

The Isabel Fish

I am the canker of my brother Sage's life. He has told me so in no uncertain terms. Tonight as we eat hamburgers in the car on the way to our first scuba class, he can't stop talking about the horrible fates that might befall me underwater. This, even though he knows how scared I am after what happened last November.

"You could blow out your eardrums," he says. "Or your lungs might implode from the pressure."

"Shut up, Sage," I say.

"Did you know that one in twelve scuba divers gets attacked by sharks?"

"Not in a pool," I say.

Sage is sixteen, plays drums, smokes unfiltered cigarettes, and drives his beat-up black Pinto to school every morning, with me practically hanging onto the rear bumper because I'm slow getting ready. I know he sees me as a problem, a younger and more stupid version of himself, and a girl, not popular, sort of plain, with my hair pulled back in a knot most days and a walk some people make fun of. He used to be cruel to me in the normal sibling sense, but now it's worse. He is far from forgetting Isabel, and who can blame him? She'd been his girlfriend for six months before the accident, and it's only

been four months since. Four months is a short time in the grand scheme of things, shorter than it's taken Sage's shaved hair to grow long again, shorter than it's taken me to grow twenty-six fighting fish from eggs for my science experiment, "The Relationship Between Aggression and Hypertension in *B. Splendens*." I got the eggs one month before the accident. When I showed them to Isabel, red and clumped together in a small tank, she laughed and said she could hardly believe that bunch of caviar would become real animals. Well, guess what? They are now.

Every day I feed them and give them liquid vitamins and alter their blood pressure with drugs, and still get my homework done and make it to school just as if I were fully recovered. Which I'm not, in many ways. My parents are aware of this. As a kind of remedy, they came up with the idea of a spring-break trip to St. Maarten in the Dutch Virgin Islands. We're not a family that tends to take spring-break trips. We've never taken one, in fact. So when my father rose from his chair at the dinner table and asked Sage and me what we thought about going to St. Maarten, I took it to mean we'd reached a state of emergency.

They've been talking about the problem between Sage and me for months, our psychologist mom trying to give us counseling, our dentist dad distracting us with jokes. Now scuba lessons, in preparation for the trip. What our parents don't understand is that their son has become cruel and unusual, and he shows no sign of changing.

We stop at a red light and Sage eats a handful of fries all at once. I stare out the window. Beneath the streetlights, snowflakes swarm like moths. It's hard to remember a time when it wasn't winter. Sage crumples the greasy bag in his lap and tosses it into the back seat.

"Anyone could fuck with your tank underwater," he says. "One turn of a knob. That's all it would take."

I lower my sandwich from the eating position. The feeling I remember is being in Isabel's car with the water coming in,

filling my mouth with its cold fishy taste, and me groping in the dark for my seat belt, my lungs already hot and tight, and Isabel in the seat beside me bleeding into the darkness. Sage must know what I'm thinking about, but he won't look at me or say anything more. He revs the motor hard, three times, and then the light turns green and we're off.

At the YMCA I follow Sage into the lobby, where the chlorine smell of the pool stops me cold. Sage doesn't notice. He doesn't even look back. He just disappears down the hall toward the men's locker room, leaving me standing there alone. I look at the trophies in a glass display case, silver swimmers and wrestlers and softball players, all frozen mid-sport. The lobby is full of kids and old people milling around and getting snacks from the machines. I sit down on a bench and think about my tropicals, my pet fish, the ones I don't do experiments on. It calms me to imagine them swimming in their pH-balanced environments, the clown loaches loaching around near the bottom of the freshwater tank, the pearl gouramis flirting in a stand of bamboo plant. I have a marine tank too, with three yellow tangs and two fireworks anemones and a dusky angel-fish. Tonight, for the first time, I'll begin to know what my fish have known all their lives: how to breathe underwater.

When I get calm enough I go to the women's locker room and find an empty locker. All around me, teenagers are tying back their hair and putting their naked bodies into tank suits. Someone in the next row of lockers says she heard we're not actually scuba-ing today, just learning about the equipment and doing some laps with fins to get used to the feeling. That makes me feel a little better. When I go to St. Maarten I will have my own fins, according to my father; we have already looked at examples in the window of Arbor Valley Sea and Ski, and I have admired a translucent blue pair with a matching mask. They seem like they'd be almost invisible underwater.

Looking at those fins made it easy to imagine swimming, but now that I'm here at the Y it seems crazy. Sure, in St. Maarten there are a lot of fish you can see living their lives around coral reefs if you happen to know how to scuba. That kind of thing is attractive to an ichthyophile like me. But I am also a person who almost drowned. When my dad told us about St. Maarten, with its great diving, I wanted to ask if he and my mother were crazy. Did they think I would voluntarily walk into the ocean and let it close over my head? Before I could respond, my mother said she'd found us a scuba certification class at the Y. She and my father gave Sage and me these hopeful, anxious looks. I was speechless for a moment, and then I blurted, "Scuba?"

"We think it'll be good for you," my mother said. "We think it'll help you form positive associations with water."

"You don't have to dive at all, of course," my father said. "But we hope you'll consider it."

After all their planning, how could I say no thanks? Even Sage, who for months had hated everything, seemed interested in the trip. The next day he called the Y and signed us up for scuba lessons, and the rest of the week he walked around with a strange half-smile on his face. Now I think he was already coming up with mean things to say to me, things that would make me feel as scared as I do now.

As I get into my tank suit I cannot help noticing the mistakes of my body. The magazine look nowadays is breasts but no hips; I am the opposite. Thin, still, but with hipbones like cup handles. My chest is too flat, my legs too skinny, and there is a scar running the length of my left thigh. Under the water, car metal sliced me in a neat line. I didn't even feel it. Only at the edge of the pond afterward did I look down and see the blood. One doctor sewed it badly in the emergency room, and another had to take the stitches out the next day and do it again. Meanwhile I was in a kind of trance, not wanting to believe what my parents had told me about Isabel.

Now the scar is thin and white, like a dress seam. I turn my leg back and forth, looking. A dark-haired girl in a red suit notices, then glances away.

"It's okay," I say. "It's just a scar. You can look if you want to."

She bends down and looks, and when she meets my eyes again she seems unimpressed. "I also have a scar," she says. She pulls her hair up to show me a jagged pink keloid at the back of her neck. It looks as if someone tried to cut her head off and failed.

"Wow," I say.

The girl looks about my age, but she speaks like the Romanian women who work at the bakery near our house. "My sister threw a broken glass," she says. "She was little, six years old."

"Ouch," I say. "Are you in the scuba class?"

"Yes," she says. "You?"

"Me and my brother."

I see her giving me a side-eye look, and it occurs to me that she might recognize my picture from the news or newspapers. Then I realize this is an extremely egotistical thought, given how many unfortunate things there are on the news and in newspapers over four months. She locks her locker and throws her towel over her shoulder, then adjusts the strap of her goggles. I realize there are probably only ten or fifteen minutes between me and the experience of getting underwater again. For a moment I wish my mother or father were here. Then I remember I am fourteen and lucky to be alive.

"Ready?" the girl says. And I am, I think.

But nothing has prepared me for the experience of actually seeing the pool. It seems to go on forever, lanes and lanes of water strung with red-and-white dividers. Lines of black tile stretch along the bottom, all the way to the diving

part of the deep end, where the water darkens to a holy blue. Sage is nowhere to be seen. I sit down on a bench and put my head between my knees to feel better. All around, the echoes of voices bounce off the water and the high ceiling. I'm hoping Sage will come out and just sit near me, and not say anything about messing with my tank, but when I look up again I see him talking to some guys at the other end of the bleachers, as far away from me as possible.

The instructor is a college student, a girl with blond hair and muscular thighs. She wears two tank suits like they do on swim teams. My brother is obviously looking at her breasts, which surprises me because of how much I know he still misses Isabel. But I suppose certain things do not go on hold. As we learn the names of different parts of the gear, we are required to take notes in the small notebooks we bought for the class. The girl in the red suit sits beside me writing very neatly in her notebook. She writes *buoyancy control device, pressure gauge, primary regulator, mouthpiece*, with small pictures next to each word. I try to make mine as neat as hers. We learn what seems to be a basic fact but one I never knew, that scuba stands for Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus. Over on his end of the bleachers, Sage is writing fast and using a lot of pages. Later he won't be able to read what he wrote and will come crawling to me for help. In my notes I write *Too bad your handwriting sucks so much, Sage!* but then I cross it out, thinking of how Isabel saved all of Sage's notes to her, those scrawls on torn notebook paper that they found in a Japanese box under her bed.

When we have gone through the basic principles of the equipment, the instructor invites us down to select a pair of flippers. At first it looks like there won't be enough to go around. I wait until everyone has a pair, then take my own, realizing nothing will save me now from going in the water. The girl in the red suit clomps around with her toes turned out. "Like a duck," she says, and smiles at me.

We learn that the fins are supposed to fit snugly but without smashing our toes. Everyone puts them on and sits at the side of the pool to get the feel of them in the water. The instructor tells us we'll have fifteen minutes of laps and then a water polo game to increase our agility. It sounds like fun, and it should be fun, but I look at my feet waving in the water and wonder if I'm going to brick. It's one of the main reasons I didn't want to take the class, the possibility of me freaking out and Sage having to take me home while everyone else learns deep dives and repressurization. Sage probably expects me to freak out too. I watch him moving his feet back and forth in the water with great concentration. Just to spite him I decide I will not brick. Cognitive therapy, like what my mother had me do to get comfortable in the bath again: I will not drown here with all these people watching, and me a good swimmer, and with fins on my feet. At least today there will be no tank for Sage to fuck with underwater. The girl in the red suit grins at me as we splash our feet in the pool. If I brick, I tell myself, this nice Romanian kid will think I'm an idiot.

We all line up to swim laps, starting at the deep end of the pool. Why we have to start at the deep end is quickly explained: We're practicing our roll entry, where we have to crouch down with our backs facing the water, the way you go backward off the boat with all your gear on. If the water were too shallow, people might clonk their heads. Once you fall in you're supposed to orient yourself and swim down to the shallow end of the pool, kicking in the fast smooth way you do when you're wearing fins, and then get out and wait by the starting blocks.

This would be a good time to have a brother who cared if you were feeling shitty about getting into the water, but Sage is not that kind of brother. He won't stand anywhere near me. I go to the back of my group, hoping to have more time to get calm, and I think about my sea anemones because they are

the calmest of the fish, though technically they are not fish at all but flowerlike polyps of the order Actiniaria. My two anemones, a purple and a pink *Pachycerianthus mana*, are similar in size but have different personalities. The pink is shy and smart and retracts its tentacles fast when something brushes by, but the purple is slower and perhaps less smart, though when it waves its arms it looks more graceful. Thinking of them makes me forget that I am about to fall backward into a pool, gallons and gallons of water, with at least thirty people watching, including my brother and the girl in the red suit, who has already done her roll entry and is now whipping toward the lighter blue of the shallow end. Sage shoots me a look that says *You'd better not fuck up*. Then it's his group's turn to fall in, and he crouches at the edge and goes backward at the count of three. It's true that I could learn something from his confidence, if only he weren't always using it to smash me down.

Finally it's my turn. The instructor gives me a smile and pats my shoulder. I stand at the edge of the pool and pretend there is no water behind me at all, but instead my bed with the quilt I wrap myself in when I get depressed, and there will be no moment when the water covers me, and I will not remember the plunge in the car as we hit the surface and started going down. The instructor begins the countdown. I bend my knees. The flippers on my feet are cold and awkward. Somewhere at the other end of the pool, my brother is watching.

"Go!" cries the instructor, and I push off the edge. There is a whirling moment as the high-up natatorium ceiling flies by, and then I plunge backward into the cold shock of water and sink almost immediately. My arms and legs go numb with panic, and my mouth fills with the bleach taste of pool water. It feels like I'm going down to that place where I was before, the cold dark pond on that November night, and if I go down farther still I will reach Isabel, her hair floating mermaidlike around her. Up above there is a commotion of water, and the

echo of shouting, and then the shadow of someone following me down.

In the car on the way home, Sage says nothing. He might as well be made of igneous rock. I keep thinking of the way the red-suit girl looked, scared and sorry for me, when they heaved me up onto the deck of the pool. Through the rest of the class, as everyone finished the laps and played water polo, I was in the locker room getting dry and dressed and then waiting on a wooden bench. All I could think about was how mad Sage would be on our way home. Once again I'd given him evidence of what a non-hero I am. Both of us can plainly see how I might have failed at a crucial moment, missed my chance to pull Isabel out of the car. The thing the police told him, the thing the autopsy confirmed, was that she was already unconscious and wedged into the crushed driver's side, the steering wheel pinning her ribs. It might have been possible for me to pull her out, but if I'd tried I might have drowned too. And she might not have survived anyway. Everyone says I did the right thing by swimming up and climbing out to run for help. Still I know Sage blames me, and in my heart I agree.

At home Sage goes upstairs and closes the door of his room, leaving me in the hallway to explain everything to my dad with his anxious smile, and our mother in her nightgown and socks. After I tell them, we sit down together on the couch. They wedge me in between them the way they used to when I was little. My dad puts an arm around my shoulder. My mother looks miserable, as if she's done this to me herself.

"You swam, though," my father says. "Didn't you?"

"I fell in the water and sank."

"That's a start," he says.

My mother gives him a stern look. We all know that falling

How to Breathe Underwater

in the water and sinking is hardly an accomplishment, and my mother's not the kind of person who pretends something is what it's not.

"I don't think scuba's for me," I say. "Maybe someday, but not now."

"But think about the fish you'll get to see in St. Maarten if you do finish the class," my father says. "Otherwise it'll just be me and Sage diving, while you and your mom play tennis."

"Don't push her, Robert," my mother says. "She knows what she can do."

"I'm not. I'm just stating the facts."

"Anyway," says my mother, "what's so bad about tennis?"

"Nothing," my father says. "But it doesn't have quite the appeal, for some people, of seeing a coral reef with triggerfish and orange spiny tangs and things of that nature."

"It's up to you, Maddy," my mother says. "We're not going to make you dive if don't want to."

I tell them I'll think about it, and that seems to satisfy them. We get up and they hug me goodnight. Then my mother goes up to check on Sage, who is undoubtedly sitting in his room thinking about Isabel, and my father kisses me on the top of my head and goes into his study.

When I climb the stairs, I see a line of light at the bottom of my brother's door. From inside I can hear the rise and fall of his voice and my mother's. I stand still outside the door, listening. "It's not my responsibility," I hear my brother say, and my mother says something too quiet for me to make out. Very faintly, from the crack at the bottom of the door, come the fumes of cigarette smoke. I imagine them both in there smoking, my mom trying to blow it out the window so as not to smoke up the carpets and furniture, Sage not caring. I'm not much of a smoker. Once or twice I had puffs off Isabel's cigarettes in the garage during band-practice afternoons, but it was never as great as she made it look. Sometimes my mom would come out and smoke a thin cigarette of her own, sitting there on the car bumper and telling us about high school and

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old boyfriends, stories that tended to embarrass me. But Isabel laughed like my mom was another high school girl, and my mom, who always secretly seemed to distrust Sage's girlfriends, liked Isabel in return.

Finally I hear Sage tell my mom he's going to bed, and I skeet off down the hall before I am discovered. In my bedroom the fish are awake, making their rounds. The pink anemone is shut tight, and the purple one waves smoothly. The loaches are mouthing algae from the side of the freshwater tank. Beside them, my science-experiment fish seem to be sleeping in their plastic containers. Even when they're still I could watch them all night—the red-purple of their bodies, the tiny flick of their gills. The control-group fish look particularly tired, their fins not even finning. Perhaps their natural aggressions have exhausted them. I've tried to learn everything they can teach me about the chemistry of anger, what makes it ebb and flow, how it can be controlled. Twice a day I give them their special food and make behavioral observations and take their blood pressure. It's easier than you might think to take the blood pressure of a fish. Hewlett-Packard makes a sensor that can feel the force and rate of their pulse through the water. My father likes to ask me where's the little cuff, where's the little stethoscope. He thinks it's a big joke that some fighting fish seem to die of heart attacks from so much aggression, but it's no joke if you're a fighting fish.

To be professional I tried not to name my science experiment fish, but then I realized the coincidence of there being twenty-six of them, one for each letter of the alphabet, and now they all have names. Amy, Ben, Carl, Dan, and so forth. I won't, of course, use any of their names in my report; they all have scientific tags like "Control 17." The Isabel fish is in the experimental group, fed a calming drug a couple times a day. She has a blue mark at the center of her dorsal fin, a distinction I happen to know is very rare in members of her sex and species. The Sage fish is a control, reddish-brown in color, mean and small with high blood pressure. At times, when I

have been particularly mad at my brother, I've been tempted to give the Sage fish little zaps with an electrode. As a scientist, though, I have refrained.

I roll up my sleeve, put an arm down in the marine tank, and tear off a leaf from one of the underwater plants. After rinsing it in a stream of distilled water, I use it to stroke the backs of the experimental fish. No one pets fish, I know, but these fish seem to enjoy it. It calms *me*, anyhow. I pity these fish, them not knowing what's going on and being in isolation except during the aggression trials. As I stroke them I think about the girl in the red bathing suit, the look she gave me as I lay coughing on the pool deck, and then later, in the locker room, how she said in her Romanian accent that she hoped I was *ollright*. That is the normal way of things, trying to make a person feel less bad about a stupid thing they've done, as opposed to Sage's way, which is to make you feel worse.

He wasn't always that way, particularly when Isabel was around. One time the two of them caught me singing "Louie Louie" in the garage when I thought I was alone. Isabel laughed, but not in a mean way. She had her electric bass there in the garage beside Sage's drum kit, and she picked it up and asked what other songs I knew and did I want to sing while she played. She was like that, taking something I considered embarrassing and trying to make it into something cool. She said I had a retro voice like girl bands in the sixties, and she convinced Sage to play the drums while she and I belted out a couple of verses of "Respect." We sounded good. Even Sage said so. Nowadays he would sooner spit in my face than let me sing with him. I keep telling myself he cannot be angry at me forever, though maybe I am wrong.

The next morning at the breakfast table, Sage does not appear. My father, eating oatmeal with honey, tells me Sage has one of his headaches and that I'll have to catch the

bus to school. Sage gets random migraines that lay him out flat for days.

As I eat my Cheerios I feel bad for my brother, even though he's been mean to me for months. Being sick is something he and I have tended to do together. Last spring, when neither of us could imagine anything like the accident ever happening in our lives, we both came down with mononucleosis. We spent a week at home by ourselves, ordering videos our parents would never have let us watch and shooting Chloraseptic into each other's throats. Years before that, we had the chicken pox together. Sage made an oxygen chamber for us out of blankets and couch cushions and told me I was not allowed to leave. We stayed in there for hours, watching cartoons and sweating through our fevers, while our mother brought us soup and juice and Children's Tylenol. This was in our house in Baltimore, with one very small room for both of us. We slept in bunk beds and played with the same toys and even wore some of the same clothes.

When I finish breakfast my father asks me to take Sage some Imitrex and a glass of water. I go up to his room but he's in the bathroom, so I leave the pills and water on his desk. As I'm leaving I see Isabel's bass lying beside the bed. Her parents let Sage keep it after she died, which makes me think they must have known how much she loved him. I pick it up and touch the smooth neck and the polished black body. The name ISABEL is painted on the bass in silver paint, my brother's work, the letters long and crooked and childlike. I pull the strap over my head, feeling the weight of the bass in my shoulders. Then the bathroom door opens. Sage comes out in just pajama pants, his hair wild. When he sees me with the bass he crosses the room in three swift steps, grabs the bass by the neck, and jerks the strap from around my shoulders.

"Don't ever come in here," he says, his ribs pumping, his eyes glassed with hate and headache. "Get out, or I'll fucking kill you."

I go to the door. "There's some medicine on the desk." He gives me a shove toward the hall. When he slams the door behind me, the whole wall shakes.

I go into my bathroom, close the door, and sit down on the edge of the bathtub. Though I don't have time to cry, I cry anyway. My father says goodbye to me through the bathroom door, and I say goodbye back, trying to make my voice sound normal. To my surprise, he buys it. I wait until I hear the garage door go down, and then I wash my face, say goodbye to the fish, and get my books and lunch money. I am late again. I have to run through the snow to catch the bus, and along the way my shoe comes off and I take one cold wet step. Everyone finds this hilarious, even the bus driver.

School offers me no comfort today. In History we watch a movie about the Civil War, with cheerful fife music and reenactments of people being shot to pieces. During Biology there's a fire drill. We all stand outside shivering for half an hour. In Math I find out that the two sisters I usually eat lunch with, Salma and Meena Padmanabhan, are out of school for a Hindu holiday. So at lunchtime I go down to the loading dock near Auto Shop to smoke a crushed cigarette stolen from Sage's pack. It's bent at the end and smells like raisins. I try to light it with someone's thrown-away Bic, but the lighter won't stay lit and the cigarette's too wet and stale to do anything. I sit down on a milk crate and watch the wind blow dead leaves and bits of hard dirty snow.

This afternoon there are only two other kids out smoking: Mike Milldow, a tall stringy kid in a plaid flannel shirt, and Althea London, a girl with chopped black hair and a purple eyebrow ring. Althea, a senior, used to be friends with Isabel. She's talking to Mike about some band called Manila, which she likes and he hates. "They're even worse than Hangtooth," Mike says, and Althea says, "Hangtooth rocks." She blows

smoke and flicks ashes in my direction, her eyes narrow and green and ringed with black makeup.

I know she's thinking about Isabel when she looks at me, maybe wishing it had been me who died instead. Althea was one of the last people to see Isabel alive. She'd been with us earlier that night, when we sneaked into the backyard of a new house and used the hot tub. It was Ty Thibodeaux's idea, a friend of my brother's. Ty worked weekends as a hot tub installer and knew where all the tubs were, the places where people were building houses on the north side of town. Sometimes he got the tubs hooked up weeks before the owners moved in.

I would never have gone along if I hadn't been standing around in the garage with Sage and Isabel and Althea London when Ty drove up in his old Buick. He and a couple of other guys came into the garage to fool around with Sage's equipment and smoke cigarettes. There was talk about going to check out a new hot tub. Everyone was excited except me. I'd been having a great time there in the garage, and now every one was going to leave. I turned to go inside, and that was when Isabel said, "Hey, Maddy, you can come if you want."

"No she can't," Sage said, looking up from his drums.

"Sure she can," Isabel said.

"Yeah, why not?" said Althea London, who had no reason to hate me then.

"She's just a kid," Sage said. "She can't."

"Go get your jacket, Maddy," Isabel said, and that seemed to settle it. If Sage had been driving he probably would have fought harder, but this was before the black Pinto. So I ran inside to get a suit and towel, and then we were off, me and Sage and Isabel and Althea London, all piled in Isabel's Toyota, Isabel singing along with the radio. I felt lucky and cool and older, and a little nervous. I wished Sage would stop sulking and act like it was okay for me to be there. He sat in the passenger seat with his feet up on the dashboard, scowling.

"Sit normal," Isabel said, but he refused.

We followed Ty past broken-down farms and wooded hills and a water tower lit up yellow, all the way to the new developments, where half-built houses stood on bare dirt lots. Out on one of the cul-de-sacs there was an almost-finished house, a blue two-story with white shutters and a three-car garage. They hadn't put down sod in the yard or finished pouring the concrete of the walkway, and one wall of the garage still had to have its siding put on. But around back, in the middle of a redwood deck, was a brand-new eight-person Jacuzzi. Ty unclipped the cover and hit a switch on a control panel, and the tub lit up and started bubbling. Everyone cheered. We were out in the middle of nowhere, with no one around to hear us.

I unrolled my bathing suit from the towel and looked for a place to change, but suddenly all around me people were taking their clothes off—shirts, pants, underwear, everything. I couldn't keep myself from staring at Sage as he pulled off his shirt and jeans. I hadn't seen him naked since we were kids, and suddenly there was the dark hair between his legs, and his pale penis. Isabel was naked too, her arms crossed over her chest. She looked nervous at first, but then she opened her arms and let the wind hit her and she laughed and shivered, her hair all loose and messed up, her skin going pink. She was so beautiful that for a minute I forgot to be freaked out by what was happening. I started taking off my clothes like everyone else, feeling the wind hit my skin. Then I saw Sage looking at me, waiting for me to take my shirt off, his mouth curling as if he were getting ready to say something mean. So I went down some stairs to the side of the deck and put my suit on. It was freezing down there, in no clothes, with nothing but hard ground beneath my feet.

As much as I wanted to go up and get in the hot tub, it seemed better to wait until everyone else was already in, their parts mostly submerged. I climbed a couple of stairs and watched them. Ty was in the tub, laughing and splashing

Althea London, who had one nipple pierced. Isabel got in next to Ty, and Sage next to her. Someone passed beers around. I was seeing the secret world of cool older people, the world Sage slipped off into every weekend while I stayed at home with my fish or made cookies with the sisters Padmanabhan. I took a breath and looked up at the stars. It was November. Orion was bending his bow in the sky above us.

"Hey, Maddy," Isabel called from the hot tub. "Where are you?"

I climbed the stairs and headed for the Jacuzzi as if this were the kind of thing I did all the time. Isabel moved over to make space for me, and I got in. Our thighs pressed together under the water, her skin slick-smooth. The water steamed and rolled and burbled around us. Ty Thibodeaux handed me a beer, and I sank down in the water up to my neck and drank. The beer was bitter and bready and cold. I thought maybe I could develop a taste for it if I tried.

There was some talk about people at school, kids I'd seen but never spoken to. Someone had gotten a tattoo gun from his cousin in New York; someone else had thrown up in Calculus class from eating pot brownies. I laughed along with everyone, as if the people they were talking about were friends of mine. After a while, when I was feeling braver, I told a story of my own: Last week a wiener dog had run into our gym class and peed on a rack of basketballs before anyone could stop him.

"I heard about that," Isabel said. "I heard Miss Cortland freaked."

"She completely freaked!" I said. Ty laughed and handed me another beer.

Then, as if he couldn't stand that people were talking to me and acting like I belonged there, Sage had to start telling the story about my fifth birthday, the pool story. I tried to make him stop, but he wouldn't. "She was drinking Sprite all morning," he said. "Gallons of it. We only got to drink soda on our birthdays, because of our dad saying it would rot our teeth." People were listening, lowering their beers and lean-

ing forward so they could hear him over the bubbles. "We were on the pool deck," he went on, "and she's dancing around like she has to pee, and our mom's like, 'Maddy, do you have to go wee-wee?'"

"Shut up, Sage," I said.

"No," Sage said. "I'm just getting to the good part." He winked at Ty Thibodeaux across the rolling water. "So I look in the pool five minutes later and there's Maddy with this peaceful expression on her face. Our mom saw it too. She got everyone out of the pool in like five seconds flat. She made them go in and have cake. Everyone was like, 'Why can't we swim anymore?' Meanwhile Maddy tried to act like she hadn't done it. She still won't admit it, will you, Maddy?" He poked me in the shoulder.

"So what?" Isabel said. "Little kids pee in the pool all the time."

"I called her the Mad Pisser that whole summer," Sage said.

"That story's a lie," I said, though probably everyone knew it wasn't.

"You'd better not have too much to drink," he said, grabbing my beer away and taking a sip. "The Mad Pisser might ride again."

He wouldn't let it rest. He kept poking me in the shoulder and saying, "Think you can hold it?" with me staring into the water and wishing he'd stop, until Isabel climbed out of the tub and stood there shivering in a towel, looking out at the empty backyard. When she started putting on her clothes Sage tried to stop her, but she pulled away and zipped her sweatshirt up.

"Why do you have to be such an asshole?" she said.

"It was funny," Sage said, and looked at Ty. "Wasn't it funny?"

"I don't know, man," Ty said, as if he didn't want to take sides.

"It wasn't funny," Isabel said, pulling her jeans on.

Sage turned away and kicked a beer bottle off the deck, and I wondered whether we'd all just go home now. Part of me hoped we would. Then the next minute floodlights were flashing and a shrill alarm was screaming. The house security system had gone off. We hadn't even known there was one. Althea London had triggered it when she tried to climb in through a window to use the bathroom.

Suddenly everyone was screaming and running around, elbowing one another as we tried to get our jeans and shoes and coats on. I was so scared I couldn't even manage to put on my pants, and Isabel had to grab my hand and run us to the front of the house where her car was parked. We got in and she started the motor.

"What about Sage?" I said. In my side mirror I could see him coming around the side of the house, his shirt bunched against his crotch.

"He can find another ride," Isabel said. Then she hit the gas, and we were off.

We tore out of the cul-de-sac at what must have been sixty miles an hour, windows down, Sonic Youth blaring from the tape player. "Woo-hoo!" Isabel screamed. Her hands were shaking as she held the steering wheel, and I couldn't tell if it was because she was cold or because she was excited. I'd never seen anyone drive so fast. The night was cold and clear, the sky shot with stars, the bare trees whipping by. The vinyl car seat was like ice against my legs, and my teeth were clacking so hard I could feel it in the top of my skull. Isabel was singing along with the tape as we roared over those roads. Every now and then she'd look at me and grin.

"We can drive all the way to Chicago," she said. "I feel like driving."

I imagined the two of us walking down Michigan Avenue, parents three hundred miles away, hot dogs in our hands. "We'd be in such deep shit," I said, and laughed.

"No, we wouldn't," she said. "I have an aunt there. She's cool. We could stay with her tonight and come back tomorrow."

"Chicago," I said. "That's crazy, Isabel."

"Let's do it," she said. "Let's go right now."

We turned in at Gettyswood Townhomes, a shortcut to US 23, and all at once I knew she was serious. I felt light-headed and frightened and almost in love with her. Together we would zip out along the open highway. We wouldn't even call our parents until we got there, and God only knew what they would say. Sage would be so jealous he would spontaneously combust. Isabel laid on the gas, and as we came around the curve near the pond I felt the jolt of the curb and a sudden hollow rush in my chest and we were airborne.

The car hit the pond nose-first. The windshield crunched and everything was dark and water poured in through the open windows, so cold it erased every part of me it touched, and suddenly it was in my mouth with its pond-scum taste and I couldn't breathe. I hardly knew what was happening. In the darkness I felt for Isabel, straining against my seat belt, and my hands brushed something warm and soft, but I couldn't make my fingers hold on to anything. My lungs began to burn. I shrugged out of the seat belt and felt for the edge of the open window, pushing through, trying to kick up to where the moon wavered like a reflection of itself. I struggled through what seemed like thick black honey, broke the surface, breathed, swam to the edge, and crawled out onto the frozen bank. Kneeling on the wet grass I coughed out water, waiting to see Isabel come up. I screamed to her. The trees beside the pond clicked in the wind. On my left leg a widening cut ran black and hot with blood. I got up onto the numb blocks of my feet and ran toward the townhouses, toward a phone, shouting for help.

Now, four months later, Althea London sits on the edge of the loading dock, shooting me mean glances, blowing cigarette smoke at me like she's trying to make me cough. I'd like to remind her that she was the genius who tripped the alarm. She has no idea what it was like between Isabel and me in the car, or what happened down under the water.

I crush the wet cigarette with the toe of my shoe and jump off the edge of the loading dock, six feet down, to land hard on hands and knees on the pavement, and then I am limping toward home.

Crime and punishment. That is the pattern between my brother Sage and me. A quiet private criminal justice system is what we've created, with Sage as judge, jury, jailer, and executioner. Our system has no checks and balances, and it allows multiple punishments for the same crime. If, in a real court, I'd been proven guilty of killing Isabel, I would have gotten my punishment and been left to live with it. In the world of Sage and me, however, I must pay and pay—even though Sage is guilty in some ways himself.

God only knows how he killed them, whether he fed them poison or put ice cubes in their water or something even worse, but when I get home from school I find eleven of my fighting fish dead, the Sage fish and the Isabel fish among them. They float on top of the water in their plastic containers, still and cold. My fish, the animals I raised from eggs. Their fins are limp, their mouths open, their little round eyes looking at nothing. Five experimental-group fish and six control-group ones. If he were smart he would have killed all the experimental ones, making me think I was somehow at fault. But I know whose stupid fault this is, from beginning to end.

Though I know it won't help, I throw the dead fish into the aggression-trial tank and administer a few electric shocks. Nothing. It's just as well. If they did wake up, they'd attack each other to death in three seconds flat. I scoop them out, put them all in an empty yogurt container, and snap the lid on. They weigh almost nothing. I take them to bed with me and wrap myself in the quilt. And though I don't want to let myself cry, I do, because they're dead beyond the reach of hope or science, and Sage is the one who did it, and no matter what I do

to get back at him—burn his room, trash his car—he'll just find a way to get me back worse.

That night, after a quiet dinner at which Sage does not appear and at which I pretend to my parents that nothing is wrong, I take the yogurt container and walk the mile to the pond, which isn't even a real natural pond but an ornamental small lake near the east entrance of Gettyswood. I crouch in the grass near a fake dock and unwrap the fish and throw them into the water, one by one. It doesn't take me long to realize how ridiculous I must look, hurling tiny fish into a pond. They float on top, dark shapes against the moonlit surface, and I know they will probably be eaten by birds or by other fish.

It's the first time I've been to the pond since the accident. Things look almost the same as they did that night, the trees without leaves, the grass patchy and frozen. In the weeds beside me I find a piece of thick glass, blue at the edge, and I can't help wondering if it belonged to the Toyota windshield. Though I know the car was dragged out months ago, I imagine it there beneath the surface of the water, Isabel still trapped inside. It's impossible to believe how gone she is, how untouchable. She's the only one who doesn't have to know what it's like here on Earth without her.

The next day I'm waiting for my dad to take me to school, thinking maybe I'll tell him about the fish, but at the last moment Sage comes down with his car keys in hand. He looks exhausted after his long headache.

"I'll drive," he says, his voice scratchy and low.

"You sure?" our dad says.

Sage nods. I kiss our dad goodbye and follow Sage to the car. All the way to school he seems to be getting ready to say something to me. He keeps giving me a squinty look, as if he's trying to figure out what I'm feeling, but I'm not about to let him know. I keep my face still as stone, just as he did when we

were driving home from scuba class. School is not far from our house. We get there before he manages to talk.

"See you at three?" he says as we climb out.

"Whatever," I say.

I wait for him to say something else, to confess or apologize, but he just turns and lopes across the parking lot.

When we get home from school I find a blue plastic bag on my bed. I open it to find the swim fins and mask I'd admired at Arbor Valley Sea and Ski. There's no note, but at the bottom of the bag I find a credit card receipt with my mother's signature. The fins look even better in person than they did in the store window, the translucent blue plastic shot through with green swirls, the glass of the mask almost iridescent. I kick off my shoes and pull the fins on. They fit.

I am so happy, clomping around the room in my new SeaQuest Thrusters, that it's a fresh shock to pass by my experimental fish and see the empty containers among them. I take off the fins and mask and put them back in the bag. I pull the experimental notebook from my backpack. I have not recorded blood pressure data in two days, and it almost seems not worth continuing the experiment. Out of habit, though, I feed the fish their flakes and vitamins and take their blood pressures with the HP device. Everyone's blood pressure is slightly high today. It makes me wonder if they can sense that something went wrong, that they themselves have only narrowly escaped disaster. As I sit down on the bed to record my results, there is a soft knock at the door. "Come in," I say, hoping it will be Sage. Instead it is my mother.

"You look nice today," I say, and she does, in black pants and a gray sweater and scarf. Her cheek feels cold when she kisses me, as if she has just come in from outside.

"How are they?" she says, looking into the plastic fish containers. Because she was the one who drove me to Detroit to buy the eggs, and helped me set up the experiment with

On the way to scuba that night I watch Sage as he drives and eats, the grease shining on his fingers. He steers with one hand and grabs chicken nuggets with the other. If he had another hand, he would be using it to smoke. He seems to want to keep his mouth full so he doesn't have to talk to me. I don't eat anything. Usually he'd finish my nuggets and fries too, but tonight he leaves my food alone.

We pull into the parking lot and find our space, and then we get out so Sage can have a cigarette. It is cold and windy March, still frozen, without a hint of spring. Sage has a hard time getting the lighter to stay lit, but finally his cigarette catches. He takes a drag and then extends the pack toward me. "Yeah, right," I say.

He blows out a plume of smoke, throwing his head back to get his hair out of his eyes—a gesture Isabel once told me she loved, but which to me seems like the kind of thing people do when they're trying to look cooler than they really are. "I know you steal them sometimes," he says.

I take the pack from him and swizzle the cigarettes around inside. Their smell reminds me of the lunch I spent out on the loading dock. I tell him I'll pass.

As Sage smokes he shoots quick glances at my fins, trying to look at them without being obvious. I lean against the car and slap them against my leg. Finally he says, "How come I didn't get any fins?"

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe because you're such a dickhead."

He takes the pack of cigarettes from me and stuffs it into his pocket.

"You can't just not mention the fish, Sage." I look him hard in the eye. "You can't pretend nothing happened."

He leans against the car and crosses his arms. Very quietly he says, "I'll get you some replacement fish."

"Do you know how ridiculous that is? I raised those fish

its control and experimental groups, she knows something's wrong when she sees the empty containers. She gives me a puzzled look.

"Some of the research subjects died," I say.

"Why?" she says. "What happened?"

"I don't know." I could tell her it was Sage's doing, but I don't. What happened is between him and me.

She has me walk her through the water temperatures and chemistry, the blood-pressure sensing mechanisms, the fish's diet. Of course she can find nothing that would have caused the random deaths. She stands there looking into the containers as if an answer might emerge from the water. If it occurs to her that Sage might have killed the fish, she doesn't say so.

"I'm sorry, Maddy," she says finally. "You took such good care of them."

I don't respond, because I know I will cry if I try to speak.

"Maybe they got some kind of virus," she says. "That can happen. You just have to carry on with the experiment. Note the deaths in your log and move on."

"I'll try," I tell her.

"You know," she says, fingering the edge of one of the containers, "I had lunch with your father today. Afterward he cleaned my teeth and bleached them." She smiles, and her teeth are as white as sleet.

"Nice," I say.

"We wondered if you were going to go to class again tonight."

"I wasn't planning to. But those are excellent fins." I take them out of the bag again and put them on, flopping around the room to demonstrate. Then I put on the mask. "How do I look?" I ask her.

She takes me by the shoulders, turning me back and forth. Despite the dead fish, despite my failure in the swimming pool, despite everything that has happened in the past four months, she looks almost proud of me. "*Très Jacques Cous-teau*," she says. "*Très magnifique*."

from eggs, just for the experiment. Under controlled conditions. It took months!"

"Okay, okay."

My throat goes tight. I sling my towel over my shoulder and begin to walk toward the door of the Y. Already I can hear the sound of little kids inside, playing as they wait to be picked up. Sage comes up behind me and grabs my wrist, but I whick it away.

"Maddy," he says, and I turn to look at him. He's so cold I can see him shivering. Behind him the Y glows with yellow light, its entryway toothed with icicles. "I wouldn't have to get you fish for your experiment," he says. "I could get you some pet fish."

"Just forget it, Sage."

"Listen to me," he says. "I'm an asshole. I admit it."

"You didn't use to be," I say. "Not such a major asshole, anyway."

Cars sweep by, honking for the kids waiting inside. When the door of the Y opens, the sound of the kids' voices grows sharper. Somewhere farther inside is the pool with its tiled depths.

"You make me wish I died instead of her," I say.

He stands there staring at me as if I've hit him. A fine dry snow has begun to fall, speckling his jacket with flakes. He drops his cigarette and grinds it into the asphalt with his heel. "I followed you the other night," he says. "When you went to the pond."

"You followed me?"

"You went sneaking out of the house. I didn't know what you were going to do."

I hate the thought of him watching as I threw my fish into that pond. It seemed a stupid enough thing to do when I thought I was unobserved. "Don't follow me around, Sage," I say. "If I want you to go somewhere with me, I'll ask you."

"No, you won't," he says. "Why would you?" He takes out another cigarette, then puts it back in the pack. Finally he

speaks again, so quiet I have to lean close to hear him. "I can't believe I turned out to be such a shitty person," he says. "I wasn't even nice to her."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was a terrible boyfriend. I got mad at her for no reason during band practice. I didn't listen to her enough. I forgot her birthday. I made fun of her car."

"You weren't a terrible boyfriend," I say. "Isabel loved you."

"How do you know?"

"I just do," I say. "I could see it."

Just then the girl from last week walks by, swinging a gym bag over her shoulder. She lifts a hand and waves as if she's never seen me coughing out water on the side of the pool. I wave back.

"We're going to be late," Sage says.

I follow him into the Y, and we split off toward our separate locker rooms.

Among the rows of yellow lockers I unpack my suit and towel, my new mask. As I change clothes, the girl in red comes over and picks up my swim fins.

"SeaQuests," she says in her Romanian accent. "Very professional."

"My mom got them for me."

"They match you," she says, holding them up against my bathing suit.

"You can try them later if you want," I say, and she looks pleased.

When I see the pool again, the place where I went down last time, nausea slams me. I try to take some slow breaths. Out on the bleachers some kids are talking about different kinds of equipment, single tanks versus double, but Sage is sitting off to one side, scratching his ankle. The blond swim-team-looking instructor whose name I have forgotten is haul-

ing complete scuba sets and wetsuits out of a storeroom. No one's bothering to help her. The red-suit girl and I go down there and start hauling out tanks, and by the time we're finished my nausea has gone away.

"All right," the instructor says, dusting off her hands. "Who wants to dive?"

People yell and clap. Even Sage looks interested.

She says we're going to do a five-minute ten-foot dive, and tells everyone to get into wetsuits. The suits are the one-piece back-zip kind; the Romanian girl and I zip each other in. The instructor gives us each a weight belt and a scuba set and shows us how to fasten the tanks to the buoyancy control device. We learn how to attach the regulator to the tank, how to turn on the air, and how to test the regulator by pushing the purge button. We learn that we're supposed to use the hang-ten sign to say *cool* to each other, because the thumbs-up sign means to go to the surface. We lift the gear onto each other's backs and secure all the buckles. Then we stagger toward the deep end and take practice breaths just standing on the side of the pool. The air from the tank is metallic and very dry. The last thing we do before going in is to put on fins and masks. My new flippers look sleek and aqua blue against the white tiles of the floor.

Finally it is time again for all of us to get into the water. Sage moves close to me as we line up to splash in, him shivering, me trying not to look over the edge into the mouth of the water.

"Quit thinking about last time," he says. "It's going to be different."

"We'll see," I say.

"Practice measuring your breaths, like she told us."

I practice measuring my breaths, and it calms me a little. We watch our classmates line up and fall backward into the pool. I see them down there beneath the surface, not coming up for a breath, and all of a sudden a great excitement fills me. Although I know it is stupid, I feel as if we're going to find

ourselves in the ocean when we splash down, surrounded by coral reefs and fish, seeing things we'd never even imagined. When I crouch for my roll entry, Sage crouches beside me. Together we fall back and splash down. At first I forget to breathe. We're underwater, after all. But when my lungs start getting tight I suck in a breath. The air is cold and surprising in my lungs, and suddenly I'm scuba diving, shooting out bubbles of used breath into the pool, and Sage is finning beside me.

When I think of Isabel this time it's not as a mermaid but as the living girlfriend of my brother, wearing blue jeans, playing bass in the garage, telling me to try singing. She would have liked to see us diving, Sage and me, going down into the richest blue of the bottom. We tread water, watching each other through our masks. I cannot see his eyes through the glass, but I can see, reflected small and blue, a girl wearing swim fins and a metal tank, self-contained and breathing underwater.