

## WATCHING MADIE

“Elijah.” Madie is calling me from the house. “Eli!” This time her voice is closer to where I’m lying sprawled on the lawn. It’s easier not to look at her, so I stare at the mower. Supposedly I’m fixing it, but it’s been an hour and neither of us has moved. I consider ignoring Madie. But then I think about how she might flop down on the grass next to me, and even if I don’t raise my head I’ll know her colt legs are sprawling out beside me and the unmown grass is tickling that place where the threads from her cut-offs meet her thighs.

“What?” I ask. Sweat runs a line down my back. Her shadow’s blocking the sun, but I keep my eyes on the greasy motor parts. I don’t need to raise my head to know what she looks like, skinny arms cut out against the sky.

“Mom wants to talk to you,” she says. Mom. The word makes me twitch. I sit up, fast enough that I almost hit my head on the mower’s handle. Madie is holding the portable phone, twisting the rubber antenna in her mouth. My skin feels cold with drying sweat.

I shake my head. “Busy,” I mouth, pointing at the mower.

She gives me a look like I’m crazy. “You’re not busy,” she says, loud enough that I know Rose can hear. “Here, talk to mom.”

Rose is not my mother. My mother is down in Florida, selling imitation Botox. This means Madie is not my sister. *I did not have sex with my sister last night.* She puts the phone in my hand.

“Hi, Rose.”

Madie’s mother left yesterday to go to a conference for guidance counselors in Cincinnati. She used to be my guidance counselor, before she took me in a year ago. I was a junior then, and Madie was twelve. This is the first time I’ve been left in charge.

“Honey.” Her voice as familiar as my tee-shirt. “I just wanted to check in.”

“Sure,” I say, kicking my foot at the mower. “Things are good.”

“Have you found anything to do?” she asks. “Keeping busy?”

It’s like in a movie, where everything goes quiet, and the words echo: Anything to *do?* Keeping *busy?* Something like a groan escapes from my mouth, because all I can think about Madie below me on the carpet. Think about lawn mowers, I tell myself. Edger blades. Recoil starters.

“I know you wanted to get away this weekend,” she says. “So don’t think I don’t appreciate you watching Madie.”

“It’s fine.” A yellow-jacket drones past my ear.

I can hear Rose tapping a pen against her teeth. She quit smoking a few years ago, and has picked up habits like this since. I wonder if that’s where Madie gets it, the oral fixation. I dig my fingers into the dirt, feeling sick.

“She hasn’t given you any trouble?” Rose asks.

I lean my head back, looking straight up at the sun. But I still see it—Madie’s bare shoulders against the carpet, flickering in the TV’s light. Her tilted-back head. The long, ridged curve of her throat.

“Elijah?”

I roll over, pressing my temples. “No, things have been fine.” My mouth is full of spit. “Listen, Rose, I think the phone’s about to die. I’m going to have to go.”

“Ok, real quick, honey. I planned on driving back today, but if things are going well I might stay for tomorrow. There’s this presentation—”

Right now, I want to see Madie’s mom about as much as I want this lawn mower to run over my foot. But if she stays away I’m alone with Madie. And eventually I will have to go inside.

“I’d pay you…” she starts.

“No!” I swallow. “I mean, it’s fine.” Black sun-spots float across the lawn. “I’ll see you Sunday.”

“You sure things are ok?”

“Of course. We’re fine. Enjoy the conference.”

“If you’re sure,” she says. I can tell that she wants me to convince her, but my voice doesn’t work. I mumble something and drop the phone onto the grass.

Madie leans over the railing. She shouldn’t be wearing shirts like that.

“She’s not coming back until Sunday?”

“Yeah.”

If Madie feels anything about this, she doesn’t show it. “Then I’m going out tonight.”

I shrug.

“Aren’t you going to ask where I’m going?”

I give one of the mower's bolts a violent twist with the wrench. It feels satisfying, so I do it again.

"Nope."

I think I hear her sigh before she goes back inside.

When I hear the door shut, I quit pretending to fix anything and lie down again in the grass. Something, an ant probably, crawls along my neck. I let it. Green and yellow spots glow like fireworks on my closed lids. I can hear the sound of birds, and kids playing in the yard next door. Back at my dad's trailer, you heard the highway, and planes landing and taking off. Outside it smelled like diesel fumes and dumpsters, and inside, like cigarettes. Here it's all mown grass and sidewalk chalk.

The loudest thing is the quiet, though. When I first moved in with Rose and Madie a year ago, I wasn't sure I could sleep, it was so quiet. My dad spent his first disability check on a satellite dish, and after that the TV never got turned off. The quiet at Rose's made me jittery at first, and for the first month I barely took my headphones off. But I got used to it. The same way I'm used to Rose yelling at me from the bathroom, her mouth full of toothpaste, or whispering to her houseplants in the morning, or the smell of curry in the evening. Now Rose's spare room feels more like mine than anything did at my dad's. The only thing I never got used to was Madie.

Back when I first moved in, she was just Rose's kid, and I didn't think about her much. Who's going to pay attention to a skinny girl chewing the ends of her hair? When there was Janet Malcovich, who usually managed to be topless before the cops showed up, or sophomores like Trina Kay, who chose blowjobs on school property as their preferred method of teenage subversion. Girls like them gave a guy plenty to think about.

Or would have, if I had given a shit about those girls. But I didn't. Just Rose. And I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't like that. Rose isn't some cougar fantasy in short-shorts set out to

seduce teenage guys. She's just a person, but next to her, there's not one girl at school that doesn't look like those plastic prizes you get out of gumball machines. Rose is real. She's got this long hair that she never puts up, and wears men's shirts unbuttoned to show the freckles on her breastbone. A lot of people, it doesn't matter if they're skinny or fat—they seem sort of trapped by their bodies. Like all this skin and bone and flesh is just getting in their way. But Rose is different. She stretches against the kitchen counter and you can almost feel the pull of the muscle yourself, just by watching her face. Or how she talks with her whole body, leaning toward you over her desk, her fingers long against the wood.

That was back when she was just my guidance counselor, of course. I started seeing her last year, after the truancies started adding up. When we'd been meeting for awhile, she said I could come to her office instead of study hall, and I did, every day.

"Elijah," she'd always start, though everyone called me Eli. "Talk to me."

But I'd just want her to say my name again, the three syllables drawn it out so it felt like she was going up one side of me and down the other. But eventually I would talk, and on the days when I couldn't she'd talk, instead. She'd tell me about a TV program she watched on killer ants, or tell me to go get water from down the hall, because her geranium was thirsty. She was the only one I told about my parents. How my mom left because my dad fractured her collarbone on a night he ran out of his meds. I'm sure Rose has heard stories like it a hundred times in her job. But the way she listened to me, you never would have known.

Part of me still can't believe she suggested I stay with them. I don't know whether it was something she had been thinking about for awhile, or whether the words just came out, and then couldn't be taken back.

"You know, if you wanted to get away for a bit..." She was looking at the bruises on my cheekbone.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

I shrugged. She never asked if it was my dad, so I guess I didn’t really lie. But the moment when I could have told her it was Trent Parker in the lot behind the Dairy Queen—which that time it was—passed.

“What’s the point in having a spare bedroom if it never gets used?” She straightened some papers on her desk.

I looked at her. All along I’d been telling myself that what we had was different, that this wasn’t the way she was with all the students who came into her office. But when she said that, I felt something open up in me, like a fist I hadn’t even known was clenched.

“I mean, sure, I’d like to get out of there.”

I watched her hands. She pulled on her ring finger. She was divorced, but when she was uncertain, her fingers still looked for the ring to twist. “It’s not... orthodox,” she said. “I’d have to run it by the office.”

“Would you? I mean, if I did stay there, it would just be for a few nights.”

“You’re right. A few nights, what’s the big deal?” Her hands relaxed.

And so we didn’t really tell people. And of course, it wasn’t just a few nights. I think we both knew how it looked. Even the few friends who did know couldn’t totally hide their doubt. I saw the way their eyes flicked to my tattoos, or to Rose’s bare hand.

But even if they talk, Rose isn’t the type to care what people think. And I don’t think she’s regretted taking me in. I help out. My dad wouldn’t believe it if he saw, but I do. I fix Rose’s ‘84 Volvo when it needs it, which is about every other week. I make it easy for her to pretend not to notice when I come home after drinking, and I share my weed with her. On the best nights we smoke together in the backyard—Madie in bed, and the house lit behind us like something warm

and alive. I think Rose likes having me around. I'm useful to her. I can watch Madie when she's out. My hand tightens around a clump of grass. I watch Madie.

It was last week Rose told me she was leaving for the conference. And yeah, I'd been here with Madie when she had a late night out, but it wasn't her idea I be the one in charge when she left for the weekend. Madie suggested it. We were on the couch after school—Madie with a book, and me flipping through channels, but not really watching. I was thinking too much about the way Madie looked in my sweatshirt. It used to annoy me when she'd take my clothes, but not that day. She was small enough that it covered her hands and slipped down over one shoulder. Her skin was so different from Rose's, which always looked strong, somehow, and tanned from working in the yard. Madie's was pale enough that faint veins showed through, and beneath it each bone was curving and distinct. I couldn't stop looking at her shoulder. It was like it had never existed before that afternoon.

She kept glancing at me. It was something she'd been doing a lot of lately, and something I tried not to think too much about. Madie had never really known what to make of me since I moved in. The first few months she'd slammed doors and glared at Rose over breakfast. "Give her time," Rose told me in private. "She's an only child. And 13 is a tough age." Sure enough, after awhile, the door-slamming stopped, and I got the feeling her annoyance was more for show than anything else. She'd kick at my shin when I stayed on the phone too long, and when her friends came over, she'd sigh dramatically. "We probably don't have any food left in the house," she'd say. "Eli eats *everything*." But lately she'd stopped even doing that. She'd gotten quieter, and I would catch her watching me the way a cat watches you from across the room.

The weather had finally gotten warmer last week, and I had been planning on going camping for the weekend. The air in the house had felt too close, almost suffocating. I wanted to get out, clear my head. But on the couch, Madie pressed her socked toe into my leg.

“Don’t go,” she said. “She’ll make me stay with Grandma.”

“What’s that to me?” I kept flipping through channels, trying to ignore the shoulder, and the way a piece of hair had fallen in front of her eyes. I couldn’t remember when it had stopped looking mousy, and instead like something I wanted to touch.

She reached for the remote, and when I held it out of her reach, she lunged across the couch. I could smell her fruity lotion, like Sno-cones and summer.

“Get off,” I said. She was still reaching, pressing against my leg, grabbing my arm. I felt her hipbone graze my belt buckle. I threw the remote across the couch, but she stayed where she was, practically sitting on me.

“Damn it, Eli,” she said. “Pay attention to me.”

I was. She seemed to forget what she wanted, then. For a second, neither of us moved, and I knew she could feel my hard-on through my jeans. I shoved her off, more roughly than I should have. Both our faces were flushed.

She grabbed the remote, and pulled herself into the far corner of the couch. “You can go camping anytime.”

I stared at the TV.

“Stay,” she said. I stayed.

I think I can feel her eyes on me now, and I look up toward the door. But there’s only the glass, and the bright glare of sun. She’s in the kitchen when I come in, making a peanut butter and honey sandwich. She wipes some of the stickiness from the edges of the crust and puts her fingers in her mouth, then looks at me over them.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing.”



I open the refrigerator door, but nothing inside makes sense. She reaches around me for the milk and her arm grazes mine. I flinch like I've been stung. Her body stiffens for a moment, and then she yanks the carton out.

"Madie." My hand is still on the open fridge door. A small, stupid part of me thinks that if I say the right thing, all of this will go away.

She answers from the living room. "What?"

I stare at the orange juice. Think about orange juice, I tell myself. Oranges, because they are large and rough-skinned and nothing like Madie's breasts. Don't think about last night, and how, that moment when you pushed into her, her eyes had been so shiny you'd had to look away.

"You left the juice cap off again." My voice comes out hoarse.

"What?"

"Forget it," I tell the juice.

It was Galen's fault. I've known him since we were kids. He still lives near my dad, and I probably spent half my nights there before I moved. He was the first person I got drunk with—we were 13, and snuck 40s onto the landing strip. Until last night I would have called him my best friend.

He knew Rose was out of town, and didn't even knock when he came in, the Jack Daniels under his arm like a newspaper.

"We're not doing that tonight," I told him. He was already on the couch, boots on Rose's coffee table. Galen isn't that big or good-looking of a guy, but the way he carries himself, it's like no one's ever filled him in.

"It's Friday night. You won't go out, I'll bring the party here. That's how good a friend I am." He ruffled my hair, and I pushed his hand away. "Where's Madie?"

She was standing in her doorway, wearing cut-offs so short you could see the pockets.

“Hi Galen.”

“Why’d you change?” I asked.

“Hi, Miss Madie,” Galen said.

She held a piece of hair at her mouth as she smiled. I’d always thought it was a gross habit, but it looked different now.

“Join us.” He waved at the couch. “We’re just getting started.”

“No, don’t.” I turned to him. “I’m telling you man, not tonight. Rose left me in charge.”

“Oh, *Rose*,” he grinned. “What’s that on your nose, Eli? It looks like a little smudge of something—*there*.”

I heard Madie laugh.

He uncapped the whiskey. “You got glasses, Eli? Let’s be civilized, here.”

“I’ll get them,” Madie said, and I listened to her bare feet on the hardwood floor.

“She’s not drinking,” I said. “No way.”

Galen shrugged.

Madie came back from the kitchen, carrying glasses and a 2-liter of coke. Galen’s gaze followed her cut-offs.

“Really, man, nothing better to do than hang out while I babysit a kid?”

“I’m not a kid.” She stood in front of us.

“No,” Galen said. “You’re not.” He reached for the Coke, but she held on, and I didn’t like the way their fingers touched.

She smiled. “I’ll pour.”

“Just Coke for you,” I said.

“Wouldn’t you rather she party here, *Dad*?”

“Madie doesn’t party.”

“You don’t know what I do.”

“See?” Galen poured our drinks, making a show of capping the whisky after his and mine, but winking at Madie. “So.” He stretched his arm back, encompassing the couch. “What’s the high school scene like these days?”

“Yeah, I’m sure so much has changed in the two years since you graduated.” I wanted to shove his feet off the table. “Oh wait, you *didn’t* graduate.”

“Was I asking you, Elijah? No, I was asking Miss Madie here.”

Madie picked at the loose thread on her shorts. “It’s cool, I guess.” She looked up. “Actually, my friends are pretty lame.”

“They’re not Young Lifers, are they?”

“Not that bad!”

“Student council? Putting up streamers for the Fall Ball?”

“Yes! Honor society, all that crap. *Boring.*”

“Oh really?”

She wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Madie, I just heard you telling Katie how you might run for treasurer in the fall.”

She glared at me.

“No?”

“I was just saying that. So she wouldn’t feel lame for... it doesn’t matter.” She laughed, a different laugh from before. Then she re-crossed her legs, and reached deliberately for the bottle.

“Yes, I’m having a drink, *Eli*, and if you want to tell Mom, go right ahead.”

Galen laughed. “That’s the spirit.”

I don't why I didn't just kick him out then, and send Madie to bed. Why I instead poured a healthy shot more whiskey into my own glass and shrugged. "She's not my mom."

The TV was on, but we weren't really watching. Galen was going on about something, wrestling maybe. I got into it, the tightness in my jaw and gut worked away by the whiskey's burn. Madie laughed at everything we said. She had curled up on the carpet in front of the couch, and while Galen talked, I felt her body shift to rest against my leg. I tried to focus on the ice, hard against my teeth. I wish I could say I didn't see when Galen added more whiskey to her drink.

Once she looked up at me, head parallel to my thigh. "This is fun, Eli." Her voice was loose.

"Yeah." Her hair splayed out over the cushion. It so hard not to touch.

Galen's fault. There was a point when things could have gone another way. When the table lamp was just a lamp, and not an orange glow softening all the edges in the room. A point in the night when I looked at the TV, and not the way it flickered off Madie's hair. But Galen kept pouring.

She found excuses to whisper in my ear. Later, she rested her head on my shoulder. "What do you want, Madie?" I asked her, but it didn't come out annoyed, like I meant. She laughed, and the sound reminded me of tinfoil.

Galen's fault for coming and his fault for leaving. He looked at her beside me on the couch, her fingers tracing my tattoo, and grinned.

"All right, man, I'm out of here," he said, and mouthed something to me that I pretended not to see. He should have taken me outside and shaken me. He wanted this to happen.

I'm so angry, thinking back to last night, that when I hear his Jeep pull up I can't believe it. My hand is already balled into a fist. Breathe, I tell myself. Breathe.

At the door, Galen shifts from foot to foot like a featherweight boxer.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“Good night last night?” He grins, but pushes past me before I can respond. “You got anything to eat? There’s been nothing to eat in our house for days. Mom’s dieting again. You got any of those little pizza snacks Rose buys?”

“Galen. Why are you here?”

He looks at me over the fridge door and unwraps a piece of string cheese.

“What crawled up your ass?” He dangles a strand into his mouth. “You going to the party tonight? I know Madie’s going.”

I shove the fridge door closed. “What?”

“I told you both, last night. Remember? Bonfire out at Decker’s place.”

I don’t remember anything Galen said last night. I shake my head. “Madie is not going to one of Decker’s parties. No way.”

“I’m not?”

I turn to see her leaning against the doorframe. She’s switched the halter for an even-smaller tube-top, one she has to adjust every 30 seconds.

“Hey, Miss Madie,” Galen grins at her. She brushes past me like so much furniture.

“You think you can pick me up tonight?” she asks him. My hand tightens on a kitchen chair.

“Oh hell no,” I say, at the same time as Galen is telling her tits, “Of course.”

Madie pulls in her bottom lip, the way she does when she’s upset. “I thought you didn’t care where I went.”

“Well, now I care.”

We all three stand there, Madie with one hand on her hip, Galen slowly peeling string cheese and looking back and forth between the two of us.

“What’s up, man?” he asks. “You were cool last night.”

“Yeah,” Madie says. She glances at her nails. “You going to start acting like my brother?”

I let the chair go with a rough shove and leave the room before either of them can see my face.

Rose comes home an hour after Madie leaves with Galen. When his Jeep pulled up, I didn't come out of my room. I've been doing a lot of nothing since. I feel like I do sometimes after smoking weed, like my thoughts have been fumigated, and my head and arms and legs all weigh twice as much. When I hear the garage door rumbling open for Rose's car, I'm not even surprised.

“Madie?” she calls. “Elijah?”

I consider staying in my room, but I know this would only make things worse.

“Hey,” I say, coming out. “I thought you were staying an extra day.”

She tosses her shoes toward the couch.

“I changed my mind.”

I keep my hands in my pockets when she pulls me to her for a hug. She smells the same, like lemon soap and coffee. I let her tilt my face toward her, but I keep staring at the wall.

“You sounded different on the phone,” she says.

I shrug. She pushes the hair from my eyes, still searching, then lets me go.

“Is that why you came back?”

She doesn't answer, just leans into the back of the couch and rubs a catch in her stocking. I know how much she hates wearing them.

“Where's Madie?”

“She went out.”

“Out?”

I start toward the kitchen. “You want a drink or anything?”

“Elijah, who’s she out with? It’s after 11:00.”

The kitchen feels way too small. But at least I’m no longer in the same room as the couch, and the place in front of it on the carpet.

“Decker’s,” I say in the direction of the cabinets. As if her not hearing me might give me time. But she’s followed me, and grabs me by the arm. She has strong hands from gardening, a grip almost like a man’s.

“You let her go to one of Jonah Decker’s parties?” Her voice rises, so that she sounds younger. I stare at her shirt so that I don’t have to meet her eyes, then realize what I’m doing.

“I told her not to go.”

“She wouldn’t do that. She’d listen to you.”

I don’t say anything.

“Elijah.”

My name in her mouth.

“What happened?” she presses.

I think about all the times she sat across from me at school, really looking at me like no one had before. All the times since she’s known that what I’m thinking before I said it, how many times a glance was all it took for us to be on the same page, or stifle a laugh over something Madie had said. I know as soon as I meet her eyes, she’ll show. But I do, because I have to, because it’s Rose.

“No,” she says, when she sees my face. And then again: “No.”

I want to tell her she’s wrong, that I’m still the person she knows. But I don’t know if I ever was.

Decker's place is way out in the country. The drive gives us a lot of time not to talk. Rose sits very straight in the driver's seat, her back barely touching the cushion. The skin under her eyes sag. It's the first time she's ever looked old.

"Rose," I try. She rolls down the window, and wind rushes in.

I can feel everything we had being pulled away. Her hand on the back of my neck, the smell of the kitchen, of laundry, of her hair. The way, when she leaned back in her chair late at night, her voice seemed to float.

"I'm sorry," I say, though I don't think she can hear me. "Rose—" I reach for her arm.

"Don't." Her voice is as flat as the road. "Don't touch me."

Many more miles pass before she speaks. "She's just a kid," she says, but not forceful—just a murmur. I hear Madie in her voice.

There might be words, somewhere, to fix this, but all I can think of is us in the kitchen, Rose at the table doing bills and Madie and me washing dishes at the sink. No one talking, only the breath's weight of Madie against my side as she dries a plate, the click of a pen against Rose's teeth, and my own hands, burning in the steam. It does not surprise me that I have lost this. What seems amazing is that I was ever a part of it.

We park at the end of a line of cars. Far away, there's the flicker of a bonfire.

"I'll get her," I say, and Rose nods.

Away from the car, the blackness of the sky gapes, and I have to stare at my boots just to keep moving up the path. I hear someone shout my name.

"You made it." Galen presses a beer into my hand. The can is slippery from the fire's heat.

"Madie," I say. "Where is she?"



Galen laughs and says something, but I'm not even listening. I've spotted her across the crowd. She's wearing someone else's jacket, holding a plastic cup in both hands. Maybe I thought she'd look lost out here, away from me and Rose, but she doesn't. She'd been talking, but when she sees me, her face freezes half-way to a smile.

"We have to go," I tell her, after I've made my way over. "Rose is here."

Madie pulls back, shrinking inside the letter jacket. For a moment I wonder whose it is.

"Come on."

I don't follow her as she rolls her eyes and starts off through the tangled grass. She turns back, and all I can see is the shine of her hair.

"You coming?"

I shake my head.

Finally I can see the dome light come on in Rose's car. I imagine Madie inside, pulling her knees up to her chest. I don't let myself imagine Rose, or what they say to each other. Then the inside of the car goes dark, and I hear the engine start. The music and voices of the party are at my back. If I can only think about this, only of the slick crush of the can in my fist, and the shifting gravel under my boots, then tail-lights will be no more than tail-lights, spots of brightness growing smaller. I won't feel anything at all.