

Honors Program

Sara Wielenberg

The Bus Seat Club: Lucy's Story

Creative and Professional Writing

27 April 2012

The Bus Seat Club:

Lucy's Story

by Sara Wielenberg

Artist's Statement: Lucy's Story
by Sara Wielenberg

The Bus Seat Club is the working title of a novel in progress that is based around the idea of the butterfly effect, in which a small act can cause larger ripples that the initiator might not even see. It is going to be organized in either two or three sections and each section will follow a distinct character. This thesis is half of the section that follows Lucy Breken, the teenage character whose parents are divorcing.

Although there are many other influences on *The Bus Seat Club* as a whole, the Lucy section by itself finds its study in the works of Ann Brashares and Sarah Dessen. I have been reading these two authors since I was as young as thirteen. As I came to the career of writing, I started to notice their techniques more. They are two authors who guided me toward a desire to write young adult novels.

Ann Brashares has had an influence on the entirety of *The Bus Seat Club* as I have studied the way she uses multiple narrators in her *Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* series. Since that series also deals with teenagers, Brashares has had a particular influence on Lucy's story. One of the things I admire about Brashares' work is that she does not concern herself with the fairy tale ending. Instead, she seeks the ending that is whole and focuses on the more common relationships of friendship and family and the trials that occur in those relationships.

Another influence on Lucy's character is Sarah Dessen. Her fiction is young adult, just like Brashares' work. She too works with the complexities of family relationships and friendships. While there is often a romance for the leading lady, the ending is not about obtaining that romantic relationship, but rather about the conquering of personal obstacles or familial struggles. In her book *Along for the Ride*, for example, the protagonist does end up with a boy,

but more significantly, she recovers a lost childhood and learns to communicate and stand her ground with her mother.

I also admire Dessen for her work with characters. A big concern that I have when writing or reading young adult literature is the characterization of the lead teenagers. I often find that adult authors do not take teenagers seriously and so when they write them, a reader cannot take those characters seriously. The writers fail to believe that people of that age group can be deep and realistic and not simply overdramatic. Dessen is an expert at creating teenage characters that adults can easily read without becoming frustrated with the teen-ness of it all. She creates characters that demand to be taken seriously, and I hope that Lucy will be just as demanding of readers' consideration.

Originally, I began writing *The Bus Seat Club* beginning to end, switching from one character to another among three characters. While I am typically very flexible with the storyline itself, letting characters drive the narrative howsoever they choose, I become pretty rigid about the structure. I had written forty pages switching through characters, but then my professor Maureen Gibbon, pointed out that Lucy seemed to dominate. I'm still unwilling to relinquish my plan for interwoven narratives, but I have changed my manner of writing this project and reconsidered the final format.

I had wanted the stories to switch from one to the next to show the subtle overlaps, but now I have considered having one character's story and then the next's. Based on Maureen's commentary about Lucy, I started working on the narratives separately, breaking them out into three distinct documents. So now, I am writing the stories independently of each other, while still including the subtle intrusions of one character into another's story. With that little nudge from

Maureen, I broke my rigid structure and learned more flexibility with the structure and not just the flow of the narrative.

This work is the result of me relinquishing power and realizing that the structure affects the story. I found it harder to write the other characters' stories when I was writing them with Lucy's because I kept feeling the pull back to her. It was that pull to Lucy that Maureen showed me. Once I saw it and broke the characters apart, I could tell their stories unencumbered by the desire to return to one character. Now, I am writing Lucy's story and when I am done with hers, I can move onto the other characters' without the constant need to tell Lucy's tale.

This first half of Lucy's story is a result of me learning that sticking to my structure can be a death sentence for a work. There are a million ways to tell a story and locking my project into a certain structure can create roadblocks in the actual story. From working on *The Bus Seat Club* I became comfortable with breaking my self-imposed, limiting rules and the results can be seen in just this beginning of one story.

CHAPTER 1

There was nothing unusual about the teenager sitting on the picnic table in the park. It was perhaps, a little cold to sit outside, but teenagers are known to face weather for what an adult would consider a foolish reason. She sat watching the boys playing basketball. Another Saturday, another game. Despite the cold, their sneakers smacked the tarred court and their sweatshirts kept them warm enough, even as their one audience member shivered.

She was a blond young lady and not given to daydreaming or stalking. She enjoyed the game as much as she enjoyed that Jack Barnes was there. She would have watched, even had she not spent much of the time hoping he might talk to her, might see her at least. She loved basketball. In fact, she played. She would like to ask if she could join, but her shyness often hindered her in doing what she would like.

Lucy Breken watched as Jack Barnes dribbled the basketball between Paul Aber's legs. She shivered a little in the cold air and watched her breath curl up in smoke-like wisps. Jack's shot slipped easily into the basket and the pick-up game ended.

Saturdays were Lucy's favorite days. She could spend the whole morning away from the shouting. She could sit and watch the boys play ball and no one cared because they never noticed. No, she never was noticed. Jack and the others would play without ever seeing her. Sometimes she could convince herself it was a good thing. After all what would they say about her if they noticed? But then again, she really truly wished that Jack would notice her at some point. Maybe at school, as they walked down the hallways and crossed paths with not even a smile exchanged. She sighed again.

The game was over and it was time to catch the bus home. She slipped down from the table and wandered across the street. It was a long cold wait, but eventually the bus came, and Lucy found a seat near the back, one where she sat before. She looked at the back of the seat in front of her to find that message she had scratched into the simulated leather more than a month ago. Matt's statement was still there, saying "Matt is here" despite his copious physical absence. Sometimes she wondered who he was and if he had been here more than once. If maybe he had seen her message and wondered who she was. Lucy's message was still there of course, but next to it was a new one: "Bridget is running and this is a part of it."

She cocked her head. It was a different statement. Not quite something you would expect to read on the back of a bus seat, but it made her curious. She wondered why Bridget had run where she was going. Would she ever end up back in this seat?

Lucy watched the news that night. She was waiting for a story of a missing girl named Bridget, but she never saw one. She Googled missing persons but found 94,400 results and couldn't even begin to narrow it down. Then she decided that if Bridget had run away, she probably had wanted to be a missing person. Lucy decided to leave Bridget alone. If she wanted to be found, she would be.

Lucy tripped in the hallway on Thursday. It was a minor humiliation since Jack was nowhere in sight and her books did not go flying across the floor. It was a major annoyance though. When a day starts bad, every little incident makes it worse, so Lucy sat up on the floor and leaned against a wall admitting defeat.

She was used to falling asleep to the sound of fighting. It left her with bad dreams.

Dreams where her parents screamed at her, at each other, and then suddenly, they would disappear and leave her alone. That's how she felt when they yelled at each other, like they had forgotten her, like she didn't matter, like only their stupid arguments did.

This morning she woke up to dead silence. She found her dad in the kitchen staring out the window with a cup of coffee in his hand. She guessed that he had been there for a while since his coffee wasn't steaming. He didn't even notice her as she went about getting breakfast. She ate at the kitchen table watching him not looking at her. She passed right in front of him twice and he said nothing. She let her dishes clatter into the sink, and he just blinked and lifted his cup a millimeter as though about to take a sip that he never did take.

Lucy went upstairs to get ready for school. When she left, he was still standing there not drinking his coffee.

"Good-bye," she said. He didn't even turn around, so she slammed the door as hard as she could when she left. She knew the dishes rattled, but her dad didn't come out the door to yell at her.

She didn't even matter when they *weren't* arguing.

Sitting on the floor in the hallway across from the freshmen math class, she thought about running away like Bridget had, but what difference would it make? She was invisible when she was there, so how would not being there change anything? Besides, at least this way she had a place to live and someone to buy food for her.

She could stick it out. There were only two years left before she graduated. That wasn't so long.

Gathering her resolve, picking up some pieces of herself, Lucy got up off the floor and went to World History.

When the school day finally ended with no incident worse than an A- paper, Lucy threw her stuff in her bag. She was going to the park. Her parents wouldn't notice if she didn't show up for an hour or so. She pulled her basketball from her locker, balancing it for a moment, then held it tight as she fled the school.

She never went to the park after school; she'd always gone straight home. How was she supposed to know? It didn't matter anyway. She got there first. When Jack and Paul and the others arrived, she was already playing hard, her bag and coat abandoned at the base of the hoop, her hair frizzing out of its ponytail from her almost brutal playing. She had a lot to work out of her system. She didn't want to think about anything at home. She just wanted to play her anger out. Get the poison from her system before she couldn't take the sting anymore and snapped.

Adrenaline from anger at being ignored by her parents made her play fiercely, dangerously. She pushed the ball into the blacktop and slapped it back down every time it returned. She didn't even notice the guys. She shot again and again, lay-ups and three pointers, and she ran after the ball grabbing it time and time again. Never letting it escape her control even when it came out of the net and bounced crazily, she was in control.

The guys watched for a moment, wondering what they should do. It was like an unspoken appointment. The court was theirs from three to five every weekday, no one had ever contested that. Apparently someone was now.

"Who's that?" Jack mumbled, a little annoyed, but not too worried; he was confident they could get her to leave.

Most of the guys shrugged in response. Paul came up with an answer though. "Her last name's Breken. Serena's her cousin."

Serena. A girl with little skills beyond flirting and cosmetology, she was outgoing and unforgettable. Some would say loud and annoying. She was a popular, talkative girl.

Perhaps this is why Serena rarely acknowledged Lucy. Lucy was quiet and smart. If one had to put a fine point on it, the two were polar opposites. Lucy did not like her cousin much because Serena frequently embarrassed her. Serena reciprocated the feeling for two reasons: Lucy's intelligence often made Serena look silly, and Lucy did not dress or act like Serena. The only people Serena liked were girls who acted and dressed just like her and boys who were cute. Lucy did not fit into either of those categories.

So it was no wonder the boys gathered around the basketball court had trouble connecting Serena with this girl playing basketball. Playing rather well too, and maybe, if they were totally honest, somewhat frighteningly.

Then, Paul jumped into her game.

Lucy was momentarily surprised as another pair of hands waited under the net before she could get there from her shot. The ball slipped into them effortlessly and the hands began to dribble it. Lucy let her surprise vanish, and Lucy slipped into defensive mode, watching her ball in his hands. She blocked his shot, took the ball past him, and sunk her own shot perfectly. Then she stepped back, letting him take the ball, and letting herself take a look. Paul Abers. She spared a glance to the edge of the court, noticing for the first time the boys gathered there—Jack and the others. One of them balanced a ball on his palm. For a moment Lucy thought she really should leave. But Paul sunk his lay-up in her moment of distraction. Paul was accepting her, maybe the others would too.

Lucy broke back into the game and took the ball for a lovely three-pointer. Paul smiled and shook his head, impressed.

Another pair of hands interrupted the game. These took the ball and held onto it. Lucy looked to see who had decided to join. Jack Barnes held the ball. Jack Barnes did not appear to be joining the game. He just held the ball in silence for a moment.

“Look, we have a game to play, so-“ Jack started. Paul could already hear the ‘get lost’ in his voice, and apparently so could Serena’s cousin. Her expression had changed to one of a surprised animal about to dart away.

“Right. We should divide into teams,” Paul cut in. Jack’s slightly infuriated look was worth the clearing of the girl’s face. “I want Breken.”

She looked surprised.

It took a moment, but Jack gave in, tossing Lucy’s ball back to her and saying, “We’ll use our ball.”

Lucy nodded and carefully tossed her ball off the court near where she had discarded her stuff.

The teams divided up fast with one extra on Paul’s and he couldn’t help but notice that Jack was considering the girl a liability.

Lucy moved a hand across her hair to smooth back the frizzing, worrying about how Jack would see her. Then Paul passed her the ball and she fell back into the game. Distraction was wonderful. The trials that had marked her morning faded in the game, and the time did too.

They played until the sun dropped to touch the horizon. Lucy hadn’t had a chance to play this hard in months. She liked sinking baskets and watching Paul and some of the others, though never Jack, shoot her smiles and offer high-fives. She liked watching the other team shake their heads as they fell behind.

Finally, Paul snagged the ball after one of Lucy’s shots and called the game. Jack and his

guys were irritated at losing their chance to overtake them.

“You just want to quit ’cause you’re ahead,” Jack accused.

“No, I just want to quit ’cause I’m starving and if I’m not home at six, Mom clears the food away,” Paul retorted.

Lucy left the court to retrieve her stuff, now having realized she was very late.

“Rematch tomorrow,” Jack demanded.

“Fine,” Paul said, then he turned to Lucy who was starting to dash away. “Hey, Breken, hold up a second!”

Lucy turned. Paul strode the few yards to her.

“You up for Jack’s rematch tomorrow?”

She smiled. “Yeah, sure.”

He looked back at the guys to nod, both a relay of her answer and a good-bye. “I know your last name,” he admitted to her, “but I don’t know your first.”

“Lucy,” she said, far less surprised now than when he had selected her as a teammate.

“Okay, Lucy. You got a way home?”

“Yeah,” Lucy said. She was hoping to catch the bus yet. “See you tomorrow.” Then she took off running for the bus stop.

Lucy decided not to wonder what was waiting at home. Instead, she remembered the game. The acceptance of the guys and the thrill of competing again.

She got off the bus and walked the few blocks home. She opened the door, heard the shouting, and she didn’t pause, just started dashing up the steps to hide in her room and turn her headphones on. Unfortunately, her mother’s ears managed to hear the front door through the

yelling.

“LUCY! Where were you?”

“At the park.” Lucy knew her mother wanted her to come into the living room, but she finished her dash to safety instead.

An hour later, Lucy’s stomach growled too loudly to be ignored. She was starving, but her mom and dad were not done fighting yet. They hadn’t even thought to feed her. Lucy slipped down the stairs, trying to pretend she didn’t hear them. Rummaging through the fridge and cupboards yielded a Pop-tart, a yogurt, pretzels, and a can of Diet Coke. Lucy hated Diet Coke, but there was nothing else to drink, so she carried it and the rest of her hodge-podge meal upstairs.

Her parents were suddenly quiet. The indistinct yelling changed to a low murmur that was also indistinct. Lucy paused with a pretzel to her mouth. The sudden quiet unnerved her.

She slunk quietly to the steps and tiptoed to the bottom where she could hear. At first Lucy couldn’t catch anything, then one word slipped through.

Divorce.

Lucy stood up. She looked up the stairs and she looked to the door. She suddenly felt lost. The walls were closing in on her. She dropped her food, tugged on some Nikes and ran out the door.

CHAPTER 2

One thing Lucy knew now was that patterns were survivable. Changes, on the other hand, upheaval and unpredictability, those were the things that left you unhappy and hiding.

The next day, she forgot all about the rematch and went home after school. Her mom wasn't home at all. Her father didn't say anything. Well, she thought, whenever the hell they decided to involve their daughter in what was going on, she'd make it as hard as she could on them.

In her room, she put in her earbuds and pressed play on her iPod. She did her homework and the house remained silent. She must have listened to nearly all the music stored on the small device by the next morning. She had stayed up the entire night, waiting for the sound of her mother's car or the door or anything that signified she wasn't alone.

There wasn't any.

Lucy shuffled to her locker, borderline depressed today. As she listlessly twisted out her locker combination, Paul approached from the noisy hallway behind her. Before getting her attention, he noticed the way she tugged on her locker door and then slumped forward when it didn't open. She rested her head on it and he saw her hand clench into a fist. She hit her locker gently at first, but the force slowly increased until she was nearly calling attention to herself.

"Lucy," he said gently.

Lucy turned, startled from the black pit she'd fallen into.

"Paul." She remembered. "Oh. I'm sorry. Yesterday. I was supposed to be there for the rematch."

Paul smiled lazily. "Yeah, well, Jack's probably real glad you weren't. They won."

"Oh. I'm sorry," she said again. Her head turned back towards the floor. "I should've been there. I just...forgot."

"You want help with your locker?" Her last sentence spoke volumes. Something specific had caused her to forget, but it was a specific sort of something she didn't want to talk about.

"It's picky," Lucy said.

"What's your combo?" he asked, as he moved to the place in front of her locker.

"Five, seven, twelve," she said. He worked it and pulled the door open for her. She weakly smiled and began unloading books.

"So," he said, "you busy today?" Lucy dropped the book she was holding and sighed at it. Paul picked it up and as he gave it back he said, "Are you okay?"

She sighed, "Mostly, no." Then, "Are you inviting me to play again today?"

"Yeah." He pulled her basketball from her bag and held it on his palm.

"See you later, then." She took the ball from him and put it in her locker. It was one thing that between classes would maybe draw a small smile from her.

"Shut up, Jack. Look, you can have the extra player today, okay?" Paul told him at their lockers at the end of the day.

"That's not the point. She has nothing to do with us why should we let her play?"

"Why should she let us play?" Paul countered.

"What?"

"Figure that one out while I go get her."

"Paul!"

Paul walked down the hall, wondering not for the first time what was wrong with Jack Barnes.

“Come on, Lucy, you’re walkin’ with me.”

Lucy shoved some books into her bag and turned to him. She was smiling and he was damn glad to see it, considering that morning.

“Give me that.” He took her bag. “Do you have *all* your books in here?”

She did, but she wasn’t telling him that. She would do all her homework and then kill the rest of the night reading ahead and listening for her mother.

“Can’t handle it?” she asked instead, arching an eyebrow.

Paul smiled at her challenge. “I got it.”

Lucy shrugged, pulled her ball from her locker and tossed it between her hands as they walked.

“You’re not on the girls’ team,” Paul said. “Why not?”

“Technically, I’m supposed to be on the bus going home now,” she replied.

“So why are you here instead?”

“No one’s home today, probably...” Her voice dropped off at the end.

Paul didn’t like the sadness she spoke with so often, but he had to admit that he liked listening when she spoke anyway.

“What’s your favorite color?” she asked in a tone more serious than befit the question.

“Isn’t that the kind of question you ask when you make friends in kindergarten?”

“Maybe. It worked quite well then, so tell me anyway.”

He liked that too. She was going to charm him right out of his mind.

“Brown.”

“Red.”

“That’s the way you play basketball,” Paul said, mindlessly.

“What?” Lucy looked up at him beside her.

“Well, not all the time. When we first got there the other day, you were playing the game like it was a fight, you were brutal and...” Paul hadn’t intended to try to explain himself.

“And?” she prompted as they stopped walking.

“And I don’t know. It was like you were attacking and defending yourself and still...playing.”

“Hmm. I never thought a person could do something like a color.” Lucy’s face softened and Paul felt himself blush under the clear blue gaze reading his face.

She started walking again and Paul followed. At the park, finally, he set her bag on a picnic table, and they joined the rest of the guys.

Lucy changed when the ball hit her hands. She became that brutal fierceness again. He saw the aggression in her and watched as that faded into pure passion. Paul could’ve gotten as much pleasure from watching her play as playing himself.

When the game ended, Paul and Lucy’s team won again. Paul grabbed her bag before she could.

“Come on, I’ll give you a ride home.”

“Are you just courting me for your team or is there some other reason you’ve suddenly taken an interest in me?” Lucy asked, following him back to the school parking lot and his car.

“Nice pun, and you’re a more interesting person than I gave you credit for, Lucy.”

“Nice back-handed compliment.” She half-smiled. He unlocked his car and watched as she slid into his passenger seat. Then he slid in himself.

She gave him directions in between their conversation, and when he pulled into her driveway he saw her face fall. Was she as sorry to end this drive as he was? Her expression seemed directed at the open garage door. There were no cars inside or in the driveway.

“Is no one home yet?” he asked. It was really dark outside.

“I guess not,” Lucy said, her voice taking on a rough quality.

“Is something wrong?” Paul asked.

“I don’t know. They don’t tell me anything.” The roughness had moved onto brick-like anger.

“Your parents?”

“Yeah. I guess.” The urge to claim them had left her. They barely claimed her, why should she give them a title they didn’t deserve?

Something in her voice made him say, “I’ll walk you up.”

“You don’t have to.”

“But I’m going to anyway.”

Lucy finally looked at him again and aside from the gratitude, all he could see in her eyes was loneliness and hurt. The anger was only in her voice.

At the door, she thanked him.

“You’re going to be okay by yourself?” He cast a doubtful look beyond her at the dark door.

“I always have been.” She began to turn away, but he stopped her swiftly with a hand on her forearm.

“Now what does that mean?” Paul couldn’t help but let some frustration leak into his voice. She had things to say but wasn’t going to say them unless someone interrogated her.

Lucy turned back to him, but she trained her eyes on the ground. “You don’t want to know about all this. I want to be friends with you, Paul, but sharing all my crap will just make you walk away. It’s too much for a friendship that hasn’t started yet.”

“Lucy-“

“It’s too much, Paul.” She walked through the door and left him there on her porch.

CHAPTER 3

Every day now, she joined the guys for their game, every day Paul drove her home, walked her up to her door. Sometimes there was a car in the driveway, either an Oldsmobile or a Taurus, never both, but the house was always dark. Paul hated sending her into that lonely-looking place. Neither of her parents had spoken to her for days now, nor even acknowledged her presence, although she was home late every night.

One Thursday, they sat in Paul's car in the driveway talking. Headlights swept up behind them and pulled up alongside Paul. The woman inside simply turned off the car and walked into the house. She didn't even cast a glance at the car. Paul watched Lucy watch the woman. When she passed the car and opened the house door, Lucy was silently crying.

"That's my mom," she said like half an introduction, her voice quavering only a little. Paul thought it strange that the woman hadn't even looked into the car or asked what he was doing there with her daughter.

"Why didn't she wave or something?"

"She can't see me. She can't see anything but her own life. I'm not a part of her life."

"Lucy, what's going on?" Paul finally asked. He couldn't take this much longer. It was frustrating and actually beginning to hurt him that she wouldn't open up.

"I told you that I don't know."

"I don't mean what's going on with your parents, I mean with you," Paul gave the question straight.

Lucy caved and answered. "I'm not coming home after school and no one has noticed," she began slowly, picking up emotion as she went along. "Only one adult at the most is in my

house. Neither one has said a word to me for over a week now. My house is dead silent, always. When they fought, they never noticed me, but at least I knew I wasn't alone. They were still there. Now it's like we're all just renting the same house and taking turns actually being in it." Lucy was crying silently now, her words barely making it out clearly. "Damn it!"

"Lucy." Paul shook his head. He was angry with her parents. "Do you want their attention?"

"I want them to care."

"Okay, I'll walk up with you."

"What?"

"Show me your room."

"Paul."

"C'mon Lucy. If your mom doesn't say anything, then I'll just walk right back out. You can trust me. Besides, I'd like to see your room." Paul smiled sweetly at her. Lucy could barely manage not to laugh at his expression.

Paul slipped out his door and went around to open hers. "C'mon, Luce, this'll be fun."

Paul had the utmost confidence that her mother would notice. He knew she would enter the house silently. "Tell me, Lucy, what's your favorite food?" Ever since Lucy's favorite color question, their conversations had frequently started with a kindergarten personality question.

Lucy smiled at him as she opened the door. "Depends on the season. In summer it is absolutely hard chocolate ice cream and s'mores. In the winter it's hot soup of any sort, as long as it doesn't have mushrooms."

There was the unspoken return of the question and Paul answered in the entryway.

"Rocky road ice cream. Winter, spring, summer, and fall."

“I knew you were a rocky road guy as soon as I met you.”

Paul laughed at her expression. “Really? How? I had you pegged as a strawberry kind of girl.”

“Ed? Is that you?” The voice of who could only be Lucy’s mom drifted in from the living room to Paul’s right. Lucy leaned so she could just barely see around him. Paul turned around and saw the woman who had passed them in the driveway.

“Lucy,” she said. It was the oddest tone she used, surprised to see her daughter and yet as though she had suddenly realized that that daughter existed. Perhaps Lucy wasn’t as melodramatic as Paul thought about the situation. Lucy’s mother then looked to Paul, and said nothing. She just looked at him. Her gaze grew uncomfortable for Paul, but still, he didn’t move.

“Hey, Mom.” Lucy thought about introducing Paul, but then didn’t.

“Um, aren’t you a bit late?”

“No later than I have been for weeks. I’m going to show Paul my room.” Lucy started up the stairs, taking Paul’s hand to pull him along and thinking him brave for walking into this hostile and awkward situation.

“Uh, Lucy, I don’t think that your father would like that.”

“He’s not here. You’re here, which means he’s not.” Lucy tugged Paul up the steps.

Lucy could feel her mother watching and then heard her come up behind them. Lucy shut the door behind her and Paul. Her mother stood outside the closed door for a moment, looking at it.

Lucy smiled out the window. She knew her mother would be upset, but Lucy also knew that it was time for some yelling again in this house. Lucy turned away from the darkened glass

and looked at Paul. He seemed uncommonly tall in this room. He always looked more normal outside where the sky was an indefinite ceiling. Inside, she almost expected him to duck.

Paul observed her room with curious eyes. Lucy had no idea how curious. Paul knew her favorite color, her favorite food, her favorite movie, her favorite music. Now he also knew about her family. Seeing her room, however, was like he finally got to look at her. He finally got to see Lucy.

His eyes took in the bed made with perfect corners. The whole room was clean in an unusual way. Clean to the point of giving away the fact that it hadn't always been this way. On her nightstand was a radio alarm clock. It was set on bell. Music wouldn't wake Lucy. The iPod was next to the clock, and in front of it was a book, a biography about Princess Diana. He opened it to see her bookmark: the corner of an old math assignment.

From the nightstand he moved to the shelf on the other side of the bed. He barely noticed how Lucy kind of moved aside as though making more room for him. Books lined the shelf in alphabetical order by author's last name. It was increasingly clear that Lucy had a little too much time on her hands these days. Next to the books was one framed photograph tipped down so the faces could not be seen. Without turning it up, Paul knew it was a family picture.

The picture had been taken so long ago that the moment didn't even exist in Lucy's memory apart from the photograph. It was taken in the living room right after her parents had bought the house. Lucy was two and her grandfather had stood behind the camera making faces so Lucy would stop scowling and smile. Perhaps Lucy had had a premonition at two years of age, or perhaps she was just a cranky child. Lately, Lucy had begun to believe it was the former.

Right next to the bed a picture was taped to the wall. Paul moved in closer. He didn't know that he had been silent for nearly ten minutes, contemplating her room. It would take

another two minutes of silence for him to inspect this picture.

This one was cut out of a magazine. There was a cat curled up asleep on the lap of a little girl. The little girl was sitting cross-legged and was bent forward, intently watching the cat.

“She’s making sure it’s alive,” Lucy suddenly said, after Paul had spent his two minutes trying to understand the significance of this picture. “It’s an ad for something or other. It was in one of those family magazines.”

Now Paul knew exactly why she put it up, even if Lucy didn’t.

Paul listened while Lucy read aloud. He wasn’t all that interested in Princess Diana, but Lucy’s voice was nice. She seemed happy to hear her own voice in her room and have someone listen to her.

He sat backwards on her vanity chair facing Lucy who sprawled across her bed on her stomach, head propped up on one hand while the other turned pages. Her blond ponytail swished onto the page and she tossed her head to brush it back behind her. It landed on her shoulder and began its slow slide back downward.

Paul may have been a little distracted by watching her hair, but he was still listening. The sound of her voice almost distracted him from the words she was reading. He wouldn’t tell Lucy, but her voice distracted him a lot lately, particularly in class. Her hair had cost him a shot or two whenever he played basketball too.

Paul knew it was getting late. He knew he missed supper, he knew that the vibrating phone in his pocket was flashing ‘Mom’, but he stayed right where he was. He sat and listened to Lucy until her voice went hoarse from all the reading, and although he still didn’t want to leave, he knew he had to.

Lucy looked at her clock when she placed the book back on her nightstand. "Paul!" Her voice cracked in the exclamation, and Paul smiled in amusement. "It's past eleven!"

"Yeah, I know. I guess I should go." He still didn't move. He looked at her shelf of books, recognizing some titles and filing away others.

Lucy stood up. "I'll walk you to the door."

"I'm gonna call my mom quick."

"Oh. Oh, yeah." Lucy didn't want to admit that she forgot he had a mother. Parents had ceased existing in her life. Funny how little time it takes to get used to absence.

Lucy ducked her head apologetically. Paul didn't find it surprising that she would forget about parents. After all, hers seemed to be almost nonexistent. He retrieved the phone from his pocket. Four missed calls from his mother. He couldn't help but appreciate that.

The conversation was brief; Paul promised his mother a better explanation when he got home. Paul would tell her about Lucy and about her parents divorcing. That would be enough to keep his mom from grounding him for a week like she had planned. He would not tell her how Lucy's parents are treating Lucy. He knew Lucy wouldn't want him to share that with anyone. She didn't have to ask him. He just knew that that's what she wanted.

"Okay, I better go now," Paul said after hanging up.

"Yeah, I guess you better." Lucy's voice was rough from the reading, so Paul didn't catch the tone of reluctance.

Lucy moved to the door first and opened it. She wondered why braving this little goodbye seemed so hard. She would see him tomorrow, after a night of silence.

Her mother was not in the hall.

Lucy led Paul down the stairs with no idea that he watched her, trying to read her mind. Paul already felt it, and they weren't even at the bottom of the steps yet. He knew that when he would say good-bye to Lucy on her front step, he would want to kiss her. This idea grew in his mind with every downward step.

At the bottom of the stairs, Lucy peered into the living room. It was empty. She glanced to the kitchen on her right. Her mother wasn't there either. She was in bed back upstairs, in the room Lucy's father used to share with her. Lucy opened the front door and stepped out. Automatically, she looked at the sky.

"Paul! Come look at this!"

Paul stood in the entryway, admiring Lucy standing on her front walk. He still wanted to kiss her, but he told himself that it was a really bad idea. Before he allowed himself to give in to Lucy's enthusiasm and follow her outside, he took a breath and pushed his own wishes aside. No kissing, not tonight at least.

A car's headlights swept past, and Paul saw Lucy grinning from ear to ear, and Paul decided he didn't need to look at the sky. The awe and happiness in Lucy right at that moment was all Paul needed to be wonderstruck himself.

The next morning, her mother spoke to her. This was such an event to Lucy that she had to restrain herself from baking a cake.

Contentedly anticipating seeing Paul at school, she poured milk over Cheerios, when her mother stepped into the kitchen behind Lucy and said, "Lucy, I think we should talk about that boy from last night." Lucy splashed some milk over the edge of her bowl.

"Wh-what?" she stuttered, sitting down so as not to collapse.

“That boy from last night, Lucy. Don’t you dare act as if you don’t know what I’m talking about. He was here for quite some time, and I just don’t see why you thought it was okay to bring a boy up to your room and shut the door. I have never tolerated that.”

“Well, maybe your toleration has expanded more than you realize. Like I said last night, I haven’t been coming home before dark for weeks. You only just noticed last night. Do you even care what I’ve been doing? Where I’ve been? I wasn’t acting like I didn’t know before; I was just surprised to have you speaking to me.”

“Lucy, that is ridiculous.”

“No. I’ll do what I want now, like I have been doing because apparently, you don’t give a damn anymore.”

Lucy threw out her cereal without eating a bite and paused at the kitchen entrance, leaving a moment for her mother to take advantage of.

“Lucy, you are not to have that boy in your room unless the door is open,” she said to Lucy’s back.

“What are you? My mother?” Her sharp return would break her mother’s heart in another hour or two, but at that moment it only stunned her. When her mother couldn’t reply, Lucy walked out of the kitchen.

By second period, Lucy was so hungry she could hardly stay seated. She hadn’t seen Paul that morning, which disappointed her; she didn’t get the chance to share the victory. Her mother had spoken. Lucy felt a little bad about how harshly she had dismissed her mom, but it seemed she could hold the attention a little longer just by provoking her anger. After all, Lucy knew with a sad certainty that her mother was quite good at yelling.

Paul waited at her locker after class. He looked around, anxiously anticipating seeing Lucy. He spotted her before she saw him. Her hair was pulled up into its habitual ponytail. Her face held an expression of disappointment and yet some sense of hope he hadn't seen yet. Her eyes ran into his. He smiled at her, suppressing the foolish grin as much as he could. Her disappointment vanished so quickly that he knew it had to do with him.

"Good morning, Lucy."

"Hey, Paul." He stepped aside to allow her access to her locker. She shifted books rapidly, and he stood by the open door, smiling like an idiot and not caring.

"My mom says you're not allowed in my room with the door closed." She smiled so wide when she said it, Paul couldn't help but return the expression.

"She doesn't like me?" Paul asked, taking a mock offended tone.

"No, but I like you, so that should be enough consolation." Lucy never quit smiling. Paul's chest tightened when she said she liked him.

"Your affection is supposed to replace that of your mother's?" Paul managed to joke. Lucy hit him on the arm and expanded her smile to a level of elation. "You still in for the game?" Would Lucy's mother start demanding her home after school again?

"Paul," Lucy said, her expression sobering, "my mother has forfeited all rights over my life until further notice. My father too."

He didn't know if Lucy intended to apply that to the door rule too, but that mattered little. He still had his afternoon game with her and better yet, the drive back to her house.

The bell rang. Neither had noticed the halls emptying around them, but now they would both be late to class. It didn't matter at all to Paul, and Lucy was in a similar frame of mind.

"I'll see you at lunch," Paul said. He took off for his class, his only regret was that he

couldn't walk Lucy to hers first.

This was the first time Lucy had ever sat with the guys. No matter how much time she had spent with them, or even with Paul, she never really considered herself a member of their group until that day. Paul had met her at her locker before lunch, and, in the flow of things, she just walked alongside him to the table.

Jack Barnes still intimidated Lucy, but that intimidation had started to set her on a different sort of edge. Instead of wanting to impress him, she just wanted him to accept her or leave her be. Neither seemed to be in his current range of plans.

She sat down to Paul's left. Shortly, the place to *her* left was occupied by Tony Madison. The guys filled in at the table, acting as if nothing were different. Indeed, as if Lucy had been there all along. She felt so welcomed without the pomp and circumstance. It was quite nearly the most pleasant thing she had experienced within the last few weeks. It came in just behind reading to Paul. It was crazy really, how much that moment enthralled her. Well, not moment. More like a solid few hours at least.

Lucy snuck a glance to her right, catching Paul's profile and a smile lingering from a laugh. His eyes started to move toward her, so she swiftly involved herself with her food. Tony's long arm bumped hers, and she shifted towards Paul to avoid further mishap after Tony apologized.

Paul glanced at her then, but Lucy did not see. She was too busy with the food on her plate to catch that moment of hope in Paul's eyes. Paul almost felt like slamming his head on the table. The spike in his heart rate and subsequent plunge when she revealed nothing were certainly not healthy.

Paul was busy thinking how pretty she looked today when Tony somehow managed to engage her in conversation. He knew he was smiling whenever Lucy smiled.

CHAPTER 4

Before Lucy left for school that morning, she saw the note tucked under a cereal bowl on the table. It was in her mother's writing.

Lucy,

it read,

I know things have been unusual lately. Your father and I would like to talk to you tonight about this and some other things, so please come home after school.

-Mom

She couldn't help but roll her eyes at the vagueness of it all. Unusual? Quiet was definitely unusual and lately it had been so quiet one might almost go deaf from it. And "other things?" Yeah, that would be divorce. Lucy wasn't necessarily looking forward to this conversation, but it would happen eventually, and she was ready to lay her feelings out on the table. Her mom had gotten an earful the other day, but her dad had been sneaking by. Yeah, she'd go home, but they wouldn't be the only ones talking during this conversation.

When she arrived at school and found Paul lingering by her locker, she told him she wouldn't be going to the park after school.

"How come?" he asked lightly as though it were simply out of curiosity, but Lucy could hear the undertone that said, "What did they do now?"

"I got a note from my mom this morning. I think they're planning on finally telling me about the whole divorce thing."

"Oh." Paul's inability to address this situation was painfully apparent to Lucy.

"So, yeah, I'm going home after school."

“Okay.”

Lucy shuffled her feet, and just as she was about to awkwardly stammer about having to go to class, Paul spoke.

“I’m sorry, Lucy. About them. Maybe I can call you later? See how it went?” When he began he was looking her in the eye, but when he arrived at the questions, he looked down.

“Sure.”

And that’s how Paul finally got Lucy’s phone number.

Lucy slipped into that same back seat on the bus. It had been a while now since she’d been here. Bridget was braver than her, running away like that. Lucy wanted to face her parents head on, but she knew that of all the thousands of things she’d thought of to say to them since reading that note this morning, she’d likely say none. She’d silently accept their decisions. The more she thought about that big D word, the more her anger faded into something like fear. Her family was going to be among the broken ones now. What does that mean when you’re a piece of something that is broken? Jagged edges. Worse, she’d be the middle piece. The one that could connect to both, but never at the same time. Bridget’s act sent a message: She wasn’t going to take it. But Lucy? Lucy was going to take it all, just as her parents would deal it to her.

Lucy sat on the burgundy couch with her mother beside her. Her father occupied the matching chair at a ninety degree angle to them.

There was some uncomfortable throat-clearing, and then her mother and father locked gazes in a silent fight over who should have to begin. When Mr. Breken’s eyes shifted to the kitchen far to Mrs. Breken’s left, she gave in with a sigh that contained all the irritation of a

seventeen-year marriage to this man.

“Lucy,” she said, facing her daughter, “I know things have been different lately, and perhaps it seemed like your father and I were ignoring you.”

Lucy planned for this sort of beginning, but all those biting retorts prepared in Geometry faded when tears came into her eyes instead. She looked at her lap.

“But it was simply because neither of us knew what to say without telling you about everything and we wanted to have a plan for you before we told you. So you wouldn’t feel lost or like you needed to figure anything out on your own. We wanted to give you a simple change.”

Simple change. Mrs. Breken looked to Lucy’s father whose eyes were still locked on the kitchen. Her expression said it was his turn, but he didn’t take the cue.

“Ed,” she said tightly.

He turned to their expectant faces like a man coming out of a coma, bleary-eyed and uncertain. This was not the face of a man ready to reassure his daughter. Lucy’s mother sighed again.

“Your father and I are splitting up, Lucy.” She focused on her daughter, waiting for an expression she could decipher and administer motherly reassurance to. Lucy looked her in the eye without an ounce of surprise, but with a flood of tears held back so the whole room looked wobbly and underwater. Now it was more real. Mrs. Breken’s own eyes filled. This was it. The moment where the damage done in the last few weeks would become irreversible and she might lose her daughter for all that remained of her life. She reached for her baby girl, hoping she wouldn’t be rejected because this moment would set the tone for the entire transition and beyond. This moment could be everything.

With her mother's arm around her shoulders, Lucy suffered through the explanations of her father taking the house and Lucy remaining there at her permanent address. Her mother had been packing her things while her dad had stayed in a hotel the last few nights. She was moving into the apartment of her friend Enid.

"She was looking for a roommate anyway and it'll be just like college, living with her again." As if this was something merely logical rather than founded on the divorce. "You'll always be welcome to come stay some nights there. There's a futon," she added like an enticing treat, a delicious gift. Yes, because Lucy had always wanted to sleep on a thin mattress with a bar in her back.

Her father said nothing. Neither comforting nor explanatory. He was a lost-looking man sitting in his chair. Much like he had looked that morning with the coffee. Shadows showed on his face now from not shaving or sleeping as regularly. Lucy was used to her clean-cut, precise father who explained everything to her from the phases of the moon to the reasons why the green nail polish was a better choice than the red. The man in front of her couldn't help her pick a cereal for breakfast, let alone guide her through this new territory. She would be living with a stranger.

When her mom finished talking, Lucy nodded and said she was going to bed. Her mother kissed her good night and Lucy returned the gesture automatically. She looked at her father for a moment and at his lack of response, she went upstairs, leaving them to figure out where they were going for the night.

Her phone was just starting to ring on her bedside table when she walked into her room. Paul's name clearly flashing across the screen, she ignored it and curled herself around a pillow into which she breathed anxiously until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 5

Santa was drinking on his sleigh. It had the milky appearance of eggnog, but Lucy suspected the mall Santa had mixed a little more in it. The Santas at the Oak Haven Mall were notoriously homeless drunkards who got this one job a year. The Santa sleigh was set up in the center of the plus-shaped mall. The sleigh had steps leading up and small children lined up along ropes with their parents.

This was the first Saturday in more than a month that Lucy wasn't at the park. Instead she was in the mall, watching the children wind up the main aisle to Santa's lap where some cried and some excitedly rambled off item after item while their mothers stood to the side looking drained and somehow afraid. Ostensibly, she was here to do Christmas shopping, but really she found herself just people-watching. Or family-watching really. She took an interest in observing them now that hers was fracturing. How many of those kids in line had divorced parents or were heading to a future in which their parents broke up?

Lucy leaned back on the slippery faux leather of the mall's tan loveseat. She had settled herself in one corner while the other was occupied by a stream of harried fathers, watching the children as well, although their observance was more of a hypnotic gaze than a studying one.

Lucy heard a familiar voice breaking through the general mall noise of Christmas music and people, calling her name. Surprisingly, when Lucy caught sight of her, Serena was alone with just a single shopping bag on her arm. As she came closer, Lucy was further surprised to see that the bag had a bookstore's logo on it. Serena was looking directly at her and more startling yet, she undeniably approached Lucy.

“Lucy, hi.”

“Hi, Serena. What’s going on?”

“Christmas shopping for Dad. Do you want to go get a coffee with me?” She gestured with her bag to the coffee stand a few feet away from the last child in line.

Perplexed, Lucy agreed.

“White chocolate mocha latte,” Serena told the girl trapped within the stand.

“Same,” said Lucy, “but with vanilla.”

After they had their drinks, Serena led her to the store front of Vanity and they began a walk that followed the path of the outside wall, crossing storefronts without entering.

“Mom told me that your parents are divorcing,” Serena said.

“Is that what this is about?” Lucy asked.

“That and other things.” They walked a few paces, each taking a cautious sip of their drinks. “I feel bad, Lucy. It would terrify me to have my parents split up. I mean, what do you do if you have to decide between parents?”

“I don’t get a choice,” said Lucy. “I was told I’m staying with my dad at the house.”

“Oh.” Serena paused and then asked tentatively, “Where’s your mom going?”

“Apparently, she’s moving in with Enid, her roommate from college.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, she offered me the futon for spending nights there whenever I liked.” Now that she was finally talking about the details of that conversation with her parents, she couldn’t seem to stop sharing.

Serena’s face twisted in a reciprocating expression. “That sounds fun,” she said, with her forehead scrunched and a downward twist to her mouth.

“Exactly,” said Lucy. “And dad’s not saying a word. He literally hasn’t said *a word* to me since the decision of divorce came up. He looks like he just came to from a knock-out. I don’t know how I’m supposed to live with that.”

“Yikes. Does he even want the divorce?”

“I don’t know who brought it up first, but I don’t see why he wouldn’t. He couldn’t have liked the fighting any more than Mom did.”

“Yeah.”

They walked in silence for a while.

“So, I have a favor to ask, but I think it might be something you’ll prefer to sitting at home with your dad,” Serena said.

“This is the ‘other things’ you mentioned,” Lucy said. Naturally, Serena needed something from her.

“Yeah. See, I need some help with my lit class. We have to do an exposition of a Shakespearean sonnet and to be honest, I don’t understand what an exposition is, or most of Shakespeare’s sonnets. Any of them, actually.” Serena’s smile twitched in an uncomfortable attempt at humorous self-deprecation.

It was that expression that made Lucy incapable of refusing her cousin. Clearly Serena was self-conscious about her difficulties with literature, and she was right about Lucy needing a way out of the house. Although she and Serena hadn’t gotten along since they were twelve, she loved her aunt Jean and uncle Nate and spending time at their house with Serena’s four-year-old triplet siblings would certainly be anything but quiet.

“Sure,” Lucy said.

“Thanks, Luce.” Serena’s appreciation went all the way to her eyes, and Lucy realized

that her cousin had more depth than she had thought. “And I’m sorry about your parents.”

“Thanks.”

Lucy’s phone began to vibrate in her pocket. It was probably Paul again since she hadn’t returned or answered any of his three calls since talking to her parents. Maybe she would call him tonight, but for now she ignored it as she and Serena walked several more yards in companionable silence.

CHAPTER 6

Paul staked out Lucy's locker on Monday and that's how he finally got to talk to her. He wasn't sure how to take Lucy's lack of response. He felt a little offended and a little embarrassed and a little more than a little angry when he called her for the fourth time and received no answer and no call back. Then again, Lucy didn't seem the type to intentionally mess with him or be that rude. Sunday afternoon, Paul checked his phone for the eighth time that day and struggled against the thought of calling just one more time. Monday was a mere day away and he was practically guaranteed to see her then. He certainly didn't owe her any more calls. Eventually, he reasoned that the conversation must have been too trying and she didn't want to talk about it yet. They could have talked about anything, he wouldn't have minded, but then the divorce thing was probably foremost on her mind.

Her jeans were tearing apart at the ankle side seams and her hooded gray sweatshirt was swallowing up her head and torso, but still Paul noticed her as soon as she turned down the hallway.

"Hey, where've you been all weekend?" He tried to ask this nonchalantly but there was tension there that he couldn't filter.

"Oh. Paul." It took her a moment to orient herself. "I'm sorry. I couldn't. And then, I-I just forgot. I'm really sorry." Her earnest expression made him believe her.

"Yeah, okay." He resisted the urge to forgive absolutely.

"Really, I am sorry."

"I know. So...what happened?"

"I'm not moving, but my mom is. She'll be out of the house tonight."

Paul began to rethink his ability to talk about this. It seemed so foreign to him. What were the right questions?

“So, living with your dad then?” he asked, stating the obvious uncomfortably.

“Yeah.” She paused, looking at him. “Um, Paul?”

“Yeah?” He leaned forward, asking the word eagerly, waiting for any request, anything he could simply do.

“Can you move? I need to get my books.”

“Sure, yeah, sorry.” Paul stepped aside, shaking his head as if loosening his brain. “So, um, are you going to come play tonight? Basketball, I mean?”

Lucy didn’t look at him at all. He felt dismissed, superfluous.

“Uh, no. I’m busy tonight.”

“Okay.” Paul tried to think of something funny to say, something about having to beat the other guys by himself, but every line that ran through his head sounded ridiculous and then it was too late to say anything. The conversation was already over.

“I’ll see you at lunch?” she asked, facing him. But she walked off to class before he could really confirm.

In first period, Paul slipped his wallet out of his pocket. Between a ten dollar bill and three ones was the picture from the face-down frame in Lucy’s room. He had sneaked it out while Lucy was reading. Toddler Lucy and her parents on either side of her. Her father was standing holding her hand and on the other side her mom was squatting down with one hand on her child’s chubby tummy and the other slipped behind. Her body faced Lucy, only her head was turned towards the camera. She grinned like it was the best day of her life, eager joy filling her

up to her eyebrows. Lucy, with a heavy wrinkled forehead and a pouting mouth, was the foil to her mother in the photo.

He quickly stowed the photo in his wallet when his name was called for attendance, shifting his focus to cell-division.

Shakespeare's sonnets, every single one about love, seemed to point out to Lucy all the things wrong with her parents' relationship. Where was their constancy? Their adoration?