Aftermath

Ellie spends the next two days wanting to tell her mom. She can't, because that'd be making a big deal of nothing—nothing happened, if she brings it up someone will think something happened, or that she's being a dick about it, or that there's some reason she hasn't stopped thinking about it. A halfway decent friend wouldn't care. It was just a conversation.

Ellie tells herself she doesn't care about four times a day, in an increasingly frantic mental tone, and finally buries her face in her pillows and yells, but not too loud, even though her parents aren't home. She lies on her bed in her jeans which are too baggy, and her yellow shirt which is too small, and thinks maybe this is the essence of high school.

Absolutely nothing has changed. Anne's keeping it secret in the way Anne has, where she says very mildly that it's not worth mentioning yet, but there's a kind of steel behind it: that her mom knows but no one will tell her dad. She said it sitting together on the front steps of the high school, the awful stained concrete ones which are cold right through Ellie's jeans and make her fidget. Anne sat calm and still as a rock.

So Anne's crush had said yes, and they'd gone out a little, and it was Jackie, on the soccer team. Jackie who is tall and angular and suffers from severe resting bitch face, and also active bitch face. Her aura of quiet competence turns Ellie into an angry hummingbird in PE, a furiously competitive blur of motion, both sucky at everything and mad about it. Ellie had always kind of hated that girl, and now she kind of actively hates her, because—

Because why? If Anne has a girlfriend, it's Ellie's best-friend duty to think she's cool. TV has taught her this. This is how it works.

So. That was a thing. Ellie said "oh" a lot and tried to look—not weird? Surprised but good-surprised, not weirded-out surprised?—and asked the fumbling questions she was pretty
Sure you asked when your best friend starts dating someone. And there were weird awkward silences and Anne was red-faced but not apologizing the way she normally apologizes for everything. She looked kind of mad when Ellie said "are you sure?" too many times but it was okay. They were okay.

It's not like Ellie knows her own deal—with crushes and why she doesn't have any. Certainty sounded nice. She could get that certainty sounded nice. So they were cool.

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It's not that Ellie's mom is uncool. She's not super uptight or weirdly religious or anything—Ellie's mom can't stand religion. She removed the little Buddha statue that was in the yard when they moved in, just to be fair to all religions in how annoyed she was. Their yard is just a dead-grass hill with a dying fence at the back of it, so Ellie thought the Buddha was kind of cool. It was all sun-bleached and old-looking. The place it occupied in the ground is still a gross-looking hole full of pill bugs; even now that it's scabbed over with grass, it hasn't quite recovered.

So Ellie's mom isn't super weird about gay stuff, probably. Not more than anyone else. A baseline amount of weird about it is normal, because it's not normal, right, derivation from a norm, that's what the word means. That's just logic. And language.

If she did bring it up, she and her mom would talk about it. A Real Talk. When Ellie was thirteen, hormones apparently dictated that she couldn't have a Real Talk without going flushed and choky-voiced and embarrassed, totally without her brain's approval. She spent a lot of time getting snapped at for going flustered and unhelpful halfway into any argument, and it's been a couple years but she doesn't really trust herself. If she got all flustered, her mom would think it's a big deal or something. So, yeah. No.
And she's not going to bring it back up to Anne. Right, because it's practically not even a thing. It's only a thing in that it's a thing she's supportive about. She sort of fantasizes about confronting people who give Anne a hard time, except if anyone gives Anne a hard time, Ellie doesn't know about it. She hasn't seen it. Everyone just acts normal, a normal teenager amount of asshole. Someone somewhere is gossiping but she doesn't get to hear it.

Ellie wonders about the secret gossip sometimes when she's hanging out with Anne. She doesn't know how she telegraphs it, but sometimes Anne looks at her kinda sideways like Ellie is failing some kind of social test with how much she's talking or not talking about it. She doesn't know which it is, or how to up her grade. There's no manual on this.

Jackie starts coming along on Fridays when they walk for ice cream after school. She smacks her lips when she eats and talks a lot about soccer practice.

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But the thing is, if she did tell Anne or her mom things, there's all this stuff she hadn't thought about that now she can't stop thinking. For example: the lady who'd taught self-defense in seventh grade. How often did she think about that before Anne said something? Is she thinking too much about thinking too much about it?

Her name had been—Ms. Twist?—something weird, something edgy. She'd been small and lean (Ellie is small and boxy, Anne is small and round, neither of them have the elf princess look) and had the smooth movements of a dancer, the clingy clothes of someone who knew how their body worked. Ellie always noticed her jacket, how the thin sleeves caught on her wrists when she took it off. She always looked so perfect, the weight of her clothes and the way she stood just right, a loose solid stance every moment. She talked loud and unafraid and waited patiently when the girls laughed at the instructions on how to hurt boys. Ellie had wanted to
watch her move forever, just watch her twist her shoulders and bunch her black sleeves around her wrists.

They'd had a male instructor who worked with her, and he was perfect in the same way, his clothes too good and the line of his back too smooth, and she didn't know how she felt about it. When Ms. Twist and him did demonstrations, they moved like dancing. She didn't know which one she was jealous of, or how, just that she felt it as an intense tangle in her chest. She was supposed to think he was hot, she knew *that*, but she wasn't sure she was feeling it right.

She'd spent most of seventh grade loudly leading which-ugly-boy-would-you-kiss-if-you-really-had-to-choose discussions and laughing at every answer.

These are the things she's not going to tell her mom or Anne, because that's weird, and she's thinking too much, and she's failing Anne's secret social test. Anne starts doing Fridays as a her-and-Jackie date thing, asks if that's okay. Ellie says yeah, sure. Supportively.

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Jackie has this kind of sulky vibe, this droning way of talking like a professor in a movie or a teen zombie. Emo jock. Ellie is sure that's a thing; if it isn't, she'll coin the term herself, write it into history. College isn't a really big thing in her family, but if she ever did go, she'd study film; she'd make a movie about it. The loser hit of the season: goth jock steals nerd best friend. Except gay.

"Sorry," says Anne when she calls off Saturday hanging-out for the fourth time.

"Reschedule?"

So she starts hanging out with Aaron more, from down the street. He's a year older, but they used to play in a kiddie pool together in her front yard, so they're basically on the same footing. She has no one else to watch the Star Trek remake or whatever with, and he's into it, so
they camp on her living room floor with shitty microwave popcorn. She tries to tell if it's a date; she tries to sense the innate dатenеss in the air, makes herself tense and jittery looking for it. She tries to project not a date in the set of her shoulders and he just looks at her weird, but mostly keeps telling her the history of Spock. Eventually she gets a crick in her neck from whatever she's doing with her shoulders and keeps getting distracted from it anyway to ask questions about the aliens.

He's big and blonde and doesn't talk a lot, in a sweet way. When she asks if he's ever had a girlfriend or whatever, in the interest of commiseration, he shrugs a nah. She wonders if he's gay.

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Ellie's mom goes on a half-hour rant about some lady's ugly crucifix earrings, and doesn't even ask if she's dating Aaron. Anne and Jackie go facebook-official. Ellie doesn't tell her mom about it.

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In ninth grade health they'd had a guy come in to talk about abstinence. Ellie knows now, in retrospect, that he was some kind of religious nut. But—she doesn't have the first idea how, this is northern California but not the hippie surfer bit, people here drive trucks—they also had a woman come in. She was normal-looking. She had dark wavy hair and glasses and wore normal jeans and normal makeup; she looked like someone's older sister. She said she was a lesbian and Ellie hadn't really believed her, because she didn't look right for it, and anyway she'd been distracted by the way the lady twisted her ankles almost nervously around the legs of her shitty science-room stool.
"I figured it out when I came back to America from a trip," the lady had said, "and suddenly I just kept noticing girls. Girls everywhere."

Ellie spent a long time thinking about how she didn't notice girls. There weren't girls everywhere. How did you know if you were noticing girls? How many was everywhere?

"Fuck," says Ellie, to her yellow-painted walls. There's the same little birds wallpapered around the bed from when she was four. "Fucking fuck," she tells her pillow.

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It makes Ellie want to change. She doesn't know what she wants to change, but she wants to be different. She wants to wear flannel. She can't wear flannel, only super gay people wear flannel, she already owns nothing but baggy cargo shorts and ugly straight-legged jeans with stains on them, and sweatpants. She has a lot of sweatpants. Ellie gladly doesn't know the first thing about fashion but you can't wear flannel and sweatpants.

And she wants boots. The big, clompy, ugly hiking kind, the army kind. She wants boots she could kick down doors with, wreck people with, which is also stupid because she can't fight, in this town she has no one to fight. If she wore army boots and flannel would someone pick a fight? High school on TV makes it look that way. High school in shit-nowhere California, maybe not.

She wonders about makeup, but no. She tried cheap dollar-store mascara once, blinked at herself in the mirror for a while and found a defensive, scruffy short wreck of a kid looking back. It didn't work; she has the wrong shoulders for makeup. She's all boxy angles and too much jaw, and too short to have too much jaw. She threw little purple the tube away barely-used, but took it out of the trash can a day later because that was wasteful and dumb. Now it's in the back of her medicine cabinet, tainted by trash can, rotting with a few sticks of lip gloss her aunt got her. She
doesn't wear that because she doesn't know how the colors work. You're supposed to wear the right colors.

While she waits for Aaron to come over, she wishes she had beer. She would probably hate beer, would probably turn into a twitchy nervous loser about it, but it'd give her something better to care about than flannel. She has two vanilla-cream sodas in the fridge, but she always kept those for Anne, she doesn't want to sacrifice the spare on Aaron, even though she should. They could talk about stuff. She could pay him in cream soda to listen without looking shocked or uncomfortable or telling her she's a moron.

But maybe that's what she needs. If someone could just decisively tell her she's being stupid, of course she's straight, she's tricking herself into thinking she's something else and that's just disrespectful to people who actually are—

In the end, Aaron gets busy with a family thing. She drinks both cream sodas and nukes all the bookmarks of boots from her browser history.

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Aaron has this way of low-key knowing everyone. It's weird, because he should be a socially-awkward nerd, but he's just nice. He goes to sports games. He says let's go see that movie and then somehow a whole little gang of people wind up there, all louder than Aaron but all there because of him. Ellie has started being one of these.

Another one is Beck.

Beck doesn't wear makeup, even to cover the zits under her bangs, and she only wears t-shirts of Mexican bands. Aaron says her name is Rebeca, but Ellie's heard the coach calling her Beck. She's the kind who sits, all pally and slouching, on the teacher's desk before the bell, and
then slides off to look stoned but good-natured in the back of the class. And the teachers let her get away with it, probably because she's a lost cause.

So it's not that weird when Ellie finds Aaron talking to her. Up close, the girl's slouch is something kind of cool: the line of her back tilts very precisely against the rattiest, paint-peelingest car Ellie's ever seen. It was maybe red and not rust, once.

"It's my uncle's," says Beck, with so much fondness for the old car that Ellie feels an echo of it. She doesn't talk with the stoner-chill vibe Ellie expected from class; it's something kinda sharp, something actually-interested. "He works on the oil rigs. You ever gone at sunset? The whole place looks on fire."

"Just to hang out?" says Ellie, mystified. Creaking nasty old machinery sounds—pretty cool, actually.

"Sure," says Beck, and her smile makes her whole face change. Ellie sort of assumed everyone hated this town. It's an assumable thing. She doesn't know how this girl can make oil rigs sound cool. "At night it's horror-movie spooky, that's even better."

Aaron's free a minute later. But Ellie keeps thinking about the way Beck tilts her shoulders, the too-perfect way her jacket bunches at her wrists.

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Ellie's mom says, one day, "I heard Anne is dating a girl."

"Oh," says Ellie. She waits for the next words to come to her. None do. Her mom is microwaving dinner, so she collects forks and knives with too much tension in her wrists, not enough to do with her hands.

"Her mother was very defensive about it. She brought it up." Ellie's mom twists her mouth in maybe-disapproval, seems to take up all the space in their small white-painted kitchen.
"Huh," says Ellie, with a hyperawareness of whether she's turning red. Maybe?

"It's a small school for that."

"I guess so," says Ellie.

She's really looking at Ellie. Ellie, starting to feel like she's swallowed a rock, dutifully inspects the ceiling and pulls her mouth tight like she's thinking very seriously and neutrally.

"How long has that been going on?" says Ellie's mom, in exactly the intense voice that messed with Ellie so much in ninth grade.

But, hey, the rock in her throat doesn't even mess up her voice too bad. "She told me about it a while ago," she says, with a kind-of-shrug. "When they started going out."

Her mom frowns all thoughtful. "How do the other students act?"

"Normal, I guess," says Ellie. Her mom doesn't say anything, like that's not enough of an answer, so she scrambles for more words. "I don't know," she says, "I don't think our high school is bad. For that. Anne's always—she's a nerd, she's kind of weird, I mean so am I, so maybe girls talk about it. If you're not really popular you can't get away with things. But I don't know if people are weird at her. I don't really pay attention."

Her mom is still just looking at her.

"I think she's okay," says Ellie, kind of desperately. "She and Jackie are always together, so it's, that's good, I guess. She seems happy."

"Well," says her mother, and turns back as the microwave dings. "That's important."

Ellie is choked by all the things she wants to say. Maybe she doesn't actually want to. She just could.

That's a dumb reason to do a thing.

She eats in her room, as usual. It doesn't come up again.
It's a while before Aaron says "we should hang out with Beck sometime," and she says, "yeah," like usual. But then she also says, "yeah, for sure."

And he looks at her as if he knows the rock is coming back into her throat with all the things she could be saying.

You have to drive a while to get to the oil rigs, but then they go for miles and miles—it's the whole point of this nowhere-town. Each structure bobs in slow motion, sunbleached old paint and running rust-stains, a field of postapocalyptic pale machinery. Aaron, who has a car even if it's his dad's shitty old one, gets some drinks and some heavy jackets because deserts go cold at night, drives them out to a dark moonlit part of the machinery forest. It's the bit where one of the rigs has broken down, standing still in the midst of all the bobbing, shadowy movement.

Aaron leads her to the girl sitting on the oil rig, arms slung over the rusted railing, even if it must be brutally cold. The shitty red car hangs out nearby, a low familiar shape. Ellie tromps over in her new combat boots, fingers buried in her pockets. Squints up through the dark, feeling made of half skepticism and half happy electricity. This is cool.

Beck smiles back, and Ellie can actually see her teeth glint in the moonlight, like in TV. It makes all the hair stand up on her arms. She's never met anyone who slouches and makes it look like she's the hero of the movie.

"Hey," says Beck. If the rock in her throat never makes any sense, neither does the way she seriously, stupidly can't not smile right now.

She thinks maybe things are starting to make sense.

"Hey," she says back.