

The barreling sound of him falling, then his face, gray at the bottom of the stairs. Ellie had been sitting on the downstairs couch, flicking a cracked piece of its blue leather between her fingers, not watching the television. Now her father stumbled away from the wall that had shouldered his fall. Ellie looked up and met his wild eyes, saw the grim grayness in his skin. She felt suddenly ill. Staggering, her father was oddly hunched in towards himself, as if he'd start convulsing any moment.

"Dad!"

She jumped up. He didn't answer her, instead turned to fully face the room, still hunched. John had been sitting at the desk, playing a computer game. Now he half-stood with concern, clutching the edge of the old desk chair, useless as Ellie.

"Dad?" John's voice sounded young.

Ellie realized her father was grasping his left arm. It looked wrong. "I - I think it's broken," he said -- desperate, shocked.

"Honey?? Are you alright?" Far away, her mother's voice, upstairs and panicked.

He looked down at his arm, incredulous, somehow even more gray. "Dislocated," he said, without context, but with more certainty. Ellie saw it, too: the strange gapping in his dress shirt where his shoulder should have rounded the pale yellow fabric.

"Maybe I can get it back in if I just --"

He listed towards the wall. With a flash of nausea, Ellie understood he planned to slam himself into it the opposite way, to right his shoulder. "No! Dad!"

Staccato footsteps came down the stairs, and with them, order. Her mother's clear nurse's voice was calm but urgent as she surveyed the scene. "Honey, your shoulder's dislocated. We'll need to go to the hospital right now. Okay? I'll take you right now. It's okay. Here we go." Within seconds they were hurrying out, past John who still half-stood, his mouth half-open. It was dark outside.

Her mother looked at her before the door closed: We're leaving. Stay calm. Make this easy.

In recent weeks, Ellie's grandmother had gone from sick to very, very sick. Once it was clear she would not get better, the decision was made that she would come home, to the red house up on the hill. It was six houses down from Ellie. When she rode her bike up and down the street as a girl, whispering invented stories to herself, her grandmother would wave brightly from the front garden, her straw hat hiding her face. In winters, Ellie would tentatively walk on the icy shore of the lake as her brother skated fearlessly out to its center. She'd turn and see the glow of her grandmother's Christmas tree through the big bay window. Now the lake was unfrozen, and by the window was a bed.

The last time she'd been in the house, Ellie had found an obituary written on a folded, faded piece of graph paper. Her grandmother's handwriting was unmistakable -- all the T's oddly slanted and capitalized. She could not bear the thought of writing such a thing, and told no one she had seen it.

Her parents were alternating nights caring for her, not sleeping. Ellie, too, did not sleep, jittery with the known absence of someone usually at home. Though it was six houses away, she felt a great distance between herself and the hill, and all that was happening there. All at once, she wanted to know everything and nothing about it. Each question she asked her parents, she regretted hearing the answer to, yet she continued to ask, and ask, and ask.

Laying awake, she thought of when she'd shared a room with her brother, both of them very young. Had she and John talked to one another before they fell asleep, then? Ellie could not remember.

She stood now, dumbly in the center of the den. It was already nine o'clock. John was looking at her, to her, for a sign of what to do next. His hair, white-blonde like their mother's, was buzzed for the season, and he wore one of his many lacrosse jerseys with the strangely-cut

sleeves. The image of her father's twisted, gapped shoulder came back to Ellie in a rush.

Yet she felt a sudden brattiness, too, at the burden foisted upon her -- irritation at having to be in charge of this, of anything. Despite the pain her father was in, that her grandmother was in, she could not stop this petulant and unearned frustration from creeping over her. Her cheeks felt flushed.

John finally sat again, and brought his elbows to his knees as if to think hard. "Did you see his face?"

Ellie looked at her brother. At times, lately, she'd notice him looking older than was even possible, as if he were someone else entirely. But at this moment looked just like himself. "It was bad," she said. The laugh track hummed again, soothing this time. "He'll be okay, though. They'll get it back in place."

John nodded. After a while: "Can we watch something?"

"Yeah."

So they sat together, through the strange and stilted wait.

The week before, Ellie had gone to a pizza shop in town for lunch. Seniors were allowed to leave school for lunches and study halls, a small but thrilling freedom. She laughed with her friends as they ate greasy fries and keyed dirty words into the video games along the walls of the restaurant.

As they walked to the car to return to school, Ellie stopped at the sight of four men walking away from the barber shop across the street. Each was a slight variation of her father: ruddy cheeks, sizable frames, differing amounts of freshly cut dark curls. They were her father's brothers -- her uncles -- appearing as if in a dream.

Ellie was overwhelmed at the sight of them. She hadn't seen them all together in many years, and while she'd known two of them were in town to see her grandmother, the others were a surprise that gave her pause. This could not mean anything good, their presence in this

parking lot. It would not be long now.

For a moment she said nothing, turning to pack into the backseat with the others. Perhaps this was the dream it felt like, and they were not really there, so out of context and time. How could they be?

She stopped herself, turned back. "Uncle Jack," she called to the tallest.

Her uncles looked over, squinting. Jack smiled and waved with confusion at her presence here in the middle of a school day. She would need to explain. Walking toward them, she saw that their fresh haircuts gave them each the look of a little boy.

It was late when her parents returned from the hospital. She and John were wide awake. Her father's button-down shirt was draped around him, his arm in a white sling that held it close to his chest. The gray was gone from his face, though no color had replaced it.

Her mother looked tired, but buzzed with nervous energy. Feverishly, she told them about what had happened in the emergency room. "The doctors didn't even know how to get it back *in*. I'm telling you, I saw them flipping through a big medical book. I'm not even *kidding*. All while he sat there in pain! Unbelievable!" The thought of it frightened Ellie deeply.

The three of them helped him into bed. Ellie slid open the closet door so he could watch the small black-and-white television that was stored inside, between hanging pants and atop a shelf full of sweaters. Her mother found Andy Griffith, turned it up. It was the show they usually watched on her grandmother's porch on summer evenings, perhaps after a barbecue. Its whistling theme conjured freshly cut grass and grill smoke.

Ellie and John sat on the floor next to the bed, cross-legged, like children much younger than they were. Backs to the television, they stared at their father. Above his sling, the muscles in his now-righted shoulder spasmed wildly under his skin, jumping like sparks from some unseen flame. Ellie and John watched them closely, as if to decipher some coded language they might be tapping out, an answer to a question neither of them knew how to ask.