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My brother's first serious girlfriend was eight years older—twenty-eight to his twenty. Her name was Julia Cathcart, and Henry introduced her to us in early June. They drove from Manhattan down to our cottage in Loveladies, on the New Jersey shore. When his little convertible, his pet, pulled into the driveway, she was behind the wheel. My mother and I were watching from the kitchen window. I said, "He lets her drive his car."

My brother and his girlfriend were dressed alike, baggy white shirts tucked into jeans, except she had a black cashmere sweater over her shoulders.

She had dark eyes, high cheekbones, and beautiful skin, pale, with high coloring in her cheeks like a child with a fever. Her hair was back in a loose ponytail, tied with a piece of lace, and she wore tiny pearl earrings.

I thought maybe she'd look older than Henry, but it was Henry who looked older than Henry. Standing there, he looked like a man. He'd grown a beard, for starters,

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and had on new wire-rim sunglasses that made him appear more like a bon vivant than a philosophy major between colleges. His hair was longer, and, not yet lightened by the sun, it was the reddish-brown color of an Irish setter.

He gave me a kiss on the cheek, as though he always had.

Then he roughed around with our Airedale, Atlas, while his girlfriend and mother shook hands. They were clasping fingertips, ladylike, smiling as though they were already fond of each other and just waiting for details to fill in why.

Julia turned to me and said, "You must be Janie."

"Most people call me Jane now," I said, making myself sound even younger.

"Jane," she said, possibly in the manner of an adult trying to take a child seriously.

Henry unpacked the car and loaded himself up with everything they'd brought, little bags and big ones, a string tote, and a knapsack.

As he started up the driveway, his girlfriend said, "Do you have the wine, Hank?"

Whoever Hank was, he had it.

Except for bedrooms and the screened-in porch, our house was just one big all-purpose room, and Henry was giving her a jokey tour of it: "This is the living room," he said, gesturing to the sofa; he paused, gestured to it again and said, "This is the den."

Out on the porch, she stretched her legs in front of

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her—Audrey Hepburn relaxing after dance class. She wore navy espadrilles. I noticed that Henry had on penny loafers without socks, and he'd inserted a subway token in the slot where the penny belonged.

Julia sipped her iced tea and asked how Loveladies got its name. We didn't know, but Henry said, "It was derived from the Indian name of the founder."

Julia smiled, and asked my mother how long we'd been coming here.

"This is our first year," my mother said.

My father was out playing tennis, and without him present, I felt free to add a subversive, "We used to go to Nantucket."

"Nantucket is lovely," Julia said.

"It is lovely," my mother conceded, but went on to cite drab points in New Jersey's favor, based on its proximity to our house in Philadelphia.

In the last of our New Jersey versus Nantucket debates, I'd argued, forcefully I'd thought, that Camden was even closer. I'd almost added that the trash dump was practically in walking distance, but my father had interrupted.

I could tell he was angry, but he kept his voice even: we could go to the shore all year round, he said, and that would help us to be a closer family.

"Not so far," I said, meaning to add levity.

But my father looked at me with his eyes narrowed, like he wasn't sure I was his daughter after all.

My mother smiled at me and said that the house was

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right on the water! I'd be able to walk right out the door and go swimming!

Only then did I understand that they'd already chosen a house; they'd put a bid on it.

"It's on the ocean?" I asked.

"Close," she said, trying to maintain her enthusiasm.

"The bay," I said to myself.

"It does have a spectacular view of the bay," she said, but, no, our house was on a lagoon, a canal. "Like Venice," she'd said, as though this would mean something to me.

Now Julia asked if we swam in there, and my mother said, "Absolutely."

I didn't want to acid rain on my mother's parade, but the lagoon had oil floating on the surface and the bottom was sewagey soft.

I was surprised how long Henry sat with us on the porch, as my mother turned the topic to summer, touching upon such controversial issues as corn on the cob (Silver Queen was best), mosquitoes (pesky), and tennis (good exercise).

Finally, Henry did get up. He went outside as though on a mission. He might be going to check my crab traps or to see if we'd brought the bikes; he could do whatever he wanted. My father was the same way: a houseful of guests, and my mother's duty was to provide food, drink, fun, and conversation, while my father's was to nap or read.

While Mother hosted and Girlfriend guested,

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Younger Sister stood up. When there was a pause in their nicing, I made my mouth move smileward: *I'd love to stay and talk, but I have to go shoot some heroin now.*



For dinner, we had crabs I'd caught off the dock. My mother covered the table with newspaper, and we all got print on our arms. As a surprise, she served preseason Silver Queen, little nuggets of mush. My brother ate his like a normal person, instead of typewriter-style; usually, he'd tap the cob at the end of a row and ding.

In response to my mother's questions, Julia told us about her brother in San Francisco and sister in Paris, both of whom would be "attending" her mother's annual "gala" in Southampton. Julia chose her words carefully and used ones I'd never heard spoken—she sounded to me like she was trying out for a job as a dictionary.

My mother eyed me: *Do not smirk.*

However slowly Julia spoke, she opened her crabs twice as fast as anyone else, and I asked how she did it. She showed me the key on the belly side and how to pull it so the shell lifted right off. Henry leaned over to watch, too.

My father asked about the publishing house where she and Henry worked. Julia described their boss as an exquisite editor and true gentleman. My brother had a laugh-smile on when he said, "Every morning when we're opening the mail, Mr. McBride comes into subrights and says, 'Did we get any dough, babies?'"

I'd met this exquisite editor and true gentleman

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myself when I'd visited Henry; and I repeated now that Mr. McBride had told me my brother "Aaron" was irreplaceable.

My father said, "Hank Aaron," almost to himself.

"Mr. McBride must be forgiven," Julia said, "as a baseball aficionado and octogenarian."

I thought, *Exquisite octogenarians and aficionados will be attending the gala.*

Then I asked my question: "Do they know about you two at work?"

My father shot me a look; and I looked back at him, *Why is everything I want to know wrong?*

Henry changed the topic: he'd been promoted from intern to assistant. I could tell he expected my parents to be pleased, and I saw right away that my father, at least, wasn't. It was harder to tell with my mother; she wore the mask in the family.

The issue, I realized, was college. Henry still hadn't decided if he was starting Columbia in the fall.

He'd already transferred four times, or five counting twice to Brown. The reasons he gave for transferring each time were always sound and logical, like "better course selection." I wondered about the reasons he didn't say.



Before bed, my mother told Julia she'd be staying with me—my cue. I led her down the hall to my bedroom, which was completely taken up by a built-in bunk-bed complex; it slept four but, I realized, lived only one comfortably.

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“A bunk,” she said, as though charmed. “Like camp.”
A cell, I thought. Like prison.

I asked which bunk she wanted; she chose the near bottom, which meant the far top for me. I got fresh towels for her and left her alone to undress; then I knocked on my door, and she said, “Come in.”

She was already under the covers, so I turned out the light. I climbed up to my bunk and swept the sand off my sheets. We said good night. After a few minutes, though, a door slammed, and I had to explain that the doorjambs in this house didn't stick; the doors would be opening and slamming all night. Then “good night”—“good night” again.

I closed my eyes and tried to pretend I was in Nantucket.

The house we'd rented every year there had a widow's walk—a square porch on the roof, where the wives of sea captains were supposed to have watched for their husbands' ships. At night, we'd hear creaks and moans. Once, I thought I heard footsteps pacing the widow's walk. You could feel the ghosts in that house, scaring you in the best way.

If there were any ghosts in this one, they weren't moaning about husbands lost at sea but slamming doors over modern, trivial matters, such as not being allowed to go waterskiing.

I couldn't sleep with Julia down there, and I could tell she couldn't sleep either. We lay awake in the dark, listening to each other. The silence between us seemed both

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intimate and hostile, like a staring contest. But Julia was just waiting for me to fall asleep so she could go down the hall to my brother's room. I heard her bare feet on the wood floor and Henry's door whisper open and close.



My father and Henry went to look at sailboats to buy, though I suspected talk about Columbia.

My mother, Julia, and I took a walk on the beach. I walked behind them, in and out of the water, looking for sea glass. My mother was describing the exhibit we'd happened on the last time we were in New York—dishes, silverware, and crystal used by royalty—and Julia had seen the exhibit herself, on purpose.

The museum was like the house of a rich old woman who didn't want you to visit; everyone had whispered and stepped lightly, as though trying to pretend they weren't really there. The guest book requested comments, and my mother, who never missed a chance to compliment anyone, had written how finely curated the exhibit was. I'd written, "Bored nearly to death."

I experienced this anew listening to them talk tableware. They loved the same plates for the same reasons with the same enthusiasm, and I thought, *Henry is going out with Mom.*



When I told Henry, he said, "My sister the Freudian."

Julia was doing my jobs in the kitchen, setting the table and helping her soul twin prepare an early supper.

I was sitting on Henry's bed, while he packed to go

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back to New York. He always did something else while we talked—changed the station on the radio, flipped through a magazine, tuned his guitar. He didn't have to look at me; he knew I'd still be there, with my next question.

"You should read Freud," he said, and went to his bookshelf to see if he had any Freud handy. He didn't, but went on saying what a great writer Freud was, as though this was what I wanted to talk about in our only moments alone all weekend.

I remembered to thank him for the last book he'd sent to me from work, by a Norwegian philosopher, and he said, "Did you try it?"

"Yeah," I said, "I spent about a month reading it one afternoon."

He turned to me and said, "Do you know that your IQ goes up and down about fifty points in every conversation?"

I didn't know if this was a compliment or an insult, but I didn't like how he was looking at me—as though from the great distance of his new life. I said, "No one likes being talked about to their face." Then I felt bad. "Anyway," I said, " $E=MC^2$."

Henry smiled and opened a drawer. He told me that he'd gone to hear the Norwegian lecture. "Imagine trying to understand that philosophy through the thickest accent you've ever heard," he said. "Now add a harelip."

But everyone was pretending to understand the lecture, he said, and he imitated serious note scribbling.

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Then he interrupted himself—he'd spotted Freud on the bottom shelf.

He flipped through the book for the passage he wanted me to hear and found it. "Okay, Freud says: 'In sending the young out into life with such a false psychological orientation' about sex, it's 'as though one were to equip people starting out on a Polar expedition with summer clothes and maps of the Italian lakes.'" He shook his head. "And that's a footnote," he said. "A footnote."

I said, "You look like Commodore Peary with your beard."

He touched his face, absently, the way bearded men do. Then he handed the book—*Civilization and Its Discontents*—to me.

"So," I said, "does Julia talk about exquisite plates when you're alone?"

He told me to go easy on Julia; she was nervous about meeting Mom and Dad. "Try to think of it from her side."

I decided I would later.

He picked a purple shirt out of his closet. "Want this?" He tossed it to me. "I bought it at a thrift shop in Berkeley," he said, referring to his last internship, a behavior-modification lab where he'd trained herd dogs not to herd.

I said, "I think I saw you more when you lived there."

He told me that he and Julia would come to the shore again in a few weeks.

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"I might not recognize you by then," I said. "You'll probably show up in a suit and tie."

"What are you talking about?"

"You seem older," I said.

"I am older."

"Three months shouldn't make this much of a difference," I said. "Your whole personality has changed."

Finally, he stopped and looked at me.

"You're Hank now," I said. "You bring Mom and Dad a bottle of wine."

Then he sat down on the bed with me. "I might be growing up," he said. "I'm probably not, but let's say I am. Is that a reason to be mad at me?"

I looked at the purple shirt in my lap. It had a big ink stain on the pocket.

Then Julia called us to dinner.

"Come on," he said.

Dinner: talk of great books everyone had read or planned to, except me. Julia had just read one by a famous author I'd never heard of and proclaimed it "extraordinary." I thought, *You read too much*.

At good-bye, I could tell how much both my parents liked her, and not just for Henry's sake; Julia was the kind, helpful, articulate daughter they deserved.



On the ride home, I thought about Julia. I calculated what an eight-year age difference would mean to me—a six-year-old boy—and thought of the one next door. I said, "It's like me going out with Willy Schwam."

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My mother pretended not to hear.

I could hear the smile in my father's voice when he said that the important thing was that Willy and I were happy.

"I was dubious at first," I said. "I thought I might be just another baby-sitter to him. But then, one night—"

My mother interrupted. "I think I'm going to be ill."

I never talked to either of my parents seriously about love, let alone sex. The closest we'd come was talking about drugs, which I wasn't interested in.



On the last day of school, I realized I had no plans for the summer. Instead of looking forward to Nantucket in August, I'd be at home in the suburbs and at the shore in New Jersey, just dreading school in September.

I said good-bye to friends who were going off on wilderness adventures and teen tours, to camps with Indian names and Israel. We traded addresses and each time I wrote mine I felt the impending boredom of the summer days to come. When one friend asked what I'd be doing at home, I found myself saying, "I might get a job."

I told my parents at dinner.

My mother said, "I thought you were going to take art classes and work on your tennis."

"I could get a part-time job," I said.

"Maybe you could work in Dad's office again," she said, looking over at him.

I liked seeing Dad in action, the Chief of Neurology in his white coat, as he shook patients' hands and ushered

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them into his office. But I said, "I need new experiences, Mom."

"What about an internship," she suggested, "in something you're interested in?"

I reminded her that I didn't have any interests.

"You like to draw," she said.

I told them I was thinking of being a waitress.

My dad said, "Practice by clearing the table."



I went through the help wanted section of the newspaper, but every job seemed to require experience. I called anyway to make my case, using the words I read in the paper: "I'm a detail-oriented self-starter." No luck, though. I gave in to a summer of art classes and tennis, swimming at my friend Linda's, and going on errands with my mother.

The nights were quiet. Dinner, and then I went up to my bedroom and wrote letters to my friends or sketched. I drew people standing in groups, as though posed for a photograph that would go in an album.

My father read his magazines, the green-covered *Neurology* and *Stroke*, up in his study. My mother read the newspaper in the breakfast room. She would call up to him, asking if he wanted a piece of fruit, and I'd go downstairs and back up to deliver the peach or plum or nectarine. Before bed, I walked Atlas, while I smoked a forbidden cigarette.

Most nights, I passed Oliver Biddle, who was middle-aged, yet lived with his parents—my own personal

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