind of thing runs in families. Jeez, I can only imagine how much she’d freak if Ellie’s mom knew the real deal about her own daughter. The woman prides herself on perfection, and not just her own.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” she says.

Ellie nods. “Thanks, Mom.”

We wait for her to leave before we start eating. The noodles are surprisingly tasteless. I think she must have used fat-free cheese and definitely no salt. I search the table for a saltshaker but don’t see one. Ellie moves her food around but doesn’t even bother to take a taste. I force down a few more bites and then give up.

“OK,” I finally say. “I’m not leaving until we talk this out.”

“Shhh,” Ellie says, actually putting her finger to her lips.

I look around in an exaggerated way to remind her we’re alone.

“Ellie, I’m serious,” I whisper. “Why do you keep doing this? Every time you hook up with someone, you get totally depressed after. It makes no sense.”

She’s quiet a minute, then puts down her fork.

“I don’t know.”

“Well — you need to stop. I mean, God, Ellie. I don’t want to make you feel bad or anything, but how many guys have you been with now?”

She covers her face with her hands and shakes her head. A sob escapes through her fingers.

Crap.

“I’m sorry, El. Seriously. It’s not your fault. I don’t know why these guys use you, OK? Maybe it’s because they know you’re too nice to stop them. But Ellie, just because a guy is nice to you doesn’t mean you owe him anything.”

She drags her fingers down her cheeks as if she’d like to scratch them.

“You don’t understand what it’s like. How it feels.”

“Try me.”

She studies her plate as if she’s looking for an answer, but she doesn’t say anything. We sit there for what seems like forever.

Finally, she takes a deep breath and says very quietly, “I can’t. I can’t explain. I just . . . when I’m with them, I feel . . . like they care about me. I feel special. I feel like they *want* me. Not just my body but *me*. Like they could *love* me. But . . . I’m always wrong. No one wants me. No one will ever love me.”

I sigh. “Then why do you keep having sex with them?”

“~~SHHHH!!~~” She clamps her hand over my mouth.

“Sorry,” I whisper. “But . . . don’t you think you should think about that?”

She looks down at her tasteless noodles. “Yeah.”

Shoes click in the hallway. Ellie automatically sits up straighter.

“You girls all finished?” Ellie’s mom asks, coming back into the room.

I stand up to clear my plate, but she quickly takes it from me, as if she doesn’t trust me to carry to the sink.

“Thank you,” I say. But she already has her back to me as she heads to the dishwasher.

I follow Ellie to the front door.

“Are you going to be OK?” I ask. She looks so tired and sad. I know I should say something to make her feel better, but I can’t think what.

She nods halfheartedly. “Thanks for being with me today,” she says.

“That’s what friends are for.” I give her a hug and whisper in her ear. “Forget him. Forget all of them.”

She nods again, but when I leave, I can almost feel her crumple behind me.

I take the long way home so I can walk by the park again. I get on my swing and pump my legs as hard as I can. It’s getting dark, and the wind on my face is much colder than it was this morning. I keep pumping, going higher and higher. I whiz past the swing next to me, Ellie’s swing, making it sway a little. I wish she were back here, swinging and laughing like nothing else mattered.

We used to laugh constantly. We painted each other’s toenails and traded flavored lip gloss. We teased each other about who we had crushes on and practiced kissing the backs of our hands. We talked about what our first time would be like — where we’d want to do it and what our perfect moment would look like. We talked about how magical it would be.

But then Ellie went and did it for real, and it seems like sex wasn’t any of those things we imagined. I wish I could cling to what Ava says. How sex is amazing. But looking at Ellie, it’s hard to believe.

To be totally honest, I’ve never even seen a real penis except when I was eight and my disgusting cousin, also eight, whipped his thing out and chased me around the yard. A few years ago, my mom and dad wanted to have “the talk” with me. They even had a book to show me. I was so embarrassed that I told them Ava had already filled me in on everything I needed to know. Of course, I was dying to look at that book. But with my mom and dad looking on? Uh — no.

I stop swinging and walk over to the park’s poor excuse for a seesaw, the kind where you can get hurt if your so-called friend jumps off to make you go crashing down. They’ve attached the springs to the bottom so the seesaw automatically balances and you can actually ride on it by yourself.

I straddle the seat and sink slowly until both feet touch the ground, then I push off. I bounce up and come back down again softly. It’s dusk, and there isn’t anyone else around except some old lady with two little kids. She pushes them on the merry-go-round and tells them a million times to hold on tight.

She notices me watching and gives me a questioning look, like, *What are you doing out here alone by yourself?* I glance around at the empty place. The slide is becoming a shadow. Ellie’s and my swings sway gently back and forth, as if two ghost friends are riding them. I get the shivers and decide I better go.

“Hey, Corinne,” a quiet voice says behind me.

I nearly fall off the seesaw.

I turn and see Caleb, looking shy, his hands jammed into his jeans pockets. My stomach does a little flip-flop butterfly thing. That hasn't happened since last year's crush on Brad Stevens, who made me practically faint every time I got near him. But *Caleb*?

"You scared me," I say.

"Sorry." When our eyes meet, I swear my stomach flutters again.

"It's OK." I try not to stare at him. I tried to tell Ellie he seemed to have gotten cuter this year but she wouldn't listen. Figures she's not attracted to the one guy who might actually treat her right. I mean, the guy's been crushing on her since we were kids. I can't imagine what it would be like to get the attention Ellie gets. Just once I'd like to get one of the flirty looks she gets every day.

Caleb studies the wood chips at his feet.

"So, uh, what are you doing here?" he asks the wood chips.

"Um . . ."

What *am* I doing here? I'm sixteen and I've been discovered by a cute guy riding on a seesaw. By myself. In the dark. On a Saturday night. There's really no good answer.

"Just thinking," I finally say. "Want to ride with me?"

"Um, sure." He walks to the other end of the seesaw and climbs on. He slowly pushes off with his feet. His curly hair looks like a fuzzy shadow in the gray light.

"I heard you were at the park earlier today. You and Ellie?"

"Yeah. Did Josh tell you?"

"Yeah."

I don't know how much he knows, but I assume Josh gives a lot more details than Ellie does, so he probably knows more than me. I push my feet against the ground lightly. It would be really great to change the subject right about now.

"So, is Ellie, you know, OK?"

I stop the seesaw with my legs, and our eyes meet. I wait, trying to figure out how to answer. But there's really nothing I can say. I kick off the ground again, and we ride up and down in silence. After a while, the little old lady says loudly enough so we hear how it's very late and they have to go home because the park isn't safe at night.

The funny thing is, with Caleb, I do feel safe. For some reason, being here in the dark with him, I don't feel scared at all.

THE FIRST BOY made me feel like I was the most beautiful girl in school. He told me I was special. That he couldn't believe he was with me. When he held me, I felt like a present he didn't want to share. He said it was his first time, too. But his kisses got harder and harder. And his hands moved everywhere, too fast. A noise came out of me when he ripped his way inside me. He didn't notice. He just moaned louder.

But I wasn't moaning. I was crying. He didn't even kiss me good-bye when he was done.

I stayed after he left the room. I sat and listened to the party noises in the other part of the house we were in. To people laughing. I wiped my eyes and sat on the edge of the bed. I thought of the words he'd used earlier. How they filled me up and made me feel wanted and alive. But how, when he pushed his way inside me, he emptied me out again.

Pretty soon Corinne found me. She asked if I was all right. She wanted to know what happened. She wanted to know all the details. "Far, farther, or farthest?" she kept asking.

She giggled when I told her farthest. She jumped up and down on the bed.

"Tell me what it was like!"

But I couldn't. I wanted to be able to tell her it was the way it was supposed to be. Special. But it wasn't. And I couldn't lie. So I just shrugged and said I'd tell her later.

When I got home and changed, I saw the blood on my panties. I was afraid something was wrong with me. I called Corinne the next morning. She said that happens when you do it the first time. Her sister told her about it. Ava said that in some cultures, they check the wedding couple's sheets for blood to prove that the bride was a virgin. I couldn't stop thinking about that. About someone else seeing my blood. And knowing what I'd done.

I didn't know what to do with my bloody panties. I folded them into a tight ball and hid them way back in my underwear drawer where I couldn't see them.

The second time, I should have known. I should have recognized the familiar lies.

You're so hot. I have to have you. C'mon . . .

And the third time.

And the fourth.

Their hands felt so good, wanting me. Needing me. Their words made me feel beautiful. Irresistible. Even powerful for that one brief moment before it was over.

But I was none of those things.

I was nothing.

Just a smell on their hands to share with their friends.

“CALEB?” Corinne pushes her way toward me through the crowded hallway at school. When she catches up, she gives me a quick semi-smile.

“Hey,” I say, grinning back at her.

“Hey. Thanks for hanging out with me at the park the other night.”

It’s just before first period, but her hair is already falling out of her hair clip. Loose curls are wispy around her face. I can’t believe I never noticed how cute she is.

“No problem,” I say. “Not that I was the best company.”

“Well, it was nice not to be alone.” She looks at her feet, then down the hall toward our homeroom.

When our eyes meet again, I take a deep breath. “Um. So. Maybe we could go again sometime.”

She nods. “Yeah. Cool.”

“Great!” I feel my cheeks get hot. “I mean. OK. Good.”

Ugh.

I follow her to homeroom. When we get there, Corinne sits at her usual place next to Ellie, and I sit in my usual place in the back. From my seat, I watch them lean toward each other to talk. Corinne reaches over and touches Ellie’s arm, as if she’s trying to comfort her, but Ellie pulls away. When she turns, I see her face. She looks like she’s going to cry. I don’t know what they’re talking about, but I think I can guess.

I don’t see Josh until last period, when we have soccer. I manage to avoid him in the locker room because we’re all in a hurry to get out on the floor before the coach comes in and starts yelling at us.

We get put on the same scrimmage team, but I refuse to pass to him. I don’t even look at him.

After practice, I try to get out of there fast, but he comes rushing over to me.

“What was wrong with you out there? You cost us two goals!”

I turn away from him and throw my stuff together.

“Hey, what’s your problem, man?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Not here.”

“Yeah, here. What’s up with you?”

The other guys wait for a fight like vultures. Only Dave seems uncomfortable. The three of us have known each other forever, and we’ve never gotten in each other’s faces. Never.

“I said not here.” I turn away from him and grab my bag.

“Party at my house this weekend,” Kyle says, walking over to Josh.

“Cool,” says Dave.

“Gonna hook up with Ellie again, Josh?” Ben asks.

“Nah,” Josh says quietly.

Dave looks toward me. “Cay?”

“Screw you,” I say.

“What the hell? What did I say?”

I grab my stuff and push past them and head out to the parking lot. I’m halfway to my car when

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