

The Ride

Looking at Lena's leg beside mine makes me angry. I'm riding bitch between her and Jillian, who is sleeping. The quiet of the ride forces me to stare at my leg and Lena's side by side. Hers is thinner and tan; mine has more muscle and probably more fat. Her white shorts accentuate it, but still. Her legs are spread a little, and her back is stretched away from the seat. My legs are crossed, matching my arms, and I'm sick of comparing our legs and our lives.

I sit there for hours, or minutes, before Tara remembers to turn on the radio as we pass a gas station. "Hey, can we go back there and get something to drink?" I ask. Sipping out of a straw will give me something to do for the next three hours.

Tara breathes out heavily, "Could you have mentioned that before we passed it?" She is always inconvenienced.

I remember the time we all went shopping before our first day of high school. We each had an idea of what we wanted to wear. We figured this choice would be one of our most important. Tara found a jean dress before lunch. From that point on, she was done. Every store we entered, every outfit we tried on, was torture. By 2 o'clock, she had called her mom

for a ride.

Tara does a U-turn, and we pull into the gas station. I get out of the car and call shotgun. Marie pretends she doesn't hear me, but I know she'll be in the back when I return. I get a Diet Coke, Skittles, grapes, and cigarettes. When I come back, Jillian is awake, and the radio's blaring. I lay my purchases down and smile at Marie, who responds with a glare. She already hates being where I was.

Tara and I left her house at 7:00 a.m., picked up the rest of the girls, and were on our way by 7:30. Pretending it would be a regular school day, we wore backpacks and smiles. The closest clinic is four hours away. Tara went last year with her older cousin. She says you can't miss it. We live miles away from any excitement. But if it exists, she knows how to get there.

I light a cigarette and look at Jillian in the side mirror. She's looking back at me.

"So what are you doing this weekend?" she asks, trying to break the silence. I can barely hear her over the radio and am glad to have an excuse to turn it down.

"Nothing," I say in a hopeless tone, wishing she would say something encouraging. I've thought about my options for months, and this is the only real one I have. It's not that I should be happy about it, but I'm not really sad, either. All I feel is guilt. She agrees that she is also doing nothing and suggests we all do that together.

Tara is going 10 miles over the speed limit and smoking my cigarettes like they're hers. "Aren't districts this weekend?" she asks Jillian, who answers, "No," before listening to the whole question.

"Then when are they?" I ask. She says they're next week, which is prom, and everyone is quiet. "Are you missing districts for prom?"

Jillian is captain of the varsity soccer team for the third year in a row. She's going to college next year on scholarship. Her parents bred her

to be a champion, Wheaties and all. She spends hours each day kicking a ball into a net while her Dad watches, cheering her on. He is almost disgustingly interested in her. Their house is covered with trophies, medals, and pictures of her in uniform. Her bedroom is even plastered with soccer ball wallpaper. She tried to get them to change it, but her dad says it might change her focus.

The district games are the biggest of the year. If they win, they become the second biggest games because then the team goes to the state championship. It's not a game the captain can miss, not something Jillian would miss, anyway.

"Jillian?"

She looks at me, straight-faced. "It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters," I begin, as everyone in the small car stares somewhere else. "Are you kidding me? Why wouldn't you go? This is your last year, and all the recruiters will be there. You might get more offers." She's still looking at me, and now everyone else is, too. "Jillian, your dad is going to kill you. Why would you do this, ruin your future?" I know I should stop, but I can't. I'm giving her the lecture I deserve, and it feels good.

"Nic, don't worry about it," she says. "I'm fine. It's not like I don't have other offers. It's one game."

I still don't get it and continue. "You are ruining your chances at a better school. What if UCLA is there and you aren't? Then you've blown it. And what, all because of a stupid prom to which you don't even have a date?" She looks a little upset, so I think I got through to her.

"Nicole," she begins but pauses. "I'm not going. The end."

But it's obvious I'm not finished. Tara turns her head away from the road and toward me.

"They don't schedule major events together, Nicole. Districts are this weekend, which means they would leave today, which means she can't

go because she's here."

I feel like vomiting. I wonder how it's possible for me to be Valedictorian yet still so dense. Jillian says it's really not a big deal, and she'd rather be here with me, with us. I begin to say how sorry I am, and she tells me to stop; "Don't worry about it." I feel like a bad friend and a bad person, especially in comparison.

Lena interrupts my guilt trip to give us a play by play of her upcoming prom date with Jeff Watson. She details her dress, shoes, hair, and then proceeds to outline the date. "He's taking me to Crossroads. He made reservations like a month ago, and then we're going to prom for a little while, and then he's got a room at the Hilton. It's on the 5th floor, where everyone is going to be. I told him I wanted a daisy corsage because my dress is yellow. Won't that be cute?"

No one responds to her for various reasons, the overwhelming one being that Lena is really annoying. She means well, she's nice, she's been our friend forever, but she's really annoying. Her family is incredibly rich and equally snobby. They own half of the property in our town. They do nothing all day and drink cocktails at night. Lena turned out pretty okay, considering. She was the homecoming queen. She is barely graduating high school but will inevitably go to a great university and be wealthy forever. She will never know what it's like to want for anything. This is another reason we usually don't respond to her. We love her, but we just don't want to. I have my own reasons this time.

She goes on for about 10 more minutes before finishing with, "Anyway, you guys can come if you want, I mean to the hotel, that would be really cool. I'm sure Jeff wouldn't mind. The whole football team has rooms on the 5th floor."

We drive in silence until Tara has to pee, and we stop at another gas station. I haven't eaten any of my food yet, but I want to get out of the car, so I go in for more. While I'm deciding between chocolates, a little girl

walks in behind her mom and points to the aisle where I'm standing. She wants some candy too. She has brown hair and eyes, like me. I imagine her as mine and wonder if this is what I'm destroying. I watch her deciding, picking up different types of candy and putting them down. I imagine that I am her mom, and I'm telling her to just pick one. For a moment I smile and change my mind.

I've been doing this for months, changing my mind. I know I cannot have a kid. I'm 17. I have a part time job at a grocery store and no money in savings. I don't even like kids, really. I'm going to college after graduation, but only because of the Valedictorian scholarship. My mom has two jobs, two kids, and no husband. She wouldn't be able to support another child.

I decide on a Hershey Bar and leave the mother and daughter behind. I pay for the candy and walk toward the car where Marie has switched with Jillian and is no longer bitch. They left me the front seat, so I climb in and unwrap my candy. Lena starts up again about Jeff, and I tell her to shut up, that no one cares. I nod toward Jillian and try to make Lena believe that I'm silencing her for Jillian's sake. In a way, I am. I'm sure no one wants to hear about her prom date. I know I don't.

Lena's tall and tan and rich and blonde. She has the perfect life, and she always will. I never realized I felt this way about her until the Jeff thing happened. I don't know if I even did. Now things are different. Every time I see her, I want to yell at her, tell her she's dumb, and tell her the truth. But it really has nothing to do with her and little to do with truth. Telling her would be my revenge for her being perfect.

I've loved Patrick my whole life. We met the first day he moved in next door. We played on the swing set my grandpa built and talked about our favorite games and how he used to play in the woods by his old house. After that first day, I can't remember him not being there. We shared our first kiss when we were 7 and had been kissing ever since. But *only*

kissing.

I've been afraid of getting pregnant since before I knew what it meant. My mom always made it out to be this horrific event. My grandmother attached it to biblical damnation stories in Sunday school. I even got a "True Love Waits" videotape for my 15th birthday. As I grew older, I realized what they were trying to do and appreciated it. I had never had sex, so I wasn't missing anything, and Patrick never seemed to mind. We did other things, and it wasn't an issue until we were juniors. Everyone was having sex except us. At first, he was sensitive to my feelings, then suggested condoms and birth control, and then just got angry. I told him he could tell everyone that we were having sex, which is what he started doing. That worked for a little while, but then he really wanted it. By the beginning of our senior year, it was over. We were still dating, but sex had torn us part.

One night we were supposed to meet at my old swing set to discuss our futures. There were so many things we needed to talk about. I had been thinking about the sex thing too, and was ready. Things had been going bad between us, but I loved him and knew I always would.

I sat on the swing looking down at the grass for what seemed like hours. When he didn't show, I knocked on his door and found out he went to a party. I called his cell phone, but he didn't answer. I left a message and then called Marie. She picked me up, and I told her what had happened. She assured me that he must have forgotten. I didn't mention my decision about sex because, as a part of my sex-free plan, I'd told her we were already doing it.

The party was in the woods outside of Jeff Watson's house. When we got there around 10 p.m., everyone was already drunk. I didn't see Patrick anywhere, so I started drinking with Marie. We had 6 or 7 beers from a keg that was mounted on the back of Jeff's truck before the bugs started to get to us. Marie walked with some guys to their truck to get

some bug spray, leaving Jeff and me with the keg. I finished my beer and, by that time, had to pee. Jeff said I could use the bathroom in his house, so I wouldn't have to go in the woods. He took my cup, filled it up again, and led the way.

Between the woods and his house, I tripped over three tree roots and two cans of beer. Jeff caught me once; I caught myself the rest of the time. When we reached the porch, we were both laughing hysterically over something that may or may not have been funny. When we walked inside, Jeff pointed to a white wooden door on the left side of the hallway. I opened it, still laughing, and shut it immediately.

"Jeff, Jeff, there's a girl in there..." I was trying to whisper, but the laughter wouldn't let me. I wanted to tell him there was a girl in his room trying to put her clothes on. When I opened the door, she had her underwear on and was trying to snap her yellow bra. I wanted to laugh at how funny it was and find somewhere else to pee. Then, I wanted to go home and wait for Patrick to call, to tell me he got a flat tire, his cell phone died, that he was fine, and he loved me. I want this so bad, now. But it didn't happen that way.

I kept laughing, trying to tell Jeff what I saw, then the naked girl opened the door. She wasn't naked anymore and looked embarrassed. We stopped laughing and avoided eye contact. I looked at Jeff, smiled, and ran toward the door he pointed at. I walked in and saw Patrick, shirtless, sitting on the edge of the bed reaching for his shoes.

"We'll be there in 30 minutes," Tara says as she changes the radio station.

"Perfect timing," Lena adds cheerfully.

"Yeah, perfect," I snap. I feel bad for the way I'm treating Lena. None of this is her fault.

Everyone thinks they know how I feel about this ride. I've been

waiting for it. I'm glad it will be over. And they're right. I lied to myself about this for a long time. I blamed myself over and over again until I realized it wouldn't change anything. But I'm still lying to them.

Things changed after seeing Patrick reach for his shoes. He looked up and saw me and cried. I told him I was done, that we had been done for a long time. We both cried and yelled and fought until he finally left, and I stayed at the end of the bed. A while later, Jeff came into his bedroom. Drunk and angry and alone, I had sex with him. Three weeks later, when I found out I was pregnant, I told him. He called me a whore, said he wanted nothing to do with me, and asked Lena to be his girlfriend the next day.

I didn't know what to do. I guess at some point I could have told my friends the truth about everything. But I did feel like a whore. And a liar. I was fucked, any way you looked at it. I thought I deserved to be alone. I still do.

Patrick called, crying, the morning after the party. He apologized for not showing up at the swing set, for saying things he didn't mean, and for sleeping with the naked girl. He said he was so sorry and wanted me back. The greater part of my life had been spent with this one person. Until that night, I had shared every part of myself with him. It's hard not to tell the truth to your best friend, even harder to be honest.

I knew for a while that things were changing. I think we both knew. Sometimes the idea is stronger than the thing itself. We wanted our relationship to work because it had for so long. And we loved each other; we still do.

The green lights above the cassette player say it's 2:48 p.m. when we pull into the clinic. All my food is gone, and the wrappers and stems remain at my side. I pick up what's left and lean back to put it in the garbage bag that hangs on the back of Tara's seat. Lena sees me move and pulls open the Velcro that keeps the bag together. I empty my hand, and

she touches my wrist. When I try to move my hand back toward my body, she holds on to it. It's perfect timing.

Letting go of something that has become a part of you isn't really letting go at all. Letting go sounds easy, like you just stop holding on. It's much worse than that.