

SOUND WAVES

It was ten years to the day since Ryan's brother Andrew fell from the third floor stairwell and cracked his head open on the pavement. He'd been playing near the railing while his mother set down a heavy bag from the 711 to unlock the door. Ryan was inside reading a Star Trek novel. He was nine at the time; his brother was six.

He heard his mother shriek. There was a frantic rattle as she flew down the stairs, and then silence. He wasn't sure what had happened but he set down his novel, careful not to lose his place, and crawled under the kitchen table to wait. Muffled yelling rose from the sour carpet, but the metallic whiz of the air conditioning vent nearby almost drowned it out. He let the hum fill his head. He didn't want his mother to come up. The shriek was something he'd never heard before, and he didn't want to learn what had changed.

When his mother did come up it was only to grab him on her way to the hospital. They sat in a starched and bleached waiting room, his mother on the phone with his father in California. After what seemed like only a few minutes the doctor came out, clean and white-coated and hiding, Ryan thought, a sucker somewhere in his pocket. He spoke to Ryan's mother privately, and then it was all over, no sucker, and they went home. His aunt was waiting for them and put him to bed.

He lived with his mother for nine more years, and she and his aunt cared for him, but she never really recovered, giving up her half-formed plan to return to school and becoming what other kids called a "shut-in." He could never really talk to her. He didn't tell her that he blamed himself for not hurrying to let them in; he'd heard her trying the doorknob. He didn't tell her that in the 7th grade he told people his brother had been murdered so they'd like him. He didn't tell her that in the 9th grade he realized he was gay, and he didn't tell her when, later that same year, he decided to become a psychologist.

When he turned eighteen and won a scholarship to UNC he thought that he could leave it all behind. He thought that he had mourned enough, laughing at a sitcom while eating off a TV tray and realizing he was the only one laughing, or declining invitations to go out and eat or wander around town with other kids out of a fear of the possible guilt, and of the even stare of his mother when he returned.

As the day approached that he would be moving out he began to be curious about what it would be like. He'd never lived in the same room as someone else, and he wondered endlessly about them, about whether they'd be gay, and about what they'd say when they found out he was. He pictured a cramped room with cinderblock walls crowded with his roommate's stuff, his roommate's friends hanging out and disturbing him, laughing or jeering at him. He saw himself falling asleep at night in the library, or wandering the campus grounds on cold nights, huddled under the lifeless sky. In the end he decided it was easiest if he stayed at home, and received a special exemption by citing his mother's mental illness.

So it was that now, ten years to the day, he'd gotten up and driven his mother to the cemetery, and stood with her in the bracing breeze of early spring amid dogwood flowers dripping from an overnight rain, and spoke a few words about missing a brother that he hardly remembered living with, and went home to wait for the night when he had a blind date.

His mother and his aunt began to fix lunch. He sat on the couch and flipped through an old issue of Better Homes and Gardens lying on the coffee table. The television sat in the corner of his vision but he didn't feel like turning it on. He didn't feel like doing anything. The bright sky outside the window hurt his eyes and the prospect of going to his room to sleep, or read, or do nothing held no appeal. He listened to his aunt and his mother talk as they made sandwiches with leftover chicken breasts and mixed up some pasta salad.