

Mary Elizabeth

The radio was playing but Claire couldn't hear it.

Her mom had looked at her for a long time before starting the car. Claire knew she was looking for any kind of emotion to cross Claire's face, any kind of sadness or shock or fear or anger. But instead of feeling more, Claire seemed to have lost feeling altogether. No matter how hard she searched inside herself for some kind of reaction, she couldn't find one. It was as if her body had closed up shop, lights turned off, blinds pulled shut, a sign plastered on the door stating to *come back later*.

So her mom had turned on Claire's favorite station, but adjusted the volume down to 5 – usually the music would be just barely audible, but Claire's ears weren't really working right either. The car bumped along the dirt path and neither of its occupants looked out the window. They both knew they would see enough people crying in the coming days, weeks, months. They didn't want to face that reality just yet.

As they turned onto the paved road, they passed two young girls riding their bikes. Claire watched them through the back window as they receded into the distance, her cheeks warming with anger. How could they act so normal? How could they laugh and enjoy the summer air when everything was so wrong? At times like this, Claire thought, the world should just stop. The earth should just stop turning and everyone should be frozen in time until her brain starts working normally again and feeling returns to her limbs.

But the earth continued turning, the girls continued biking, and still Claire's head felt empty and her body felt numb.

"Honey, please talk to me," her mother said, the first sound breaking through the barrier. Still Claire couldn't find the words to respond. "There was nothing you could have done."

And all of a sudden everything crashed into Claire. The dread lodged itself in her throat, and the shock shot through her veins. She felt helpless with every breath she took but the most prominent feeling – the regret – found its home in her heart and reminded Claire of its presence with a weight so profound it felt as if she were lying down with cinderblocks on her chest.

She couldn't hear the radio but she could hear the screams piercing in her memory. It was just hours ago that Claire had been on her way home from her part-time job at the local swimming pool. She usually took the long way, the safer way by the main road, but she had an essay to write and needed all the time she could get. The short-cut through the woods would save her ten minutes.

"Claire, we're going to get through this," her mom said in the car. "It's a horrible thing that happened but it's not your fault. I hope you know that."

I hope you know that. Her mom, of course, didn't know the weight of these words for Claire. Every time she heard that phrase she thought back to her freshman year of high school. Three years had passed and still she could picture as if it were yesterday sitting in the lunchroom and hearing Mary Elizabeth say these words as she clicked the side of her coffee mug with perfectly manicured fingernails.

At that point freshman year, Claire was still making a weak effort to maintain her friendship with Mary Elizabeth, but she had long since noticed the gradual disappearance of the girl she had once shared every secret with, ridden bikes every day with. The girl she had snuck into her seventh grade crush Ronnie Burke's house with to sip Miller Lites and pretend to like the taste before they were busted by his dad.

Freshman year Mary Elizabeth wouldn't be caught dead with dorky Ronnie Burke. She called herself El now, listened to rap music she had hated the year before, and laughed in Claire's face when Claire told her she might dye her hair.

"Black hair, Claire, are you kidding?" she had said. She took a large sip from her mug, slurping loudly – something that had always irritated Claire but for some reason, in that moment, downright infuriated her. "It would look god awful, trust me. You'd look like some weird emo girl, especially because of how pale you are."

At the time, though Mary Elizabeth's delivery felt abrasive and embarrassing, Claire couldn't help but appreciate the brutal honesty. Looking at herself in the mirror that night, she had to admit that her idol Amy Winehouse's slate-black hair color would not suit her ivory skin and light Irish freckles. She abandoned her spur of the moment idea, began to appreciate her long carrot-brown strands, and felt a faint sense of gratitude toward Mary Elizabeth for saving her from a big cosmetic mistake. That gratitude lasted for almost two weeks until one day Mary Elizabeth walked into school, her skin – a few shades lighter than Claire's own – positively glowing in contrast to her hair, which was freshly dyed the color of midnight.

When Claire had confronted Mary Elizabeth about it, her former best friend shrugged it off. "This has nothing to do with you wanting to dye your hair," El said in a sugary voice. "I hope you know that."

Claire and her mom came to a red light. Claire steeled herself and continued to stare straight ahead, hoping her mess of emotions on the inside would stay on the inside, at least for now. She couldn't start crying. There was a time and a place for that, and it didn't feel like right now. Especially because the tears had already started rolling down her mom's cheeks.

Mary Elizabeth had not been to Claire's house for a while, but she had practically lived there when they were young. The two girls were inseparable, a kindergarten connection that had blossomed into a friendship resembling more of a sisterhood. Neither Claire nor Mary Elizabeth had any real siblings, but the bond they shared made it easy to forget that. They would take turns going home on each other's bus each day in elementary school. Every time they came to Claire's house, they would drop their backpacks off in the foyer and run straight to the playset in the backyard, which had been handmade by Claire's father, the carpenter, a few years before.

The girls spent hours making up stories and taking on false personas: adventurers who needed to conquer the monkey bars to find the hidden treasure, or pirates who walked the plank by descending down the yellow slide. Claire could feel her father's presence each time she was out there on the playset. He had finished building it just days before he died in the awful car accident. He had carved his and Claire's initials into the dark wood, and Claire made sure to brush her fingers over the carving each time she and Mary Elizabeth played outside.

The closeness of the friends also led to the formation of a bond between Claire's mom and Mary Elizabeth's mom, Mrs. Conner. It was hard for the mothers not to become friends themselves after so many carpools, drop-offs, and pick-ups. Before long, the four of them would often spend afternoons together at the park, walking around the mall, or eating ice cream at Frankie's Parlor.

Those were some of Claire's favorite memories – the "Girls' Days" they liked to call them – and they lasted until middle school. Mrs. Conner stopped being so available when she and Mary Elizabeth's dad decided to file for divorce. And Mary Elizabeth didn't like going to Frankie's Parlor so much anymore when she started to notice the way Frankie looked at her mom and the way her mom looked back at him.

The after-school get-togethers started to take place more frequently at Claire's house than Mary Elizabeth's, and though both of them noticed this neither addressed it. It was better this way. Claire's mom made sure snacks were waiting for them when they walked through the door each day. She let them watch T.V., and if Mrs. Conner told Mary Elizabeth she needed to stay late, Claire's mom made sure they both got their homework done. She always told the girls how much she loved having two daughters.

It was no wonder that Claire's mom was crying in the car. She hadn't seen Mary Elizabeth in a few years, but at one point she was like a mother to her when Mary Elizabeth's own mom forgot what it meant to be one. Claire wondered if this was what was going through her mom's head as she absentmindedly rolled through a stop sign. She wondered if her mom was thinking about the time she brought Mary Elizabeth to the hospital when she had an allergic reaction. Or about the time when she picked up Mary Elizabeth from her gymnastics practice a half hour away because Mrs. Conner had accidentally scheduled a hair appointment.

As if on cue, they drove past Zebowski Automotive, the body shop a few blocks from Claire's house. It was owned by Reggie Zebowski, who'd moved his family to town during Claire's and Mary Elizabeth's eighth grade year.

Morgan Zebowski almost instantly became the icon of Garlington Middle School. She had tanned skin, waist-length blonde hair, and a thick southern accent. Boys immediately noticed her maturity compared to the other eighth grade girls. And while the boys wanted her, the girls wanted to be her. She was sickly sweet, captivating, and always willing to tell her crazy stories about how her brother got caught growing weed in his apartment or her own run-ins with the police.

Claire nearly fell into her trap one day when Morgan decided to sit with her and Mary Elizabeth in the cafeteria. Morgan had the girls in humor-induced tears after telling them the story of almost being caught by a janitor at her old school when she and her friends decided to streak one night on the baseball field. But while Claire's interest in Morgan had only been piqued, Mary Elizabeth fell head over heels. She talked non-stop about befriending the new girl, started picking up on her clothing trends, and began using words and phrases Morgan liked to say. And her persistent following seemed to pay off. Morgan noticed the fan she had in Mary Elizabeth, and decided to take her under her wing. Claire would never forget the first day Mary Elizabeth had used "Can't, hanging out with Morgan, sorry!" as an excuse not to come to Claire's house after school.

As the eighth grade days ticked by and Claire saw her best friend less and less, she tortured herself wondering what Morgan Zebowski had to offer that she didn't. Sure, she was pretty and hilarious and interesting. But could their newfound friendship compare to the years of history Claire and Mary

Elizabeth had? This question continued to torment Claire as the girls entered high school and the string holding together the old friends frayed more and more.

It wasn't until late freshman year that Claire got her answer. She was working on stage crew for the musical, and it was the night before the first show. She and two others had stayed at the school until midnight trying to solve an issue with the lighting, and when they were finally let out Claire was exhausted. The two others were seniors who lived far from her, and though they offered Claire a ride she told them to go ahead and she'd call her mom. As she stepped out the back door into the staff parking lot, she heard muffled whispers and laughter coming from close by.

"Oh my god, you're a savage," whispered one voice. Claire recognized that voice.

She turned the corner to find two figures dressed in black crouching behind a dumpster. One of the figures had tried to stuff her hair beneath a hat, but long blonde strands were coming loose.

"What are you guys doing?" Claire asked. The figures gasped and whipped around, then sighed with relief when they noticed who was talking. That's when Claire registered the brick wall they were facing and the cans of spray paint in their hands. Across the wall, written in large red letters were the words: MR. BRYANT AND MRS. NICHOL FUCKED IN THE EAST STAIRWELL.

"What does it look like we're doing?" Morgan whispered. Mary Elizabeth laughed, and Claire's heart pounded angrily. "Now can you, like, get away before you get us caught?"

"Did they really have sex in the stairwell?" Claire asked.

Morgan let out an exasperated groan. "Hayden Burke saw them."

Claire kept from rolling her eyes. Hayden Burke was about the least reliable source there was. He would say anything to start trouble, or to get any kind of attention.

"But Mrs. Nichol's married. I think she has young kids." Even though Claire was convinced the words on the wall weren't true, she could foresee the trouble they would cause. She didn't want Mrs. Nichol to have to go through that. Claire had her for biology, and she had gone out of her way to help Claire prepare for the last exam.

Mary Elizabeth stood up and faced her old friend, and though she was wearing a ski mask Claire could make out her light blue eyes. "Well then," she said, her voice sounding more sad than malicious. "She should fucking pay."

Claire understood then. She thought suddenly of the time when Mrs. Conner had missed Mary Elizabeth's gymnastics meet because had taken a "spontaneous road trip" with Rickie from Rickie's Parlor and "just simply forgot." So Claire understood, but she still didn't think it was right.

"Guys, I think you should take that down."

"You're no fun, Claire," said Morgan. "You need to learn to lighten up or else nobody's going to like you."

Claire wondered how she could ever, even for a moment, have wanted to be Morgan Zebowski's friend. Her funny stories couldn't come close to making up for the fact that she was a total bitch. She shook her head and turned to leave when Mary Elizabeth's voice came from behind her.

"And you better not tell anyone about this," she hissed. "Not even your mommy. I know how you tell your mommy everything."

"Claire, I swear if you say something, someone's getting smacked." Morgan said. She twisted and contorted her s's, mimicking the speech impediment Claire's mom struggled with. Claire could feel her blood boiling, her fingers tingling, itching to do some sort of damage to Morgan's made up face. She could take the abuse herself, but would not tolerate anyone making fun of her mother. "Don't you agree, El?" Morgan added.

Mary Elizabeth went quiet for a moment, avoiding eye contact with Claire. Claire thought maybe this would be a turning point, maybe her friend would realize what a nasty person Morgan was and all hope for salvaging their companionship would not be lost. But instead Mary Elizabeth just chuckled and responded in the same ridiculing manner, "Yessss, Morgs. I agree."

Claire and her mom spent the rest of the drive in silence, though Claire could hear the hitches in her mother's breath. She registered an inappropriately upbeat song playing quietly on the radio. When she reached over to turn it off, her mom flinched, as if a statue had suddenly moved in front of her. Claire wished she were a statue. She wished she were sitting in a museum somewhere, unmoving, unaware of the world happening around her. But instead she had to face the world, which felt right now like a dark tunnel so long and narrow that she couldn't see the light peeking out the end.

Finally they pulled into their driveway. It felt eerie to Claire that everything appeared so normal and unchanged – the small white house, the neat front yard. This was exactly the way their property had looked in photographs from the day they first moved in – when Claire was just an infant. Of course, some minor changes had been made over the years. At one point they had an exquisite wooden mailbox, another of Claire's father's hand-made creations. She smiled thinking back to when her dad had decided that his top priority would be to make their family the best mailbox in the neighborhood. He spent weeks working on it, staying in the garage for hours after work sawing, sanding, and painting until it was complete. He was so proud finally putting it out front, his best effort on display for family and friends.

Claire loved that mailbox. It was beautiful and sturdy and long-lasting. It could put up with wind and storm, but unfortunately could not withstand the blow from a baseball bat.

One Saturday night, this past autumn of her junior year, Claire could hear the sounds of exaggerated laughter and screeching car brakes coming from outside. She ran to her bedroom window and yanked open the blinds. A beat-up black Sedan swerved down her street, the limbs of its passengers hanging drunkenly out the windows. Claire knew that car – it belonged to Hayden Burke, the same Hayden Burke who spread the nasty rumor about Mr. Bryant and Mrs. Nichol.

Hayden was driving, and Claire could make out three other figures in the car. A guy in the backseat was holding a metal bat in one hand and a beer can in the other. As they made their way toward Claire's front yard, she heard him shout "You've got this one, El!"

Claire's heart jumped to her throat as she watched the passengers scramble and switch places, the guy handing the bat to a girl with wild black hair. Mary Elizabeth took a swig from her beer can then threw it on the lawn. She gripped the bat in both hands, and leaned out the window as Hayden slowed the car's speed. Claire couldn't watch as Mary Elizabeth swung, but she could hear the reverberating thud

of metal on wood. The other passengers whooped, and a voice Claire knew belonged to Morgan Zebowski screamed "Doesn't it feel great?!"

The old friends had not spoken for a long time. After Claire had caught Mary Elizabeth and Morgan vandalizing the school that one day freshman year, she knew that their friendship was officially done, the string finally frayed to the point of breaking. But since then, as far as Claire knew, there had been no incidents or interactions that would cause Mary Elizabeth to hate her. She thought they just had different interests now, and associated with different people. Claire had her drama friends, Mary Elizabeth had Morgan and the few boys like Hayden who still found them appealing. Claire worked hard on her homework and college applications, Mary Elizabeth decided school wasn't worth it and drank at the bridge by Foe's Passing River every weekend.

That's what angered Claire so much this autumn night. What had she ever done to Mary Elizabeth for her to show such animosity? Mary Elizabeth knew the story behind the mailbox and she knew how fond of it Claire was. At least, the old Mary Elizabeth did. The new Mary Elizabeth – El – had black hair and no cares.

Before, Claire had been loyal to her old friend. She gave Mary Elizabeth the benefit of the doubt and stayed quiet rather than speak up when Claire was aware of the stupid things she did with Morgan. But Claire felt no trace of loyalty to this new El. In her state of rage, brought on full force at the sight of the demolished mailbox and damn beer can leaking onto the flowers her mom had planted, Claire picked up her cell phone and dialed 911.

She told the dispatcher about the black Sedan and the smashed mailbox. She told him about the beer cans and the swerving car. She told him that she saw four passengers, but the only one she could identify for sure was Mary Elizabeth Conner.

"I'm just going to stay out here for a minute," Claire told her mom as they got out of the car.

"Do you want to talk?"

"No," said Claire. "Not yet."

Claire's mom gave her daughter another long, searching look before nodding and heading inside. Claire walked around to the back of the house and sat down on the bench by the forest's edge, placing her lifeguard backpack next to her. She closed her eyes, soaking in the warm breeze and the sounds of small animals scuttling in the woods behind her. She tried to imagine a timeline, thinking of how she would feel waking up tomorrow, then the next day, then in a month, then in ten years. Would the cinderblocks on her chest ever disappear? Would she ever be able to close her eyes again and not picture the look on Mary Elizabeth's face, as if it were tattooed on the inside of her eyelids?

A shudder ran through her body and she opened her eyes instantly. The first thing she saw was the large bare patch on the ground in her backyard, sticking out in contrast to the freshly mowed, green grass surrounding it. Claire's stomach turned violently, and for a moment she felt as if she were going to throw up.

Junior year was rough for Claire after the night she called the cops on El and the posse. Even though a lot of their classmates hated El and Morgan already, snitches were considered the bigger enemy.

Claire became the uncool, un-fun girl who could kiss good-bye her chances of ever being invited to a get-together with alcohol. Her close friends stuck by her, though, and she wished could just not care about the whispers in the hallways and the laughs behind her back. But Claire was human, and her new position as the famed outsider in school began to take a toll.

She heard in passing the punishments the posse received after they had been caught: hefty fines, license suspensions, and even worse consequences for Hayden who had been charged with a DUI. Claire couldn't care less about what happened to Hayden, Morgan, or the other passenger who turned out to be low-life senior Jake Webster. But though Claire wished she felt indifferent toward what happened to El, she couldn't help but register a twinge of regret knowing what El was going through as a result of the incident.

Just a few weeks earlier, on a Sunday afternoon in late May, Claire was doing homework on her front porch when a shiny silver convertible rolled up in front of her house, music pumping so loudly she could feel the vibration in her bones. Morgan Zebowski was driving, and Hayden sat beside her in the passenger's seat. When the car pulled to a stop, Claire could see Hayden clutching a joint between his index and middle fingers, the breeze blowing the white cloud that leaked from his lips into the sticky air. Unsurprisingly, El sat in the back, her feet propped up on the console between Morgan and Hayden. Her black hair was unkempt and wild, like a lion's mane, and she had to sweep it to the side when she turned to face Claire in her yard. El sat next to Jake Webster, who was also smoking and wearing a backwards baseball cap. Claire wondered how he kept it on while riding in the back of a convertible. *The idiot probably glued it to his head*, she thought, amused.

"Hi, Claire!" El called out, with a wide, mirthless grin on her face.

"What are you doing here?" Claire replied, setting her homework down, heart pounding. Interacting with El after so long felt foreign. Claire had no idea why they were here, but she knew without a doubt it was not to make amends.

"Just thought we'd stop by to say hello," Morgan hissed. She was also smiling. She put the convertible in park and killed the engine.

"I haven't been here in so long," El said, getting out of the car. "Can we see your backyard? I wanted to show them how I spent so many days as a kid."

The rest of the passengers got out and slammed their doors. Hayden and Jake tossed their joints on the ground and stomped them out. Morgan was getting something from the trunk.

"Maybe another time," Claire said. Her hands shook.

El looked at Claire's empty driveway. "Your mom isn't home is she? Too bad, I wanted to say hi."

"I really think you guys should go."

"Aw, come on C," El said. "We'll just be a minute. I just want to show them the playset!"

Claire knew in that moment that no matter what she said or did, she couldn't stop them. Hayden, Jake, and Morgan started walking toward her backyard. Morgan was carrying a gallon water jug. Claire moved to get ahead of them, but El grabbed her old friend by the arm and held her back.

"We haven't spoken in so long, Claire," she said. Claire stared at her, and despite the caked on makeup, thick eyeliner, and black bangs framing her face, her eyes were just as they always had been: wide, light blue, and sad.

"Yeah, I know," replied Claire. She heard Morgan saying something from her backyard, but when she tried to release herself from El's grip, El just held on tighter.

"We were so close," El said. "In elementary and middle school I thought we would be friends forever."

Claire managed a nod but wasn't really listening to El. What were they doing in her backyard? She hoped they weren't smoking. She didn't want to have to explain it to her mom.

"But we just grew apart, I guess," continued El. "I mean, I always thought we'd go through high school together and maybe even go to the same college!" She laughed, and Claire winced as El tightened her grip even more. "That was stupid of me to think, though. You're so much smarter than I am! It's probably because your mom always quizzed you with those flashcards. Remember the flashcards? Maybe my mom would have done that for me too if she wasn't so busy fucking Frankie Martin."

"Mary Elizabeth-" Claire started, but was cut off.

"So, yeah, the same college thing would never work out," El resumed. "For a little while I was worried I wouldn't be going to college at all! If any place ever accepted an idiot like me, fat chance my parents would pay for it, you know?"

Claire heard Hayden laugh. But she knew El wasn't finished.

"So when I heard about my gymnastics scholarship, I just about died," El said, still smiling that strange smile. Dread started seeping into Claire's bones.

"Listen, El-" Claire tried again, with no success.

"No, how about you listen Claire! That scholarship was going to change things. I could finally do something with my life. My stupid mom told me she was proud of me, you know how long it's been since I've heard that?" El's eyes filled with tears. "But now, because of you, I don't have that anymore. My life has gone to shit once again because of a goddamned mailbox."

Suddenly, Claire smelled something and her body lost feeling altogether.

"I lost something important to me because of you," El whispered, releasing Claire's arm. "Now I'm just returning the favor."

The black smoke billowed high in the air, and when Claire finally reached her backyard the damage had been done. Monstrous flames engulfed her beloved childhood playset, another hand-made creation from her father. The water jug lay empty on its side and Jake returned the lighter to his back pocket. "The fire department is on its way, sweetie," Morgan said. "Wish we could stay, but I actually have a thing."

The four turned and ran from the house, but not before Hayden whispered in Claire's ear, "Tell the cops on us. You saw where it got you last time."

El and Morgan's cackling and the rev of the car engine served as a morbid soundtrack to the action unfolding in front of Claire, her childhood memories igniting and burning, disappearing among the ashes as Claire looked on too shocked to cry and too angry to move.

The all-too-fresh memories were suffocating Claire as she sat on the bench, so she decided to make her way inside. She slipped past her mom who was sitting head in hands at the kitchen table and went up to her bedroom. As soon as Claire lay on her bed, the events of the afternoon began to cross her mind in flashes, as if she were watching a movie with some strips of the film cut out.

Claire had clocked out of her job at the pool. She decided to cut through the woods. She prayed that she wouldn't run into anyone from her school at Fool's Passing Bridge which hung haphazardly over the river. It was a well-known spot for high schoolers to visit on the weekends to get drunk and smoke weed.

The summer light was fading fast behind the trees. Her mind's space was occupied with stressed thoughts of her essay and getting home before dark. Suddenly, these thoughts disappeared and her brain was consumed with alarm upon hearing frantic calls for help coming from a short distance away. She found Morgan Zebowski on the bridge, tears streaming down her face. Morgan said something with the words "El" and "fell" and "drowning" and "you're a lifeguard do something."

Claire looked below. She saw a flash of black hair and heard screams cut short each time the current pulled her under. In that instant, her mind racing, her hands shaking, her body sweating, she thought of her dad. He was the first one to tell her about the notoriously strong current of Fool's Passing River. They hiked on a path along the river a lot when Claire was younger. She loved listening to his stories. She wished he were here right now, he'd know what to do. But he was gone, and the last trace of him – his initials – had recently turned to ash.

"It's a death wish," Claire said to Morgan. "If I go down and try to save her I won't make it either."

She told Morgan all they could do was wait for help to come. But when help came, it was too late. Morgan was hysterical. Calls were made. People gasped and cried. Everyone told a frozen Claire that there was nothing she could have done.

Claire shot up from her lying position on her bed, her whole body trembling. The cinderblocks weighing on her chest felt heavier than ever. She reached over and grabbed the lifeguard backpack she was required to have with her at all times on the job. Slowly, she unzipped it and emptied its contents.

Sunscreen. Eight dollars. And a small, orange life preserver ring, designed to throw into the water to save a person from drowning.