

A NIGHT OF FALLING ALONE

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Our tires crunch on frozen slush. My dad edges slowly up the driveway, high beams on, driving in the ruts made yesterday in the daylight. I see pine trees, house, garage. The back end of the mighty station wagon sways, tires spinning. My dad has supreme confidence in snow tires, even on ice. The lights of the dashboard illuminate his hands, one at the ten o'clock position, the other at the two — the proper way to drive, he says. When I drive, my hands fall on twelve and six. This irritates him. My stepmother is in the passenger seat. I am in the back. It's eerily silent in the car, and I know why.

My dad woke me not more than thirty minutes ago, shook my shoulder until my eyes opened. "Mr. Clark called," he said. "We're going over there right now. Put your clothes on and meet us downstairs."

I'd been having a dream, the same dream I've had since I was three: I am falling, falling, falling into a dark, turbulent void. No connections, no people: permanent exile. I usually wake up shaking.

My room was dark except for the glow from the street-light. I was holding my stomach, as if there were a hole there. I'd known this day was coming. I looked at the clock: 2 A.M. I felt like crying, I was so afraid. But my dad had said to get up. I slid out of my pajamas and put on my school clothes: plaid button-down shirt, chinos, dirty bucks. I brushed my teeth and looked out the bathroom window: hazy light, no cars on the street. *OK, I thought. You have to go downstairs. Do it.*

The darkness inside our brand-new 1960 Mercury Colony Park station wagon is broken by the Clarks' porch light. The defroster is finally melting away the fog on the windows. It's only a five-minute drive, and my dad didn't wait for the car to warm up, just drove to our middle-of-the-night rendezvous. He puts the car in park. I look at my stepmother, trying to figure out what she is thinking. I never know. Mostly she spends her time trying not to displease my dad. She is a failure at this, and they argue from their separate beds almost every night. I have given up trying to figure out why he married her. He tells me it is because I needed a mother.

I am sixteen. I love to drive cars, any car; I am not particular. My dad taught me to drive when I was fourteen, on the dirt roads around Higgins Lake. He let me drive to the dump and back, about twelve miles round-trip. But when summer ended, that was it. We moved back home to Marshall, Michigan. A town of five thousand, it has lots of dirt roads — but my dad is known here. He wouldn't take a chance on being caught with his fourteen-year-old son at the wheel.

I love bikes too. My buddy Jon Rivers and I ride our bikes everywhere. Jon taught me how to put my ear on the railroad tracks to determine when the train is coming from Chicago or Detroit. Ear to cold steel, he'll yell, "A train's coming!" Sometimes he'll say, "Freight." Then I'll put my ear on the track and hear nothing. But soon, very soon, I will hear the vibrations, and then feel them too.

At home, my ear has been on the track for more than three months now, listening anxiously for the phone to ring. I'd come home from school and wonder, *Is it today? Is it now?* Somehow I figured it would be at night — when defenses are

low, when tired resistance gives way to truth.

Now the train has come, and all three of us are here to witness it. I am both frightened and strangely relieved. No more waiting, hiding, keeping silent.

The three of us get out of the car. My stepmother has on black rubbers over her shoes. She slips and grabs my dad's arm. They walk up the steps. He knocks on the door. In this small town, people knock once and then open the door and yell, "Anybody home?" To knock and wait means you are not good friends. We wait. Mr. Clark opens the door and greets my dad. We walk into the brightly lit kitchen — black-and-white tile, black-and-white countertop. My eyes hurt from the glare. I feel exposed.

Mr. Clark has on a camel's-hair sport coat, blue button-down shirt, a rep tie, and black tasseled loafers. (He was the first man in town to wear loafers with tassels.) My dad has on his tan Marshall Field's sport coat, white shirt, no tie, and his chukka boots. My stepmother has on her black fake-fur coat that comes to her waist. She takes off her rubbers. I glance beyond the kitchen, looking in vain for my beloved, Kelly Clark.

Mr. Clark greets me, his round cherub face hiding his true feelings. "Good to see you."

I give him a firm handshake, and he leads me toward the living room, my favorite room of their house — a mansion, really. This is the informal living room. They also have a formal living room as big as the whole downstairs of my house, done all in white except for a black grand piano that no one plays. Theirs is one of two mansions that sit across Kalamazoo Avenue from each other, built by two brothers who manufactured corsets and back braces. When the owner died long ago, this house just sat there. No one had the money to buy it and fix it up. Enter Mr. Clark, who bought an ailing division of a large paper company with a factory in town. He moved his family here from a downtown Chicago high-rise. They restored this old mansion, complete with a new swimming pool, an elevator (the only one in town), and a ballroom on the third floor. Mr. Clark flies his own twin-engine plane out at Marshall Field and owns a Mercedes and a Citroën with hand controls for his wife, Maggie, who's in a wheelchair. It's as if the Clarks were thumbing their noses at Detroit.

This is the first time I have been in this house with my parents. We stand around and wait to be invited to sit. I edge forward to see Kelly, who's sitting on the couch. There are three long sofas arranged around the fireplace, and a wood-and-slate coffee table stacked with magazines about flying and the Sunday *Chicago Tribune*. Kelly's mother, Maggie, is seated next to her in her wheelchair. Mr. Clark (whose nickname is Teddy) says to my parents, "Jack and Leah, why don't you sit here?" and he points to the couch facing the fireplace. We say hello to Mrs. Clark, and she takes my hand and smiles, but says nothing. I want to walk around her wheelchair and sit next to Kelly. I want to grab Kelly's arm and run out to the car and drive away and escape, but I don't know where to go. I have eighteen dollars in my billfold. I at least want to sit next to Kelly and embrace her and kiss away her tears, tell her everything will be OK, which is what I have been doing these last

few months. But I know now that it's not true. I have failed.

I walk over to the couch opposite Kelly and sit and look at her, this weary teenager with a blue quilted housecoat on, her face splotchy, her eyelids swollen from crying. There's a pitiful look to her, shamed to silence. I think: *She is my love, isn't she? Kelly, wake up! It's me. It's us!* My eyes find only the blank look of a sixteen-year-old positioned between her mother and her father. She is not mine. I have lost her.

"What do you want to drink?" Mr. Clark asks my parents.

"Scotch and water for us," says my dad.

"Want some white wine?" Mr. Clark asks his wife, and she nods. "What about you kids? Do you want anything?"

We shake our heads, separating ourselves from this meeting that will draw us down, down, down. Tonight I am not a strong, athletic, impassioned teenager. I feel like a hurt, fearful puppy. I cannot even protect Kelly.

Ice clinks into glasses. Mr. Clark returns and passes the drinks around, keeping a martini for himself. He sits down beside Kelly. I fight this feeling I have of falling into the void. This couch is too big, too long. It's just me here, all alone. If I could only scream, or pace about, or hug Kelly, or take some action. I put my hands in my lap. I wait.

I look up at Kelly, her legs crossed and pale now, not tanned like last summer. Strong legs, tennis-playing legs, biking legs. Her hands are curled together. No fingernail polish, ever. I like that. My stepmother wears fingernail polish, has the woman at the beauty parlor do her nails. Kelly has recently begun to bite her fingernails. Her hands are sunk into that blue quilted robe. Maggie has on a soft brown wool suit, her hair in a bun. Her legs fall straight down into the footrests of the wheelchair. She seems off in a world of her own, maybe that time in her life before polio, when she could walk and run.

I want to go back in time too, but where? This awful loneliness I feel seems to have been with me forever. I try to envision bike rides, ski trails, the logging road that my dog and I would walk along. This couch I am sitting on is the scene of the crime. I wonder if everybody knows.

One April several years ago, at our cottage on Higgins Lake in northern Michigan, I woke up in the middle of the night to a strange groaning, a creaking, like a slow earthquake. I looked out the window and saw nothing but darkness and dirty white snow. This groaning in the earth continued as I got up and put my clothes on and walked outside. I felt something shudder in me, or was it around me? I went to the shore of the lake, and then I understood: the ice was breaking up. When the ice melts, it expands and tries to come ashore, great wide plates of it crawling over other plates, like a spring migration.

Now I've been awakened in the middle of the night once more, and I have the same feeling of something breaking up, groaning, crawling toward shore. Nothing can stop this flow. I'm in the way. It will cover me up.

I look over at Kelly. Such a flat, dull look on her face. She seems so small, the washed-out blue of her robe overwhelmed by the dark red sofa where she and I would kiss, embrace, and then lie down, sinking into each other's bodies. We kept the tv turned down low, so we could listen for voices or foot-

steps. If we heard anything, we would quickly sit up and zip up. It was a drill we performed mostly in response to false alarms: one of Kelly's younger brothers searching for food in the kitchen, or their live-in housekeeper making a telephone call. We would listen for a moment and then sink back down into the cushions.

"As I told you on the phone, Jack," Mr. Clark is saying, "we just found out that Kelly is pregnant. We have to act quickly. She is at least four months pregnant, maybe more." He leans toward my dad, as if this conversation were a business meeting just between the two of them. I don't hear any suggestion that it might include Kelly and me. I wait. I hold my stomach. The truth is out, like a bat from our attic, and I can't catch it. It's winging its way in and out and all around us.

Pregnant. In my town, this word is bad news. Usually you hear "She's expecting." *Pregnant* is used only when discussing Roman Catholic women or farm wives who produce large families. Or illegitimacy. Now the word resounds through my body like a ping-pong ball, bouncing off organs and muscles. Blood shoots up my neck to my head. My hair is wet with perspiration, as if the fireplace were blazing with oak logs. I crunch my hands together as if trying to break a walnut barehanded. When I pull them apart, they throb. Kelly is slipping away, her hands in her lap, hunched over, her slim body containing the word that condemns us: *pregnant*.

"If you kids just could have told us a month or so sooner," Maggie says, "we could have done something about this. Now it's too late."

(end of excerpt)