

All I knew about Ashley before I went over there yesterday was that until this year she went to private school and now she sits next to me in math. But she asked me over and since I couldn't think of a good no, I said OK.

Ashley lives near school, so we walked. We didn't have a lot to talk about on the way, but she didn't seem to mind. She was telling me that when she grows up she wants to be a veterinarian and a movie star, and travel all over the world very glamorously and live life to the hilt. She asked if I like to live life to the hilt.

"I mostly just hang around," I admitted.

"But when you get older, and you can do anything," she whispered, as we began climbing the steep steps up to her huge stone house. "What do you like to imagine?"

I was a little winded from the steps, so I just shrugged.

"Like, I am constantly imagining I can fly," said Ashley, spreading her arms wide. "Do you ever imagine you're flying?"

I stopped for breath. "I sometimes imagine I'm in a bakery."

"Today is my half-birthday," she said, pulling a key out of her shirt. It had been hanging from a shoelace around her neck. She bent close to the lock, to use it. "Are you thirteen and a half yet?"

I shook my head. My birthday was just last month.

"It feels, you just feel... older, at thirteen and a half," she said. "Things shift, subtly. You'll see."

I followed her in. I think her house might actually be a mansion. The ceiling is very, very far from the floor in the room where you walk in. In my house we have a front hall. Ashley's you'd have to call a lobby. On the left there was a huge square room that I think was a library. Anyway there were tons of books in there, on dark shelves all the way up to the ceiling. At the far end of the library two huge doors opened into some other room. I don't know what room it was or if that one would open to another huge room. I decided to stay close to Ashley to avoid getting lost.

Ashley unzipped her jacket and dropped it on the floor, with her backpack still hooked through the sleeves. I took off my jacket and backpack too, put them next to Ashley's, then followed Ashley past a dining room that had paintings of annoyed-looking people hanging on the greenish walls, down a long hallway, into the kitchen.

"What do you want for a snack?" asked Ashley.

I didn't know.

Ashley climbed up onto one of the counters and opened a cabinet. "Let's have Mallomars," she said. "I think you can tell a lot about a person by the way she eats Mallomars, don't you?"

She brought down the box, and held it open for me to choose one. I picked one in the center of the back row, wondering what that revealed about me. She took one from the far right front and said, "Come on and meet my bird, Sweet Pea. Did I tell you I've had him since I turned three?"

My Mallomar was melting a little on my fingers as I hurried to keep up with Ashley, around corners and then up, up, up a steep flight of stairs with dark red carpeting worn out in the center of each step. My house is just regular.

"Sweet Pea is a budgie," Ashley was explaining. "People think that's the same as a parakeet, but it's not. Budgies are slightly larger and much more exotic. Do you like exotic animals?"

"Um," I said.

"I got Sweet Pea when I was three years old and though tragically he never learned to talk people-language, he is still able to communicate, at least to me. I can tell his chirps apart. You'll see. This is my brother's room—don't go there," she warned, indicating a closed door. "This is the bathroom—do you have to go?"

"No."

"OK. Tell me when you do."

I took a bite of my Mallomar, maybe revealing that I was a hungry type of person.

Ashley gripped a doorknob on a tall white door. "And this—this is my room."

She swung the door open. Everything inside was pink. Pink carpeting, pink walls, pink bed piled high with pink pillows. "Sweet Pea?" she called, heading across the thick rug toward an empty birdcage. "Sweet Pea? Ahhh!!!!"

I got there as she began screaming, and saw a dead bird, lying on its side in the bottom of the cage.

She was still screaming when a woman raced into the room, across the acres of pink rug, and grabbed Ashley, demanding, "What happened?"

Ashley stopped screaming, said, "Sweet Pea...died!" and started to sob. The woman, who, now that I got a better look, was an older version of Ashley—big brown eyes, freckled nose,

black hair pulled back in a ponytail—anyway, the woman gathered Ashley into her arms and sat down on the rug, hugging her.

I was still standing there, holding my half-eaten Mallomar, feeling a little weird. I don't think the woman, who I had to figure was Ashley's mom, even noticed I was there.

Ashley's crying turned from shrieks to gasps to, finally, just little burbles that sounded like she was saying, "Haboo."

Her mom was stroking her hair whispering "OK," and occasionally checking her watch.

I ate the rest of my Mallomar and tried not to look at the dead bird or Ashley and her mom, who seemed to be having some private time, just with me happening to be standing three feet away. I would've gone to the bathroom but Ashley had said to tell her before I went there, so I thought maybe their family had a rule of some sort about that. They seemed like they might.

Ashley sniffled, then said, "I've had him since I was three." She whimpered a little, then dried her face on the bottom of her t-shirt. "It feels, it just feels like, like the death of my childhood."

"Oh, Sweetheart," said the mom.

Ashley started sobbing again.

"Maybe I should call my mom," I whispered.

"Don't leave!" screamed Ashley.

So I didn't.

"I feel like," she started again. "I feel like maybe Sweet Pea felt like, like I had grown up, now that I turned thirteen and a half, and like, after all this time, this lifetime together..." She was too breathy to continue.

"Ashley," said the mother. "There's something I have to tell you."

Ashley sat up straight, slid off her mother's lap, and sat cross-legged on the carpeting facing her mom. She swallowed hard and then nodded. "OK."

"Sweet Pea," started the mom. "Sweet Pea wasn't actually, well, what you think he is. Or was."

"What do you mean?" asked Ashley.

"You didn't get this bird on your third birthday."

"Yes, I did," Ashley protested. "I remember. I went to the pet store with Grammy and Papa, and picked him out."

"Well," said the mom, tilting her head sideways. "You picked out a bird. He looked something like Sweet Pea, and his name was Sweet Pea, too..."

"You mean..."

The mom scrunched her face apologetically. "You were so excited, but then the darn bird died a few weeks after we got him, and, well, I didn't want to start explaining death to a three-year-old so I just went back to the pet store and got a new one."

"I can't believe you."

"Well," said the mom. "I didn't want you to be sad. And when that second one died you were five, and just starting kindergarten, so that seemed like a bad time to deal with death, too. So I just bought a new parakeet."

"Budgie."

"Isn't that the same as a parakeet?"

Ashley stared at her mother. "Budgies are more... Sweet Pea was a budgie."

"Not recently."

"There was more than one replacement?"

The mom smiled awkwardly. "Sweet Pea was sort of a series of birds."

"NO!"

"Honey," said the mom, leaning toward Ashley. "Some of them were green, some were blue..."

"You said he was molting!" shrieked Ashley. "Get out! Get out of my room! I want to be alone with Sweet Pea, or whoever this is! Get out!"

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to stay or go, but I followed the mom out just in case. Ashley didn't yell at me to stay, so I figured I'd made the right choice.

The mom closed the door behind us and said, "Do you want a snack? I am studying for the Bar."

I had no idea what that meant. I just shook my head.

"You can wait in the kitchen," she said, moving fast toward the stairs. I could see where Ashley gets her speed. "I'm sure Ashley will be down soon."

When we got down to the kitchen, the mom took out two glasses and a pitcher of water. She poured us each some, gulped hers down, then looked at me for the first time, really. "It's nice for Ashley that you are here. She was bound to discover death eventually, and it's nice she has a friend to lean on."

"I'm not really... we're not that close," I explained. "I just sit next to her in math."

"Well," said the mom, pouring herself more water. "I wish I could chat, but as I said I really have to study. Call me if you and Ashley need anything."

And then she left. I sat alone in the kitchen listening to the clock tick, wondering if I should call my mom and ask her to pick me up early on account of the death of the bird and also since it was getting a little creepy there in Ashley's humongous kitchen all alone.

Just as I was starting to wander around to look for a phone, though, Ashley appeared in the doorway. She had a jewelry box in her hands. It was the kind where, when you open it, tinkly music played and a ballerina spun on her toe. I had one of those when I was little.

"Want to do a funeral?" Ashley asked.

"Is he in there?" I asked.

Ashley nodded.

I followed her through the kitchen out into the back yard.

Across a big green lawn, up a hill toward some evergreen trees, we came to a shed. "Hold this," said Ashley, and handed me the jewelry box/coffin. I waited outside the shed while she went in. I tried to be very still so I wouldn't drop it. She came out wearing big denim gloves and holding a small spade. "I don't have any experience with death," I told her.

"I didn't think I did, either," said Ashley. "I guess you never know."

I followed her to the evergreen trees. She knelt down beside one and started digging. I just stood there holding the jewelry box/coffin. When she was done, she said, "You can put him in."

"Do you—maybe you should," I suggested. "You're the one, you know..."

"That's OK," she said.

So I placed the box into the hole.

"Kneel down with me," she whispered. "Please? I'll be quick."

"OK." I knelt in the soft dirt. Usually at a friend's house we play ping-pong or something.

"I'm going to say some stuff, OK?"

I nodded.

Ashley took a deep breath. "Goodbye, Sweet Pea. I'm sorry I didn't realize you were actually a series of birds. I'm sorry if I wasn't a good enough bird-owner, and you never learned to talk and you never flew anyplace interesting. I guess you probably had a pretty boring life. I'm sorry." She sniffled.

I was thinking she might start really crying again, and if she did, where would I find her mother? But she cleared her throat and turned to me. "Do you want to say anything?"

"Uh-uh."

"You can. Just say whatever comes to mind."

"I'm not that good at saying things," I whispered.

"That's OK," whispered Ashley. "He can't really hear you anyway."

I turned and looked at her. She was sort of smiling at me. I sort of smiled back. Ashley closed her eyes and lowered her head again.

I took a deep breath and said, "OK. Sweet Pea? Um, I never knew you, you know, alive, but, and I don't really know Ashley that well either—I can't figure out if she is severely weird or like, the opposite, but, um, I think she really, kind of, loved you."

"I did," mumbled Ashley with her eyes closed. "I did."

"So," I continued, making it up as I went. "I was thinking maybe it would be nice, if you could, like, maybe show up in her dream some night, and fly with her. Because Ashley likes to imagine she's flying. Anyway, um, that's all."

Ashley stayed still with her eyes closed, so I didn't get up either. Sometime after my feet fell asleep, Ashley shoveled the dirt onto the top of the box and patted it down hard. Without saying anything, she got up and went back to the shed. I waited outside it again, stamping my pin-cushiony feet, until she came back out without the gloves and shovel.

"Thanks," she said, as we headed back toward her house. "That was really beautiful, what you said."

I shrugged.

She held the back door open for me. "Is this the worst playdate of your life?"

"It's up there," I admitted.

We waited out front for my mom to pick me up. I sat between my stuff and Ashley. We both tilted our faces up toward the sun. When my mother's car pulled up and she beeped, I turned to Ashley. "Happy half-birthday," I said.

"Thanks," she answered. "Thanks for, you know, being here today."

I grabbed my stuff and ran down the steps to my mom. I slipped into the car, buckled my seat belt, and leaned over to get my kiss.

"Did you have a good time?" Mom asked.

I shrugged. I looked out the window. Up the hill, on the front lawn, Ashley was running around in big, loose circles, her arms spread straight out.

The end.