

I am nine years old, and I have a crush on Brendan. I don't know where he is right now, but I wish I did—it's hot underneath the jungle gym. The plastic bench kneads into my legs; I try leaning my arms on the table between us all, but the sandy texture digs into my skin. The new sun burns through the holes in the black, rubbery floor of the structure above us. Soles stomp and scream, making it harder to hear what my friends are saying. Something about American Idol. Something about who is the best singer and which boy is the cutest contestant. From my seat, I try to look around the playground for Brendan again, but the primary-colored poles and slides and climbing walls block my view.

I readjust myself on the bench and feel the imprints of the bumpy pattern on my leg. I move my foot and get stabbed by a piece of mulch stuck in my sock. I flinch and reach down, take off my sneaker to pull it out.

I am sitting next to Brendan's sister, Shelby. She is a year older but in the fifth grade because she skipped a year. I don't know anyone else at school who has skipped a grade. She is the same age as my brother and Emma's brother and Elizabeth's brother. She is the same age as Amber who sits across from me. Amber has bright eyes and a sheepish smile; her voice is so soft that sometimes I can't hear what she says, but I'm always eager for her to repeat it so that I can laugh.

I like to hang out with Brendan and Logan, too. They make me laugh, and they treat me the same as their other guy friends. We talk about video games and Harry Potter, and I feel very cool when I am around them. I like to be liked by them.

I sit with them a lot at lunch time. We have a lot of time to talk about whatever we want to when we're not in the classroom.

Being gay is just wrong. Brendan told me.

What's that? I'd never heard that word before.

It's when a guy loves another guy and they do...*things* together.

Oh, yeah, that's not right, I shook my head.

That's not true, it doesn't matter if you're gay, Logan sat across from us.

Yes it is—

It's not supposed to be that way, I said, so quickly on Brendan's side.

My mom's best friend is gay and he's really nice, Logan stopped eating.

Brendan and I stopped eating, too. Brendan took a deep breath.

The Bible says—

I'm gay! Logan turned red.

Brendan and I looked at each other with wide eyes and empty lungs. My chest had gone so cold, it burned. For the first time, I couldn't read Brendan's expression.

Guys, I'm kidding.

We each picked up our sandwiches, needing something to fill our mouths with.

I can hear Brendan and Logan in the distance, probably yelling on the blacktop, probably Logan has a football and Brendan is pulling on his golden bowl-cut. I should get up and join them. I like playing football, too. I like being rough and pushing them and them pushing me, the pride that comes with a trip to the nurse's office where I am a regular.

Sweat drips down the middle of my chest, down my belly and into the waistband of my shorts.

I look down at the mulch, just one color for some reason, the dulllest light brown that has ever been invented.

I take a deep breath and inhale the exhaust fumes from Cleveland Avenue behind me.

I look at Amber and the quiet chaos in her eyes.

I look at the underbelly of the red triple-slide where I usually sit with Emma. I hear the painful, dry sound of child skin sliding down sticky, hot plastic.

The playground is loud and messy and wild, bright and crunchy and hot, thick and rich and smells like dirt, but I cannot think of another single thing to look at besides —

I look at Shelby's boobs.

Her shirt, probably one from before her growth spurt, shows the edge of her cleavage, the soft line of separation in the middle of her chest. She laughs at something one of the girls said and her boobs ripple, hesitantly, as if they don't yet know how to move properly. They're big and they shine in the sunlight filtered through our holey floor-ceiling.

But I'm not staring. I'm not really looking, anyway. My face is pointed towards Amber like I'm listening to her favorite performance of last night, but my head is slightly tilted to my right. Just enough to see Shelby out of the corner of my eye. I'm not really looking. Not really.

"Emily, stop staring at Shelby's boobs!"

"No, I'm not!" My defense is out of my mouth before I can process what has happened and who has said that. I turn my head back towards Amber (I *was* looking at Shelby's boobs) and she had an embarrassed grin on her face and a laugh in her eyes. The other girls are looking down towards us. Shelby expresses her confusion with a smile but doesn't seem bothered. I think my stomach flipped six times over and exchanged places with my heart during the shock of being outed. Someone brings up Ms. Kathy and why she's being annoying again. Attention has already shifted; there's only space for one drama at a time in third grade. I don't hear what Ms. Kathy did. I don't know who told the story this time.

I should go find Brendan, since he's my friend, and I have a crush on him.