

underneath



sarah jamila stevenson

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one

The whistle blasts three times and Coach Rydell yells, “Take your marks!” Fifteen seconds more. I step up onto the starting block. My feet are poised on the dark, sandpapery surface, toes hanging slightly over the edge, my body tense and ready to dive into the lane.

I take a deep, slow breath and expel it in a quick puff of air.

Looming in my peripheral vision are all of the other swimmers lined up on either side of me. I try not to look at them; instead I focus on the abstract pattern formed by everyone’s legs on the blocks, the different colors of swimsuits, the faint reflection of the cloudy sky in the surface of the water. I look at people’s toes. Cassie, as always, has a perfect, glossy pedicure. Not me. The light-purple nail polish I painted my toes with is starting to scrape off.

Glancing back up, I see my mother sitting on the lowest bench of the small bleachers on the south side of the pool. For some unknown reason she’s on her cell phone. Why now, when my race is starting? I frown.

Five seconds. Almost time. I push everything out of my mind—Mom, cell phones, even Cassie, who’s in the lane to my left, adjusting her goggles.

The whistle shrieks, and we’re off. It’s my best event, the 100-meter freestyle. My arms and legs cut into the cool water with hardly a splash, and then I surface, sucking in air. It’s only an off-season invitational, but I push my muscles that extra little bit because I know I’ve got this one covered. I barely notice that I’m gradually edging ahead of a girl from Lakewood in the lane to my right. I’m focused on my rhythmic breathing, my legs churning up the water, the exhilaration surging through me.

This time, I’m leaving Cassie behind, and for once that makes me glad. She can go ahead and look perfect all the time. But guess who’s going to win today’s

race? Not Miss Fancy Feet. I file that one away for post-race teasing at Spike's house.

After a perfect flip-turn, I try to add an extra burst of energy for the last length, even though it doesn't matter because I know I'm going to be the first one in by a long shot. Soon the familiar calm comes over me. I'm in the zone, quiet, just me and the other end of the pool beckoning me, coming inexorably closer with every stroke. My happy place. One of the reasons I swim. Really, the only reason I—

ohgod, ohgod—

NO! no. no. no. no—

dead.

I pop my head up, my legs floundering in the pool. My heart pounds. Who's dead? I hear screaming, and my hands go reflexively to my ears as I try to block out the sound threatening to drown me.

The wake of the person in the next lane washes over me, pushing chlorinated water into my nose and mouth. I cough and sputter, my sinuses burning, and take a quick glance around. But I've realized by now that nobody was screaming. It was all in my head. I'm in a race, at the school pool.

Was in a race. A race I am now losing as Cassie swims past me and tags the end of the pool, me belatedly pulling up a few seconds behind her, my head spinning.

Elisa is already there, her long dark hair tucked tightly into a swim cap, ready for the relay in a few minutes. She high-fives Cassie and shoots me a sympathetic smile.

I shake my head. This is not good. I heave myself out of the water and head over to the junior varsity bench, not wanting to meet my mother's eyes. I can see her out of the corner of my eye, sitting like a statue with her cell phone in her lap. She looks shocked. I am, too. Everyone else is looking at me as if I'm mentally unstable. Did *I* scream?

Cassie squeezes my shoulder before sitting down on the bench next to me. "Wow," she says, and pauses for a moment to catch her breath. "That should've been you, not that Lakewood chick." I nod, then shake my head, still in a daze.

Coach Rydell is not happy. Not happy at all. She stalks right up to me, brandishing her whistle, as I'm drying off by the benches.

"Pryce-Shah," she says, with a measuring glare. The dreaded last name. "What happened back there? That was your race. You had it."

"I know," I say hoarsely. I clutch my towel around me, dripping, and shiver a little in the breezy October air. "I ... I don't know what happened." It's a pathetic answer, but it's true.

"Well, I don't want to see it happen again. We're lucky this is the off-season." She sighs, straightening the Citrus Valley Vikings baseball hat that's mashed down over her sun-bleached hair. "And your form was looking so *good* before you just ... freaked out and bailed. I hope this doesn't become a habit, Sunny. I'd hate to see you drop in the team rankings before the season even starts." Coach peers at me over the top of her sunglasses. I swallow hard.

"I'm just—maybe I'm getting sick," I say. Coach makes a frustrated noise and moves down the bench to where Cassie is celebrating with James, who won earlier for backstroke. I should be there, too, but I can't even manage to be happy for my friends.

Maybe it's true. Maybe I *am* sick.

Sick in the head.

Because nobody just spaces out mid-race and dreams they hear voices.

But it's not real, either. Nobody's screaming. Nobody's dead.

As I'm heading to the locker room to change, I catch sight of Mom hurrying to her car to pick up Dad from work. I'm kind of glad I don't have to talk to her about how I messed up my race. She'd say something well-meaning, but she's never been part of a school sport and she wouldn't understand how it really feels, how I didn't simply disappoint myself. I drive home in silence, still trying to figure out what happened, but all I can think is maybe I didn't get enough sleep last night.

I pull our old green Volvo into the driveway next to Mom's hybrid. As I drive up, I notice the mailbox door is open and a big puffy envelope is sticking out. I walk to the curb and grab it. It's addressed to me, from my cousin Shiri. She hardly ever sends me snail mail from college, so I rip it open eagerly.

A small notebook falls out. The hard cover is dark blue, plain. I open the front; turn a few pages. I flip to the middle. All the pages are covered in Shiri's neat, rounded handwriting. I frown, perplexed, and rummage in the envelope for a note or a card or something. As I do, a folded slip of paper falls out of the back of the notebook. I bend down to pick it up.

"Sunny!" My mom is standing in the doorway. There's a strange note in her voice.

"Yeah, Mom." I straighten up, juggling the slip of paper, the notebook, and my backpack.

"I'm so glad you're home. Come in right now—we need to talk."

"Is this about my race? Because—"

"No," she cuts in, and this time her voice wavers. "No, honey, it isn't." She goes back inside, and I'm left standing on the front lawn, suddenly shaking for no reason I can name.

From Shiri Langford's journal, January 18th

My grades again. Dad was livid. Not that I care what he thinks. Why should I?

It's not like I was planning to get a C in Math 75, but everything just seemed like too much last semester. At least this semester I have Existentialist Lit. I don't care if he says it's useless.

But while I was home, THAT happened. Again. I thought it stopped about a month ago, but it happened every night, while I was trying to go to sleep. One night I must have screamed or made some noise, because Mom came in to check on me and stroked my hair like she used to when I was small.

I miss it. I miss my family, the way it used to be when I was little. Before THAT started happening.

two

The air in here smells like sour dirty laundry. The heavy yellow curtains are closed and it's too dim to see much, but I can feel the lump of bedspread bunched up under my right shoulder; I feel my dry, cracked lips and swollen eyes but I don't move. I should probably go downstairs to get cucumber slices to put over my eyelids, but it doesn't seem important.

I haven't gone downstairs in two days.

I haven't changed out of my pajamas. I haven't showered. I haven't talked to Cassie, or Coach Rydell. I haven't called Auntie Mina or Uncle Randall to say ... what? What would I say?

My mom brings in tomato soup, my favorite creamy kind that comes in a box from the organic section of the grocery store. She's even grated cheddar cheese over the top and brought a small plate with a slice of buttered toast. I only make it halfway through. It doesn't taste like anything to me, and when I swallow my throat is sore. I put the plate on my nightstand and pull the covers up to my chin.

"Sunshine," my mom says gently. "Please try to eat something before we leave."

We're leaving in an hour. It's my first funeral.

We're here, and it's awful.

I stare at the dry skin on my knees, at the white specks of lint on my navy blue skirt. In my peripheral vision, everything I see is black—black dresses, black suits, Mom's black crocheted handbag on the floor next to my chair. Dark wood-paneled walls.

All I want to do is go home and crawl back into bed. Mom squeezes my hand and doesn't let go, as if she's afraid I might bolt. Her hand is freezing, and her elaborate silver wedding ring dents my skin.

Of course, it isn't technically her wedding ring, since my parents didn't "technically" have a wedding. Instead, they eloped on the beach during a yoga retreat in Santa Cruz. And since both sets of grandparents are holding grudges about that, now I only "technically" have grandparents. You know; on holidays and birthdays.

And funerals.

"We are here to console one another during this time of grief and to remind ourselves of our love and respect for Shirin Alia Langford." I jump as the chaplain's voice blares out of the speakers that sit on either end of the dais.

"This young woman was just twenty years old, but she was universally loved by family and friends alike ... blah blah blah dee blah." The chaplain is obviously using a pre-fab introduction, something he downloaded off the Internet or pulled out of a file folder. His reedy voice rises and falls, punctuated by frequent sighs. I can't help but wonder if that's rehearsed, too. It makes me angry. It seems so insincere, so flat and empty and forced.

When Shiri first decided to go back east to Blackwell Cliffs College, it felt like part of me was getting ripped away. I knew she wanted to get as far away from her family as possible, but she was pushing me aside, too.

I was furious. I imagined the East Coast turning all her familiar Southern California habits into something I couldn't recognize, some uptight, work-obsessed go-getter with a New York accent and no more interest in me.

Little did I know how much she really would change. Little did I know that my anger then would be nothing compared to now. When she choked down all that pain medication and drove off into the mountains, did she even think about what would happen to the rest of us? Is she somewhere out there looking down at us, regretting what she did, or worse, *relieved* she's not here? My teeth ache, I'm clenching them so hard.

Auntie Mina, tiny and forlorn, goes to the front of the room. She starts talking in a small voice about how much Shiri was their little girl, how proud they were of her, and then she breaks down and I can't make out the words through the crying. Uncle Randall and Randall Jr. go up and lead Auntie Mina back to her seat.

Randall Number Two, as Shiri and I used to call him when we were little, is dressed in a dark three-piece suit, his brown hair slicked down and a somber

expression on his face. Uncle Randall's son from his first marriage, his golden boy. The one he always indulges, while Shiri has—*had*—to excel at everything just to get acknowledged.

When Number Two gets up to speak, he manages to stop being an asshole for five minutes and sound like an actual human being. He even squeezes out a few authentic-looking tears for his poor departed half-sister. But I'm not convinced.

I look at Uncle Randall. He sits there rigidly, his face not showing any emotion at all. Auntie Mina can't or won't stop crying.

I don't feel like I'm about to cry. I'm not even sure what I feel.

I guess I just don't understand—not any of it.

I think about the journal Shiri left me, the one that arrived the day we found out about—everything. The note, scrawled on a half-sheet of paper, that fell out of the journal. *Dear Sunny: I don't expect you to understand any of this yet, but we'll always have yesterday ... and today, and tomorrow. Maybe one day you'll figure it out. I never could.*

I squeeze my hands into fists in my lap, digging my fingernails into my palms. I don't know why she thought I'd be equipped to figure anything out. She was always the brilliant one. And me—I wanted to be just like her. My whole *life*, practically, I wanted to be like her; to have all the boyfriends, the tennis awards, the scholarships. By the time I started high school a little over two years ago, I was able to bask in her reflected glory, even though she was a senior while I was only a freshman.

Insipid as it sounds, the chaplain was right—everyone did love Shiri.

I didn't just love her, though. I idolized her.

An imam from the local mosque gets up and says a few words at the request of my Pakistani grandparents, Dadi and Dada. On my right, my dad shifts awkwardly in his seat. He's not religious at all; Auntie Mina isn't either, and Shiri certainly wasn't, so the imam's words seem just as false as the chaplain's address.

“No vanity or dark rumors will they hear,” the imam quotes, describing some heaven that I can hardly imagine exists; “only the call, ‘Peace! Peace!’ ”

He rationalizes Shiri's death for my more traditional relatives, reassuring them that she will still make it to Paradise, since she was obviously suffering some mental affliction that made her not responsible for her actions. I glance around.

On the other side of Auntie Mina, Dadi is rocking back and forth in her seat, her gauzy shawl wrapped around her head and tears trickling down her wrinkled, nut-brown face. Dada just sits there looking miserable.

After the lanky, skullcapped imam concludes his part of the ceremony with a brief *sura* from the Qur'an, there's a viewing of the deceased so people can go up and pay their respects. My dad puts a hand on my shoulder as we stand, so I know I can't avoid this.

Even though all my shaking legs want to do is run out of here.

The wooden casket lies on the carpeted dais at the front of the room. The top half of it is open. It's surrounded by arrangements of white and yellow flowers, and black plastic stands holding blown-up photographs of Shiri: her senior portrait with the fuzzy filter that makes her look like a movie star; an action shot of her whacking a tennis ball that appeared in the local paper her junior year. In the tennis picture her long brown hair is tied back in a ponytail, flying behind her as she hits the ball; her tiny features are scrunched in a grimace of concentration.

I stop, reach one hand up, and lightly touch the edge of her senior portrait, my other hand knotted into a fist at my side. In that photo, she's the epitome of calm, her makeup perfect and her mouth curved slightly as if she's smiling at someone off camera. But she's got that little line between her eyebrows that she only gets when she's upset. I wonder what made her so unhappy that day.

I wonder what made her so unhappy, period. She seemed embarrassed about taking antidepressants; she only told me reluctantly, after I found the bottle in her purse while rummaging for hand lotion. I can't help feeling like I should have known, should have been able to figure it out somehow. But how could I? How could anyone?

Earlier today, my mom told me something else I hadn't known. Shiri had been put on academic probation after last spring and would be in danger of losing her scholarship if she didn't get a good enough GPA this fall. Even worse, she'd gotten a stress fracture during a tennis match that left her on the bench for the duration of the season.

"None of us knew that was going on," my mom said this morning, looking at me with red-rimmed eyes across the kitchen table. "She must have been feeling so much pressure. We never want you to feel like you're under that kind of pressure, Sunshine."

I let out a shaky sigh. There was no chance of that happening. Sure, they're always telling me I have to "live my ideals," but I don't think the words "parental pressure" are in their vocabulary. Not the way Uncle Randall put pressure on Shiri. They're probably just glad I'm not like they were at my age, ditching school to smoke pot at the nude beach or whatever. They have nothing to worry about. I'm a swim jock, not a hippie. I have popular friends. I fit in at school. I'm happy there. I am *nothing* like them.

But they've always supported me. I'm lucky, I guess. We don't have money to throw around like my aunt and uncle do, but we live in a pretty nice neighborhood and I go to Citrus Valley High, which is a college-prep magnet full of the "right" kind of kids, as Uncle Randall would put it. The kind of kids that parents love.

Kids like Shiri.

I reach the front of the room. The sickly sweet smell of the flower arrangements almost overwhelms me, but I step up to the coffin, trying to swallow past the huge knot in my throat. I force my eyes to stay open, force myself to look at her. At her body. This isn't really her, says a little voice in my head. She's still back at school, studying in the library or throwing a frisbee with her hair flying in the breeze. Not lying here, her lips artificially pink and her skin powdery and dull with makeup. Not dead.

—*dead. no no no*—

I grind my teeth. I don't want to remember the voice. The swim meet. Not now.

My limbs feel jerky, like they aren't attached to me, as I step down from the dais and stand near the end of the front row of seats. My dad is off to one side, talking quietly with Grandma and Grandpa Pryce, Mom's parents. Cassie's older sister Tessa is on a bench about halfway back, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. She used to be one of Shiri's best friends in high school. It was because of Shiri and Tessa that I met Cassie, the summer before freshman year. Shiri brought me along to a swim party at Tessa's house, and there was Cassie, who loved swimming as much as I did and invited me to go shopping with her for first-day-of-school clothes.

I search for Cassie. She's in the very back, next to Spike, who's looking uncomfortable, and Marc, who's texting somebody. She's frowning at her mother, shaking her head, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. Some people might think she's being cold not coming up to me, but I know Cassie—she's not hard-hearted. She always remembers things like my birthday, like my *cat's* birthday. She's detail-oriented like that. But she's never been a touchy-feely person. She's not good with tragedy.

Who is, though?

Still, I have the urge to run over there. Rip the phone out of Marc's hand, put my head on Cassie's shoulder. Listen to Spike make a dumb joke. But I can't.

I move away, cross the burgundy-carpeted funeral parlor to the ladies' room in the back. There's a small cushioned bench in there, plush like the carpet, and I sit. I stare at the beige-painted wall but I can't bring myself to cry. I feel abnormal and disloyal, but I can't help it. I shake my head, almost violently. That's not her out there.

And she didn't commit suicide. *Suicide*. It's something that happens on TV. Not in real life. Not to *her*.

I can't grasp it. I may not be a religious person. I may not know what I believe. But I can't believe she's gone.

three

I go to school on Wednesday in a fog. I missed Monday and Tuesday. Of course, everyone knows what happened. Gossip spreads quickly at our school.

Failing that, there was always the local newspaper: “Suicide Suspected in Teen Overdose Death.” Just in case you hadn’t heard.

While I was gone, the school counselor held one of those excruciating assemblies where they talk about “what *you* can do if you think someone close to you might harm themselves.” Today, everybody asks if I’m okay. I just nod, keep walking. I feel like they’re all staring at me, at my disheveled hair and shifty eyes, trying to figure out if I’m “thinking of harming myself.”

When I walk into my second-period Honors American Lit class there’s a sudden uncomfortable silence, though I can still hear the clamor, the echo of voices in my head. I feel like plugging my ears. It’s as if people were talking about me in their little pre-class groups and then zipped it the minute I showed up. Even Cassie won’t quite look at me.

Eyes-Front—a.k.a. our friend Marc—does his usual chest-level stare. I automatically cross my arms. At least I know the world hasn’t gone entirely nuts.

Mr. Patrick says, “Welcome back, Sunny. We all hope you’re feeling better.” He puts the emphasis on *feeling better*, just in case there were one or two people still left who didn’t have a clue. I duck my head and slouch into my seat, but I’m sure they can all read it on my face. Still, I try to stuff down my emotions, swallow them so that I can get through the day and go home.

Lunch is even worse. I buy a bottled water from the cafeteria, trying to hide from the curious stares that seem to be everywhere. Then I go back outside to the table where I usually sit with Cassie, Eyes-Front, Elisa, James, Spike, and a few other people from swim team, at the west side of the quad near the popular crowd.

One table away is where Shiri always used to sit before she graduated. Before she left us all.

I try to pretend everything's normal, but Cassie can't resist talking about it.

"Oh, Sunny ... we all miss her so much. It must be so awful for you." She flips her perfect straight blond hair back, reminding me that I'm a few weeks overdue to lighten my own hair. I could see the dark-brown roots in the bathroom mirror this morning when I was getting ready. "Dark Chestnut Blonde" is still sitting on the side of the tub, but I haven't had the energy.

"Yeah, everyone's been talking about it while you were gone," James says through a mouthful of fries. "Even some of the teachers were crying when they found out." He leans against the picnic table, his tall, skinny frame towering over the rest of us.

"At first all we talked about was how you freaked out in the pool," Cassie says. "That was totally weird enough."

"Mr. Lopez asked me if I was okay." I sigh heavily. "I've never even had a class with him. People I don't even know keep coming up to me and talking to me about Shiri." I stare at the ground.

"Doesn't that drive you nuts? I'd be so sick of it," Cassie says in an irritated voice.

I look up at her, curiously. "I guess so. They're just trying to be nice."

"Yeah, whatever. Like they care." She turns away, takes out a tube of lip gloss and starts reapplying it, casually, as if this is the kind of conversation we have every day.

"Harsh," Spike says, laughing. We exchange a wry smile. Classic Cass.

Like last year, when James took a spill that time we all went mountain biking at Lake Arrowhead. All she could do was stand there and pretend she wasn't freaked out by the whole thing, even though everyone else was gathered around James and fawning all over him to make sure he hadn't broken anything.

Still, Cassie's sister was one of Shiri's best friends. I saw how unhappy Cassie was at the funeral. And she knows how I feel about Shiri. I expected she would have something more to say.

The last two classes of the day pass in a blur, all concerned faces and hushed whispers whenever I walk into a room. When the final bell rings, I leave campus gratefully. I get into the Volvo and start driving.

It's too quiet, so I turn on the radio. Dad or Mom must have been using the car last because it's tuned to a classic rock station. I hardly notice the music, just head for home on autopilot, until the Beatles song "Yesterday" comes on. Just like that, there are tears streaming down my face and I'm remembering Shiri's note. *We'll always have yesterday ... Maybe one day you'll figure it out.*

Mascara runs down into my eyes, making them sting. It was one of Shiri's favorite songs. She loved the Beatles. Her other musical tastes came and went, usually according to whatever group of friends she happened to be hanging out with at the time. But the Beatles always stuck around. She was always trying to get me to listen to them, copying playlists onto my computer when I was out of the room: "Wistful Beatles." "Happy Beatles." "Funny Beatles." "Trippy Beatles." On and on.

I went to my first concert with her when I was thirteen and she had just turned seventeen. It was just a cover band playing at an all-ages beach party, but we spent over an hour getting ready, Shiri helping me with my makeup and brushing my hair until it shone. By the time she was done, I looked almost her age. Almost as pretty.

But, squished into the back seat, tall tennis-team guys to either side of me, I still felt small. Shiri sparkled in the front passenger seat, smiling and laughing. I scratched at my eyeliner surreptitiously, pressing my knees together to avoid too much contact with the guys next to me. But it didn't matter. I was going to a concert with high school kids. When I went back to middle school the next Monday, my friends were in awe.

My stomach hurts. I'm having trouble concentrating on the road, so I pull into a Target parking lot halfway home. I drive to a space at the very back, where it's less crowded, and sit there taking gulping breaths until I finally calm down again.

I glance in the rearview mirror. My eyes are puffy and red-rimmed, with traces of makeup giving me raccoon eyes. I pull my hair out of its elastic and try to arrange it around my face so that my eyes don't draw as much attention. I look awful with my hair straggling down like this, like one of the stoner kids who hang around the convenience store near school, but at least nobody can see my face.

I start the car again and head for home. Traffic is heavy and I keep my eyes on the road ahead, the white lane-lines, the light turning from green to yellow to red.

At home, I eat half a small container of fat-free vanilla yogurt before feeling gross, my stomach turning over like I'm going to throw up. I toss the rest of the yogurt, go upstairs, and turn on one of the playlists Shiri left me: "Wistful Beatles." Then I lie down on my bed. The strains of Paul McCartney singing "Let It Be" whisper softly out of my computer speakers. Mom and Dad aren't home yet and the house is still. My tortoiseshell cat, Pixie, hops silently onto the bed, settles next to my shoulder, and starts kneading my upper arm, purring loudly.

I don't know what I would have done the past week without Pixie. That's one thing I always had that Shiri didn't. Her dad doesn't like animals in the house.

When we were kids, Shiri spent months asking for a pet rabbit. Uncle Randall smiled and said he had something special planned. When her eleventh birthday came around, she was positive she was going to get a rabbit. Instead, Uncle Randall gave her an investment portfolio.

Shiri burst into tears. Uncle Randall didn't get it.

"A rabbit only lives for ten years if you're lucky," he said, a frown creasing his forehead. "I'm planning for your future. Your college education. Maybe even a house, if the stock market goes up." Shiri cried harder. Uncle Randall got up and stomped out of the room.

"I can't believe he would say that," Shiri said, wiping her face with her sleeve. Auntie Mina hugged Shiri and whispered, "I know. I'm sorry." I just huddled in the corner of the couch, wishing I were somewhere else.

Later, that type of thing made Shiri frustrated, not sad. Last winter—after taking a women's studies class—she said her mother was still too traditional, that she wouldn't know what to do with her life if there weren't a domineering, paternalistic male in it.

Uncle Randall hadn't wanted Shiri to take that class. He was always trying to butt into her college life, telling her what she should be studying and interrogating her about her grades after every test, just like when she was in high school. I didn't realize this until I started reading her journal. She always acted

so happy when she called or visited, telling me stories about late-night pizza outings and loud college parties with live bands.

But the stuff in her journal—she didn't tell me any of that.

The last time I saw her—just a couple of months ago, before she left for the fall semester—she was giving me advice about college applications for next year. I've gone over the conversation a million times in my head, wondering if I should have guessed something was wrong.

“Don't worry, you can always call me if you need help with the essay, but I know you'll do great,” she said, her brown eyes lighting up. Then the light died and she broke into a brittle smile. “Just pretend you're trying to impress my dad.” She shook her head. I laughed, a little tensely, and flopped back across my bed, eager to change the subject.

“So how about Blackwell Cliffs? What was the application like?” I asked. Her eyes strayed off into the distance and her smile disappeared.

“Blackwell's okay, I guess.” She bit one fingernail unconsciously, though it was already down past the quick.

“What, do you not like it there?”

“I don't ... No, it's great. I just think you'd prefer someplace else,” she said, still not meeting my eyes. It sounded like she didn't want me there at the same college with her, and I felt confused and hurt. Then the moment passed and she pulled a smile back onto her face. “I know you'll find the right school. You're popular and friendly. You'll fit in wherever you go,” she reassured me.

Yeah. Popular. Friendly. Those were words I would have used to describe Shiri. So, why?

Why?

Why?

That one word pounds into my brain like a jackhammer. My lips, my jaw tense into an unfamiliar-feeling rictus, almost a snarl.

Suddenly I'm furious. I pound my fist into my pillow, over and over. I want to scream. I want to yell at Shiri. I had so much I still wanted to ask her about, to talk to her about. I thought she *cared* about me. Enough to stick around.

I should have known after she left us the first time.

I grab the pillow and throw it as hard as I can. It hits the glass of water on my nightstand. The glass falls. Water stains the beige carpet. I pick the pillow up and

throw it again. The bedside lamp tips, crashes to the floor. Pixie streaks out of the room and runs downstairs. My face is hot and I'm breathing hard.

"Sunny, is everything okay?" My dad comes stomping up the stairs, rushing into the room with a look of panic.

"I'm fine, Dad," I say. Strangely, I do feel calmer. Dad picks up the lamp, puts it back on my nightstand, and replaces the shade. Then he turns to me and puts his hands on my shoulders.

"What happened here?" He squeezes a little, gently.

"Nothing." I look down, avoiding his concerned gaze. Water's still seeping into the carpet. What can I tell him? *I lost my temper? I'm mad at Shiri?* No. I can't. I can't bear to have that conversation yet. "I scared Pixie. She knocked everything off the nightstand and ran out."

"Okay," he says, doubtfully, brushing his disheveled black hair out of his eyes. "If you're sure. I'll be downstairs if you need anything." He looks like he wants to say something more, but he just squeezes my shoulders again. I close my eyes. He must see something in my expression, because I feel his hands lift, hear him walking softly out of the room. Thank God. I just want quiet. I go over to my computer and turn off the music.

Usually I like the sound of voices and music around me. Sometimes when I'm home alone I switch on cheesy comedies about high school, the kind my parents hate. Cassie and I watch them while we're doing homework, cracking up at the idiotic one-liners and making fun of how the actors are obviously way too old to be in high school. We haven't done that in a while. Not since the beginning of the school year.

I pick up the now-empty water glass, wondering what Cassie is doing right now. Then I remember I'm currently missing swim practice. Ever since that disastrous meet and everything else that's happened, I haven't felt like swimming. After the funeral, I emailed Coach Rydell to tell her I needed some time off the team. I felt a little guilty, but it seems like too much energy to get my arms and legs to function in tandem.

My body is tensing up again, so I lie back down. Mom is always trying to teach me deep-breathing meditation techniques and I try some of those, inhaling slowly through my nose and visualizing my breath filling my body all the way from my toes to the top of my head. I hold it for a moment and then gradually

exhale, trying to imagine the tension in my body leaving along with the used-up oxygen.

After a while, my mind drifts and I lie there in a stupor. Images swirl through my head, but I keep going back to one memory: Shiri and me as little kids, hiding in a backyard fort made of chairs and bedsheets, dressed like superheroes in pillowcase capes and safety goggles from the garage. She was Wonder Nerd and I was Super Dork, fighting to rid the world of “dum-dums.” Alone and silent in my room, tears flow down my cheeks.

I can't handle this.

I suck in air, desperately at first, gasping, then more slowly and evenly. After a few minutes, my thoughts are quiet again. I focus on the catch in my breathing until it finally goes away, too.

That's when I hear the voice in my head.

Not her, no, no, why? I don't understand why she—

It bursts in like static and then fades away like a radio station, leaving me with only the surge of emotion that accompanied the voice, all grief and pain and loss. My eyes sting, and I feel a pain in my chest like my heart is breaking.

And then my mind is silent again, and I can hear the usual noises of the house and smell some kind of spicy re-heated chicken dish my Dadi sent over, and it's like I'm waking up from a bad dream. I almost felt disembodied for a minute—the voice in my head seemed so *not* me. But it sounded familiar. I must have been dreaming.

I open my eyes and flex my muscles stiffly. Arranging my sun and moon pillows, golden yellow and creamy white plush, I get up and change out of my school clothes, now damp from spilled water. Clean gray sweats are all I can manage before going downstairs. Gray fits the overall mood, though; dinner is somber, and mostly silent. I pick at my chicken biryani, pushing the grains of Basmati rice around my plate with a fork.

“At least eat some naan,” my dad says, putting a piece on my plate. Normally, naan is comfort food, pure doughy goodness only available on special occasions or in restaurants, but I can barely choke it down. Dad, on the other hand, is wolfing down his food, tearing chunks of chicken away from the bone with little pieces of naan and scooping them into his mouth. His shirt is wrinkled and

disheveled-looking, and he's got a five o'clock shadow of dark stubble on his chin and upper lip.

Like me, Mom isn't eating much. Her hair is sloppily pulled back in an elastic, one long, stray light-brown lock dangling unnoticed into her plate. There are dark circles under her eyes and she looks even paler than normal.

"Have some green beans, honey," she says quietly, passing me the dish. "And put some on your father's plate, too, please. He needs the fiber."

Dad looks up momentarily. "I ate some already." Usually he'd make some kind of dumb, inappropriate-for-the-table joke about having so much fiber in his diet he ought to be crapping bran muffins. But tonight he's just quiet.

I sit there, too, and eat green beans one at a time. I'm pretty sure this is the longest meal ever. I can hear the clock ticking in the living room and the sprinkler going outside. A rumbling feeling of frustration starts welling up inside me like an earthquake about to let loose, but I just clench my jaw and put my fork down. I take deep breaths and try to envision a calm ocean.

Calm. Ocean. Calm.

My mom coughs, takes a sip of water, and then says, forcefully, "I just wish she would have told us, that's all. We could have done something."

"I *know*, Mom," I say. "I know exactly what you mean." And I do. All of a sudden, I'm frustrated again, almost uncontrollably so; and sad.

Mom looks at me strangely, her fork halfway to her mouth.

"What was that?"

"What you just said. I was agreeing with you." I eat another green bean since she's looking at me.

"I didn't say anything, honey. You must have been thinking out loud."

But I *know* I heard it, loud and clear.

"No, you just said you wish we could have done something for Shiri," I insist. But she looks so surprised that I'm no longer sure.

"I was thinking something along those lines. Did I say it out loud, Ali?"

"Hm? Sorry," Dad says. "I wasn't listening." He goes back to cleaning his plate, still preoccupied with his own thoughts. I try to go back to my meal, but it's hard. My head is spinning, confused. Full of static fuzz with bursts of coherence like a poorly tuned radio station.

“Poor girl,” Mom sighs. “Poor Mina.” And I’m not sure now if she’s talking out loud or if I’m going crazy.

But as I stare at my mother, her words trickling to a stop, I know it in my bones: It’s in my head. Her mouth isn’t moving, but I can hear her voice *in my head*. Her bewilderment, her grief—they’re filling me up, ready to overflow.

My jaw involuntarily clenches, and my teeth grind together. I shove my chair away from the table and run up the stairs. I can hear my mom’s questioning tone and a mumbled response from my dad. It makes me want to plug my ears.

By the time I get to the top of the stairs, I’m in a cold sweat and I’m shaking. I go into the bathroom, strip off my clothes, and duck into the shower, blasting myself with hot spray. I must have been dreaming. Or hallucinating.

I shudder, despite the warmth of the water and the suffocating steam. The less-appealing explanation is that I’m somehow going crazy. That I’m cracking from the pressure of everything that’s happened.

I get out of the shower and wrap myself in a fluffy towel. My mom’s voice comes through the door, muffled, asking if I need anything. Tea. Aspirin. I say no, I’m fine.

Normally, I’m a perfectly functional person under stress. I even *like* it. Coach Rydell can tell you that. I’m the one she boasts about having ice in my veins before a swim meet. This kind of thing—it’s not me.

I read something in Shiri’s journal yesterday, though. There was something unexplained happening to her, too, a mysterious “that.” “*THAT happened again,*” she’d say, never quite saying what “that” was. But it got worse and worse until eventually she couldn’t take it anymore.

Going back into my room and sitting on the bed, still wrapped in my towel, I glance at the desk drawer where I hid the journal away. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. What if she was hearing voices, too? What if something was seriously wrong with her, and now it’s happening to me? I can’t even fix my mind on that idea—that what’s happening to me isn’t just stress, but something weird.

Really weird.

From Shiri Langford’s journal, January 31st

Another "incident." I was hoping it would stop once I got back to school, far away from everything my dad says and does and how my brother gets everything he wants all the time and my mom doesn't say anything about it. I always thought it happened because of them, and so I couldn't stand being home. Couldn't stand hearing, knowing. Knowing too much. Feeling so out of control.

Yesterday Professor Macken talked about people who enable inequitable behavior by not ever protesting, people who imply tacit agreement with an unfair situation by never expressing their disagreement. And she said well-behaved women rarely make history.

My mother is definitely an enabler.

I don't behave. We'll see if I make history.

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