

The evening Petey Sikorsky ruined his life, business was booming.

That night, Magda Sikorsky's gallery was full to the brim with people, and not just any people, but her ideal clientele. Deep pocketed tourists, the newly nouveau rich, and posturing suburbanites desperate to impress. The sort of people who could be sold an ice cube while living in the North Pole, so long as they were told that particular ice cube was a commentary on respectability politics. Magda's gallery had been designed to lure in these sorts of people like swarming flies to a pot of honey. Every architectural corner of the gallery's sleek white facade and manicured interior screamed "upscale" and the curated selection of sculptures, photos, and paintings were delightfully inaccessible. "The average person has very low self esteem," Magda had once explained to Petey. "They'll pay premium for something they don't understand, just so no one notices they don't understand it."

Petey wasn't sure that even Magda understood the art at this particular opening. He wasn't sure there was anything to understand. The artist, was an absolutely prolific producer of found sculpture (aka trash she took from dumpsters and declared art) and blurry photographs of miscellaneous objects from odd angles. Magda was billing Sierra as "The Dadaist Darling of the Art World" and needless to say, the 25 year old had taken the art world by storm. As for Magda, well, she was eager to get as much as possible out of Sierra before her patrons decided that placing actual pieces of garbage in their living rooms and calling them art was no longer the latest trend in unnecessary status symbols.

Petey's thoughts on Sierra were conflicted. On the one hand, he thought she was a terrible person, pretentious and silly and hypocritical. He had once heard her pronounce Descartes as "Desk-art." He thought her art was as stupid as her opinions, if not more so. As far as Petey was

concerned, Sierra only had one redeeming quality. On the other hand, that one redeeming quality was perhaps enough to make up for all the rest. Sierra was Jeanie's older sister.

Jeanie. If Petey had been asked to explain Jeanie, he wouldn't have known quite where to start. Jeanie wrote notes on and highlighted fiction books she read for fun. Jeanie was afraid of small dogs, but not big ones. She was one quarter of an inch taller than Petey, which didn't bother him, really. Much. She was covered from head to toe in freckles, dark pin pricks in light skin like a galaxy's worth of inverse stars. She had a habit of picking at her split ends in order to avoid eye contact. She was in the grade above Petey at school, and she compulsively eavesdropped on the conversations of strangers in public spaces. Once, when Petey and Jeanie were pulling an all nighter studying for a test in their only shared class (physics,) she had leaned her head on his shoulder and almost fallen asleep before catching herself, jerking up, and muttering something about the speed of light. She was allergic to pistachios.

She had started coming to the gallery with her sister about a year and a half ago, after their mom had died and Jeanie moved into Sierra's apartment and transferred to Petey's school. Every time she'd come to the gallery, she and Petey had ended up off in some corner, talking and laughing about life and about art. They had the exact same opinions about Rothko, about Murakami, about Koons, about everything save for Sierra's artwork.

"You have to see that her stuff is awful," Petey would insist.

"It's not so bad..." Jeanie would say. Then she'd stare at her hands in a way that would make Petey think she was lying, that she knew Sierra's stuff was exactly that bad. In reality, Jeanie was just staring at her hands because she was bad at disagreeing with people out loud.

“I don’t know why you always defend her,” Petey would say. “Just because she’s your sister-”

“Not just because she’s my sister,” Jeanie would say simply, but with surprising force. And so she and Petey would talk about something else.

But this particular gallery opening, the one on the night in question, this had been different. Jeanie hadn’t come over to talk to Petey. She hadn’t even looked at him, or seemed like she was looking for him. She’d made a beeline straight for a particular corner of the gallery, the one with the bench, and plopped herself down in front of a wall of Sierra’s atrocious photos. She hadn’t budged since.

Petey was not sure how best to handle this situation.

There was no real reason, no good reason, why Petey couldn’t just go up and start talking to Jeanie. But Petey had never had much use for people his own age before Jeanie, and so he’d never really learned to speak to them. One of the many impossibilities that formed Petey’s friendship with Jeanie was that his lack of social finesse had never been an issue for the two before. However, this night, Petey couldn’t help second guessing himself, almost compulsively- as if he sensed trouble on the horizon of this interaction. What if she hadn’t spoken to him because she was upset? Well, if she was upset, then of course he should talk to her, to see if he could help. But what if she was upset because of him? Then he should still talk to her, right, in order to figure out the problem and resolve it, that was reasonable. But what if he only made things worse? But how could he make things worse? Would he embarrass himself? It seemed highly likely Petey would manage to embarrass himself, especially given the sailor suit.

The sailor suit had seemed like a good idea earlier in the day, when Magda had sent him off with a hand wave to get dressed for the gallery opening. Petey had been plotting this particular minor rebellion for a few weeks, ever since he'd found the suit in their attic, a relic that had been purchased for Petey to wear for a picture on a holiday card when he was 10. In the five years since he'd worn the suit, Petey had grown, though not as much as he would have liked. The collared top of the suit now barely grazed his midriff. The stiff wool shorts did not quite button, and gave him a perpetual wedgie. The matching sailor cap fit perfectly, and sat jauntily on his mop of black curls.

Magda, when she had seen this particular outfit choice, had stretched her very white teeth into a broad smile.

"Why Petey! Don't you look just precious," she had crooned, in the tone of voice Petey hated most. It was the tone Magda took when she knew she was saying exactly what Petey did not want to hear.

"Thank you," Petey replied stiffly, his excitement about seeing her reaction to the outfit deflating from his face like so much hot air.

"You know... some mothers might accuse you of deliberately dressing to embarrass them, if you were their child and you showed up to one of their important events dressed that way," Magda said in a deliberately cheery, almost sing songy tone.

"Why Magda, that sounds almost like an accusation," Petey had responded.

"Not at all, not at all! Though some children might only show up dressed like that if they were counting on their mothers making them change clothes," Magda folded her arms and

looked Petey up and down. “Got that out of the attic, did you? I bet it’s quite tight. A bit uncomfortable, maybe?”

It was. Petey said nothing.

“Well, we all must make sacrifices for fashion,” Magda had declared smiling, and then returned to the work of preparing the exhibit. And so, Petey had spent the gallery opening thus far in the sailor suit, and now found himself with one more reason to feel uncomfortable walking up to talk to Jeanie. An hour before, he had thought Jeanie would find the costume funny, that the two of them could laugh about it. Now he was less sure.

But whatever. He couldn’t stand around staring at the back of her head all night.

“Jeanie?” he asked, walking up to her beside the bench.

“Mmm?” Jeanie responded, not looking at him. She was still facing the wall of Sierra’s photos, her eyes partially glazed over.

“May I sit here?” Petey pressed.

“Mmm.”

Petey sat. It was a start. “You’re not going to say anything about what I’m wearing?”

“Mm-what?” Jeanie said, finally turning to look at him. She had the vaguely disoriented quality of someone who had just been woken up from deep sleep. She took in the sight of Petey in the sailor suit placidly. “Oh. Is that some sort of, some sort of piece?”

“...Yes. It’s performance art, yes,” Petey nodded firmly, deciding to cut his losses with the lie and not go into the full story. Sleepy indifference wasn’t quite the response he’d hoped for from Jeanie, but he’d take it. “Where’s Sierra? I didn’t see her when you came in.”

“You know what she’s like with that 8 ball,” Jeanie waved a hand dismissively. Her eyes flicked back to the wall of photographs. “She’ll get here eventually.”

The two sat in silence for a few moments. As it so happened, Jeanie and Petey both suffered from occasional bouts of restless leg syndrome, and at this point in time both of them started tapping away, with neither’s beat quite falling in line with the other. Meanwhile, Jeanie looked at the wall and Petey looked at Jeanie.

“Are you ok, Jeanie?” Petey, eventually asked. The tapping stopped. “You seem more out of it than usual. You’re looking at these photographs like you’re expecting them to start moving, and... Could you just tell me what’s going on?”

“Mmm,” Jeanie shrugged. She would have been content to end the conversation with that, but she knew Petey wouldn’t drop it, so she sighed and added, “I’m just wondering which one’s will get sold.”

“Since when do you care which of your sister’s crap pieces get picked up?”asked Petey.

“...You think that they’re all crap?” Jeanie’s brow furrowed with concern

“Everything Sierra makes is crap.”

“I hate it when you say stuff like that,” Jeanie said. “You know I hate it.”

Petey’s face contorted into a pout. “I know.”

Jeanie decided to change the subject. “You see that one in the middle? The sort of upper right middle, number 17. I think that ones me. I think Sierra took it while I was sleeping, I’ve been trying to work up the willpower to be upset about it, but I’m not even really all that surprised.”

“Is that why you’ve been staring at this wall?”

“You’re like a dog with a bone sometimes, Petey.”

“Dammit, Jeanie. This is going to drive me nuts!” Petey jerked up, gesturing at the wall.

“Is that why you’re doing this? Are you trying to drive me crazy?”

Jeanie only rolled her eyes, then glanced behind him. “Your mom’s coming.”

Petey turned and followed Jeanie’s gaze. Sure enough, there was Magda, click clicking her way across the gallery floor on a pair of immaculate patent pumps. She had a sort of vague smile on her face, her very best “hello I am the ever so approachable gallery owner and what can I sell you today?” expression. Jeanie and Petey both felt that there was something intensely predatory about Magda when she made that face, but neither could ever quite pinpoint what it was. The flare of her nostrils, maybe.

“Hello, you two. Jeanie, what a lovely sweater you’re wearing.” Magda said, her face relaxing when she reached the bench where the two were sitting. Jeanie took a moment to look down self consciously at her sweater, which was oversized and the color of oatmeal and smelled perpetually like someone’s grandfather.

“Hi Magda,” Jeanie and Petey said in unison, half singsong. It’s worth noting that neither would have been so sassy if the other wasn’t present. Jeanie was actually terrified of Magda. As for Petey, well, Petey tended to be more rebellious when he had an audience. Particularly when the audience was Jeanie.

“What brings you over to our little corner, Magda?” asked Petey.

“I actually needed to speak to Jeanie. I was wondering if you’d be willing to help me out with your sister?”

“Sierra is here?” Jeanie asked.

“She’s late, but she’s here,” Magda said to Jeanie. “She’s got that damn 8 ball with her, and you’re much better at managing her when she’s like this than I am.”

“Mmm...” Jeanie wasn’t quite sure she agreed with that assessment. She thought it was probably less that Magda was bad at handling Sierra and more that she didn’t want to bother.

“Jeanie doesn’t want to leave this wall of photos,” Petey piped in. “She’s watching it.”

“Really, how interesting,” Magda said in the vaguest of tones possible. She turned to face the other end of the gallery. “Sierra! Sierra, darling, over here! Dr. Michaels, would you mind bringing Sierra over? There’s someone I’d like the two of you to talk to!” Magda then turned back to Petey and Jeanie with a pointed look. “Best behavior, ok kids? Dr. Michaels is thinking of buying the whole sculpture garden.”

Petey and Jeanie watched as across the room a bespeckled and liver-spotted man took Sierra by the arm and essentially began to drag her over to their bench, as though the woman was a rag doll. Sierra was good looking in that effortless sort of way, with a jaw strong enough to cut glass, eyes that Petey felt looked dead but others had described as “dreamy,” and with hair a livid red that hadn’t seen a brush in so long it had matted together in places. Jeanie noticed that her sister was actually wearing one of Jeanie’s dresses, one made of a sort of shiny silk. It looked better on Sierra, so Jeanie resolved not to be too annoyed. At least she’d put on clothes. Besides, the sheen of the dress sort of went well with the magic 8 ball her sister had clutched in her hands.

“I’ve been having such trouble- such trouble- trying to get her to tell me about her work,” said the man, whom induction would indicate was Dr. Michaels.

“She won’t talk to you unless you ask her direct questions,” Jeanie explained, looking as though she wanted to sigh but was fighting the urge.

“But I did ask-”

“And even then, she won’t answer you unless the magic 8 ball tells her to,” Jeanie continued. Jeanie had explained this to people many, many times.

“This is who I wanted you to talk to, Dr. Michaels!” Magda gushed. The sharky look was back in her eyes. “This is Jeanie, Sierra’s sister. She’s very familiar with her sister’s process, she can help the two of you communicate.”

“Like a translator?” asked Dr. Michaels.

“Oh boy,” muttered Petey. He shifted uncomfortably, watching Jeanie’s face flush. In general, Jeanie shied away from conflict, which meant she tended to bottle stuff up. When she did snap, it more often than not had to do with her sister.

“She doesn’t need a translator,” said Jeanie, tensely. “She just needs patience. If you want to know something, ask her. If she doesn’t answer, ask again until she does. It’s not hard.”

“I don’t know why she can’t just talk to me,” huffed Dr. Sikorsky.

“It’s art!” Jeanie exclaimed, her voice coming out in a sharp little squeak. This made her blush more deeply, and she found herself stumbling over her words. “It’s about, it’s about... free will! And, um, waves, and something to do with accepting the randomness of, of- about how

everything is meaningless, and how that means that it's meaningless to- dammit. I'm bad at this, Sierra you know I'm bad at explaining this. Would you just talk to the guy, please?"

Sierra shook the magic 8 ball. "Ask again later," said Sierra.

"Look, Magda why don't you wait till whenever 'later' is and do the asking, I don't think I'm going to be any help after all," said Jeanie. She suddenly had the overwhelming urge to take the 8 ball and smash it onto the ground, and she really might have, but then they would have been right back to where they started.

Really, the whole thing with the 8 ball had been Jeanie's fault, which was possibly (probably) why she was so very defensive about it. It had all started with a stupid conversation. Jeanie had known the conversation was stupid at the time, and that she was better off keeping her mouth shut, but she hadn't. Jeanie loved her sister, but she didn't always understand her, and though she tried, she didn't always understand her art. Still, Jeanie knew that Sierra at least took it seriously, and so she tried to take Sierra's opinions seriously. But on the day of the conversation in question... well, Sierra wouldn't stop going on and on about nihilism, and how nothing means anything, and about the illusion of free will, and how cause and effect could all just be an illusion, and basically just regurgitating all the philosophical and self contradictory nonsense that generally fueled her strange behavior and stranger works of art. And Jeanie didn't get it, and she had been frustrated and insecure about not getting it, and she was already consumed with her own insecurities about art and if she was good enough and thoughts about being compared to her sister and... and Petey's words kept ringing in her head. She was beginning to think Petey was right, and that she didn't always get Sierra's art because sometimes there was nothing to "get." And so Jeanie had pointed out that if what Sierra had described was

really how she viewed the world, it didn't make much sense why Sierra did anything. Why bother eating, or moving? Why bother making art? If there were no actual choices, and if even if there were choices they wouldn't matter because nothing matters, why did Sierra even bother to go through the motions of life? Jeanie hadn't expected Sierra to listen to her. Jeanie, as a general rule, didn't expect anyone to listen to her... but Sierra, being Sierra, couldn't help but be the exception to this rule like every other. Not only did she listen to Jeanie, but she was convinced.

And so Sierra stopped. Everything.

She stopped moving, eating, she tried to stop blinking (with less success than the rest.) Right there in the living room of their apartment, Sierra just... laid down and stopped. Froze. No matter what Jeanie said or did, she wouldn't get up. She wouldn't talk to her. Jeanie didn't know what to do. She could call the hospital, but this... well, this wasn't the first time Sierra had gone to a questionable extreme. Rather than get her sister sent through the psych ward and pumped full of pills that wouldn't do anything to help but would just result in a terrible few days of withdrawal once Sierra was out of the hospital and refused to keep taking them, Jeanie decided to see if Sierra would eventually break out of this particular funk on her own. So with a guilty conscious, Jeanie had gone to sleep... only to find Sierra still on the living room floor the next morning.

Now, Jeanie was used to dealing with artistic temperaments. Jeanie and Sierra's father was a self proclaimed airbrush tattoo guru, and before he'd taken off when Jeanie was eight, she had clocked many hours of experience in talking him out of decorating her skin with flowers before sending her to school. Her mother, before she had died, had been convinced that she was psychic, and Jeanie had swallowed her tongue for years of dream interpretations over breakfast,

knowing it wasn't worth the fight. And so when faced with her older sister, lying motionless on the floor of their apartment for going on twelve hours, it didn't take Jeanie long to think of a way to help manage the situation. Jeanie figured Sierra had backed herself into a corner with this whole performance, and needed a way out that wouldn't hurt her artistic pride. If Jeanie could talk Sierra into behaving like this, she figured she could talk her out of it.

And so Jeanie had skipped school that day and gone to the dollar store, and come home with a plastic bag. After a few more hours of Sierra showing no signs of changing her mind, Jeanie had sat herself down beside her sister. "Sierra," Jeanie began, "I think I spoke... thoughtlessly earlier, when I said you should do nothing because anything else would be a choice. You lying here on the ground like this is also a choice, if you think about it. Everything's a choice, right? So whether you ignore the urge to eat, to move to sleep or give into those urges... it's all the same. So is actively resisting the urges you feel, urges to eat, to move, to sleep... either obeying those urges or forcefully ignoring them is a choice."

Sierra didn't move. Jeanie hadn't figured that little speech alone would be enough, but that's why she had brought a prop. Jeanie pulled the magic 8 ball out of the bag, and placed it next to Sierra's head.

"I've brought you something, here," said Jeanie. "See? This way, whenever you have the urge to do something, or are asked to do something, or find yourself considering speaking to someone, shake this. That way, you're not the one making the choice. Does that make sense, Sierra?"

Sierra didn't move.

“I’m really sorry I said that stuff earlier, you know. I was being a jerk,” Jeanie said, not moving from her crouch besides her sister. “I’m really sorry. Aren’t you hungry? Do you want to get some food?”

At first, Sierra didn’t do anything. Then, she sat up and picked up took the magic 8 ball, shaking it, then reading it.

“Yes,” Sierra said. “Let’s get some food.”

All of that had happened a few weeks before the gallery opening, and so far the 8 ball had at least kept Sierra sort of occasionally almost functioning. But now, when Jeanie found herself trying to justify the dollar store toy to someone, she couldn’t even choke out the same stupid arguments that had convinced Sierra. Jeanie felt guilty, guilty and frustrated, and she couldn’t help hating herself for being no good at presenting things to people. She was no good at communication, in general, which just fed into her other insecurities, because art was just communication and Jeanie really, really wanted to be good at art. Instead, she couldn’t even explain it, and when talking to someone like Dr. Michaels, the best she could do was snap at him like a brat.

Magda had guided away Sierra and Dr. Michaels. Petey and Jeanie were left alone on the bench.

“You kind of got really worked up there,” Petey said, gently.

“Mmm.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, because he couldn’t think of any better words.

“Where’s your mom taking them, you think?” Jeanie said, doing her best to shrug off the downward spiral of anxiety she’d been starting to slip into.

“I think she’s heading to the black canvas,” Petey explained, leaning back on the bench and kicking his feet in thought.

“Black canvas?”

Petey rolled his eyes. “You know the black canvas by the entrance? Of course you know it, you’re constantly here. She’s giving them her spiel about it.”

Jeanie shook her head, her auburn hair flopping with the motion, which made Petey smile.

“Do you... do you want to hear the spiel? It’s pretty funny. I think so, at least.”

“I could use a laugh,” said Jeanie.

Petey sat up straight, and pursed his lips in his best impression of Magda, and then in a nasally affected voice that actually sounded nothing like her, began to spiel. “I’m so glad you came to our little opening! I wanted to show you this piece- isn’t it just amazing? I know what you’re thinking, it’s what everyone thinks at first. It’s so... bold! So incredibly bold. But right, yes, you have an excellent eye so I’m sure you’ve picked up on that. Some people just look at it and think “But it’s just a black canvas!” but you’re much too well trained for that. You know, I actually have a great story about the artist of this piece. It’s actually about another painting, a different painting that she did. I’d been working with her for a while, for many years, lovely woman. Like a sister, you know. This artist, her name was Olivia, and she was in a bit of a rut for a while. Went years without picking up a paintbrush, and when she finally did, well she got this

idea into her head. She had this idea that if she was going to paint again, she was going to do it right. Each and every brush stroke was going to be perfect, it had to be, each and every one. And so she worked her way through layer and layer of her painting, her perfect painting, and she worked in oils so you have to understand this was quite a few layers and after weeks and months of exposure to the fumes she started to go a little wonky, and that only made her more intense about the idea, this concept of what she was doing. And so when it was done, when the painting was done, she called me up and she told me about it, and of course I had to have it, and she told me that the real art of this thing was the effort and intensity and focus she has poured into it. And so when she came to me with that painting, that masterpiece, and I saw that she was right and it had such an incredible energy, I said to her, I said Olive, because her name was Olive, did I mention? I say Olive, do you know what you've done? You've created a painting with such feeling and energy that the image itself is only a distraction. And she said, she said she knew, and that she was so happy that I'd realised it as well, because she wanted me to be there to witness what she did next. And so she took out this tin of black paint and she dumped it, right on her masterpiece, and she pulled out a brush, thick as a fist, and spread the paint till the canvas was covered and as though from the ashes of the old painting a new painting was made, with no image to get in the way of what mattered. And here you have it... It's this painting, I mean. This black canvas here."

"Wow," said Jeanie. "You have that all, like, memorized?"

Petey shrugged, the sailor suit stretching with awkward tightness across his shoulders..

"Geez. How long has she been trying to sell that painting?" Jeanie murmured.

“That’s the thing. She has sold that painting. Repeatedly.”

“...What?”

Petey grinned a grin that did not convey happiness. “Every time she sells it, it’s to an out of town, someone she knows won’t come back. Then she waits a bit, and hangs a new black canvas on the wall. She’s got a broom closet full of black canvases, waiting to go.”

Jeanie and Petey sat in silence for a moment, neither knowing quite what more there was to say. And then Jeanie giggled, and so Petey smiled and looked at her that way that he did, and it suddenly occurred to Jeanie that she’d spent the entire night either ignoring her friend, shrugging off his questions, or only listening to him because of a self-serving need for a distraction.

“You’re a good person, Petey. You’ve made me feel a lot better,” Jeanie said softly. “I’m really sorry your mom sucks.”

“Me too. I’m sorry your sister sucks.”

“Petey!” Jeanie exclaimed, her voice half a laugh.

“What? I’m kidding, I guess. I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Petey smiled. Jeanie smiled back. But then, of course, he had to ruin the moment. “So does this mean you’re going to tell me why you’ve been so focused on this wall of photos?”

Jeanie let out the frustrated groan. She didn’t want to talk to Petey about this. Or she did, because she wanted to hear his thoughts, but she was also scared to hear his thoughts. The whole thing was, well, embarrassing, and she didn’t want to embarrass herself.

But then Jeanie looked at Petey and suddenly remembered that he was the one wearing a child's sailor suit to an art gallery opening.

“Ok. Fine. I'll tell you. Don't laugh? And don't tell your mom, she'd be pissed.”

“I won't do either!” Petey said, leaning forward eagerly. “And my mom already doesn't like you, she thinks you're mopy. What'd you do?”

Jeanie took a deep breath. “Ok. So. I usually drop off Sierra's artwork at your mom's gallery for her, because of course I do, it's not like Sierra's going to drop it off herself, and she's letting me live at her place for free so I might as well do basic things like that. Anyway. I drop off her pieces, every time, and the sculptures are junk, which is obvious, and the photos... well, I look at the photos and think, ‘I could do that.’”

“I didn't know you took photos,” said Petey. Petey was a little bit hurt Jeanie hadn't told him. More than a little. The fact that Jeanie had never mentioned her photography to him felt like a punch to the gut, a poke to the eye, a wet finger to the ear.

“I didn't tell you. Why would I tell you? It's embarrassing. But I got it stuck in my head that I... I wanted to know how they'd do if people thought they were Sierra's. Whether anyone would like them. Whether they'd look ok, hung up, you know, on the gallery walls. So last time I dropped off her photos, the ones for this exhibit, I snuck some of mine in. And I've been sitting here waiting, wondering if anyone will buy them, but none of them have been taken down. That's the thing, none of them, not mine or Sierra's. No one's bought any of them, and so now I don't know what to think.”

“That... that was ballsy, Jeanie. But you’re probably wrong about none of the photos selling,” said Petey, thinking through Jeanie’s words, but still quite upset. He just didn’t understand why she wouldn’t tell him that she took photos, why she didn’t tell him she was planning to sneak them into the gallery. He would have helped her! And it should have come up. Art was basically all they talked about. Did she just not trust him? Petey was so distracted by this worry that he didn’t even notice Jeanie was hanging on his every word. “People have almost definitely bought at least some of them. Magda probably just hasn’t taken any of them down or put up sold signs because she doesn’t want to ruin the display before the gallery opening is over, that’s what she usually does with this sort of photo wall.”

Jeanie sat, processing this. She hadn’t considered the possibility that she wouldn’t realize when the photos sold. After spending the evening getting used to the idea that no one was interested in any of the photos (possibly because of the two caustic teenagers sitting guard over them) it was a bit of a shock to her system to find out that she might suddenly have an answer after all to the question burning away in her gut. Her eyes flickered to her photos, to the snapshot of the inside of a hot dog, of a paperclip haphazardly jutting from a wad of gum, of a close up view of a hangnail. She didn’t want to even tell Petey they were hers, she knew he’d hate them- but wasn’t that the best sign of all that they were fitting in amidst Sierra’s photographs? That her sister didn’t have some magical, implacable artistic life blood that Jeanie was just born without?

Petey, meanwhile, was having a huge amount of trouble interpreting Jeanie’s silence. Since he was already busy trying to figure out why she’d kept the photos a secret from him, he stood little chance of solving either mystery. Was Jeanie excited about finding out about her photos? Was she scared? Sitting there in his midriff baring sailor suit, jaunty cap clutched tightly

in his hand, Petey wanted- no, needed- to prove to Jeanie that he could be helpful, so that the next time she did something as uncharacteristically wild as risking his mother's wrath to sneak her art onto the walls of the gallery, she'd at least tell him about it. Petey felt the need to take control of the situation. So without another word and without nearly enough mental prep time for Jeanie, Petey jerked up from the bench, marched to the front of the gallery, and snatched his mother's ledger while she was distracted. It was hard to be sneaky dressed like Petey was, but he did his best. He brought the ledger over to Jeanie's bench, where she was blinking rapidly and balling her fists up with handfuls of sleeve.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Mmm?" Jeanie said, not quite in a state for fully formed words. She was nervous. Was that what this feeling was? Nerves? Nerves and nausea and the slightest hint of excitement.

"I got the ledger," Petey snapped, his tone unintentionally harsh. "I'm going to look to see which ones have sold." Jeanie didn't respond, so Petey sat on their bench and dutifully flipped through the leather bound book, finding the page where the photos were listed.

"....Alright. Ok! All of them have sold except for number 5, number 16, and number 42."

Jeanie remained quiet. The wide eyed expression on her face did not change. Suddenly, Petey felt the tension of the moment, and a pressure he did not previously feel. He found himself scanning the previously uninteresting wall of photos, but they all looked the same to him, Sierra's usual uncomfortably close and amateurish views of gross but everyday sights. Then, he heard the girl beside him let out a sigh. "...Jeanie?" he asked.

Jeanie began to laugh.

“Are you ok?”

“Those are mine,” she said, and the laughter became sobbing.

And now Jeanie, quiet Jeanie, was making more noise than he’d ever heard her make.

Now Jeanie, who considered wearing brown rather than grey to be a bold attention grabbing move, was having an actual fit in the middle of a crowded art gallery. And so suddenly Petey felt he was not control of his world, because at this point in his life Jeanie pretty much was his world, and so certainly he was not in control of his hands or his arms, which he saw raise up unbidden and reach for Jeanie, and when Petey finally found he had control of them again those hands halted and froze, hovering inches from her shoulders, not quite touching her. And Petey could neither finish the gesture and hug her nor bring himself to put down his arms and instead just stared at his hands as Jeanie cried, unable to even look at her. And the people in the gallery turned and stared, and an infinity of seconds passed, and then Magda and Sierra were there, beside the bench, as though they had teleported. And something was wrong with Sierra.

She didn’t have her magic 8 ball anymore. Where had it gone? Petey wondered, distantly. Perhaps she had dropped it on the ground or handed it to a passerby. Something was different about Sierra’s eyes. They weren’t dead, anymore, they were burning, burning as lividly as her hair, sharp as the diamond cut corners of her jaw. Sierra yanked Jeanie away from Petey, off of the bench, and clutched at her, hands too rigid and grip too strong, hugging her tight. “Shhh,” Sierra was saying, and the noise was sharp. “Shhhhh, shhhhh.” She turned to look at Petey, and he would have sworn that she bared her teeth at him like she might bite. “What did you do?” Sierra asked.

What had he done?

“Petey, why do you have my ledger?” Magda asked from somewhere behind him. Her voice sounded almost like it was coming from underwater, and Petey realized it was being distorted by the sound of blood pounding in his ears.

Why had he even mentioned the stupid ledger?

“We’re going,” Sierra said, taking Jeanie by the hand, and all Petey could do was watch the back of her auburn head.

As far as Petey was concerned, that was the night he ruined his life.

After that night, Jeanie and Sierra didn’t come back to the gallery. Sierra found somewhere new to show her work, despite Magda’s protestations, and she hadn’t gone back to using the magic 8 ball. Sometimes, Petey still saw Jeanie around school, and when he would wave hi she would wave back, but her face would flush red and she’d compulsively look away, as though she could taste the memory of that night like bile on the back of her tongue and Petey himself had become tainted sour.

Jeanie didn’t want to associate Petey with that night. Petey was her friend, one of her only friends. But that was the night she’d given up a dream she hadn’t dared admitted was a dream, a wish she’d told no one just in case it didn’t come true. Her deepest fears and insecurities had been validated. And to make matters worse, she’d disappointed herself. On some level she’d always sort of known she wasn’t built for art the way her sister was, but at least she’d been built for the real world, at least she could take solace in being the practical one. But after her breakdown at the gallery, Jeanie had a whole new set of fears- what if she had all the broken

bits of Sierra inside her after all, but she wasn't even able to use them to make things? The events of that night had cut her like a knife, and now even seeing Petey was salt in that wound. It wasn't his fault, but it was the truth. If Petey tried to talk to her, Jeanie would do her best, but end up picking at her split ends instead of looking him in the eye.

When Petey tried to talk to Jeanie about art, she would say nothing at all.