



Farrar Straus Giroux · New York

*For H., my first best friend, who was
(and always will be) a part of me*

The author gratefully acknowledges the support
of the British Columbia Arts Council.

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

Copyright © 2018 by Karen Rivers

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Designed by Aimee Fleck

First edition, 2018

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

fiercereads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rivers, Karen, 1970– author.

Title: All that was: a novel / Karen Rivers.

Description: First edition. | New York : Farrar Straus Giroux, 2018. |

Summary: While seventeen-year-old Sloane shares a drunken kiss with her best friend Piper's boyfriend Soup, Piper is murdered on a nearby beach, and over the next few days, Sloane and Soup are left reliving their past moments with Piper, wondering if they are responsible for her death and figuring out how to move on without her.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017011019 (print) | ISBN 9780374302467 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Death—Fiction. | Best friends—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. | Love—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.R5224 (ebook) | LCC PZ7.R5224 A1 2018 (print) | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017011019>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

PROLOGUE

What do I do now?

I'm under.

I'm gone.

I'm below.

Above me, there is the surface of the water, the sun streaming in like light through fog, except the fog is water and I can't reach the light. My hands twirl like ballerinas spinning in a music box. I never liked ballet. I didn't want to dance.

Someone has already found my body in the sand, seaweed draped over me, my eyes frozen open, staring at the sky. I want to blink.

Blink.

I can't.

Paralyzed.

So why am I still looking at myself, my hands pushing at the curtain of water, red blood ribboning into the sea? How can this be happening?

It isn't so much like being in the water as it is like being inside music. I can't hear it, but I'm a part of it. There's blood and fear and emptiness and death and me and we're locked together in an underwater song that's forever.

It's a bad thing but there is no good thing to balance it out.

It's everything and nothing and I'm in the water but I also am the water.

I'm in Sloane but I also am Sloane.

I'm also the jellyfish and the rocks and the girl and the boy on the beach, the girl struggling, the boy triumphing, and I'm sorry.

I'm the current.

I'm everything.

I'm nothing.

When the water closed over my face, it felt as soft as the velvet curtains that used to hang in the room where Sloane's grandma stayed in their house. They were pale yellow. We used to hide in there, wrapped up in them, thinking she didn't know we were there. "I sure miss those pretty girls," she'd say. "I sure wish they'd come in here and see me."

She's not dead.

I am.

Death turns out to be the moment when the present freezes in place and holds on, a slice of everything held between two pieces of glass, like on a microscope slide, with you in the middle.

I know you hate me, Sloane. It's okay. I hate you, too.

I love you.

I'm sorry.

But think about it: you're the one who gets to live.

I don't.

Am I a ghost? Is that what this is?

It's a riddle and an answer and a mistake, all at once.

This isn't what I thought it would be, but what is?

Nothing.

Life.

Love.

Death.

I feel like I can almost understand but the words get all jumbled up in me, like salty weeds tangling around my tongue, and I can't breathe and I can't breathe and I'm drowning, I've drowned, and I can't speak any of the words and I never will again. I'm here under the water but somehow I can see the blue of the sky, I can see Soup kissing you, I can see the birds who careen by on the wind, I can see people on the beach, police, a German shepherd dog, and it was dark when I died, and now it's light, and my body isn't here, but I am still here, I am here, can't anyone see me here?

You don't even know yet.
I'm going to miss everything.
I wasn't finished.
I'd barely even started.
The past and future are both leaving.
Gone.
I am the water.
I am the blood in the water.
I am the wind blowing above the water.
I am the salt in the water.
I am the molecules of everything touching the water.
I am you.
I am your blood.
I am your heart.
It's okay, Sloane. The dead don't stay mad. We probably can't.
Everything is too hard to hold on to.
Everything is drifting away from me, or trying to, but I can't
let it.
I am so angry.
I am holding on.
I want to break through to you somehow.
I want to scream, LOOK WHAT YOU DID, YOU
MONSTER.
I want to say, I LOVE YOU.
I'm the price that we paid.

I paid the price, but more than I owed.

More, right?

Did I really deserve this?

I twirl and twirl.

*Blood in the water, an endless ribbon of blood,
is me.*





PART ONE

NOW

WHEN MY PHONE RINGS FOR THE FIRST time since I last saw Piper, I ignore it.

The ice in my glass melts into my Diet Coke, turning it watery and thin. I take a gulp that hurts the whole way down, a stone that I've swallowed whole. I hold my breath. It stops hurting all at once, like a light going out.

Piper's mad and I'm not ready to talk to her. I don't know what I'll say.

"You're her spirit animal," Piper's mom once told me. I wanted to tell her that "spirit animal" is actually offensive the way she's using it. I also wanted to say that Piper's inner animal isn't a person, anyway. It's something furious and powerful, already extinct, so rare it couldn't even exist anymore—a

clouded leopard or a Caspian tiger—beautiful and strange and pretty much impossible to understand.

I'm none of those things.

There are thousands of girls like me. Millions. I'm as common as a house cat.

The only thing that makes me different from every other girl is that Piper chose me. We've been friends for so long that we've started to look the same. We sound the same. We definitely, on purpose, dress the same. It messes with people, to see us together. I don't really know why, but it makes us powerful—twice as pretty, twice as special. But there's no guidebook for what to do when suddenly, you don't feel like being two.

You want to be one.

I want to be one.

Me. Without Piper.

Me, with Soup.

We said a boy would never come between us, but we were so wrong.

I kissed Soup.

Soup kissed me.

But what if it was a mistake? Maybe Soup just got us mixed up. He was pretty drunk and the lighting was bad and I was drunk, too, and no one said no. So it was my fault. He has an excuse, but I sure don't.

Me, alone, is terrifying, and Soup is Piper's boyfriend.

I take another sip of my watery drink and the blue sky sinks down around me and the sun burns my eyes and my head aches from a hangover I totally deserve and I stare at my phone and my skin beads with sweat and the day gets hotter and longer and worse.

Last night feels more real now that it isn't happening than it felt when it was happening. At the time, it felt like a dream. The house was tilting around me, all corridors and half-built rooms and echoing sounds of emptiness, and I was dizzy, spinning. Then the music that felt like it was inside me. Drinking and more drinking, the cough-syrup sweetness of the mix. Then there we were, me and Soup, dancing, slower than the beat, but also just right. The filth on the unfinished floor rose up around us, stomped into clouds, both of us shiny with sweat and grayed from the dust. And then there was his face and my face and I can't explain it, I definitely can't explain why I did it. I couldn't help it. It just . . . happened.

That's never happened to me before. I've kissed boys, but it's never felt like that kiss, like a force bigger than me, pulling my lips to his lips and taking over every part of me. I couldn't have stopped it if I'd tried.

But I didn't try.

I have to talk to Piper, but I can't because it's impossible to tell her the truth and I haven't thought of the lie yet. I can't be in love with Soup. And I won't be. Love is a decision, that's

what Piper always said, before she changed her idea about that. But maybe she was right all along. If so, I'm deciding now. Love is chemicals: dopamine and serotonin, flooding your brain, making you more or less yourself. You should be able to take a pill to stop it, to lock into your neurotransmitters, blunt the signal.

There should be a cure.

But anyway, it's over, whatever "it" was.

The thing with Soup and me.

I shiver hard, but I'm not cold. Not even a little. If anything, it feels like I'm cooking. The backs of my legs stick to the paint on the sun-hot wooden Adirondack chair. I can feel my skin everywhere tightening from the heat, like a sweater shrinking in the dryer, the sun robbing it of everything.

"I'm sorry," I practice. "Please, Piper. Pipes, come on. I was drunk, so it didn't count. Maybe the alcohol and my meds . . . maybe that was . . . I mean . . ."

I lick my lips. They taste like a lie I'm telling myself, salty and wrong.

I don't always like Piper but I need Piper. Piper is part of me. Not being friends with Piper isn't an option.

I'd die.

But kissing Soup wasn't like kissing anyone else. It was something different. It was *everything* different.

It was everything I wanted all along.

* * *

I should go inside the house, where there is air-conditioning and Netflix, fresh ice and Diet Coke, but I can't seem to do anything but sit here and try not to think about Soup. I have a plan for my life and there's no room in it for a boyfriend right now.

I'm going to travel after senior year.

I'm going to go to film school in New York the year after that.

I'm going to be important. I'm going to really change things with my films. I know it.

I'll look back on this and I'll realize it didn't matter. I'll know that we made a big deal over nothing. Over a boy. We agreed a long time ago, boys don't matter.

There is so much stuff that *matters*. Real things.

Things like how flocks of birds are mysteriously falling dead from the sky, raining down on towns and farms in feathery hailstorms.

Things like how herds of antelope are lying down all at once, dead, on the grassy plains of Africa.

Things like how thousands and thousands of fish died at the same time in one lake in China.

Things like how polar bears are drowning because the ice is melting out from underneath them, leaving them wobbling on shrinking islands, and then swimming for their lives.

Everything is dying.

I hope you die, for real, Piper said. *Monster*. I could feel her spit hitting my cheek; I knew how much she meant it. Piper has hated plenty of people, but it's never been me. Not before last night. I didn't know how to answer. She was close enough to kiss and then she wasn't. Her eyes were tiny, angry slits when she spun away and vanished into the wall of music.

I don't know how she could see where she was going.

I hope she didn't fall.

I hate myself, but it wasn't *all* my fault. Soup should have let go first.

But even while Piper was yelling, we were swaying without meaning to, without wanting to; our bodies were touching in a way that felt like we weren't in control of them, our hands entangled, reaching for each other, her face collapsing.

Why does it matter so much?

It was only a kiss.

Whales are washing up dead on beaches everywhere, their corpses rotten and bloated. Sometimes they explode. It still doesn't seem like anyone cares.

If the elephants start dropping dead, maybe then the world will notice. Everyone likes elephants, right? Elephant zombies would really be something, their decomposing flesh dropping off in leathery sheets. They wouldn't be ignored.

I'll call my first real documentary film *The Zombie Apocalypse: The Future of Us*. It will make people notice. It will make them stop what they're doing and pay attention to what they've done to the Earth. What's more important than that?

Definitely not Soup Sanchez.

I flick through some photos and videos on my phone of me and Piper that I took over the summer. The selfies are always from the same angle, my arm reaching up with the camera, our heads together. Sometimes Soup is in the photos, sometimes he isn't. I've mostly avoided tagging along when they're together. It's hard to be the third wheel; it's hard to see her draped over his shoulders, her lips next to his ear.

I find a photo with him in it and I study his features, zoom in tight. He's an ordinary guy. Objectively, a little better-looking than normal. A *little*. But his nose is too pointy. His eyes are too close together. His cheeks are always dark with a beard that wants to grow in, making him look older than he is. My stomach clenches. I zoom back out again. In the photo, Piper is smiling so wide, it's like her face is splitting open.

I am a terrible friend.

I slide the screen off. Last night is already taking on a blurry quality, like an Instagram filter has been laid over the kiss, a vignette shadowing the outline.

"It wasn't real," I tell myself.

What's real is what is here right now: there is the green of

the trees and the grass and the garden and the gardener and his music and the smell of fertilizer mixed with my sunscreen and the alcohol that's still oozing out of my pores. There is the beach just beyond that and the ocean with its dark depths and the swaying kelp and the smell of something rotten pushing through the smoke smell: sewage and decay. Farther out than that, a shadow in the distance, there is the island, glowing in the sunlight. There is the optimistic pink of my bikini, the way my skin has melted off and stuck me here, and I can't move and I can't do anything and I'm paralyzed with not knowing how to fix this thing that has to be fixed.

What's real is the future. My future and Piper's future and our plans. Next year, Europe. The year after, New York. That's when our real lives will start.

"I'm sorry," I say again.

"I hate you," she says, as clear as anything I've ever heard.

"Piper?" I say, swiveling around.

But no one is there, just a crow, so black it is almost blue, its head cocked, like "What is your problem, girl?"

"Sorry," I say. It disappears in a frantic flurry of flying. "Sorry!" I call again.

I don't cry a lot but I'm crying now. I don't think this can be fixed. I don't think she'll forgive me. And without Piper, what if I'm nobody?

Without Piper, I might not even exist.

* * *

The first thing I ever said to Piper was “Sorry.”

The preschool was in a small red house with white trim that looked like a dollhouse. There were five steps leading to the front door, which had a huge door knocker shaped like a lion’s head. It looked scary. My blood was rushing through my body too fast; my three-year-old heart was racing. I’d never been separated from my dad before. Mom always worked, but Dad stayed home with me right up until the day I started preschool. Everything was changing.

I’ve never been good at change.

My mom lifted the lion and knocked, and the sound of it hurt my ears. It felt like my brain was vibrating. She pushed the door open. I missed my dad so bad. I wanted to run down the street toward our house. I wanted to find him. To simply push back through the door and out onto the street and to get away, anywhere, anywhere, anywhere but here.

Then I saw Piper.

Her hair hung loose in shampoo-commercial waves. (Even then, I was easily seduced by good hair.) She was wearing head-to-toe purple, which to me, at three, made her look like someone from a movie. Her feet were slightly apart; she was taking up more room in the space than she actually took. It was like she was commanding the air around her.

In contrast, I felt dirty. Sticky. Small. My mouth was still sour from the chocolate milk my mom had let me drink in the car. I almost definitely had a milk mustache. My mom said goodbye and my knees went soft, like they did near the edges of high things or when something came on the TV screen that made Dad yell, “Look away!”

A boy came running up to me, disheveled and spitty. “You stink,” he declared. He pushed me, hard, and I landed heavily beside Piper, elbow first, the pain rattling through my bone. She was lying down on the floor in a pool of rectangular sunlight, framed by the lines in the windows. The sun lit up the dust motes in a way that reminded me of home and I missed my mom and dad so intensely and my arm hurt so bad and I started to cry. I wanted to be anywhere but there.

I struggled off her and she grinned. Then she purred. I could see her invisible tail, her cat whiskers.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, rubbing hard at my tears. I was scared of this magic half cat, half girl. Who wouldn’t be?

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m fine. Boys are dumb.” Then, “Meow.” Her teeth were tiny perfect squares.

“Meow,” I said, deciding. I could have run away, but instead, I sat up and leaned toward her. I licked my own paw.

It was me and Piper against the world. Together.

* * *

There are a lot of ways to say “I’m sorry.” I google the translations on my phone and start memorizing them. Memorizing stuff makes me feel like a better version of myself.

My mouth moves as I say out loud, crystal clear: “*Prosti menya.*” Then, “Call me, Piper. Do it. Now.”

The phone doesn’t ring.

The wind pushes at the water in the bay in front of me, and white foam starts to break on the curved shore. The wind is hot. It’s still so hot.

This summer, there has been a heat wave. It’s September, but the sun seems unstoppable. Maybe it will stay hot forever. Maybe nothing will ever change. The heat shimmers over everything, blurring today with yesterday last week last month and forever. I lift my camera and point it at the sea, looking for whales. No fins break the surface.

I put the camera down.

I look at it.

I spin it on the table.

I think about everything it contains.

Things happen, or have already happened.

Sometimes I can’t tell if something is a dream or real, if something happened or didn’t.

Look.

A boy and girl set up their blanket on the beach in front of the house where the ground is layered with rocks the size of fists. It doesn't welcome sitters. It's lumpy and small and there's a rip current in the bay that makes it pretty dangerous for swimming. There are a lot of nicer beaches here. The best one is Smythes, with its silky-soft sand. Or Bay Beach, with its concession stand and lifeguards and music. This is a hard beach, alternating sand with surprisingly jagged rocks, rendering it unfriendly and usually empty.

There are also mosquitoes. The smell of decaying seaweed. The threat of raw sewage pushed in by the tide. The rope-and-driftwood swing hanging crookedly from a low branch on a leaning tree.

The blanket is one of those furry wolf blankets that probably smells musty and unwashed. The blanket looks familiar. Something about it makes me shiver, makes me want to climb out of myself and disappear. The girl has long, waist-length blond hair. Pretty hair. The boy has black hair. The girl is in a bright bikini. The boy is in trunks that look French. They are both thin and narrow-hipped, like models in an ad for Abercrombie & Fitch. The girl is barely sitting down before the boy starts to kiss her. It's hard to tell from here if she's enjoying it. His tongue is as fat and gross as a sea cucumber

launching itself into her mouth even as his hand grabs for her bikini bottom.

The girl pulls away and gets up from the blanket. It looks like she might come toward the house. I hope she does. I want her to. *Go*, I want to say. *Do it*. But instead, she runs into the sea, hopping on the rocks like they are hot potatoes, which they sort of are: some slippery, some even sharper than others because they are encrusted with barnacles. She is looking around, almost as if she is looking for help. There is something shimmery about the scene.

Something surreal. It is a mirage or a hallucination or both.

“This isn’t really happening,” I say out loud to myself, and I’m alone on the deck and no one is on the beach.

Am I going crazy?

Maybe.

The girl is so familiar.

It’s like looking in a mirror.

Is it me?

She spins around and she’s laughing in that fake come-and-get-me way that some girls do. It looks like she’s acting, though. Something is off. But she’s fine and it’s a game and she’s in control. I try to exhale.

There are jellyfish—a current from Hawaii that was created by the messed-up weather has brought thousands and

thousands of lion's mane jellyfish drifting into the bay and up onto the rocks, their stinging bloodred tentacles splayed out like organ meat in the sun—which she has to step carefully to avoid. The girl hops over the rocks and kicks the water in the sea up in an arc, like a photo, like she's moving in actual slow motion and the water drops are following suit. Someone should be filming this or is or isn't or could be or didn't.

Then she wades out fast, in a half run, half skip.

The water is always so shockingly cold.

The girl splashes awkwardly in a messy front crawl. She probably used to be on the swim team. (I was on the swim team.) She probably took lessons at the pool, earned badges, tried hard. (Like me. Is it me?)

It can't be me.

She bobs in the distance for a few minutes and he shouts something and she laughs and goes under, coming up again like a seal, her hair now looking dark and sleek. The boy gets up and stubs his toe on something. Curses, sits down again. Yells something that the girl seems not to hear.

Then, finally, the girl comes splashing out again, safe, still alive, giggling, her body bright red from the cold water. She laughs and wobbles, hopping awkwardly over the rocky shoreline, not letting on how it was so icy it must have felt like needles piercing her skin, how now she probably can't feel anything at all from the neck down.

Numbness is necessary.

The boy is angry; his body language is clenched.

She laughs, pokes him in the shoulder.

He stands up, grabs the blanket. He throws it down again.

She says something.

He pushes her.

Then he's on her and she's struggling and she's waving and shouting and someone is watching but she isn't coming and why isn't she going to help and no.

No.

I close my eyes, swallowing something bitter and acidic that's risen in my throat. My hands are shaking.

There is no one on the beach. The rising waves lap at the green-and-brown line of seaweed on the shore. It sounds like dogs drinking water, the slap of the waves against the stones.

I can't breathe. I have to bend over and force air in and out, in and out.

It takes a few minutes of concentrating before I feel okay again, before I can sit up.

The sky keeps pressing down on me, blue and judgmental. The angry sun shines right through me and how I feel.

"If no one saw, it didn't happen," I tell myself, my voice chopping up the sky into pieces.

"Stop talking to yourself," Piper would say. "You sound

crazy. You're one step away from being that guy on the corner shouting 'THE END IS NIGH.'

"The end probably *is* nigh," I tell Piper's absence. "We're just too dumb to know it. Ask the whales. Ask the antelope. Anyway, I'm sorry."

"Too late," she says. "You're dead to me."

"People make mistakes." I plead my case to a june bug that has rattled to a landing on the arm of my chair. There are certain things I'd never say to Piper, not out loud, but the bug is a safe audience. "I'll never talk to him again," I tell it. "He's just . . . Soup. He's not important. Not to me." The june bug is unconvinced. It spreads its iridescent wings and vanishes, clicking. "You're right," I call after it. "I hate me, too."

It's easy to hate myself when Piper isn't here to tell me not to.

My skin feels prickly. I have goose bumps, even though I'm sweating, the hot wind blowing the sun into me like fire that my lungs can't quite breathe in.

She's thinking about me. I know she is. I can feel it.

That's how connected we are, whether we want to be or not.

I squeeze my eyes shut, tight. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," I murmur.

The phone rings on the table, making me jump.

I hold up the phone so that I can see the screen. *S Sullivan*, it says. So she's at home, not on her cell. Piper is always losing her phone and never seems to care. She's like Hansel or Gretel, whichever one dropped bread crumbs in the woods, except what she drops are brand-new iPhones. BlackBerries. Samsungs. None of them upsets her. She claims it's a Buddhist thing, to not get attached to stuff. Piper is Buddhist when it's convenient, but mostly the only thing she believes is that everything will work out for her in the end, and it always does.

It's not really fair.

The phone stops ringing.

If Piper weren't beautiful, she'd just be another smart geek, relegated to the social backwaters of Physics Club. She doesn't care about being smart.

She'd rather be me.

This is one of the fights that we're having without saying anything. This is one of the things that's come between us, ugly and true.

She wants what I have: a clear idea of what I want to do with my life and exactly how I'm going to get there.

And I get it, because I've spent a lot of my life wanting to be her.

"She's a bit mean to you, Sloane," my mom always says. "I think it's too intense, this thing with you two. You need more

friends, a group of friends. I worry about you. You don't always have to dress alike, you know."

"She's not mean," I insist, even when I know it's sort of true. "I have plenty of friends," I lie.

Me and Piper are a *thing*. Piper and Soup are a *thing*.

Which means that me and Soup are nothing, like multiplying something by zero. No matter how many times I go back to that equation in my head, the answer stays the same.

The phone keeps singing again in my hand. I'm safe to not answer because she'll call back and call back and call back and then I can be the one to be mad, a bit standoffish, in control.

My grip is loose and the phone slips out of it and falls to the deck, which makes me think of that time when we were six, in first grade, and I held the class gerbil for the first time. "Don't squish him!" Piper squealed. She was scared of rodents. ("The way they wiggle," she said. "Yuck.")

I love animals, all animals, always, and anyway, he was the cutest. I kissed him gently on the nose, not squeezing, and he looked right into my eyes, like he loved me back a little. I didn't often feel braver than Piper, but she shivered when my lips touched his and it made me feel bigger and better. But it turns out that I loved that dumb gerbil to death: instead of squashing him, he slipped out of my hand and onto the floor. Piper shrieked and jumped and somehow pushed me, and I stepped

on him by mistake. The furry crunch was the worst feeling I ever had.

The phone goes silent.

“*Je suis désolé,*” I say dramatically. “*Es tut mir leid. Barkatu.*”

I reach for the silent phone, filling myself up with sorries until I have enough. Swahili and Slavic. They feel like poetry in my mouth. They’ll protect me from Piper’s anger, if she’s still angry.

If.

“*Unnskyld,*” I whisper. “*Samahani.*”

I could make a documentary called *Sorry: The Piper and Sloane Story*. Documentaries often have subtitles. The subtitle of me is Piper.

I would interview people on the street. “Who do you want to apologize to?” I’ll ask. “What do you need to be forgiven for?”

The only time I feel okay asking people questions is when I have my camera in my hand. The familiar weight of it anchors me at the same time as letting me be someone who is not quite me. I pick it up from the table right now—it’s always within a few feet of me—and put it up to my eye. I hit record, and start filming the sky. “What are you sorry for?” I intone, panning the camera slowly across the sun. When I put the camera down, there’s a huge sun spot over my vision. “I’m blind,” I murmur. “I’m blind.”

Is Piper ever sorry? She must be. Besides, everyone wants

to get this kind of thing off them, put it out there, save themselves, be forgiven. Even if they don't believe in God, which I don't. But I believe in karma.

And everyone is sorry for something.

The phone screen cracked when it dropped on the deck. I pick it up and run my finger over the long seam of the crack and it comes away with a line of blood. I lick it clean. It tastes like pennies. We are all copper inside.

A seagull flies by, crapping on the deck right next to my foot. I flip him off. "The bird!" I say to him. "I'm flipping you the bird, Bird." The seagull laughs. "You're a good audience," I tell him. "What are you sorry for?"

The phone rings. The seagull circles and then flaps away.

I look at the screen.

Philip Sanchez.

My heart drops all the way through the deck and onto the front lawn and rolls down the driveway like in a cartoon.

"I'm dead," I whisper.

Soup.

I take a sip of my horrible diluted soda. Mr. Aberley, the old man from the other side of the bay, is slowly rowing his half-submerged dinghy on his first trip to the island. He does

it twice a day: at dawn and at dusk. “After breakfast and after supper,” he says. “Keeps my girlish figure.” He laughs his old man laugh, teeth exposed, showing his receding purplish gums. Mr. Aberley keeps himself impeccable, reads *Vogue*, dresses better than I do. But his teeth give the game away. I hope I never get old. Not that I want to die young, but still, his *gums*.

The phone rings and rings. My voice mail must be full. My heart is beating so hard, I press my hand to my chest.

No one ever calls Soup “Philip.” He has been Soup ever since third grade when Mrs. Moffat helped everyone to “discover” their heritage and it turned out that he was a mix of every race anyone could even name. *You are like human soup*, Mrs. Moffat had said thoughtlessly, the racist cow, and it stuck, as things do in small schools, forever.

I slide my finger on the screen to answer, leaving a red smear, but my voice is stuck and nothing comes out.

“Hey,” he says, without waiting for me to talk. “Sloane.” There’s a silence. Then, “Is Piper with you?”

I let the question hang in the air and then I say, more cruelly than I actually feel, “Actually, she’s busy traveling back in time to stop your parents from making the fatal mistake of ever screwing without a condom.” I don’t know why I said it. I don’t know how to unsay it. “Soup,” I say, more softly.

“Wow,” he says over me. “That’s not what I was expecting,

I guess. I need a second to digest that. That's pretty harsh." He coughs. Then, "We've gotta talk, Sloane."

I can't decide how to respond, so I don't say anything at all. *I love you*, I think, but don't say. *I'm sorry. Anteeksi. Prosti menya*. I might be crying, or maybe it's only sweat running down my cheeks in salty rivers.

It takes him a long time to hang up. He breathes into the speaker, in and out, in and out. The sound of his breathing makes my own breathing slow down. I feel sleepy and warm. I can hear a car going by, then the lower roar of a bus in the far distance. Then finally, he clears his throat and clicks off without saying goodbye.

"Well, goodbye, *Philip*," I say to the echo in my ear that he leaves behind.

I pull more and more paint off the chair and drop it onto the shingles of the roof, where it looks like flakes of the sky, falling.

"The sky is falling, the sky is falling!" I whisper.

I put another cigarette into the cigarette holder and light it. I don't know when I became a smoker for real. The first time, it made me puke, but I kept doing it because Piper did and now I couldn't stop even if I wanted to, though the truth is, it's gross. It makes me feel like I'm coated in a sticky dust, the taste of it on my teeth, the scent on my skin. It's just one more thing about myself that I don't quite understand. How

did it happen? When, exactly? The holder, which I stole from Grandma's jewelry box when she used to have a room downstairs, is made from an elephant's tusk. Her room had these white velvet curtains that had turned yellow from the smoke. Mom took the curtains down when Grandma moved out. She replaced them with blinds that go up and down at the touch of a button. She took Grandma's bed out and replaced it with a stair climber and an elliptical trainer.

Grandma won't miss it. She's completely out of it. She lives in an old-folks' home now, where she sits in a chair with an oxygen tank beside her and stares out her window all day, remembering something she can't articulate but keeps trying to say, phlegm swirling around in her lungs, her cough keeping her neighbor awake. The veins in her hands droop down like yarn. Sometimes I go there and sit in her room. Grandma doesn't exactly have conversations. It's hard. It makes me feel panicky, like I can't breathe, like I'm going to die.

The only sounds are the rustle of her polyester shirt as she reaches to push her glasses up her nose, the harsh sounds of her breathing in and out of the tank, and the sound of my sneakers, squeaking on the floor as I leave. Being there makes me too aware of my own racing heart.

It's obviously wrong to use ivory for anything, but it's not like Grandma went out and killed the elephant herself. Maybe the elephant didn't even die. Maybe someone just found the

tusk, lying there, a hapless victim of some kind of elephant sickness or something. Maybe that elephant recovered and now is running around with one tusk, trumpeting at the sky, or whatever elephants do when they aren't being shot at for their ivory.

Probably not.

Elephants bury their dead. I try to make the fact of that in combination with the cigarette mean something, but I can't.

The things people are willing to kill for are so stupid.

I take another lungful and hold it in until it burns.

Then, again, after forever or a few minutes, the phone rings: *S Sullivan*. I'm flooded with relief. That's how it is with Piper and me. I clear my throat and I slide my sweaty finger across the screen and take a deep breath.

"*Anteeksi*," I say dramatically. I pull the middle syllable out nice and long. Then I exhale, a perfect smoke ring. I wait for Piper to say something back, something sharp and clever but forgiving, like that.

But instead, her mother's voice comes on the line. It sounds weird, tight, high-pitched. "Sloane, is that you? I need to speak to your mother. Can you put your mother on the phone?"

The way she says "your mother" makes my skin hurt and

a ringing start in my ears. She sounds like she did the day she flung open the door to Piper's bathroom, where the two of us had been bleaching our eyebrows, and calmly told us that Piper's father's plane had crashed somewhere over the Atlantic. I couldn't tell what were real tears and what was the bleach fumes, stinging my eyes. Piper's dad was pretty much a stranger to me. I'd only met him twice. But it was my tragedy, too, because it was Piper's.

"There were no survivors," Piper's mom said. She sounded like a talking head on CNN, like she was simply delivering news. It took me a minute to understand that I was crying and Piper was crying because Piper's dad was dead. Piper fell sideways into the bathtub, cutting her forehead on the shower tap, the beautiful bright red of her blood dripping into her golden hair. My head hurt for a week after that.

Right now, we are platinum blond.

I touch my stupid, ugly short hair. *Our* hair.

It looks better on Piper than on me. On her, it's gamine. On me, it just looks shorn. I know I'm supposed to say something now to Piper's mom but I don't know what it is. My brain is suddenly thick with fog. I can't find any words.

Piper's mom is crying now. She is crying hard. She is talking like she's not crying or maybe like she hasn't noticed that she is. The cry is more of a moan that I can feel underneath my skin, buzzing like static. It is unbearable.

“Stop,” I say. “Stop doing that.” I can’t stand it. My eyes water and I can’t blame bleach this time. She doesn’t stop. “STOP!” I shout.

Piper’s mom is supposed to be in Hong Kong. She’s a flight attendant. She is not coming back until next Thursday, Piper said. She’s working on starting a business over there, importing strings of pearls to North America. Pearls are cheaper in Hong Kong.

Today is Saturday. “It’s only Saturday,” I say, more quietly. She says, “Sloane. Your mother.” Then, “Please.”

Mom has gone into work, but I can’t seem to say that. My words are scabbing in my throat, dry and hard. I can’t breathe. I cough. Tonight Piper and I are having a huge party at Piper’s house. We are celebrating the start of our last year at Rogers. “The party,” Piper said, “that will set the tone for all other parties.” (But that was before last night, the biggest worst best party I’d ever seen.)

I have a terrible feeling. It’s not that I’m choking, it’s something else. Something inside me is collapsing.

My logical brain keeps trying to interrupt: maybe her mom found out about the party. I’ve already bought watermelons that are right now piled up in Piper’s living room, two deep, absorbing the vodka we carefully injected with huge syringes. “Junkie melons,” Piper said. She put the pics on her feed. “When

melons go bad,” she typed. “Support clean needle sites for melons.” She drew sad faces on the watermelons.

“Sloane, *now*,” Piper’s mom says again, and a sound comes out of her that peels my skin away in sheets.

“Where is she?” I say, in someone else’s voice. “Where is Piper? Is this about the party?” But I know that isn’t it. I already know. I knew. Maybe I’ve known for this whole morning. I’m drifting entirely away from myself and up into the sky, where I can see myself below in the blue chair. Flakes of me fall onto the roof like feathers from a zombie bird.

I’m the zombie apocalypse.

I’m the dead.

Am I?

“Tell me.” My voice is a tape recorder and the battery has run out. My words are thick and coagulated. “Telllll meeee.”

“Sloane,” she screams. What is left of my insides is made of glass. The glass shatters and falls up like sharp rain and maybe that’s why the sky is falling in pieces all around me, bringing birds down with it, dead before they hit the ground.

The gardener starts the hedge trimmer and the roar fills up the world, which is now entirely a blue bowl of noise. I can’t hear anything at all.

“I can’t hear you,” I say, panicked. “I can’t hear you! What? I can’t hear!”

I think she says, “Sloane, I need you.” Or maybe she says, “Sloane, I need you to . . .”

And I say it, I say, “She’s dead, isn’t she? Is Piper dead? Tell me.”

The word “dead” catches in my throat and I start to choke. I press the lit end of the cigarette into the flesh of my leg. I lie down on the deck. The wood is burning hot. My skin is bubbling off. Nothing is safe.

Nowhere.

I’m still holding the phone and I can’t hear anything but a roar that’s inside the blue sky of my skull, which is inside out. I smell flesh burning but I still can’t feel it and so I press harder and harder until the cigarette breaks and falls away.

“I can’t feel it,” I say between coughs. I’m choking. My lungs are hands, grappling for air. “I can’t feel anything.”

The sky is crumpling up and I see a freckling of stars that can’t be there, but are, and a halo of light that is coming from the sea or everywhere.

I’m talking in slow motion but I’m not talking, I’m screaming, but I’m not screaming either, I’m moaning.

I’m silent. I am silence.

“Sloane?” the phone squawks. “SLOANE.”

I throw the phone up into the sky and it somersaults, mirrored against the too-blue brightness, down onto the lawn, where the sprinklers have come on with a *rat-a-tat* machine-gun

fire. And even as it is midflight, still falling, a police cruiser crunches onto the gravel of the long, curved driveway.

That's when I know for sure that I'm right.

Then I hear her, her voice cutting cleanly into the mess of everything.

Look what you did, she says, as real as I am. *I'm the price we paid.*

And then nothing nothing nothing just the sound of my own scream curling around my head like smoke.