

ONE

The wrapping paper on my birthday present is impenetrable. Mom must have used half a roll of tape to secure the sharp folds, creases, and delicate trimmings just so. She wants my Sweet Sixteen to be special — more special than me wearing a Hanes undershirt, Levi’s, and my dirty pair of Converse in our cramped mustard-yellow kitchen.

“I bet you can’t even fit into that pretty sundress I bought you in August!” Mom taunted when she realized I was dead serious about not dressing up for dinner. “You’ve shot up at least three more inches since then.”

It was endearingly pathetic. So I put on a foil party crown.

Mom cooked her homemade ziti, got me a whale-shaped ice-cream cake with chocolate crunchies from the Carvel across town, and invited my friends over at nine to help me blow out the candles. Once we’re all tweaked out on sugar, we’re going to bail on Mom for some suburban debauchery in my honor. Even though it’s Thursday, I’m allowed out until midnight.

“Dinner was awesome,” I say, and watch Mom’s lean body shake with elbow grease as she scrubs hardened noodles off a Pyrex dish. A chocolate-brown ponytail swishes across her shoulder blades and a few gray hairs catch the light from overhead. They seem to sparkle.

“The trick is, I cut all the ingredients in half . . . except for the cheese,” Mom tells me over the sound of running sink water. She is a pro at halving family-sized recipes. The anti-Betty Crocker.

I shake her present next to my ear. It doesn’t make a sound. “Can’t you do the dishes later?”

“All this buildup. The suspense must be killing you!” When she turns around, her grin is wide. She flings a damp dish towel over her shoulder and plops into the seat across from me. “Happy birthday, Ruby.”

I tear into the package, prepared to give an Oscar-worthy performance of Best Reaction to a Bad Present. Historically, Mom has exploited gift-buying opportunities as chances to make me more girly. A baby-blue eyelet blouse with cap sleeves to soften my angular boyish figure. A palette of sparkly eye shadows to brighten my strikingly plain face. Some dangly earrings that get swallowed up by my dark, thick hair. I never begrudge her thinly veiled makeover attempts. It just seems stupid to keep things I’m never going to use. So I trade the goods for credit at the thrift store and get presents more my style. Like old camp T-shirts from summers before I was born, jeans so worn you could trace the white outline of the pocket where the previous owner’s wallet was kept, or those striped socks that have little sections for each of your toes.

But Mom promised this year would be different. That I was going to “absolutely die” when I saw her present. She’s been all

goofy over finally cracking the code to her daughter's weirdness, a proud moment for a single parent whose kid turned out to be nothing like her. I only hope I can act my way out of disappointing her. After all, she's trying. And trying should count for something.

"Read the card! The card!" Mom says, rescuing it from the shreds of wrapping paper I've tossed aside. But I'm already inside the box. When I unfold the flaps of tissue, my mouth drops open and I swallow the whole roomful of air in surprise.

My hands hold an old Polaroid camera. It's tan and black, with three retro racing stripes of red, yellow, and blue darting down the front. There's a tower of four flashcubes, like miniature disco balls stacked on top of each other. A nylon lariat threads through a loop of plastic on the back. I slip it over my head and the cord digs into the back of my neck. It feels wonderfully clunky.

"I found it at the camera shop on West Market. I wanted to splurge on one of those digital cameras, but once I spotted this on a shelf behind the register, I knew you'd get a real kick out of it. The man said it's in perfect condition, though it took me half a roll of paper towels to wipe away all the dust." She reaches underneath the tissue and hands me two boxes of film, which she explains are standard and still available at CVS.

It takes a few tries, but I figure out how to load the film into the front hatch. Then I frame Mom's face in the viewfinder and pull the orange trigger. The room flashes and the camera roars. Seconds later, it spits out a foggy white square.

I've never owned a real camera before. Just those cheap disposables you can buy at the drugstore. I didn't even know I wanted

one. It's not like many moments in my life are picture worthy. But now that I do, well . . . it couldn't be a more perfect present.

"Mom," I say, but she cuts me off with a *shhh* before I can get sappy. We are very anti-sap.

"Here. You're supposed to at least *pretend* like you're interested in this." Mom replaces the photo in my hand with an envelope. She's not annoyed or anything. I can tell by the way she's grinning.

The card is her plain cream-colored stationery, folded once along the middle. There's no flowery Hallmarkian poem with twirly golden script about how I'm now a real woman and blah-blah-barf. I am so thankful that hormone-soaked sentiment is not our relationship. It just makes things uncomfortable. Especially with a history like ours.

I crack it open.

Ruby,

Make wonderful memories.

Love, Mom

I look up at her and smile, but she's already returned to dish duty. Her photograph lies on the table. Even partially developed, my mom is so pretty — a stark contrast from the peeling linoleum of our kitchen floor, a stark contrast from me.

The doorbell rings. Three times, rapid fire.

"Now, who on earth could that be?" Mom asks in a sugary way. She peers over her shoulder and winks, because we both already know.

I run out of the kitchen, hurdle the living room coffee table, and position myself steps away from our front door. Raising the

camera to my eye, I fight to keep the laughter inside my mouth. “It’s open!”

Beth is wearing a green mohair cardigan over a gray tank top, dark skinny jeans, and pointy brown leather flats. The sides of her wavy auburn hair are pinned back with a few bobby pins and her face is tinged pink from her brisk walk around the block. She steps into my house but freezes in action pose as the flash pops.

“Surprise!” I shout, before she can wish me a happy birthday for the fiftieth time today. Beth was the first to call me, at exactly 12:01 A.M. She bought me a birthday egg-and-cheese bagel and delivered it to my homeroom. She covered my locker with pictures of birthday cakes from an old cookbook, threw two fists of three-hole-punch confetti on me at the lunch table, and forced me to tie a helium balloon to the strap of my book bag and keep it there for the entire day.

“Ruby!” she screams and lunges with wiggling peach-polished fingers. I am seven inches taller than Beth, so I hold the photo over my head, comically out of her reach. But she’s not afraid to exploit my weakness. She jabs a finger into my armpit and I recoil in a fit of laughter.

I hustle backward to the kitchen and Beth makes chase. We circle the table and both of us are screaming and laughing so hard the windows shake in their frames. Beth slows down only to kiss my mom hello on the cheek.

I am way out of breath, so I stop. Beth throws her arms around my neck and sinks us to the floor. We stare at the photo in my hands. As our panting subsides, her face emerges from the mist of the film. Her hazel eyes are wide open and her mouth is a perfect O.

“Ha! I look like you!” she says, because I’m notorious for making stupid faces in pictures while everyone else around me smiles like normal.

“No, you don’t,” I say, pointing to the gap in my front teeth. A genetic gift from my dad that I absolutely hate. It’s wide enough to slide a nickel through, like I’m a human slot machine. Beth’s teeth are naturally perfect. She’s never had braces or even any cavities. They’re all tiny and straight and white, like Chiclets. I stick my tongue out at her.

“I like your little space,” she says. “It’s cute.”

I roll my eyes. “You think everything is cute. Even dog poop.”

“Shut up! Dog poop can be cute,” she says, matter-of-factly. “But not as cute as rabbit poop.” We both laugh and my mom calls us crazy.

The doorbell rings.

“Ooh! That’s Katherine!” Beth says, glancing at the clock over the sink. “Her mom was going to drop her off after her basketball game.”

She wants us to surprise Katherine with another guerrilla picture, but suddenly I’m worried about conserving my film. That, and Katherine gets on my nerves. But Beth is so excited, hopping up and down like a little kid who has to pee, I shrug and follow her lead.

Beth readies her hand on the brass knob and I crouch down near the recliner. The bell rings again, this time long and impatient. As Beth swings the door open, I spring up like a jack-in-the-box. We both scream our heads off.

The flash pops, but Katherine doesn’t even blink. Instead, she leans against the door frame in her yellow track pants and

navy Akron High School varsity basketball sweatshirt. Her chapped lips wrinkle around a brown filter, and she takes the last deep drag of her cigarette before casting it off into my neighbor's bushes.

"I could seriously kill my parents," she says. A combination of smoke and her hot breath in the cold air clouds her face.

The three of us head into the kitchen while Katherine rambles off a crazy recap of her parents fighting in the bleachers over who will keep which half of their sectional sofa. Beth gets her a glass of water. I quietly watch the picture develop in my hands. With her stick-straight blonde hair and icy blue eyes, Katherine is too pretty to be a smoker.

Beth taps Katherine on the shoulder to scoot in her chair because she wants to help my mom push the candles into my cake. It's a tight squeeze past the sink, and Katherine moves in, but not nearly enough for Beth to pass. Rather than ask again, Beth goes around the other way. I don't think Katherine even notices. She just looks around the room in wide-eyed wonder.

"Wow, this is like the smallest kitchen I've ever seen."

Oh, right. The new girl's never been in my house before.

"Yeah, well . . ." I say, but decide not to get into it. Anyhow, she's right. The kitchen is tiny. We have to keep the refrigerator in the pantry and our oven filled with pots and pans. When I want an English muffin or a frozen waffle, I have to move the block of knives over to the table so there's room for the toaster on the tiny spread of countertop. It's nowhere near the size of the kitchen in our old house. But Katherine wouldn't know that.

Katherine's only been hanging out with us for a few weeks, since Beth found her crying on the windowsill in the girls' bathroom during fourth period. She said that none of her friends

understood what she was going through, now that her dad had officially decided to move out. Apparently, Katherine tried to have a heart-to-heart with a few of her teammates on the way to a basketball game. The girls half listened to her sad story, between joking with each other and waving to the cars passing by the team bus. When Katherine was finished, they reminded her that, as both captain and their strongest player, she had to concentrate on the court if Akron High was going to squeak out a victory against Barberton. So Katherine pushed everything out of her mind and played her best game of the season. Her teammates congratulated her on the win, then boarded the bus, put on their headphones, and rode back without another word. No one cared about her family problems, so long as she made her free throws. And that's when she decided that she needed some new friends.

That day, at fifth period lunch, Beth told us the story. I found it weird that Katherine would admit all that to a relative stranger, but whatever. Beth said that we couldn't turn our backs on her, even if Katherine wasn't quite a perfect fit with our established group dynamic.

"Says who?" I had taunted in my best wise-ass voice when Beth had brought it up. Maria had laughed at that. And even Beth had cracked a smile. After all, it wasn't like we were looking to increase our numbers. The addition of Maria to our twosome last year, when the principal assigned Beth to be her shadow, caused me enough stress. Sure, it all turned out fine in the end. Maria was into the same kind of things we were — thrift stores, rock music, and rolling our eyes over how dumb the popular kids were. But I still had growing pains and all the other awkward stuff that comes with getting used to someone new. Katherine was a different story altogether. We had nothing in common with her. She was a senior,

and we were all sophomores. She was popular (or at least she used to be), athletic, and pretty wild. We were, well, not. I just had a feeling that Katherine wouldn't be worth the trouble.

But later, at my locker, Beth had pushed my brown hair aside and had whispered into my ear. She reminded me that I knew more than anyone what Katherine was going through with her family stuff. She said there was probably a lot I could do to help her.

I felt like a real jerk. Especially with how great Beth had been to me, single-handedly helping me survive all my own family drama. I couldn't imagine what kind of state I'd have been in if I hadn't had a friend like her looking out for me. So I've been trying, mostly for Beth. But for Katherine too, I guess. Though she doesn't make it easy.

Gravel crunches under a set of tires in the driveway. I grab my camera again and return to the door. This time, I drop to the carpet and point the Polaroid out of our mail slot. As Maria walks up the stairs, I snap a picture. Her knees are brown and meaty and partially concealed by red stripey leg warmers.

Maria blows me an air kiss and sheds her fur-collared old lady coat as she walks through the door, shifting her cell phone from ear to ear. "You can't come! I told you, NO BOYS TONIGHT!" she shouts before flipping her phone closed and rolling her eyes. "Ugh, he is so annoying!"

I nod in sympathy, but the truth is, Maria talks to so many guys, I have no idea which *he* she's currently annoyed with. Maybe it's this guy Davey who graduated last year and works at Square Records. I spotted her draped all over him in the school parking lot yesterday, while I was walking toward the science wing for a lunchtime study session.

I doubt they saw me. I'm very quiet.

"Cool camera! It's a certifiable relic!" Maria says, batting her long eyelashes and raking her fingers through her choppy little bangs. She leans in and whispers in my ear. "Meanwhile, you are totally in for some major birthday madness tonight! So let's down the family cake and get going, okay?"

I skip back into the kitchen. On the way, the lights go out. Mom sets the glowing cake in front of an empty seat at the table. I sit and look out at the four bodies that fill the tiny room. Beth snaps my picture with my new camera and, for once, I smile as big and bright and normal as I can.

"Happy Birthday" is belted out in bad harmony. Even my mom, who has her arm around Beth, is singing loudly. The tiny room is so full of happy off-key noise, I almost don't hear the doorbell ring.

There are five plates, five people. There is no one missing.

I am stuck in birthday cake prison — my gut pressed into the table, the back of my chair scraping our cabinets. Katherine, who is off to the side, grabs my camera from the table and bails mid-song into the living room to answer the door.

Suddenly, I'm five years old. I don't want her touching my present.

The doorbell rings again.

Is that Davey? I mouth to Maria. Maybe a ring-and-run to protest his exclusion from our guest list? She shrugs.

Beth keeps smiling, and drags out the *youuuuuuuu* as long as her lungs will let her.

My birthday candles flicker, begging to be wished upon. I take a deep breath, but get distracted by a flash of white light in the living room.

Katherine bounds back into the kitchen and flicks a freshly snapped Polaroid at me like a Frisbee. “Someone’s here for you.”

Blurry features slowly sharpen in my hands. But I only need to see the gap teeth develop before I know who’s here.

My dad.

A tall, lean man steps forward and fills the door frame, an unlit cigar stub clenched between his teeth. He holds some pink flowers down at his side. They are carnations, I think. The bunch is wrapped up in clear plastic and secured with a dirty red rubber band, like the bouquets you can buy at the gas station or 7-Eleven when you haven’t planned far enough ahead to go to a real florist.

He clears his throat with a thick guttural cough and his eyes lock onto my birthday cake. “Happy birthday, Rubes,” he says, but doesn’t look at me.

“Thank you,” I whisper and scratch a hardened piece of mozzarella off the table.

I used to obsess about what I might say to my dad if I ever saw him again. Not for the last several years, but when I was a kid and things were really messy. I even wrote a never-to-be-delivered letter when I was ten, at the request of the school guidance counselor, who thought it would help my *issues*. It was four pages long, written front and back on bright pink construction paper. I can’t remember much of what was in it, and I’ll never know for sure because Beth and I microwaved the stupid letter until it caught fire so I wouldn’t have to find it again and have it upset me. But I am so totally positive I never, ever wrote *thank you*.

Mom flicks on the light and everything is too bright and too real. I blink a few times, half expecting my dad to disappear.

“Jim,” she says in the same surprised voice reserved for when you run into a neighbor at the supermarket. I wince, hating that there’s even a hint of friendliness in her voice. “You should have called. You . . .” Her face fights both smiles and frowns as she struggles to finish her sentence. There are too many options.

His grip tightens around the flowers and crackles the cellophane. “Yeah. I thought about that.” Still in the doorway, he shifts his weight from dirty work boot to dirtier work boot. He’s afraid to enter the kitchen, and it’s too late to run.

All these long-buried feelings are rising up and churning around, but, thankfully, I can’t seem to hold on to a single painful thought.

Maria’s lips move silently at Katherine: *I think that’s her dad.*

“Who?” Katherine blurts out. Maria slaps her hand over Katherine’s mouth.

“I wanted to get you a dozen,” Dad says, ignoring my friends and sheepishly extending the bouquet in my direction. He doesn’t explain why there are only six.

Beth takes a step back from the table, like the whole scene is too intense for her to be standing so close. We lock eyes for a moment and I silently beg her to tell me what I’m supposed to do. She’s always been the one with all the answers, ready to help me through any tough time I might be having. And I need her now, more than ever before. But her face is frozen. She’s not even blinking.

Dad’s eyes finally settle on my face. Everyone is looking at me now. They all wait patiently for me to give them a cue. To see if this surprise family reunion might be my birthday wish come true. But my candles are still lit and, thankfully, I can’t even

remember the last time I saw him. So I make a wish to keep on forgetting and blow them out.

“Rubes,” he says again. The bouquet sinks slightly. “These are for you.” His voice drips with expectancy. Like I owe him something. It’s almost funny. But I don’t want to laugh. I want to scream.

“THANK YOU!” I shriek at the top of my lungs, suddenly springing to life. My chair leg catches on a buckle in the floor, and I hip check the table to allow for my escape. Droplets of melted wax and ice cream splatter all across the pictures I’ve taken.

Someone gasps. Maybe everyone does. The volume of my voice even freaks me out. These are the only two words I can think of, so I repeat them over and over. “THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU,” as loud as I possibly can, between gulps of air. Each word coincides with a room-shaking stomp as I stalk around the kitchen table until my dad and I are face-to-face.

Measured against him, it hits me how tall I am. And I see more of myself in his face than the gap between my teeth. The steep slant of his nose, the pale green of his eyes, a ridiculously pouty lower lip. I don’t want to notice these things. I don’t want to be like him at all.

I snatch the flowers out of his hand. A few stems break, some petals fall. We are nearly chin-to-chin. The only air I can inhale is what pours out of his partially open mouth. It smells peppery, like his cigars. It’s so potent, like he’s breathing clouds into my face.

We lock eyes and I don’t dare blink. I want to make him sorry that he’s come here.

He wipes his watery eyes with the sleeve of his flannel coat. He is just sorry.

I drop the bouquet and run out of the room.

“Ruby!” Mom calls after me.

Outside, the cold October air pricks my hot cheeks like a thousand tiny needles. My body throbs equal parts adrenaline and embarrassment. For a moment, I don’t know where to go. What I should do.

The front door opens behind me. I turn around and see Maria emerging from my house, keys in hand. Beth comes next, holding my sweatshirt. Katherine pushes past her. I allow myself the smallest sigh of relief. We dive into Maria’s ancient orange Volvo while she turns her key a few times, pounding her foot on the clutch.

An old blue pickup truck blocks us in the driveway. As soon as the engine catches, Maria guns her car onto my front lawn and pulls around it, carving tracks into the dying grass and cakey soil. We jump the curb and the spinning tires squeal against the asphalt.

Maria’s hands strangle the steering wheel. “Oh my God! You scared the living crap out of him!”

“Screw that. You scared the living crap out of *me*,” Katherine mumbles, fumbling for a cigarette.

Maria checks her rearview mirror. It’s strangled with a hundred of those sickly sweet yellow air freshener trees, swishing violently from side to side. “I don’t think he’s following us,” she says, taking a turn way too fast. She slows down and allows a deep breath. “That was insane!”

I shiver off the goose bumps popping up on my bare arms. I don’t know what to say, so I press my lips together and concentrate on breathing.

Beth wraps my sweatshirt around my shoulders. “I’ve been waiting for you to have a moment like that for six years, ever since the day your dad left.”

Then it hits me. It’s over. I finally have closure — the best birthday present I could have asked for. The murkiness of my mind gives way to one clear, honest feeling that I don’t try to hide from.

I want to celebrate.