

Current Events

The beginning of the dinner party, the part I liked best, was always the same. Us kids ate pizza (now with gluten free crust—in the last year we'd all become celiac-sensitive), while our parents, holding white bean dip on a sesame cracker in one hand and a glass of white wine in the other, got us to talk about things. What Spanish vocabulary had we lately learned? Which part of Montessori gym class did we like better, kickball or yoga? Had our opinions on the Iraq invasion changed now that there was conclusive evidence Saddam had never possessed WMDs?

“Jesus Christ Murray!” Miles’ mother said. “They’re kids!”

“Which means they can’t have intelligent thoughts?” This was my father, Murray, the one who had asked the question about WMDs. He knew *my* thoughts on the war in Iraq; to keep up with Current Events I was supposed to read and discuss one newspaper article per day. The question was directed at the four other kids. Meanwhile he smiled at me in that way I loved, the way that reminded me that—even though right now there was a woman with Twizzler red hair with her hand on his leg—we shared a secret. The secret was this: we were better than everyone else.

“She’s right,” Jackson’s dad said, snorting like my golden retriever Sally when she sneezes. “There’s a limit. Soon you’re going to be asking them about Abu Ghraib.”

“What’s Aboo Graeeb?” said Miles, who was the youngest of us. But I had been wondering the same. How was it possible that I didn’t know about a current event?

“Some very bad men did some very bad things,” said Miles’ mother.

“Not just men,” said Jackson’s mother.

We were sitting on the couches no one liked because they were too Ergonomic, loosening mulberries stuck to the soles of our shoes. It was the time of year when the berries were everywhere, on windshields and sidewalks and dog paws.

“Maybe it’s time for you all to go upstairs and play,” Drew’s mom said.

“What did the bad men do?” Miles asked his mother.

“I’ll tell you when you’re older,” she said.

“*When* when I’m older?”

Miles’ mother rolled her eyes at my father to say: Thanks for starting this. “When you finish Suzuki Level Six.”

Jackson whispered something to Miles, something I couldn’t hear, and Miles seemed to relax. On the car ride over, after the woman with Twizzler hair had pushed her seat back against my calves without thinking to ask if she was squishing me, my father had warned me about Jackson. “Every year that kid gets worse,” he’d said. “His parents’ relationship is poisoning him. Don’t let him make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“What’s wrong with his parents?” I’d asked.

“People who don’t belong together shouldn’t stay together.” At this he looked at the woman with Twizzler hair, congratulating himself for being with her now instead of my mother. They squeezed hands over the transmission.

Now Drew’s mother was handing me a plate piled with pizza slices. “Nora, take this upstairs, would you? You kids have hardly eaten anything.” I was the one given the pizza even though Drew was her son and even though Jackson was the oldest. All the parents knew I liked sitting with the adults more than playing with the kids, which led them to assume I was the most responsible.

“Remember the rules!” Drew’s mom called after us. The rules were what they always were: no using the parental home offices for hide and seek, no pestering the guinea pig, video games are not an appropriate form of entertainment, no flipping the lights because of Miles’ epilepsy, no bothering the adults until dessert.

Upstairs, I didn’t even bother asking anyone if they wanted the pizza. I went straight to the bathroom and tipped the plate into the trash. I piled some paper towels on top to hide it. The marinara smell mixed with the smell of the dried lavender in a vase on top of the sink. I don’t know why they thought I was the responsible one. I didn’t want to be and had never pretended otherwise.

That night there were the four of us regulars plus Saara, Drew’s half-black cousin from South Africa. We were all only children and except for Saara we’d grown up with these dinner parties, a couple times a semester, rotating houses with about the same frequency as Sidney, our school iguana in his smudgy tank. It was the job of the kid whose house it was to keep the rest of us from being bored. Tonight was Drew’s night. Now we watched him pull a string on the ceiling next to his father’s office to release a wooden ladder that led to the attic. This had been cool the first time we saw it; tonight must have been the third. But we hauled ourselves up the rungs into the musty darkness, because what else was there to do?

The attic was hot and dim as if it were always evening there. Two dehumidifiers lurked in the corner, dehumidifying nothing. Above the one dirty window there was a small circle of ruby glass. Miles seemed like he wanted to look at it, so I lifted him up. Our cheeks touched, and I felt his porcelain-pretty skin next to mine, which was bumpy from rosacea. I hated my skin. The woman with Twizzler hair said it was going to get worse before it got better. She also said

my breasts would ache and that I would feel new things “down there.” Some of them might be good, some of them not so good. She said that someone needed to tell me these things if my own mother wouldn’t. I didn’t know until then that my mother wasn’t telling me things. I wasn’t sure I wanted the woman with Twizzler hair to tell me them instead.

Miles’ skin was like rice paper—you could almost see through it.

It was true that I always took care of Miles at these dinner parties. But I didn’t do it for the reason the parents thought. It was more that I had always wanted a little brother even though I accepted my father’s excuse: that I was, and would always be, enough for him.

“In South Africa we have a servant,” Saara said, “and he lives in a room like this.”

“If you lived here,” Jackson said, “you wouldn’t have enough money for a servant.”

Every dinner party we had to learn all over again how mean Jackson was. I remembered my father’s words in the car. I considered crawling backwards down the ladder, going back downstairs and demanding to stay with the adults. But then Jackson and probably even Drew would make fun of me. Also, I wouldn’t be able to lean my head against my father’s shoulder because the woman with the Twizzler hair would have gotten there before me.

So instead I traced curse words in the dust with my sneakers along with the rest of them, caught hold of the rafters and swung back and forth. After two minutes we were all bored again. Jackson let out a smirky sigh. He had flouncy blond hair, pizza crust still gummed to his braces and eyes that told anyone who looked in them that he knew everything. “Is this all you got?”

Drew grinned like he had been waiting for Jackson to complain. “If that’s your attitude, I might as well not even show it to you.”

We perked up, impressed with Drew’s retort.

“Jesus Christ Drew!” Jackson said, and I realized that sounded familiar because Miles’ mother had said it to my father just minutes before. “Just show us!”

Drew still took his time opening the sliding wooden door to the closet and scuffling around inside like he had something important to do. After a minute Jackson shoved his way in.

“Not bad,” we heard him say.

The rest of us followed to see what it was. It was a laundry chute. A square door flat against the closet floor that opened onto metal walls reaching down into darkness.

“And that isn’t even the best part,” Drew said, unable anymore to hold in his excitement. I wondered if he had been saving the chute for a special dinner party or if he had just discovered it himself. “The best part is that if we stop in the right place we’ll be inside the dining room walls. We’ll be able to hear everything they say.”

This was enticing, but it meant we actually had to go down the chute. We clustered around the entrance, staring into the void.

“I don’t wanna go down there,” Miles said.

“No one’s forcing you,” Jackson said.

“I’ll carry you on my lap,” I offered, even though anyone could see there was no way we could both fit. I figured this would calm him until I could quickly push him down. The opening was just big enough for one kid—not just any kid but a kid like us, a kid who practices the cello and builds Lego castles after school instead of going to Little League.

“Give me a minute lead time to wedge my feet where the chute bends.” Drew sat down with his feet already dangling down the hole. “And then the rest of you follow. Try not to fall too fast and try not to land on my neck.”

Then he was in, head zipping away, scrunching his arms against his body. Saara counted out the minute in Mississippi. Next went Jackson, who had to hold his arms above his head to get his chest through. Then Saara, who had beads on the end of her dreadlocks that scraped against the metal as she slid.

“OK Miles.” I sat him on my lap at the rim of the chute. “On the count of three.” He must have known what I was going to do. “Close your eyes,” I said. On three I pushed him away from me. He cried out. I could only hope our parents didn’t hear. I followed close behind.

I arrived in a second. Miles’ head was in my crotch, and my butt was up against cold metal. There was a faint slice of light from the attic bulb above, but it was only enough to know that there were boundaries between us and the darkness around us, not to know where those boundaries were. I breathed in particles of darkness. Was this how it felt to be buried alive?

We listened for our parents. I could hear Drew’s mom saying something fuzzy, and then the dull-edged voice of Jackson’s dad.

“Did you know Graner got that girl holding the leash pregnant?”

“Why do you know his name but not hers? It’s just, ‘that girl holding the leash.’” This was Jackson’s mom.

“What, do *you* know it?”

“Lynndie England.” She spoke the syllables carefully. Inside the chute someone, probably Miles, began to hyperventilate. But we had to last a little longer; we had to hear more.

“I couldn’t stop looking at that terrible grin on Graner’s face,” Miles’ dad said.

“And those gloves!” This was Jackson’s mom again. “Teal never looked so sinister.”

“Admit it,” Jackson’s dad said. “It turns you on.”

“What you could *possibly* mean, I don’t—”

“The whole scenario. The power play, the props, the photography.”

“I can’t believe you just said that.” There was silence: a few forks clattered. They were probably eating rosemary-roasted chicken or seafood risotto, though it was hard to say for sure.

“Oh, don’t be such a prude.”

“It’s torture. It has nothing to do with sex.”

“Suit yourself,” Jackson’s dad said, and then there was more silence.

Inside the chute even Miles had stopped breathing. I was amazed at our luck. To hear Jackson’s parents talking about sex! This must be the real reason why we weren’t allowed to eat with the adults.

“Can I refill anyone’s wine glass?” Drew’s mom’s voice was too bright.

Jackson’s mom spoke again, quickly. “He’s not going to tell you, so I guess I have to. We’re getting a divorce.”

Again, silence. Someone in the chute actually gasped. Was it Jackson? I wondered what my father was doing. From the table outside came a soft wall of sound.

“It’s fine,” Jackson’s mom continued. “Don’t waste your breath on regrets. Just do what you need to do—form your allegiances, choose between us as you must.”

There was another cloud of voices, probably people saying it didn’t have to be that way. But I didn’t have time to figure it out because in an instant Miles had slipped out from under me and we were falling fast and then landing hard, on our heels and tailbones, on Drew’s fortunately finished and carpeted basement floor.

Miles had wet his pants. This was clear once we stood up and rubbed our butts and noticed the wet spot, which Saara said looked like South Africa. It was good, in a way, because the peed

pants were a problem we could work on instead of having to look at Jackson. Except what could we do? Drew's pants were too big, never mind that if we went upstairs to ask his parents for some we'd have to say what we'd been up to. Besides, Miles didn't seem to care. He must have been too young to feel shame because he was standing there smiling, happy to be out of the chute.

So there really *was* nothing to do but stare at Jackson.

“What?” he said finally. “*What?*”

“It's bad at first,” I said. “But you get used to it after a while.”

Jackson looked at me as if he hadn't really noticed, before now, that I was there. “And then my dad'll start going with a slut, right?”

It took me a second to realize he was talking about the woman with the Twizzler hair. I clenched my teeth against the warm wet coming from behind my eyes. It wasn't that I wanted to defend her, but I felt the insult on my father's behalf. I thought of my mother, who I stayed with on Mondays, Tuesdays and alternating weekends, saying that we shouldn't judge men who wanted to be with younger women but that We Had to Wonder. What did we have to wonder about? She wouldn't say.

I looked at the others; no one was going to say anything to help me. I said, “You're an asshole, and you have pizza sauce on your forehead.” Jackson scrubbed at the mark, looking a tiny bit embarrassed.

“What happened with your parents?” Saara asked Jackson finally. Saara could be braver than us because soon she would go home across the world and never see us again.

He waited for a while and just when I thought he wouldn't say anything he said, “They're both fucktards, But they're smart to get divorced. I'm never going to get married. When you're

not married you're free to bone anyone you want." The pizza sauce was gone from his face but there was a pink mark where the red had been, from where he'd rubbed.

"Did your father *do* anything?" Saara asked. I had been wondering the same thing. And then it occurred to me that my own parents' divorce was probably my father's fault. That it was hypocritical for me to love him more.

Jackson scowled and withdrew again. "You don't have to *do* anything to get a divorce. This is America. Anyone can get a divorce here."

"Anyone can get divorced in South Africa, too," Saara pointed out.

"Still," Jackson said, as if he, not Saara, was the expert on South Africa. "It's different."

That was when I noticed Miles. Miles was sitting on the chair by the basement computer, typing something. When I went over to see what it was Miles said, "I can't find it."

"Find what?" I looked on the screen. Miles had put "blue grape" into Google. The monitor seemed to exhale something sour.

"I got this," Jackson said from the other side of the room. "I promised him I'd show him." I remembered Jackson whispering into Miles' ear upstairs. Jackson made Miles get up so he could sit in the rolling chair that didn't roll, since it rested on carpet.

A-B-O-O G-R-A-H-E-E-B, Jackson typed.

Did you mean 'Abu Ghraib'? Google asked, and Jackson clicked on the question to say he did. I turned the words over in my mind, these words that had been on our parents' lips all night. It sounded like the kind of place you would go on a flying carpet, until I saw the pictures.

There were people piled on top of each other. The people were naked and their private parts had been blurred out. Some had hoods tied around their heads. Jackson let the slideshow play once, then started it again. The article was dated today, which explained why our parents

had been obsessed and why my father hadn't gotten around to giving me anything to read about it. What would he say when he did? There was a photo of a man in what looked like a tattered black sheet. He held up his arms and wires wormed out from the sheet. Jackson clicked back to the naked photos. People in army uniforms were standing over the naked people. One of them, the one with the teal gloves Jackson's mom had talked about, gave the thumbs up.

"That's Aboo Greeb?" Miles said, eyes wide.

"That's it." Jackson gave a thumbs-up back to the man.

He let the slideshow run again and we watched—we wouldn't have been able to turn away if we'd wanted to. I tried to understand what the people in uniform were doing to the naked men. Was this what sex was? I thought I understood about the penis and the vagina, but this was different. Was this what my father did with the woman with Twizzler hair? I thought about her tight jeans, the way my father liked to look at her butt when she turned to leave the room. He'd never looked at my mom that way.

"Kids!" The voice came from upstairs. "Are you all right?"

Footsteps. Jackson minimized the webpage. We were used to this kind of secrecy.

"Dad!" Drew said. "Everything's *fine*."

Drew's dad appeared at the head of the basement stairs looking frazzled. One of his shirt buttons hung from a thread. "I thought you all were upstairs."

"We snuck by you, Dad. We made a game out of it."

"Oh. Tricky of you." Drew's dad looked like he wanted to talk to us longer, like he was searching for an excuse not to go back to the company at his table. He turned to Jackson. We knew what was coming.

"Jackson, I'm so sorry about...about your parents."

Jackson shrugged. It was obvious that it killed him not knowing what to say.

“But you’re a big boy,” Drew’s father added. “You can handle it, right?”

We winced. Jackson hung his head lower, muttered something.

“What was that?” Drew’s dad said.

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“What are you all looking at?” Drew’s father pointed to the desktop.

Jackson was still sulky and didn’t reply, so I jumped in. “Current events,” I said as if I’d planned it all along.

Drew’s dad nodded like he hadn’t really heard me and shuffled off. After he was gone we couldn’t relax because of how embarrassed we were for Jackson.

“Your dad’s a faggot,” Jackson told Drew.

Drew swallowed. His Adam’s apple had grown since the last dinner party. “Maybe it’s your dad who’s the faggot. Maybe that’s why your parents are getting divorced.”

In what looked like one motion Jackson stood up and shoved Drew, hard, knocking him onto the carpet and scrambling to get on top. Drew’s first defense was to put his palm right in the center of Jackson’s face, covering his eyes and nose and part of his mouth. Jackson started cussing, but it came out garbled. He grabbed hold of Drew’s hand and twisted at the wrist. Drew howled.

“Be quiet,” Saara said. “Your dad will come by again.”

They stopped to look at her and it broke the spell of the moment. Jackson rolled off and Drew sat up, rubbing his wrist. For a minute they sat there angry and panting and the rest of us

put our heads in our hands, glum. I was keyed up at bored all at the same time. It was hard to see how anything we could do now could match the excitement of the laundry chute, of the darkness and what we'd heard outside.

Drew cleared his throat, as if to remind himself to keep us occupied. "Let's think of a project," he said. In a few years he could be a camp counselor. Laughter sounded from upstairs; I could pick out my father's from the rest, a low scraping chuckle. Maybe all was well at the table again. Maybe they had moved on to another course, crisp Asian pears maybe, with sharp cheddar from some family farm upstate.

Later like all our parents my father asked, "How did it begin?" I understood that it was important to know but I honestly couldn't say for sure. I told him this much: that Drew gathered the supplies, that Jackson made Miles our model. "But how did you come up with the idea in the first place?" he insisted. I told him about the laundry chute, about what we'd heard. But how we got from that to the costume wasn't ever going to be able to be explained by the part of my brain that formed the *whys* I later gave like an art class Sculpey pot to the adults. This was the truth: we just did it.

Drew found supplies in big plastic storage crates lined up along the sides of the basement, where past Halloween costumes lay tangled with lanyard string and glue gun ammunition and squares of felt. In fact it was an old ghost costume from some thrown-together Halloween, when Drew's parents had probably been busy preparing for conferences or swamped with committee work or student papers, that gave us the sheet we needed for the basic form. We divided the tasks, Jackson and Drew forgetting about their fight now that they had something to

do. Saara cut the edge of the sheet into tatters. I pinned the top into a hood shape. We tried it on Miles, who complained he couldn't see.

"You're lucky we're letting you do anything at all," Jackson said, and Miles stopped complaining.

We tied bits of string to the ends of the sheet's tatters and stepped back to survey our work.

"Cool," Drew said.

"It looks just like the picture," Saara said.

But Jackson wasn't satisfied. "We need to stand him on something."

Drew pulled out an empty cardboard box. I lifted Miles (still a little damp around the crotch) on top, but soon the bottom gave way. It was my idea to stand him on the laundry machine instead. Once he was up there we told him to raise his arms and spread his hands wide and stay there, and he did. He did everything we told him to.

When we had everything set up we decided we needed to take a picture. Drew went upstairs to get a camera, promising not to say anything about what we were up to. He was gone for longer than we thought he'd be. We dragged out some beanbags from the corner and slumped down into them. Miles complained his arms were getting tired. We told him he could sit down and he did, Velcro sneakers dangling, heels knocking the laundry machine like a timpani drum. A corner of the sheet had gotten caught up in one of his pockets, giving us a view of his shorts again, the wet stain still obvious. The same thing must have occurred to Saara as it did to me, because she said, "He should say he spilled juice on his pants."

"They'll be able to smell," I said.

Saara nodded.

“Go get some perfume or something from the bathroom upstairs,” Jackson told Saara.

Saara left to do this and Drew came back down, which was good because I didn’t know what I was going to say to Jackson, just the two of us sitting there and Miles confused on top of the laundry machine.

“Our parents are still talking about it,” Drew reported. “They’re talking about how they would torture someone, if they had to.” He looked at Miles. “Your dad says that in the Middle Ages they’d put a guy in a cage in the bright sun and cover him with food scraps and let the birds peck at him.”

Miles smiled proudly. “My dad’s a medieval historian.”

Saara came back with a bar of soap. “This was all I could find,” she said.

We lifted the sheet and rubbed the soap on Miles’ shorts, turning the zipper gummy white. Now he smelled like pee and Shea Butter. He giggled, enjoying the attention.

Drew turned to me. “Your dad’s girlfriend thinks the best way to torture someone is to tell them endless knock-knock jokes on no sleep.”

“She’s not his girlfriend,” I said before I knew I said it.

“Well what is she, then?”

“I don’t know.” The fact was that she *was* his girlfriend, so now I was in a tough place. “She’s new.”

“Anyway,” Drew said. “They’re about to eat tiramisu but we can’t have it because it’s got liquor in it. We can have ice cream, though, if we come upstairs soon.”

“Let’s just get the picture over with,” Jackson said. “Miles, get up.”

Miles stood on top of the machine again, shaking the strings into place. Jackson took the camera from Drew because of course *he* was the rightful picture taker. He looked for some time

through the display window and then lowered the camera. “One more thing,” he said. He switched the camera to video record, then walked to the laundry machine and turned the dial to “spin cycle.” When he pulled the knob Miles began to vibrate.

Jackson stepped back, took up the camera again and began to record. “Perfect,” he said. Miles’ whole body was quivering, the strings alive now, jumping and shaking. The whole thing looked pretty professional, and I was proud even though some part of me knew we were doing something wrong. Miles didn’t say anything, which was a little weird. Somehow he didn’t quite seem like Miles anymore.

Jackson switched from video record to camera. There was a warning bleep and then *flash*. *Flash* again, and once more to be sure. All this time Miles was shaking—the picture would be blurry but that was ok—it would be part of the effect.

“All right,” Jackson said. “Let’s go.” I pushed the laundry knob to stop the spin cycle. The laundry machine came to a halt, but Miles didn’t stop shaking.

“We’re done,” we reminded him. “Get down. Quit acting.”

But he kept at it, his whole body convulsing. It was like he didn’t have any control over what he was doing anymore. And then I remembered: the camera flashes, the rule not to flip the lights, the stress we’d put him under...epilepsy!

“Oh my god,” I said.

For forever, which was probably just one or two seconds, we couldn’t do anything. We stood there transfixed by the spasms in his arms and legs. Then Miles’ legs buckled and he was lying half on top of the washer, half sliding to the floor, and I started to say catch him but he’d already rolled all the way onto the carpet. He twitched, he wouldn’t stop twitching. “Get the

sheet off him,” Jackson hissed, and then all our hands were on him at once, pulling up the sheet while also trying to pin his arms down, as if enough pressure would quiet the demon inside.

“Not just the sheet,” Jackson said, his breathing quick and torn. “All of his clothes. Take all of them off.”

There wasn’t time to wonder why we needed to do this, though later I would. In that instant we were grateful for something to do. Once we undid the snap his pants came off easily. It was his shirt that was difficult, his little striped shirt made from all natural cotton. I scratched his face trying to get it off but he didn’t cry out. He was drawing quick gasps through his nose, taking in bits of air that never seemed to be enough, and his face was turning pale blue. The sides of his mouth moved as if reciting something in a language we would never know.

Now he had only his underwear on, little form-fitting things with safari animals faded from the wash. I looked at Jackson and he looked at me and nodded. I felt a momentary thrill, like Jackson had finally accepted me as an equal. I pulled the underwear down Miles’ legs, his skin smooth and cold. Now we could see his little penis rag-dolling around with every seizing.

Being an only child I had never seen one before, though once I had walked in on my father in the bathroom and saw just a tiny glimpse as he put it away.

“We should get our parents,” I said. “They’ll know what to do.”

“Are you retarded?” Jackson started for the basement steps. “I’m going to lock the door.”

“Don’t!” Drew got up, too. His eyes were glossy with fear. “Don’t lock it. Don’t lock it, and don’t tell them. Either way it looks bad.”

I was trying to stop myself from crying but it wasn’t working. For once, I didn’t know what my father would think of me when he heard what we had done. The thought that I might no longer please him filled me with bottomless panic.

Saara had been googling. “Here they say just to wait it out.” She frowned and scrolled some more, clicking a couple other tabs open. “On this site they say to hold his tongue. On this other site they say to never put anything in his mouth.”

Miles’ neck muscles were dancing like there were maggots below the skin. Saara closed down the epilepsy tabs and the Abu Ghraib pictures came up behind them. Our model for Miles was still posing on screen: the brown-skinned man who looked like Jesus in a hood. Now Saara started crying, too.

“What the hell is wrong with you two?” Jackson said.

“We shouldn’t have done this.” Saara’s voice sounded squeezed. “He could die.”

“He’s not going to *die*,” Drew said. But I had thought it, too. Miles was having an even harder time breathing now, the blue tone to his face deepening, the veins in his neck so full I was afraid they would burst.

“Then *do* something,” Saara said, looking to Jackson like this was all his fault, which it might have been—I was too scared to remember if any of the fault was mine. Just then Miles began to moan and roll his eyes back in his head like the girl in the Exorcist, a movie we’d watched in snippets online once we’d learned we were too young for it.

“Shut up!” Jackson put his hand over Miles’ mouth, his knuckles quivering with Miles’ spasms.

“Careful,” Saara said. “Let him breathe!”

Instead Jackson put his whole body on top of Miles. He kept his hand on Miles’ mouth and Miles gasped through the spaces between Jackson’s fingers, chest heaving. Jackson’s eyes fogged over and he pressed himself down harder with fierceness I’d never seen before, from

anyone. He spoke so softly at first it took me a moment to tell whether he was even speaking at all.

“Stop shaking. Stop shaking. Stop it, stop it.” Jackson’s teeth were clenched, his knees were on Miles’ belly, and each time he said “stop” he pushed his hand down on Miles’ mouth like he was trying to Heimlich something out through Miles’ abdomen. “Stop it, stop it, stop it,” he repeated, again and again, so that I forgot what the words meant, where we were, what we might have done except stare.

Jackson was sweaty now, the muscles under his T-shirt working. He kept pushing.

Eventually Miles was still. I screamed. I want to think it was for Miles’ sake, but I know better. I’d seen something in Jackson’s eyes. It was like I’d been pulled against my father on a winter day, wrapped snug in his coat smelling of cloves and warm wool, only to discover the lining was torn, cold wind was coming through and I was no longer safe.

Ten minutes later the ambulance arrived. Miles was alive. He *had* actually stopped breathing, but his dad had done CPR to start him up again. Miles’ mother was crying. *All* the mothers were crying. The fathers were muttering things to each other. We stood outside, watching Miles being loaded onto the stretcher. My father had his arm around me. The woman with Twizzler hair was next to us. Or maybe it was more the color of the lampshade with the bulb inside glowing through the living room window which was open because it was spring, and no one had bothered to turn off the blues playing on the stereo so Bessie Smith mixed with the sound of sirens and the lamp glow and the ambulance’s flashing lights.

“Nora,” my father whispered, his beard scruff against my scalp. “What were you all doing?”

Instead of answering I burrowed into his chest.

“No more current events,” he said, and I thought it was just to me but it must have been louder because the woman with Twizzler hair said, “She can handle it. She’s twelve years old.”

“Eleven,” I said, but it was like she hadn’t heard. She was the only woman who wasn’t crying. I pulled away from under my father’s arm to look her square in the face. For the first time it occurred to me that her hair color might not be natural.

“You’re a slut,” I told her. “I hate you.”

I didn’t wait to see her reaction. I needed to be away from all of them. I half-walked half-ran back inside the house, ignoring my father calling my name with a voice I hadn’t ever heard him use before, a type of voice like he didn’t know me. Well, I thought: he doesn’t.

I stood in the kitchen, my only company the dirty dishes piled next to the sink. Half the tiramisu was still in the pan. It was cross-sectioned into spongy layers, like a model of the earth’s crust we’d seen in class.

I had an idea.

I put a finger into the pan. It came out covered with pillowy chocolate foam. I licked it clean. I put my whole hand in. The tiramisu felt like the inside of a jellyfish. I had never felt the inside of a jellyfish but that didn’t matter because I knew it was true. I licked my palm and finger pads and the webbed spaces in between. It was the best thing I had ever tasted. I could taste the cinnamon and cocoa but also the alcohol, strong and sharp. It was obvious why we hadn’t been allowed it.

I finished the whole pan by myself. Even after I was home with my teeth brushed and the covers up to my ears, I could taste a little of the tiramisu over the toothpaste. That night I dreamt of jellyfish and wine.