

The water isn't cold, and that's where my first mistake lies. It's lukewarm. I remember reading — in some textbook, maybe, or on the Internet — that water must be near-freezing to constrict the blood vessels. High pressure, cold water. I have employed neither of those things.

Ironically, when this happened, I had been studying for my first-year biochem midterm. Serena was sleeping over at her friend's house, so I had precious time alone in the room to study. I say "ironically" because biochem is one of the required classes on the pre-med track. It's easy — monotonous, even — to read about protein structures and metabolism processes. I'd like to think doctors have a more fast-paced lifestyle. But now that I'm experiencing it I know I'm not ready. I'm a fraud.

Augie didn't even try to open the door; it sounded for a moment like he threw his body against it, instead. Which isn't saying much: he's thin and bony like a scarecrow. He actually gets that nickname, sometimes. Anyway, there was no screaming, no barging in. I didn't have any reason to believe there was something wrong, besides the strange *ka-thunk* against the door. I just heard Augie's classic warbling voice: "Jaden? Can you come out?"

Augie isn't one for drama, which I appreciate. We get enough of that in this house, between Serena and the twins. He might be a delicate creature physically, but Augie exudes a calm and clear energy. Kind of like a very old and skinny tree trunk. He's the second oldest — after me, of course — and though he's 15, I rely on him more than I'd like to admit. I tell you that to say that I didn't expect any of this when I heard his voice. He spoke evenly and coolly, as if he simply wanted my opinion on something. If I had known, I would've moved with more urgency when I got up to open the door. Instead, I sauntered, with a laughably naive curiosity. *Did he really throw himself at the door? Whatever for?*

Opening the door, I see Augie's eyes first, sunken and bluish. He's holding his left hand to his stomach, and it's covered in a haphazard bunch of bloody paper towels. *Oh*, I think. *Oh, that's what this is.* The realization is too slow.

"What — "

"Jaden, I cut myself," he whimpers.

"Okay," I say dumbly.

I don't move. *Why* didn't I move? Maybe this was my first mistake, actually. I'm a fraud.

Normally people say: *my body moved before I could recognize what was happening*. But I'm still processing the sight before me. There's so much blood that I can smell it: thick, sour. The paper towels droop like over-watered plants. It's the quick staccato drip of blood onto the laminate hallway that moves me from my stupor.

"We need to stop the bleeding," I tell him. That's when I take him down the hall to the kitchen; that's when the first useful thoughts kick in. *Cold water and pressure. Raise the hand above his heart. Stop the blood from flowing out.* "Augie, raise your hand up, above your chest."

In front of the sink, he swallows desperately and does as he is told. He never complains; I should have known. He lets go of his left hand and the paper towels drop heavily to the floor. Augie is so tall and thin that I crane my neck to see it, but I see it, and I wish I hadn't. The four fingers are curled far too tightly into his palm, surely breaking the skin. But that doesn't matter, because the blood is pouring out of the stump where the thumb should be. In that first horrible second I think about that trick we play on the twins, the puerile optical illusion, *ha ha look, I took my thumb right off!* I throw up in my mouth a little, but I swallow the bile back down, because there's nowhere to spit it out. There's so much blood in the sink, next to the sink, on the cutting board. There's a russet potato partially cleaved in two, a perfectly uncut tomato, and a small piece of sausage.

The blood is streaming down Augie's left arm in two small lines. He's clenching his eyes shut, but I can see the tears escape too. "Jaden, it really fucking hurts," he growls.

*I'm a fraud.* "Aug, you're gonna be fine. It's a little more blood than I expected, it's okay, we'll just — " I turn on the tap water and put my hand under the water. It's supposed to be cold, as cold as possible. It's not. "We just need to — "

I take Augie's hand from above me and bring it down to the water. It's not cold at all. Like I said, it's lukewarm. What was I thinking? But I drag the stump directly into the high-pressure gush of water. "We need to stop the bleeding," I keep saying, because I'm supposed to know what to do next.

Augie retches. "Uhhhh..." he moans.

Our kitchen sink is a deep utility sink that is normally considered one of the nicest amenities in our old house. In this moment my mind wanders to that weird fact: under different circumstances, we appreciate this thing. Now, the depth just shows how much blood it can hold. The bottom of the sink is covered in a layer of red; there are streaks and splatters up and down the sides of the tub.

Augie's stump turns the water from the spout into a deep wine color. I keep it there, because I believe it will stop the bleeding. I know this, because I make the decisions, and they *must* be right. In this house, I'm the firefighter. My siblings come to me with all sorts of small fires, and I put them out with grace and foresight. This is how we survive.

"I'm... kinda dizzy..." Augie says drunkenly, and I look up just in time to see his eyes roll back.

This time, I fucked up. I'm so, so, *so* wrong.

First, I feel his body moving away from his hand in the sink, pulling his limbs away. Then I stumble forward to catch him, but he just kind of sinks to the floor. He looks like a rag doll. There is a hideous moment in which I think, *I know you're just faking it. You're better than this, Augie. Stand up.*

It's so like me, to blame the mistakes I've made on somebody else's incompetence. In this case, it's not even incompetence. My brother is unconscious. There's nowhere left to hide from my failures.

While I have my arms around Augie's torso to keep his head from hitting the ground, I notice the twins, in their Sailor Moon kid pajamas, standing at the edge of the kitchen. Of *course* they couldn't sleep. Their feet are probably covered in the blood from the floor. They're gripping each other the way, I imagine, we would grip a mother's chest for security. Out of fear they might suddenly explode if they let go. And —

"AUGIE?!" One of them shrieks at the top of his lungs. The other throws her head back and wails, a pitiful thing. "IS AUGIE DEAD?"

As soon as he says it, something in me breaks. It hits me, clear as a bell. *I failed.* This is not something I can handle. If Augie dies because of me...

"No. He won't," I mutter.

Pathetic. *Unbelievable.* To think that I could fix something like *this!* And what, at the cost of my brother's life? Would my mistakes kill my own family? I had been living in my own brain, thinking about my next steps, believing so fervently that *I* could solve the problem. I had not considered my own limits. And I... this is... this is not a small fire. This is Augie's life.

How could I have put myself first like that?

*We need to go to a hospital.*

“Augie’s not dead,” I tell the twins, using a firm voice to cut through their sobbing. I shuffle around Augie’s body, trying to lower him down to the floor. His legs are folded all weird, but in this moment I’m more concerned about his head and his bleeding hand. As the kids are crying, I put one hand under his skull and one hand under his chest. I check his flow of breath, and then I reconfigure his legs so he looks like he’s just laying on the ground. Finally, I jump up and grab the clean paper towels to make something of a tourniquet for his finger.

“LISTEN TO ME,” I bellow at the twins. They flinch away as if hit. “I’m going to the hospital with Augie. You go back to your rooms and *stay there*. Don’t open the door for anything or anyone.”

Their huge eyes gaze at me, unblinking, stunned. Snot trails down each of their faces.

“*Go! Now!*”

As the twins scurry away like wild animals, I notice a passing thought: *They’re afraid of you*. Because this moment in time is lawless, I disobey myself and let it go. There is something more important than the kids’ feelings — something more important than me and my reputation.

I grab the nearest cell phone and dial 911. My hands are shaking violently but that doesn’t matter. *Augie, I couldn’t put this one out. But somebody else will.*