

His aunt was complaining about a problem she was experiencing with a coworker, "And I just don't understand what I'm supposed to do." His aunt had a cheerful personality that seemed to be always stretched thin, half an hour inside their house, and it evaporated and left only a tired dusting.

His mother stood at the cutting board, unmoving. She had gained a lot of weight since his brother's death, and with her round eyes, flared nostrils, and broad face she was a woman defined by curved lines; a cubist could paint her portrait without a single corner. "Well, can't you go over his head?" It was always interesting for him to hear his mother talk. She gave sound advice, saying the right things at the right times, but it seemed like she was an actor phoning it in. In difficult circumstances, where the path of common sense was elusive she was often silent, or adopted a stoicism that seemed to result from detachment rather than strength.

His aunt pushed her silver hair out of her face, "I suppose. But I'm afraid in the end it'll just be more trouble for me."

"There's no end to trouble on this earth," his mother said.

"Ain't that the truth."

They called him over to the table and he came, dragging out his chair and sitting with them in the sparse, yellowed light of a single old lamp in the corner of the dinette – there was only one overhead light in the whole apartment and that was in the kitchen. They passed him a plate – a sandwich, pasta salad, and potato chips – and began to eat.

The table was square; it was, in fact, the same table he'd hid under years before, as his mother flew down the stairs after a son who had already ceased to exist. No one said anything for several minutes and Ryan glanced under at the space, which was much smaller than it had seemed when he had first crouched there. He thought he could, even from this distance, still smell the carpet, sour with cat urine.

His aunt caught his glance and laid down her sandwich, "You still remember it, don't you baby?" He looked away quickly, like he could escape the question, but she went on, "You knew what'd happened even though you couldn't see it. You heard it, didn't you? Or you felt it."

He gave a vague nod and pushed the last of his potato chips around his plate. It was the most his aunt had ever said to him about it; it was the most anyone had ever said to him about it. He could feel his mother gazing at him, her face expressionless. She was like a time bomb, or an elephant under the rug, something he never talked about but always crept around. She wheezed slightly, and he waited for his aunt to say something else but when nothing came the silence was unbearable, and he said that he'd like to go to his room and was allowed to leave. He stared out his window. The sky was bright and blue and he wondered what it was like to be high up in the air with nothing but white sunlight all around.

The afternoon passed, and as the sun sank into the far horizon he began to think about his date. He didn't know the guy he was going out with. They'd been set up by his friend Laura, who assured him the guy was smart, although even then she had to sweeten the deal with pot before he agreed to go. She'd also said he was cute, but she and Ryan disagreed on what cute was. She'd argued with him once that Elijah Wood was cute, while to Ryan he had a thick neck and bulging eyes. He looked like a maggot.

He went to the living room and curled up on the sofa, trying to read *Foundation*, except that thoughts of what he was waiting for kept interfering. His mother was in her room; he'd already told her that he had a study session with some classmates that evening. He set down his book on the glass coffee table; it was useless. He traced a long crack in the wall with his eyes. Sometimes when it was silent in the apartment he thought he could hear cockroaches scuttling behind the walls. He considered that even a giant maggot could be sweet, and he wouldn't have to worry about being cheated on. He glanced at his watch, 6:10, close enough. He took his jacket off the coat rack and walked out.

Outside the southern spring heat was giving way to cool darkness and a steady breeze. The town's lights cast a wan halo into the evening sky. Ryan got in his car and turned the key. The engine gave an asthmatic cough