

## Body Image

My friend Sonia had pair after pair of tinted contacts, and when people said her eyes were such a pretty green or blue or hazel she would just say thank you. They would say, *what an unusual shade*, and she would glance at me and smile, because I knew what color her eyes really were: brown, a lighter shade than mine.

Sonia's eyes were blue the time she took off her clothes at one of my parties our senior year in college. I remember, because they were such a bright blue they looked neon, and she lost one of her contacts somehow so that one eye was a shocking blue and the other was a very light brown. It made her look demented. Everyone at the party seemed to have something wrong with them. It was my apartment, but I didn't seem to know anybody there. At one point a strange girl came up to me and bit me on the arm. I jumped away from her. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm demonstrating the power of a tick," she said. She was completely serious, but for some reason what I thought about was her hair, which was bleached so blond it was almost white. The part was dark brown, almost black, and the whole thing made her look like a skunk in reverse. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you were someone else."

I patted her on the head. "Your roots are showing," I said.

She pulled a piece of her hair in front of her face and studied it. "By the way," she said, "a girl in your bedroom is taking off her clothes."

I found Sonia in the bedroom, in her bra and skirt, knocking back a bottle of vodka like it was water. "Where's your shirt?" I asked her.

"It's so hot in here," she said. "Why is it so hot?" She looked at the bottle in her hand. "This is empty," she said, and dropped the bottle on the floor.

I grabbed a t-shirt out of my closet. "Hold still, sweetie," I said, and pulled the shirt over her head. She wouldn't help me, letting her arms dangle loosely at her sides, so

I grabbed her wrist and tried to shove her hand through a sleeve. “But it’s so hot,” she said, her voice muffled by the t-shirt. “I don’t feel good.”

I took her into the bathroom and held her head while she threw up. “I want you to know,” she said, afterwards, lying on the floor, “that I didn’t throw up on purpose.”

“No kidding,” I said. Sonia was beautiful, but she was bulimic and wouldn’t believe she was beautiful, no matter how many times you told her. She was four inches taller than I was, with the large breasts and small waist I wanted. Every once in a while she would tell me things like, “I haven’t thrown up in three days.”

“That’s wonderful,” I would say. “Maybe you should go into counseling before you do it again.”

“I know,” she would say. “I know.”

“I’d go with you,” I would say. “I’d hold your hand in the waiting room.”

“I know you would,” she’d say. Sonia went to student health frequently to pick up brochures. She read books about eating disorders; she could quote statistics. Everything that went wrong with the body, digestive problems, weakened esophagus. Swollen red knuckles, she would tell me, are the sign of a bulimic. Together we would study the back of her hand, but her knuckles just looked normal to me.

“Do you remember that party when Hilary drank two bottles of wine and passed out?” Sonia asked.

“Mmmmm,” I said. Hilary was a friend of ours who sometimes went a day or two eating nothing but white sandwich bread. At that party, Hilary crawled into the bathroom and threw up seven times, though there was nothing in her stomach to bring out. We tried and tried to make her eat. Even bread would have soaked up the alcohol in her stomach, but she just said, weakly, “I’m on a diet.”

Now Sonia took my hand and squeezed it. “That was so stupid,” she whispered. “So fucking stupid.” She looked up at me, and I was shocked again by the sight of that one crazy blue eye. “What would I do without you?” she said.

“Be very still,” I said to her, and then I held her eye open with one hand, and with the other I ever so carefully pinched that contact out. I didn’t want her to look in the mirror in the morning and be startled by her appearance. Not for even the briefest moment did I want her to see herself looking that strange.

When I visited the campus in Nashville as a high school senior, they told me that *Playboy* had named the female students there the most beautiful in America. The vice president of the student body had posed in a special college issue. The sophomores who hosted me had a sign up in their dorm room. *Smoking is like sex, it said. It hurts the first time but you do it again anyway.* I was a virgin and had never smoked an entire cigarette by myself and that sign made me feel like I wanted to stay in my small town and go to church with my Southern Baptist friends for the rest of my life. Of course that was only a momentary feeling. Of course I knew better than that. Later I found out that sign was the truth, though I gave up smoking after a month.

Now, even at the end of September, girls in bikinis littered the lawns. Sonia and I sat outside the student center and watched them, though they didn’t do much, just lay there and every once in a while rolled over. “Look at them,” Sonia said. “Those bikinis are so *small..*”

I had never owned a bikini in my life, and I didn’t care about getting a tan. When I was fifteen and we lived in New Mexico my mother used to give me daily reports on skin cancer rates. One day when she was at work I climbed out onto our flat roof and coated myself with coconut oil. I swear I could hear it sizzling on my skin, like I was browning myself in a deep fat fryer.

“Tanning is so unhealthy,” I said, but Sonia wasn’t listening. She had extended her legs in front of her and was studying them. “My legs are so *white,*” she said.

It was times like this I wished I smoked. We should have been sitting there, smoking cigarettes, dressed in black, sharing a cup of coffee. But I was wearing a white t-

shirt and jeans and Sonia was wearing a short pink skirt and a t-shirt that looked a lot like mine but cost twice as much, and we were eating yogurt out of cartons with plastic spoons. I finished mine, but Sonia had still only taken a bite or two. She was staring at a girl playing frisbee in a red bikini. The girl jumped up to catch the frisbee, and one breast came surging out of her tiny top. Laughing, she tucked it back in, and threw the frisbee back. I said, “Nothing like a girl with a healthy body image.”

Sonia seemed to come awake suddenly. She took a tiny bite of her yogurt. “That was sort of beautiful,” she said.

That was Friday, and that night I was supposed to be going out with Joe, who I had been dating for two years. We weren’t really having sex anymore. I tried to believe the decline was natural, but I couldn’t help but wonder if it had anything to do with the ten pounds I’d gained. It had gotten to the point where I was reading those articles in women’s magazines— “Put the X Back in Your Sexlife.” A few days earlier, Joe had said to me, “Rosie, we need to spend some time together. Let’s go out, just you and me. We’ll get dressed up, and go out to dinner.” I took a long bath in perfumed bubbles, and, underneath my dress, put on black tights and the lacy black slip he liked to see me in, and I painted mascara on my upper outside lashes to make my eyes look bigger, and I waited for him to come.

He came to the door, and there he was, clean-shaven for once, in a button-down ironed shirt that he’d tucked into his jeans, and he said, “We have to hurry. I parked the car in a handicapped spot.” But then he collapsed on the couch and just sat there with his keys in his hand.

I climbed onto his lap, my skirt going every which way, and I said, in my sexy voice, “Kiss me my darling.” He turned toward me like he was going to, and then he said, “I think we need to talk.”

“Oh Jesus,” I said. I got off his lap and went into my bedroom and hit my head a couple of times against the wall. I couldn’t believe it. He came over to get me in his nice clothes so we could have an evening together, and then he dumped me. He said, “I still love you. I just don’t *love* you.”

We went out to dinner anyway.

For two weeks after Joe broke up with me, I didn’t want to get off my couch. “That bastard,” Sonia said. She came over with a box of Kleenex and a bottle of bourbon, and I ripped up tissues and said things like, “How could I not have known he was going to dump me?” and “How could I have dated such an asshole for so long?” and, once, collapsed pitifully on the floor, not even crying so much as *leaking*, I said, “I just want my boyfriend back.”

“You didn’t want him that much when you had him,” Sonia said.

“I know,” I said. “But I was *used* to him.”

“Rosie, I promise you, you’re going to be all right,” Sonia said. “Change is good,” she added, but she didn’t sound like she meant it. I think she wanted to prove it when she made me go with her to the hairdresser, where she was going to get her hair dyed brown, in some shade that approximated her natural color. She said she was tired of going every four weeks to have an inch of dark roots bleached the same light blond as the rest of her hair. “Are you sure?” the hairdresser asked her, her hands plucking at Sonia’s long hair. “I’ve been doing this for five years, and I’ve never made a southern girl’s hair darker before.”

“I’m not southern,” Sonia said. “I’m from Connecticut.”

“Really?” said the hairdresser. “I would’ve sworn you were southern.”

Sonia frowned. “I’m going to go read a magazine,” I said.

“No, don’t,” Sonia said. She flashed me a weak smile in the mirror. I stood by her chair and watched them going through color samples, the hairdresser holding the little

bundles of hair next to Sonia's cheek. You might have thought the hairdresser was prepping Sonia for surgery, their faces were so twisted with concern. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw with surprise that it was on my own face, that same frightened, uncertain look. What was wrong with me? It was only hair.

That night I was still up, watching late night talk shows, when Sonia called me just after midnight. "I had a nightmare," she said.

She showed up wearing her coat over her nightgown, which was white flannel, with a blue bow at the neck, like the little girl nightgowns I used to get for Christmas. "Do you want to tell me about it?" I asked. She shook her head. I took her coat and gave her a blanket, and she curled up in a corner of the couch, the blanket across her knees.

"Don't let me fall asleep," she said.

"Don't worry, sweetie," I said from the kitchen, where I had gone to make her some food. "I'll keep an eye on you." I knew she had probably eaten nothing but a bagel all day, so I didn't bother to ask before I heated up a can of soup and made her some tea, a little skim milk, one tiny spoonful of sugar, no more, or she wouldn't drink it. Her eyes were closed when I came back in. "Hey," I said softly, and she started awake.

I paced around the room while she ate. I had the hopeless, jittery feeling that it would be a long time before I'd be able to sleep, like the one time I tried acid, not knowing beforehand that the speed in it would keep me awake for twelve endless hours.

Through a yawn, Sonia said, "I had the worst evening. I had to go out with Tracy Porter."

"But you hate her," I said.

"I know," she said. "But it was a social obligation."

"That's one thing I hate about growing up," I said. "When I was a kid I never worried about social obligations."

She cocked her head. "Didn't you?" she asked, incredulous.

I laughed. "Sometimes you forget," I said, "how different we are."

"Social obligation is not what bothers me about growing up," Sonia said.

"What is?" I picked up the bowl of soup, which she had only half finished, and held it out to her.

She took the bowl and grimaced. "Having my period," she said.

"That's not a recent development," I said.

"Okay," she said. "Having sex."

"But you don't have sex," I said.

"I know," she said. "I can never be with a man until I get my body right."

"There's nothing wrong with your body."

"That's not true," she said. "My breasts are huge."

"Men like that," I said.

"I wish my chest was flat," Sonia said. "I wish I still looked like I did when I was twelve."

"You have to grow up some time, don't you?" I said. Even though she was only twenty-one, I had heard Sonia lie about her age, telling people she was twenty, or even eighteen.

"Why?" She looked at me like she really wanted me to tell her, but all I could think of was that you just have to. I shrugged and went back to my pacing.

After a minute, Sonia said, "You know that thing the hairdresser said today? I wonder why she thought I was southern." She frowned, as though the idea bothered her.

"I don't know," I said, but what I thought was, one rich white girl in pearls and a Ralph Lauren skirt looks pretty much like any other. I felt bad for thinking it. I couldn't understand how, when people were at their weakest, I could have such urges to be cruel. She looked so pale and small, underneath that cloud of newly dark hair, hunched over her tea cup. I should've wanted only to hold her like a mother, to tell her everything would be

all right. I sat down next to her on the couch and stroked her hair. Even after all that mistreatment, it was sleek as seal fur and soft, almost unbearably soft.

Joe had this friend named Alan. He wrote sports for the college paper and at the end of October he called and asked if I wanted to sit with him in the press box at a women's basketball game. "Did Joe put you up to this?" I asked, and he went uhhhh for a minute, and then finally he said, "Well, yeah."

Joe thought he could buy off his own guilt by making me feel better, getting his friends to help cheer me up. At dinner the night he broke up with me he said, "Maybe some nice guy in one of your English classes will ask you out."

"I guess I don't care," I said to Alan. "I'll go to the game anyway."

In the press box he brought me a slice of the pizza they had for the sportswriters and when I said I didn't like pepperoni he pulled each piece off for me. He opened his mouth to put them in and then he got distracted by a fast break and he left his mouth just hanging open far enough that I could see his tongue before he put the pepperoni in there and shut it again to chew. He was left-handed and his arm kept bumping against my shoulder as he took notes, and, when I was leaning forward to watch the center trying to knock the ball in, his arm brushed against the side of my breast. He had a girlfriend, Sharon, but she had another boyfriend somewhere else, and it's too complicated to explain but anyway I wanted to sleep with him, and I thought it would be all right.

"You did *what*?" Sonia said.

We were sitting in the back of our sixteenth century poetry class and the professor, an enormously fat man who looked rather like a cartoon beaver, glanced our way, so I pretended to be taking notes and wrote in big letters, It was fabulous. Actually it had been only okay, nothing like when Joe and I were first together and would have sex even in the afternoons. It had in fact been rather awkward, because Alan wore briefs

instead of boxers, and not only are briefs silly looking but they can be hard to get off. Underwear removal has always made me uncomfortable, and I kept waiting for Alan to take them off, but it was clear he wanted me to do it, so after a while I pushed them down. They were kind of tight and hard to get over his thighs—which were muscular, he said, from high school soccer—and then I got them farther down his legs than my hands could reach, and the whole time I kept accidentally popping the elastic waist. I knew before I ever had sex that it might hurt the first time, but I never guessed it was going to keep being so embarrassing. It did no good to talk about these things with Sonia, she was so squeamish about sex.

Hilary was in this class too, but she never came, or, if she did, she showed up thirty minutes into it and bumped her way to the back of the classroom to sit at the empty desk we always saved for her, just in case. Where's Hilary today? I wrote to Sonia in my notebook.

Who cares? she wrote back. What's Joe going to say about Alan?

He kept hoping someone would ask me out, I wrote.

Yeah, she wrote back. But I bet he didn't think you were going to sleep with his roommate.

I knew Sonia was thinking I had done it in some pathetic attempt to get even with Joe. I knew almost everyone who heard the story would think that; chances were, if Joe ever found out he would think that. But Alan had looked good to me that night and no one had looked good to me like that in a while, and that was why I did it. Because I wanted to. Couldn't just that be the truth?

Hilary, Sonia and I had just ordered a pizza and eaten it, sitting on the floor of my living room. Or Sonia and I had eaten it. Hilary had picked at one piece until it was a collection of mushy little mounds on her plate. Then she ate the crust, pulling each piece off before she put it in her mouth to chew and swallow. Now I was holding Sonia's hand,

which was twitching, and trying to make conversation for the next eight minutes, which was all the time Sonia had to throw up before it was too late. I was proud of her because she hadn't thrown up in over a week. It had been three days since I first slept with Alan.

"Guess what happened today," I said.

"What?" Hilary said. Sonia jiggled nervously beside me, watching the clock.

"I was napping on the couch and there was a knock at the door, so I got up and answered it, and it was Alan. He didn't even say anything; he just grabbed me and kissed me. Then he let go of me and said hello." I squeezed Sonia's hand.

"That sounds awful," Sonia said.

"Did you like it?" Hilary said.

"I don't know," I said. "Kind of."

"Then did you sleep with him?" Hilary said.

"No," I said. "Then he went to class, and I went back to my nap."

"What if Joe finds out about this?" Hilary said.

"It's none of his business," I said. "He dumped me, remember? There are *rules*. Besides, how would he?"

"Oh," Hilary said, pushing one of her cheese mounds with a finger. "I don't know." She sighed. "I wish I could have an orgasm during sex," she said.

"You can, Hil," I said. "If you'd just relax. Anybody can learn how. I keep telling you."

"Four minutes," Sonia whispered. "Four minutes."

"Yes, honey," I said. "Almost there." I liked being the sensible one, holding hands, making tea, offering advice. When I heard my voice, explaining calmly what to do, how to handle things, I believed in it, the way I had believed in my mother's voice telling me how to make french toast, how to shift from first to second gear. It was so clear to me, what they needed to do to fix their lives. It made me believe I knew how to fix my

own. I could have an orgasm. I could go jogging to work off that extra ten pounds. I could forget Joe so fast I would stop missing him almost as soon as I'd started.

When I thought about him, I was beginning to remember things I didn't like. For instance, he would never dance. I understand that he didn't want to dance alone, to fast music, because the only times he ever did he was drunk and I could see he had no rhythm, like this one time at a bar in Memphis on New Year's Eve when he kept bumping into the other couples dancing near us. And Joe was not a small guy; he was practically knocking them down. But I mean he wouldn't even slow dance, not just to big band music like at my cousin's wedding reception, but even to rock ballads, when all you do is hold on to each other and sway. You don't need rhythm for that, I kept telling him.

"What's the big deal?" he said. "I don't dance. I don't want to dance. I don't understand why you care so much about it."

"It's so easy," I said. "It's a primal urge. All people do when they dance like that is rock each other."

"If you want to be rocked so bad," he said, "you can just climb in my lap and I'll sing you a lullaby."

"Asshole," I said, and then I think we wrestled around for a while. He liked to tickle me. That was another thing I wasn't so crazy about.

"Rosie," Sonia said. "Rosie."

"What?" I said.

"You're squeezing my hand really hard," she said.

"Oh," I said. I loosened my grip on her fingers, which were the same length as mine—we had held our hands together to measure—but slender, the nails shiny with clear polish. "Sorry," I said. "Did I hurt you?"

"It's okay," she said. "You didn't mean to."

Alan was afraid that Joe would find out about us, and though I tried to tell him Joe had no right to care, he still whispered when he called me on the phone. One night before Thanksgiving break, he called around eleven to ask if he could come over; Joe was out studying, and wouldn't be there to ask where he was going. I went into the bathroom to check my hair in the mirror. I lifted up my shirt and sucked in my stomach, turning sideways, trying to decide if I looked fat. Then I heard a knock on the door. It was too soon to be Alan, and I wasn't surprised, when I opened the door, to see Sonia.

"Are you busy?" she asked, stepping inside. Her hair was wild, and the only color in her face came from the dark circles under her eyes. She looked so washed out it startled me, and then I realized she was wearing no make-up. I hardly ever saw her without it. She was like those women in the movies who get out of bed in the morning with lipstick on.

"I'm not busy, now," I said. "But I will be in about ten minutes. Alan's coming over."

She hesitated. "Well, I won't stay long," she said, and, as though to demonstrate this, she kept her coat on when she sat on the couch.

"What's the matter?" I asked, sitting next to her.

"Nothing," she said. "I was just bored." She didn't seem to have anything else to say, and I couldn't make conversation, listening all the time for Alan's knock on the door, so we just sat there.

When Alan arrived, I opened the door and said, my voice bright, "Sonia's here."

He looked over my shoulder and waved. "Hi, Sonia," he called. I didn't hear her answer. Then he whispered, "Should I go?"

"She'll leave soon," I whispered.

But she didn't. In fact, she sat there for over an hour, and it was the most awkward hour of my life, because Alan and I weren't about *talking*, and with the addition of Sonia it was hopeless. I noticed that after a few minutes of silence, someone would

begin a sentence with “so,” as in, “So, you’re taking that film class,” or “So, I heard you have an interview in Chicago,” and then when the subject was exhausted we were all quiet again. Alan kept picking up things and playing with them, a CD case, a paperweight. He was starting to shoot me looks, but Sonia just sat there, still wearing her coat. Someone had to go, and the way I was feeling right then, watching Alan roll that paperweight slowly between his strong, thick-veined hands, I sure didn’t want it to be him.

Finally, when Alan got up to go to the bathroom, I leaned toward Sonia, took her hand and whispered, “Sweetheart, maybe you’d better go home.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, withdrawing her hand from mine. “You should have said so before.” She stood up.

“Sonia,” I said.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m going. I shouldn’t have stayed so long.” She was gone before Alan got back from the bathroom, but when he started kissing me, all I could think of was the moment when I told her to leave, the way her eyes widened. I knew she wasn’t angry, but embarrassed.

“I’m sorry, Alan,” I said. “I’m not in the mood anymore.”

“Damn that Sonia,” Alan said.

“It’s not her fault,” I said. “You’d better go.” So he left, and then I was alone.

Not long after, Alan confessed to Joe that he had slept with me, and Joe decided that just because he had thought he didn’t want to sleep with me anymore, it didn’t mean anyone else could. He took to calling me at four in the morning to tell me I was a slut and ask why I didn’t laugh at his jokes anymore. He said I was controlling and vindictive. He said I was a person no one liked. At my Christmas party, when I wouldn’t talk to him, he called after me, loud enough for everyone to hear, “That’s right. Just walk away from me again, you bitch.”

“Keep your voice down,” I said. “I’m not going to have any more scenes.”

“Fine,” he said. “No more scenes.” Then he turned and bolted out the front door.

I waited a minute, and then I followed him, just to see what he was doing, and there he was, racing toward the street, and when he got into the middle he started doing jumping jacks, up and down, up and down, wildly flapping his arms and spinning in circles. He was screaming something, but I couldn’t tell what, and the whole thing made me furious. I started to run after him, and when he saw me coming he started running again too and finally I caught up to him in the parking lot of a pizza place across the street. “What the fuck are you doing?” I shouted at him.

“I’m trying to kill myself,” he screamed. “You make me want to kill myself.”

“For God’s sake,” I shouted. “It’s three o’clock in the morning. There’s no cars on this road. What kind of idiot are you?”

“Excuse me for being in love with you!” He threw his arm out, so that for the briefest moment I thought he might hit me. “Excuse me for the fact that you’re ruining my life, you and your pride, fucking all my friends.”

“You son of a bitch,” I said. “You’re the one who broke up with me, remember? I don’t know what you think I owe you, but I’ll tell you what it is right now. Nothing, nothing, nothing. I’m not your girlfriend, I’m not your mother, and I’m sure not your shrink, and I’m over you, over, over, over.”

His face crumpled. “I love you,” he whispered, and then he threw himself on the ground and started to sob. I stood over him, watching his shoulders heave, and I had a strong urge to kick him. This was someone I had thought I knew better than anyone, and I had never known he was capable of this. What were we all really capable of if he could throw himself over the edge this way, if instead of wanting to help him I felt disgust? What was keeping any of us together besides control?

I crouched down beside him. I couldn’t bring myself to touch him, but I put sympathy into my voice when I said, “If you’ll get up and let me drive you home, I

promise we'll talk soon, okay?" I suppose that was a terrible thing to hear after telling someone you love her, but right then it was the best I could do.

When I got back to my apartment, Sonia met me at the door. She had sent everyone home, and Hilary was crying in a ball on the armchair. "What now?" I said. Sonia took my hand and held it. "Hilary has just told me something," she said. "She slept with Joe before you broke up."

"Oh my God," I said. "That's just perfect."

Hilary stood up. "You don't know how awful I feel," she said, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I'd give anything not to have done it. You're so important to me."

"I just want to know how many times it happened," I said, my voice cold. I let go of Sonia's hand. "And you better not lie to me." I stared at Hilary. "You better not lie."

"I wouldn't lie," she said, so quietly I could barely hear her.

"Well," I said. "We already know that's not true."

She sobbed and couldn't speak.

"This is so awful," Sonia said, her hands splayed out in front of her face, as though someone were trying to make her eat food she didn't want.

"Goddamnit, Hilary, I'm tired," I said, throwing myself onto the couch. "Just tell me what you have to tell me and get on out."

Sonia laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Go easy," she whispered, but that was the last thing I felt inclined to do. I had never liked Hilary much anyway, though we were friends. Was anyone I knew worth keeping? I sometimes think I never liked anyone I knew in college except Sonia and, sometimes, when I thought of all that wasted beauty, not even her.

"I slept with him twice," Hilary said. "Right before you broke up."

"How was it?" I asked. "Did you come?"

"No," she whispered.

“You poor thing,” I said. “You did it for nothing.” I felt clear and sharp. I noticed little things: the way she clutched at her shirt, the strand of wet hair clinging to the corner of her mouth.

“You’d better go now,” Sonia said.

“Rosie,” Hilary said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Goodnight,” I said, and closed my eyes. I heard her putting on her jacket, still sniffing and gasping for breath. Then I heard the door open and close.

“Well,” I said, after a moment.

“Well,” Sonia said. She sat down beside me on the couch and patted me on the hand. “What a mess,” she said.

“You can go home,” I said. “I’m fine.” She didn’t want to leave but I insisted. When she was gone, I hugged my knees to my chest and cried and cried. Then I blew my nose and went to bed.

The next day, Sonia called to say she thought I would feel better if we went out of town for the weekend. We decided to go to Memphis, three hours away. In the car she seemed tense, and I wasn’t really listening to her until she started talking about a meeting she had had with a professor.

“I told her that I had an eating disorder,” Sonia said.

“What?” I said. “Why?” I had always thought she would never tell anyone but me.

“I don’t know.” Sonia shrugged. “She looked me up and down and said, ‘Well, you must be bulimic, because you’re certainly not anorexic.’”

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘Well, thanks for the help with my body image. I think I’ll go binge and purge now.’”

We both knew she hadn't said that. But I sometimes let her tell stories the way we wished they had happened. "You didn't though, did you?" I asked. "Binge and purge?"

She didn't say anything.

"Did you?" I said. I turned toward her and touched her arm. She stared at me, and the look was almost hostile. Then an unpleasant smile crossed her face.

"Tell me," I demanded, turning back to watch the road.

"What do you want to know?" she asked. "Do you want to know exactly what I ate? A bag of cookies. A medium pizza. Three twinkies. Do you want to know how many times I threw up? Go ahead, ask me. Ask me anything."

"Do you think I'm asking out of idle curiosity?" I said.

"I don't know why you're asking," she said.

Because, I thought, you wanted me to ask. I felt terrible for letting everything else distract me from Sonia. I would pay more attention to her, I thought, from now on.

Halfway there, we stopped to get lunch at the McDonald's drive-thru. Sonia ordered a two-cheeseburger special, with a large fries and large coke. She ate it really quickly, not as though she enjoyed it, but as though she had to swallow every last bite before someone caught her at it. Then she watched the clock for the next few minutes, so I watched it too. It was 12:08 when she finished eating. At 12:13 she said, "Pull over."

"What for?" I said. I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

"Just pull over, Rosie," she said wearily. She pointed out the window at the shoulder. "Right here."

"Forget it," I said. "I'm not going to be a party to this."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. She sat up straight and gripped my arm. "I need you to pull over now. Please." She glanced at the clock.

I shook my head, keeping my eyes on the road.

"Goddamnit," she shouted. "Pull over now. Now!"

"No," I shouted back. "Fuck you."

“Fine,” she said, her voice suddenly calm again. She grabbed the McDonalds bag off the floor, stuck her fingers down her throat and neatly threw up in the bag.

I couldn't say anything. I think I screamed. I jerked the car off the road onto the shoulder. We skidded on the gravel, veering right out into the grass, but then the car righted itself and I slammed on the brakes. She was staring straight ahead out the window. I can describe the look on her face as nothing else but triumph. “I can't believe you did that,” I said.

She reached for the door handle. “I'm going to throw this out,” she said.

“No you're not,” I said. “You did it, now you can hold the bag in your lap.” I thought, this time she wasn't going to get away with it. Things had become serious so quickly.

“Are you crazy?” she said. “I'm getting out of the car.”

“If you do,” I said, “I'm going to leave you here.”

She looked at me for a long moment, and her face hardened. “Really,” she said flatly. Her fingers tightened on the door handle.

“Sonia,” I said. “Don't.”

There must have been something in my voice that softened her, because she smiled, this smile she had that made her look like a child given an unexpected gift, delighted with you, amazed at her own good fortune. “I'll be right back,” she said. Then she opened the door and stepped out of the car. As soon as I heard the door close, I stepped on the gas, and the car squealed back onto the highway. I was watching her in my rearview mirror, I saw her turn, I saw her mouth open. I looked for her in the mirror long past the point when it was possible to see her.

There are a lot of things I could say about Sonia. She wore a string of pearls, even in the shower. “After all,” she said, laughing, “they come from the sea.” I don't know why these should be the things I remember. All that soft hair. Her head thrown back laughing. Sonia, the one person I thought I could save.