

and turned over. There was a loose rattle as though the tired frame were cracking its knuckles. The car smelled of cigarettes because the previous owner smoked. Ryan hated the smell. He didn't smoke; his life wasn't that stressful. The car engine began to idle regularly, and he drove away.

He made it to the restaurant before Ian, and sat on the patio despite the chill breeze. The restaurant was a pretentious affair called The Skyline, and the patio was dotted with miniature old-fashioned streetlamps and hanging plants. Soft jazz was being piped through speakers clasped to poles or set on the ground out of the way. The smell of roasted meat wafted out the double doors.

He tried to think of all the things people said on dates; he'd never been on a real date. When he was 17 he and his best friend had started having sex, and it had turned into a relationship of sorts, what they chose to call marriage and what Lauren later told him was properly called drama. He'd thought before it had started that it would make him feel whole, because that's what people always said love did, but when he looked back on it, it was as if during the whole year they'd been together he'd felt more incomplete than he ever had.

He heard footsteps coming up behind him, and Ian came around and sat at the table across from him. He was tall, with a mass of curly brown hair and blue eyes. He was wearing some kind of cologne that smelled like cedar chips. He did not look like a maggot.

They introduced themselves and opened their menus. Ryan studied his, and tried to concentrate on the jazz music in the background. After a moment the waiter came to take their orders.

"So, how do you know Lauren?" Ian asked.

"We went to high school together. You?"

"I met her at this crazy party."

"Yeah?"

Ian laughed, "Yeah, it was one of those parties where everyone falls asleep on the floor, and you wake up with your leg over someone else and your head under the table." Ryan smiled, and Ian went on, "You don't go to parties, do you?"

"How'd you know?"

"You don't look like the type." He laughed again.

Ryan thought that he laughed too much. It reminded him of his mother once saying about a comedian on television, "See how much he laughs at himself? Not a thought in his head."

Ryan had nodded mutely; he'd heard her say it before, and he wanted to hear the comedian. But now he didn't want to believe that his mother had been right, "Why'd you choose to be an English major," he asked.

"It's what I've always been interested in. Teachers have had a greater impact on my life than anybody, and I just want to give some of that back, I guess."

"That's admirable," Ryan said.

Ian smiled, "It's not like I'm going to be a doctor."

Ryan opened his mouth but nothing came out. He'd intended to say, "What have doctors ever done for me?" But it didn't come out just then. He glanced around the patio instead, which seemed to have emptied. Ian was looking in every direction but at him. Ryan smelled his cologne again - it was a wonder. He'd never worn cologne in his life. He didn't even know any of the brands, but he could learn all that he wanted to about cologne if he wanted. If only he wanted.

The smell of roasted chicken engulfed Ryan as the waiter set their plates in front of them. He refilled their waters with a loud gurgle, and the delicate clink of ice against the glasses. The chicken was covered in herbs and the smell filled Ryan's nose, but in his mouth it tasted dry and salty. He looked back ten years to that afternoon under the table and saw no movement, no desire, no change.

When they were finished they split the check and walked to the parking lot, reaching Ryan's car first. Ian lingered in front of him, "So, that was fun. I can call you later on this week and we can do it again."