

Excerpt from *We Came All This Way* by Mike Heppner. All material Copyright 2015, Mike Heppner.

Welcome to nowhere.

We are a loose collection of individuals who have made a choice and come to this place. Some of us are related by blood, others by circumstance. Our numbers were once thirty-eight and now they are ten.

We live on a manmade island located fourteen nautical miles off the coast of Newfoundland. Our President is Wallis Crim, 34, born and raised in Milner, Ohio. My name is Roseanne Okerfeldt, President Crim's personal assistant. I'm also his sister. I'm thirty-one, separated, with four children. The twins, Mary and Connor, live with their father along with their older brother Vance in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Star has chosen to stay with us on the island. Other full-time residents are as follows:

Dr. Emmanuelle Snow, 35, medical advisor and Head of Surgery. Dr. Snow also has an eight-month-old son, Sander, who was born on the island.

Dr. Clement Snow, 73, technical advisor.

Charity Blaise, DDS, 41, Head of Dentistry and Dr. Clement Snow's second wife. Stephanie ("Steffi") Blaise, 12, child of Dr. Blaise's first marriage.

Neil Laporte, c. 40, cook and fisherman.

Gavin Baptiste, 48, Head of Security.

Together we are citizens of the Independent Island Nation of "Mobility," which is also the name of a wheelchair manufacturer in Moline, Illinois.

The island was built four years ago, in 2010, under the direction of Dr. Clement Snow. It has since survived two fires, yearly storms, an attack by pirates, and countless power outages. We call it an island but it's really a semi-submersible platform with room for eighty people on three decks. Much of the platform was salvaged from a retired Danish oil rig that Dr. Snow purchased at auction. Among other crimes, the Canadian government has accused us of using the island for illegal offshore drilling, but this has been proven false.

Nowadays the island stands three-quarters vacant, and to save power we've sealed off the bottom deck. Star has her own room facing the mainland; on clear days she can see the lighthouse at Cape Spear through her binoculars. We spend most of our time indoors, though in the summer we sometimes go topside to sunbathe on the helipad. The island's sophisticated on-board communications system permits us to intercept radio and television programs from around the globe, which makes us feel less isolated.

Days tend to follow a routine. Our cook, Neil Laporte, leaves at dawn on Mandy One to catch our dinner. Sometimes he takes Dr. Blaise's daughter, Steffi, who's keen on fishing. Our security task force, headed by (and now consisting entirely of) Gavin Baptiste, makes three daily patrols around the perimeter of the island in Mandy Two. Unless someone needs a filling replaced or a crown re-glued, Dr. Blaise looks after her elderly husband, Dr. Clement Snow, who's lately shown signs of decline.

When she's not taking care of her son, Dr. Snow's daughter Emmanuelle ("Mandy") presides over the medical wing on Deck Two. Mandy has the biggest job on the island but also seems to do the least amount of work. She'll probably be the next of us to leave.

Then there's my brother—President Crim, I should say. Getting around has always been hard for him, so it's my job to make his life easier. I bring him his lunch, his dinner, his paperwork, his change of clothes. I help him in and out of bed, prepare his baths. I try to be a good sister.

It's a tough life out here, though rewarding. Only Sealand in the North Sea rivals Mobility in terms of worldwide public interest. We've been featured on the Discovery Channel, 60 Minutes, and CBC Radio, and our online store logs hundreds of transactions each month, selling Mobility T-shirts, shot glasses, bookmarks, key chains, and other such collectibles. But along with fame comes hardship. As a group we've been laughed at, persecuted. Dr. Clement Snow can't set foot in Canada, and I'm still considered a fugitive in the United States. Mobility isn't only my home, you see. It's also my prison.

I was fifteen the year Wallis came home for Christmas break and introduced us to Mandy Snow. Imagine it's 1998 and your older brother's off to college for the first time. You've finally got the whole downstairs to yourself. If you're like me, you like to stay up late listening to your headphones and smoking with your bedroom window cracked open. Cigarette of choice, American Spirit. You store your CDs in a shoebox under your bed, all the discs scratched and stuck in the wrong jewel cases: The Cure mixed up with Oasis and Third Eye Blind. Until recently, you haven't thought of boys as anything special, but now you can't think about anything else. You stare at them in class, keep an eye out for them at lunch, dream about them in bed. You get off on their smell, their bad penmanship. You're nothing like the little kid you were a year ago.

Wallis wasn't due in from Penn until the 25th, so my mom and I spent an hour on Christmas Eve getting the house wheelchair-ready again. My brother was ten in 1990 when he broke his spine falling out of Mrs. Deaver's station wagon on his way to a scout trip. The backseat had been crammed with too many kids and someone had forgotten to pull the door all the way shut. After the accident, my parents had a special toilet installed in the downstairs bathroom with grab bars on the sides so he could push himself up. They also widened the doors to his closet and invested in a new bed with side rails and an adjustable mattress. The ramp to the front door was fun to slide down in the winter.

Dad left the house after dinner for Christmas Eve services, and I wasted no time switching off the holiday music in the living room. My dad was the only one of us who still went to church. Every Sunday he walked or drove the six blocks from our house in Milner to the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, which I passed on my way to school. The building was stone and traditional but had a modern annex that looked out of place. When I was younger my friends and I rode our bikes in the parking lot, and Gretchen Clearwater once broke her collarbone doing a stunt off the steps to the thrift shop.

Mom swept into the room with two glasses of wine. "Don't tell your father," she said, handing me one.

I sipped and pretended to look disgusted. "That's a very expensive chardonnay," she said. Mom was a silvery beauty with a hard chin and wrinkles that she covered with makeup. She was six years older than my dad—they'd had us late.

“It’s great. I’m just not used to it,” I said. My regular drink in those days was Jim Beam and Coke. I wasn’t a very good kid growing up. I started sneaking drinks in my early teens, smoked behind Kroger with my friends Erin and Jill after school, and swiped the occasional twenty from my mom’s desk. Petty delinquent stuff. I wasn’t much better as a student. School bored me, though I did well enough in every subject except art. My art teacher said I took her assignments “too literally,” whatever that meant. Ask me to draw something and I’ll draw it. I can’t promise it’ll look like much.

I took another sip, then one last quickie and placed the glass on the coffee table. Under my sweater I wore the heart-shaped pendant that my boyfriend Brian had given me for our first Christmas together.

Mom pushed some pillows aside and dropped next to me on the couch. “What happened to the music?” she asked. I gagged. “Some of it’s nice,” she said.

“Mom, I’ve been listening to Christmas music since September.” I had an after school job at the Pier 1 Imports in Montclair where we played the same dozen Christmas carols all day while unwrapping the holiday décor in the back room. It wasn’t too awful. One of the assistant managers, Dean, went to Montclair Community College and scored us beer after work. Always the same joke: “Hey, Dean, can you pick us up a case of Pabst?” “Yeah, if you blow me.” No one ever blew him.

At Pier 1 we wore blue aprons over our jeans and hoodie sweatshirts, and we’d park our used Honda hatchbacks out in back by the dumpsters. I just had my permit, so either my dad would drop me or I’d ride in with Erin. I spent my paycheck on incense and things for my room: a rag rug, a woven tapestry from Portugal. The full-timers were guys who’d gone to schools like Milner ten years ago and found themselves still in the neighborhood. One guy, Steve, had a Ford GT that ate up most of his salary. We made out once before I met Brian.

Other than Pier 1, my only job was babysitting. I wasn’t naturally good around kids, though I took care of the Hodges girls on Friday nights. I could handle the diapers and putting Aggie and Kate down in their cribs, but I always had to force myself to keep them entertained with books and games and stuffed animals. I never imagined having a kid, let alone four. If you’d asked me what I’d be doing at age thirty, I would’ve said, “Making money, hopefully.” Not a lot, but enough to travel three or four times a year.

I'd probably be married to some guy. We'd have a condo in Westlake and go to concerts. Maybe I'd have my own business, something I could do out of the house. I wasn't particularly ambitious. I guess I just wanted to coast.

"What did Brian get you for Christmas?" Mom asked, and I showed her the pendant. "Very pretty. Is it silver or white gold? Remember, silver tarnishes. If it's white gold, you should get it rhodium plated every two years."

I tuned her out. Brian and I had only been together for three months, and we'd just started holding hands in public. Not a good topic for family discussion. Brian was half-Korean, which I thought was cool. He had floppy black hair that hung in his eyes and soft kissy lips. I liked how he looked at me, his eyes giving me all the attention in the world.

Earlier that afternoon I'd led him to a rusty old bench near the edge of Hayes Park. Most kids had already left town for the holidays, and Brian was heading out in an hour to visit his aunt and uncle in Columbus. From where we sat we could see clear down the sledding hill to the frozen pond below. Little kids were sledding and wiping out at the bottom while their parents looked cold.

I handed him his bag of presents. The stuff from Pier 1 was a joke, some markdown soaps and bath beads I got with my discount. I'd gone to Macy's for his big gift.

"I've never worn cologne before," he said.

"Put it on." I opened the box and spritzed him behind the ear. The cologne brought out the pine smell of the woods.

"Mm. I may need to attack you," I said, nuzzling his throat. We hadn't had sex yet—we were innocent in that sense—but I had my eye on the 31st. I wanted to ring in the new year with champagne and condoms.

He laughed and squirmed away. "Aw, you're tickling me, dude."

It was his turn, so he took a jewelry box out of his pocket. I wondered how much he'd spent, if he'd borrowed the money from his parents. He couldn't have made more than seven bucks an hour bagging groceries at the Kroger downtown.

He opened the box. The necklace was one of those Shared Heart pendants from Zales—ninety-nine dollars plus a free box of chocolates.

“I didn’t know what to pick,” he said.

“It’s perfect. Can you put it on me?”

He tried but his thumbs were no good, so I put it on myself. We kissed some, and I let him run his hands over my chest.

“So. Columbus. That sucks,” I said. His head was buried between my breasts, his face in my sweater.

“It’s my mom’s side of the family. My cousins are cool. They live a mile away from this huge state prison, and every now and then someone gets out and they have to lock down the neighborhood. Rapists and murderers and shit. You’d never know—it’s a real nice place. There’s a Borders and a Gap and a Sports Authority.”

Brian and I didn’t really know much about each other. I knew that his favorite jacket was from Eastern Mountain Sports and his first concert was Kenny Chesney and we’d both had Mr. Dale last year for American History. Mr. Dale made us sit in alphabetical order—Brian’s last name was Young and mine was Crim—so we didn’t see much of each other. Brian spoke more in class than I did. He raised his hand a lot, and Mr. Dale only called on him when he couldn’t get an answer out of anyone else.

We weren’t rich kids at Milner High. Most of our parents were teachers or small business owners or had jobs working for Sperry Steel. We were working-class Democrats. We lived in nice ranch houses and inherited our parents’ old cars for our sixteenth birthdays. I knew for a fact that at least half of us were having sex by tenth grade. The school itself was built in the fifties—single-story, pretty non-descript except for the breezeway connecting the west wing with the science building. Our principal was an out-lesbian named Mrs. Carter, and everyone acted like it was no big deal. I would describe Milner as basically moderate, politically speaking. We liked Clinton. Kids listened to hip-hop and smoked weed and still managed to put in a clean appearance on school-pictures day.

“I’m glad the necklace fits. I went to Montclair Gardens. I thought I’d run into you there,” said Brian. Montclair Gardens was the shopping mall across the street from the Pier 1 where I worked. Erin and I liked to dash across the four-lane highway during our break and have lunch in the food court. The mall was one of those huge, four-story plazas with a fountain and a marble concourse. Montclair kids and Milner kids hung out

in the parking lot by the Cineplex. A good half of the stores catered to teenagers—they sold our clothes and played our music—but the mall cops had an attitude about us. The only troublemakers lived in Montclair—they shoplifted at Pier 1 all the time and there was nothing you could do about it unless they practically waved the incense or votive candles in front of you. Stealing's easy, if you want to know the truth.

Mom had another look at my necklace, nearly choking me in the process. "I think it's probably white gold. Sometimes it's hard to tell. White gold isn't actually white, did you know that? It's got a surface plating that makes it look white. Those earrings your father bought for me in Taos are white gold. Let's see..." She pulled tighter on the necklace. "Yep, that's gold—see where it says '10K'?"

"Mom, I don't care," I said.

"I'm sure you don't, but it's good to know the difference. You can rub the plating right off if you use silver polish on a piece of white gold."

"I'm not stupid. I know how to take care of things." I twisted and squirmed until she finally let go. "I don't care if it's silver or gold or how much it'll be worth in ten years. It's just a necklace. Stop ruining it for me."

We both sipped our wine.

An hour or so later my father came back from church. Hearing the front door open, Mom called across the house, "Boots off."

"Got it," he said over the thump-thump of his knocking the snow off his boots.

She leaned over the sofa and spread the window blinds. "I wonder if it's still coming down."

Dad appeared in the living room in his stocking feet. His cheeks looked red and hard from huffing around in the cold.

"Good service?" Mom asked.

"Not bad," he said.

"Do you feel spiritually enlightened?"

He chuckled gamely. "What I feel like is a glass of sherry. You?"

She gulped back the rest of her wine and handed him her glass. "What was the sermon about?" she asked as he went out to get their drinks.

“Just what you’d expect. We went over some passages from Luke. *And then we all held hands and sang a song.* Where’s the sherry?”

“Bottom shelf. Was it crowded?”

“Not too bad. Most people go earlier in the day. Pastor Bob asked after you.”

“He did? Did he say, ‘Where’s your sinner wife and daughter?’”

“Hardly. No, Bob’s not like that.”

Dad returned with two small pours of sherry, gave one to Mom, then took his regular seat near the fireplace. The bottoms of his blue socks were damp, and he still had some snow in his hair.

“Before you get too comfortable,” Mom said, “the fire.”

He laughed to himself. “You always say that. ‘Before you get too comfortable’ right after I sit down. Oh boy...” Moving like an old man, he pushed out of his seat and threw another log onto the fire. “It’s a complicated procedure, I know.”

“Did you really hold hands in church?” I asked.

“Your father’s kidding, dear. He’s being a wit. *A card.* Roseanne and I were just talking about Brian,” she said. Dad looked at her uncomprehendingly. “Brian, the boy she’s been dating?”

“Ah, yes. I knew there was a boy, I just didn’t remember the name,” he said.

“He bought her a necklace for Christmas. Show your father the necklace.”

Mom drove me crazy when she got like this. I dutifully held up the white gold pendant, gave it a silent two-count, and shoved it back under my sweater.

“He didn’t see it, Roseanne. Get up and really show it to him.”

“I saw it fine. Dazzling. Sounds like a serious relationship,” Dad said in his *Masterpiece Theatre* voice. He and I laughed; Mom didn’t.

“Define serious,” I said.

“Serious, as in lasting more than three weeks,” Mom said. She rose to bring my empty wine glass into the kitchen, showing it to my father as she passed. “You weren’t supposed to see this.”

“Then don’t show it to me, Jess. If I’m not supposed to see it, don’t wave it right under my nose.” Cupboards banged in the kitchen, and he asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking for the *biscotti!*”

“That’s fine, just don’t break everything while you’re at it.”

“Can you guys not be assholes to each other for one night?” I suggested. No one listened. Mom stormed back with the biscotti and enough cocktail napkins for a block party.

We had an early night, and I stole an extra glass of wine before going to bed. My parents never marked the bottles or kept the booze locked up. It was almost like they wanted me to drink it.

Dad left the next morning to fetch Wallis at the bus station in Montclair, and I took my hot chocolate onto the deck to wait for them. The snow had drifted and the yard looked dirty. We’d always had plenty of room to run around when Wallis and I were little, though I was the one who usually got hurt. At six I broke my jaw tumbling out of the big maple between our house and Mr. Leeland’s. Another time I stepped on a steel rake in my bare feet and had to get a tetanus shot. Wallis was supposed to keep an eye on me, but I guess he didn’t do a very good job.

I went back inside, and a few minutes later our van pulled up. “Who’s next to Dad?” I asked, joining Mom at the dining room window.

A shape—not a Christmas present or a piece of luggage but a person with a head and shoulders and two arms—sat in the passenger seat. Definitely not my brother—he couldn’t ride up front. Through the windshield I made out a slim face and long, straight hair: a girl, older than me, maybe even older than Wallis—and tall; her head loomed over my father’s.

“Wallis didn’t mention anything. I wasn’t expecting another guest. We’ve barely enough roast as it is,” Mom said.

“I think it’s a girl,” I said as we hurried to the door, and my mother, pulling it open, called with forced cheer, “Merry Christmas!”

The cold swept into the house, so we shut the door and shuffled down the icy path. Swaying to keep her balance, Mom said, “Phil, you forgot to sand the walk.”

Dad stood next to the van. “The bag’s in the door, Jess. You’re welcome to do it yourself.”

The girl had already stepped down, and she looked past us to the house. She was, as I say, enormous, at least six feet tall, and wore blue mirrored sunglasses. I wondered if she played basketball.

Dad introduced her. “This is Mandy, Wallis’ friend,” he said neutrally.

“Hello, Mandy. It’s nice to meet you. Do you live in Milner?” Mom asked. I knew she was hoping Mandy’s next stop would be Christmas at home with her own family.

Mandy shook her head, still watching the house. She seemed to have a thought about it, though I couldn’t tell if it was good or bad.

“Mandy’s from Canada. She’s down here on a... what did you call it?” Dad asked.

“A merit scholarship,” Mandy said.

Wallis banged on the window, and Mom said, “Forget something?”

“No, I didn’t forget,” Dad said, sliding open the side panel. Wallis had on the same brown corduroy jacket he’d worn home for Thanksgiving. I could imagine him up at Penn wearing it everyday to class.

“Hey you,” I said.

“Hey back. Someone want to get me out of here?” Wallis asked.

Dad unfastened the safety belts holding Wallis’ chair in place and pulled down the ramp. To our surprise, Mandy got in front and helped Wallis out of the van. She handled the wheelchair like she’d done it before.

“I’m in the way. I’ll get the door,” Mom said. Mandy didn’t have any bags, just a red backpack that she wore over one arm.

With Mom in the lead, we trooped up the path to our house. My parents chose the steps while Mandy, Wallis, and I took the long way up the ramp. Once inside, Wallis parked himself in the living room next to the Christmas tree. We’d stacked all the presents high against one wall to make room for his chair.

“I tried calling but I couldn’t get service on my phone. Mandy got stuck. She was going to stay at the dorm, but we found out we all had to vacate for the holidays,” he said.

Mandy kept her sunglasses on, her hands jammed in the pockets of her ski vest.

“Well, that’s quite all right. We have plenty of room at the table.” Mom’s smile crystallized. “How long will the dorm be closed?”

“Through New Year’s, but don’t worry. I’m heading down to L.A. tomorrow. I just need a place to crash for the night,” Mandy said, finally removing her sunglasses and clipping them to the collar of her vest.

“You’re not spending the holidays with your family? Or maybe they’re in L.A. I’m sorry, I’m asking too many questions,” Mom said.

“Mom’s in Ottawa, Dad’s out east. It’s too much of a hassle,” Mandy said.

“And you don’t want to pick just one, I understand. Well, sit and take off your jacket. Wallis, would you and Mandy like some eggnog before we open our presents?”

They said yes, so I went into the kitchen to help Mom with the drinks while Dad kept Wallis and Mandy company in the living room. Mom was quiet as she portioned out the glasses.

“She’s going to be bored watching us open presents for two hours. Can I have some Bacardi in mine?” I asked.

“Most certainly not.”

“Why not? You let me have wine last night.”

“Night time is one thing, Roseanne. It’s Christmas morning.”

I watched her top off the other glasses with spiced rum, concentrating on getting each pour just right. “And why does what’s-her-name get to have some?” I asked.

“Because she’s older, and she’s our guest. Here, don’t just stand there. Help me carry these.”

We brought the drinks into the living room. Mandy grabbed two and handed one to Wallis.

“I feel silly in my robe. Let me go upstairs and throw on some real clothes,” Mom said.

“It’s fine, Mom. No one cares,” Wallis said.

“Really, it’ll just take a second. It’s almost nine, anyway.” Leaving her eggnog on the coffee table, she clutched her robe around her neck and slipped out of the room. We spent an awkward moment sipping our drinks.

“Where do you live in Canada? I’ve just been to Toronto,” I said finally.

Mandy smirked. “Not *Niagara Falls*? Whenever I tell Americans I’m from Canada, they all think Niagara Falls.”

I slouched back, feeling insulted. “No, I’ve never been to Niagara Falls. I don’t even know what’s there.”

“Well, there’s a *waterfall*, for one thing. Every few years someone goes over in a kayak and gets themselves killed. And there’s a bridge with traffic that always backs up from New York. What else... gift stores, fine Canadian dining.”

“What’s Canadian dining?” Dad asked.

“Oh, let’s see... twenty-four hour breakfast is a big thing. We like our steaks well done. Ginger beef, beans and toast. Chinese smorgasbord.”

I gazed over at the presents to avoid making eye contact with her. I didn’t want to open my gifts in front of Mandy. I didn’t want her to know anything about me, what I liked, my taste in clothes.

Mom eventually returned in blue jeans and a thick red sweater. She’d had some time to pull herself together, and her speech sounded rehearsed.

“Now Mandy, on Christmas we like to open our presents in the morning, then Roseanne and I will do some baking in the afternoon, and we’ll all sit down for dinner around five. I hope a roast is okay.”

“I’ll eat anything.” Mandy swept back her hair, her arms and legs sprawled across the sofa. I’d changed my mind about her playing basketball. If I had to guess, I’d say she pitched softball—she had the same captain-of-the-team cockiness that Gail Bolander, our star pitcher at Milner, had. She even looked like Gail—pretty and hard at the same time.

“As long as it’s not dorm food,” Wallis said.

“Are you kidding? I love dorm food. You should try the veggie stew at McClelland. They only make it on Thursdays.”

I sat on my hands. “So... you guys eat together and stuff?”

Mandy gave me a withering look. “Wallis is a hermit. He only leaves his room to go to class.”

“Really? I don’t like that.” Mom nipped at her drink. “Wallis, is this true? You should be getting out more often. That’s part of the college experience.”

“It’s not the part I’m interested in,” he said.

“Wallis is a classic academic. He’s like my father. Half the time he doesn’t know what day it is. He wears ties to class. He answers questions without raising his hand,” Mandy said.

This wasn’t going over big with my mom, I could tell. “Well, you certainly know a lot about my son. Are you an Econ major as well?”

Mandy laughed at the apparent dumbness of this. Frost continued to accumulate on my mother’s nose and chin.

“Uh, no. I’m auditing a calc class. That’s how we know each other. It’s purely extracurricular. Actually I’m a double-major, Bio and Poli Sci. The Poli Sci’s to please my father.”

“Impressive,” said my dad.

Mom reluctantly admitted that it was. “You must not have any time to enjoy the city.”

“Philly? That’s okay, I’ll pass. West Philly’s a dump,” Mandy said.

I looked at my watch. Somehow only ten minutes had elapsed since we’d sat down.

We opened our presents—my parents got me tickets to see *Fame - the Musical*—and by noon we’d all run out of things to say to Wallis’ new friend. I spent some time in my room putting away my Christmas gifts before helping Mom in the kitchen frost the traditional Christmas cake. Wallis and Mandy were watching TV in his room; it sounded like a *Star Wars* movie, judging from the music.

Mom whispered, “I’ll try to do better at dinner. She’s actually a perfectly pleasant girl. I’m sure she’s just nervous and feels awkward about being around a group of strangers.”

“She’s not pleasant at all. She thinks she’s so great because she’s from a foreign country. Just because you’re smart and cool and from—Ontario or Ottawa or wherever—doesn’t mean you’re better than everyone else,” I said, still seething from Mandy’s crack about Niagara Falls.

Mom set down her frosting knife and gave the cake a quarter-turn. I didn't know why we associated baking with Christmas. Because Mom and I weren't religious, we had no real traditions to fall back on, just the ones we'd invented ourselves.

"It's hard for me. I can't quite tell if they're dating. Wallis has never really had a girlfriend before. Believe me, I want him to be happy, and there's no reason he shouldn't have fun, but..." She looked up from the cake. "He's in a wheelchair, for God's sake. Think of it from the girl's perspective."

By the time we'd finished decorating the cake, the *Star Wars* movie was over and Mandy was in the kitchen looking for a glass of water. "It's for Wallis," she said.

"You don't have to wait on him, you know. Wallis can get his own glass, and I can fill it for him. We keep everything in these bottom cupboards," Mom said.

Mandy took a glass out of the cupboard and filled it with tap water. No "thank you" or anything. "I like your house, Mrs. Crim," she said to the window over the sink. Even that sounded like a put-down.

At dinner my father asked Mandy if she had any family other than her parents in Canada. Mom hadn't said much all night, and she sat with her chair half-turned toward the kitchen.

"I had an uncle but he died. My dad's sister is still alive but we never see each other," Mandy said.

"So it's not a close family," Dad said.

"Close enough. I see my dad once or twice a year. Mom's busy with her consulting service. My parents trust me. They don't need to keep an eye on me all the time."

Mom jumped up. "Shit, I forgot the creamed onions. Keep eating, keep talking."

While she was out of the room, Mandy turned to Wallis, raised an eyebrow, and said in an arch tone, "*She forgot the creamed onions.*"

Mom came back with another steaming plate for the table, and we carried on with dinner, Dad asking his usual polite questions and Mom and I sulking at opposite ends of the table. Dessert was a relief, and I wolfed my last bites of cake and ice cream as I brought my plate to the sink.

Venting on the phone that night, I complained to Brian, “God, what a jerk. I could barely last through dinner. I’ve been in my room for two hours with the door closed. I think everyone’s gone to bed. Wallis might still be up. I wish I was there with you.”

Brian and his family had gone to Dave & Buster’s after dinner to play video-games while the adults hung out at the bar. I could hear the din of the arcade over Brian’s cell phone, kids screeching, games buzzing and chirping and shooting out tokens.

“My cousins are playing Dance Dance Revolution. They’ve got a crowd of girls watching them. My cousin Tay rules at DDR. He’s been battling these Casian lame-o’s all night. My ears are *totally* ringing! I wanted to chill out in the mall for a few minutes but they wouldn’t let me bring my pop.”

I rolled over in bed and looked at the clock on my nightstand. “Isn’t the mall closed on Christmas?” I asked.

“The concourse is open but the stores are closed. We were here last night too. Tay bought some pants at American Eagle. Oh, and there’s a Benetton! I was psyched. The chick on register was a bitch to my cousin, though. She yelled at him for trying on a pair of jeans. She was like, ‘Nice work folding those jeans, dude.’”

Sometimes I wondered if I liked Brian enough to have sex with him. He seemed really young; he’d seen *Dr. Dolittle* with Eddie Murphy six times that summer and his favorite group was Spice Girls. Erin had told me the first time wasn’t that great anyway. Her first had been with a senior named Dave Connors. They’d done it in his parents’ shower, but Erin was drunk and only remembered a dull ache between her legs the next morning.

The room breathed quiet when I got off the phone. I had some incense burning on my dresser and it smelled like Pier 1.

Tired of hanging out in bed, I got up and eased open the door. Wallis called to me from his room across the hall.

“What’s up?” I asked.

The lights were off, and he was lying in bed. “Shut the door and let’s talk,” he said.

The room was pitch black with the door closed, so I turned on a lamp. Seeing the trapeze bar over his pillow always gave me the chills. Wallis used it to pull himself up in the morning, but to me it looked like something wicked and spindly watching over him.

“Where’s your buddy?” I asked, taking another step into the room.

“Crashed out on the couch.”

I pulled up a rocking chair and wrapped my arms around myself. Wallis’ room ran a few degrees cooler than the rest of the house. It was like the cold spot in the swimming pool.

“Mandy doesn’t seem very nice,” I said.

“Oh? When wasn’t she nice?”

“When I asked where she lived and she made that crack about Niagara Falls. *That* time. And then when Dad sang Christmas songs like he does every year and she just sat there looking sarcastic.”

“Give her a chance. She’s really a genius, you know. You think *I’m* smart, I’m nothing. And she’s been to more countries than everyone we know combined. She’s been to Israel, she’s been to China... she’s been to the *Galapagos Islands*.”

“Where are the Galapagos Islands?”

“They’re in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, near South America. You know, Darwin? That’s where Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species*. Evolution. Mandy went with her parents before they split up.”

The more he praised Mandy, the more I disliked her. “Why did they split up?”

“Her dad had an affair with one of his students. He used to teach at the University of Ottawa. Linguistics. He’s French-Canadian. A Canuck.” He smiled at the word, as if he’d just discovered it.

“He did it with a student? That’s gross. And how do you know she’s really been to all those places? She might be a compulsive liar,” I said, hoping.

“Unlikely. I’ve seen the pictures of her in Jerusalem standing at the Wailing Wall—have you heard of the Wailing Wall? It’s where Jews go to deliver their prayers to God.”

“Is Mandy Jewish?”

“No. You don’t have to be Jewish to visit the Wailing Wall. It’s not like Mecca.” He read my blank face. “Mecca’s in Saudi Arabia. You can’t go there unless you’re Muslim.”

“That’s dumb.” My eyes went to the TV and the *Star Wars* box lying on the VHS machine. “Were you guys really watching TV in here or were you making out?”

“No, we’re not like that.”

“You’re allowed to have a girlfriend, Wallis. You’re in college. Mom’s right—you should be getting out and having fun.”

“I am. My kind of fun.”

“Your kind of fun doesn’t count,” I said, reaching over to look at the *Star Wars* box. The description on the back made the film sound colossally stupid. I tossed it across the room. “Darth Vader’s lame,” I said.

Before I could go back to my room, Wallis asked, “How’s your boyfriend?”

“He’s nice. He gave me this necklace, see?” I showed him the heart pendant from Zales, which I’d kept on over my pajamas.

“Aw, how sweet,” Wallis said.

“He *is*.”

“How serious are you guys?”

“Me and Brian? I don’t know. We’ve ‘gone public,’ so…” He laughed, and I asked, “What?”

“Nothing. I just forgot how kids talk in high school. ‘Gone public.’”

I wanted to kick his bed. “It’s not like you’re suddenly so old, Wallis. You’re only eighteen. And how old is Mandy?”

“Nineteen. Just turned.”

“Well she *acts* like she’s eleven. Brian’s *way* more mature and he’s young for his grade.”

“I’m sure he is. Just be careful. You don’t want to wind up like Katie Eisencroft.”

Katie Eisencroft was a classmate of Wallis’ who’d married a guy from Montclair right after graduation—got pregnant, the usual—and now lived in her in-laws’ basement. I had no intention of winding up like her.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, switching off the lamp.

“Hey-”

I bent forward in the darkness and kissed his warm forehead. “Merry Christmas.
I hate Mandy. Sleep tight.”