

Excerpt from *If This Is How It Is, How It's Going to Be* (Chapter 1)

*Notice that in this photograph, we are all together. On a wooden bench swing. In a pasture. White fences in the background. Mother has the baby and the little boys are on each side. You can't see her face: she's bending down for some reason. She's dropped something and reaches to pick it up. The camera clicks and now this moment is in here, in my hands. I rub my thumb over it, over Mother's head, in frustration. Look up, woman. Look up, dammit. I need to see your face. I can't remember what you look like. But the fences, the fences are so white. How could I forget the fences?*

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We were locked out.

Mother had locked herself in the bathroom. In her tub water. Above her, the grass smoke and vapors eddied around. The radio played Aerosmith. And in the bedroom, a ceiling fan swirled above us, making the clack sound over and over. A man was passed out in the kitchen. We could hear him snoring. Justin knew the snore: he would tiptoe in and sip from the man's whiskey bottles. He would climb onto the countertops and swallow Jack. He was four years old.

I was two.

The water moved and we heard it: she's in there filing her nails. Reading a fashion magazine. Feeling her pregnant belly. Water dripped. We heard the man make a hacking noise in the kitchen. Was he choking in his sleep? Would he die this time? We waited. This was his house, the man's. He let us live there in exchange for our Mom. He

had the pictures all over, pictures of himself, of Vietnam, his dead wife. He still wore a wedding ring.

Mom, Justin said. Mom.

What?

What're you doing in there?

Taking a bath.

How long?

Not long.

How much longer?

Not much. Do you need something?

No.

We were two years apart, but Justin wasn't much bigger. Our hair grew bloated and wooly: mine white-blonde, his coal-black, because of our different fathers. We never knew these men.

She had the faucet on again. Hot steam floated out from under the door and touched the windows. Justin sat with me on the bed where I made a little racecar vroom vroom. He took the racecar and said I wasn't doing it right.

This is how you do it, he said, ramping the car off a sheet curl.

We watched it fall onto the floor.

That's how you do it, he said.

The car was belly up on the carpet: the passengers would be dead by now. The car would blow up.

Her clothes were on the floor by the bed. Wranglers, boots, a tank top, a tag with the name 'Laurie.' At night she would tend the bar, hope for good tips. She was saving. She would be a model, yes, meet the right people, be discovered. She was twenty-two. Young.

Mom, Justin said. How long?

You know I'm taking a bath, Mom said. Do you need something?

Yes.

What do you need?

I'm bored.

Go play with Jim. He needs you.

I did. It's boring.

He needs to play, Justin. Go play.

Justin sighed and climbed back onto the bed. The comforter was thrown off and wadded on the floor. Empty beer bottles on the nightstand. An ashtray. A glass pipe. And this is where they were. My brother took a Miller Lite and held it above his mouth: only a few drops left. Mmm, you want some? he asked, knowing I wouldn't answer, knowing I don't speak. It's good, he said. Real good.

Justin had his eyes on something. On the dresser. A little box, green and white. She had put them up there, away from him. Marlboro Menthol 100s. The dresser was tall, too high to reach. We heard the snoring break its pattern. Was he dead now? For a moment it was quiet. Then it began again. Behind the other door, the faucet stopped and we could hear small splashes over Bon Jovi. We could hear our mother.

I was content with my racecar vroom vroom. The same motion back and forth vroom vroom. But Justin wanted the cigarettes. He stood beneath the dresser: he could use the wooden drawer knobs to climb up, his fingers tight around them, he could tug his bodyweight up. He was a good climber, too. But the knobs were so tiny. He kept slipping. Then he had a better idea: to pull the drawers out. Aha, it would make a kind of ladder. Ascending over the folded piles of plaid shirts, underwear, and belts, he made his way up to the cigarettes, turning his back to the doors: the locked bathroom, the open hallway. Adults could come through and find him. What would they do? A hand-swatting? A belt-whooping?

Victory.

He made it to the top, with the cigarettes. He packed down the box against his palm; that's how they did it. They were cool. He thumbed one out like James Dean. Let it hang between his lips. Real cool. I need a light is what they say, so he said it too. There, next to him, were the strike-on-box matches. You'd expect her to be more of a lighter type. He took one out and struck it against the chemical edge. Dead. It was harder than it looked, the way they did it. No. 2: dead. Again. No. 3: alas the burst, finally, he felt in on his fingers. Hot fire. Hot, hot fire. The feeling as he lifted it to the butt's end, the way it raced down the wood. The feeling. Real fast. Real cool.

The house burned down with everything in it.

The owner drank himself back to God.

Mother had the baby, named her Alissa.

Then this woman came and got us.

Me and my brother and the baby.

This woman took us away.