

Culicidae

For my thirteenth birthday, I got a new pair of AirPods and a little sister. The AirPods, I asked for. The sister, not so much.

Bridgette didn't arrive in my life the way most children do; she was no wrinkled red bundle, delivered by stork onto my doorstep, nor was she an infant at all, capable of being wrangled into a fluffy headband for pictures or stuffed into a bassinet to greet me with pudgy legs and dimples. There was no fanfare, really, to Bridgette. No balloons. She entered my life like a Jehovah's Witness. One day I opened my door and she was just there.

With her came a middle-aged man named Andrew, who had endeared himself to my mother with big brown eyes, a mildly impressive physique, and a voice that rarely rose above a whisper. He was a nice foil to my own father, whose arrogant timbre was capable of bulldozing most conversations.

Andy dropped his seven-year-old daughter off on a Saturday, and that was that. Bridgette and I went from being vaguely acquainted to siblings in just one month, but neither of us minded. It was like we'd crossed some unspoken threshold when I zippered her flower girl dress at the wedding. We were sisters. We acted accordingly.

In the four years since, not much about Bridgette has changed. I mean, she's gotten taller. She's nearly outpaced me in pencil marks on the dining room doorway. Someone else might call her lanky, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. There's nothing remotely ungraceful about Bridgette, with her heart-shaped face and thick blonde hair that transcend even the disadvantages of a gap-toothed smile and braces. Sometimes, selfishly, I worry that she'll grow up to be prettier than I am.

"What are you staring at?" Bridgette asks irritably from across the kitchen table, scrunching up her face so her lips kiss the bottom of her nose.

"Relax," I say, then flick a piece of penne pasta at her, but it bounces harmlessly off her cheek and falls limply to the placemat below. Shame. "I was just thinking about how you should be a shampoo

model or something. Right, Mom?"

"You're both beautiful girls," my mom says, without looking up from her phone. Bridgette rubs a glistening smear of butter off of her cheek and glares at me. "CJ is being sarcastic," she says.

"No, seriously," I say, shoveling a forkful of pasta into my mouth. "Go get yourself an agent or something. Shit, I'll find one for you."

"Language," my mom interjects helpfully, then goes back to her article. Sometimes I wonder what the dinner table would be like without Bridgette. With Andy working nights again, I think we'd all just sit in silence.

My phone buzzes with a message. Without looking, I know who it is. "Hey Mom, can I run out to pick something up?" I ask, tucking it away in my pocket. "It won't take long."

Across the table, Bridgette's gaze darts to me. I have a feeling she knows that it's Matt texting, but she doesn't say anything. Like most eleven-year-olds I know, she treats secrets like currency. I'm convinced she's just waiting for the right moment to cash in.

My mom sighs. "Just be quick. And make sure you have gas left over in the morning. I don't need a frantic call tomorrow when you get stranded in the beach parking lot."

"Got it," I say, already pushing in my chair. "I'll be back soon."

"Don't hit any mailboxes," Bridgette calls out to me as I leave, giggling like it's the funniest thing in the world.

The drive to Wakefield only takes me ten minutes, but somehow it feels like crossing state lines. I watch as the small saltbox houses of our neighborhood in Narragansett rush past the window, soon replaced by beautiful green lawns and two story houses that boast fresh coats of paint. Matt's bedroom window is already propped open when I get there. The sticky June air is warm enough to accommodate

mosquitoes, so by the time I climb the lattice into his second-floor bedroom, I'm covered in bites. My family jokes that I must have bad genetics or even worse karma. Something about me attracts them.

"You're lucky I love you," I tease, as Matt helps me off the ledge into a dimly lit room, curtains drawn at every other window. Scattered across my arms and bare legs, the insect bites are already beginning to swell. At this time of year, it's hard not to feel like carrion.

"Very lucky," Matt agrees, his dimples reappearing at the sides of his mouth.

I've known Matthew Hayes since we were sophomores, but something about him is still exciting. He's one of those special people who feels foreign from every new angle, a kaleidoscope of personalities. When I first met him standing in the concession line at the Prout-Narragansett football game, I thought he was an athlete, with his broad shoulders and biceps. Seven months later, I see him as more of an artist, with his gentle hands and pianist's fingers.

Mostly, though, he's just Matthew Hayes, and that's good enough for me.

"I've got snacks and everything," he says proudly, fumbling around between rumpled bedsheets for the remote. Sure enough, his nightstand is piled high with bags of popcorn and Sour Patch Kids. "Help yourself."

Grinning, I pop a few kernels in my mouth as the opening notes of the *Jaws* theme start to trickle through his TV. I know it's one of Matt's favorite movies, but I've never been a big fan. Something about it has bothered me ever since I watched it for the first time at twelve years old and saw the smooth slope of Chrissy's bare breasts disappear below red waters. It's like the filmmakers were trying to twist her suffering into something seductive. I don't know. Sometimes Matt says I overreact.

I make myself comfortable at the foot of his bed, tugging my legs up onto the covers. He sinks down beside me, resting a hand on my thigh. It's endearing for about twenty minutes, before I get a cramp in my leg.

"Hey, Matt?" I ask, shifting slightly, but his hand doesn't leave my thigh. I weigh my options. I

could make an excuse and get up from the bed, but he might take it personally. I could move his hand, but I think I'd miss the feeling of his skin against mine. The cramp isn't so bad, anyway. "Never mind," I say, and Matt smiles, squeezing my thigh a little too hard.

We only make it halfway through the movie before my phone buzzes with a text from my mother, telling me I need to come home. "We can finish it later," I offer apologetically, as Matt pauses the TV. The timestamp at the bottom of the screen reads an hour twenty. He doesn't say anything. I swipe a can of lukewarm Sprite off his nightstand and take a sip, my throat suddenly dry. My cherry pink lip gloss lingers on its rim.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the beach, right?" I ask hopefully, retrieving my car keys from the folds of his duvet. Matt nods wordlessly. I know he must be pissed that our movie night was interrupted, so I try to break the tension with a joke. "I'm just hoping I don't run into your parents on my way out the window."

Matt shrugs. "Next time maybe I'll come through yours."

"Not if Bridgette can help it," I grimace, thinking about the look of suspicion she gets whenever I ask her to shut the adjoining door between our two bedrooms. She'd see Matt coming from a mile away. "Nothing gets past her."

Matt nods again. "Note taken."

"You can pull it tighter, you know," I tell Bridgette, handing her the strings of my bathing suit top. "I don't want it to come off in the water."

"Can't you do this yourself?" she whines, but helps me tie the strings into a knot anyway. Her slender fingers dance at the nape of my neck. I adjust my top in the mirror. Usually I have freckles by now, dotting my skin like little scars, as though the summer heat has teeth. But I haven't been to the beach yet this year. Matt is a lifeguard at Narragansett, so he gets bored of it quickly. We're only going at all

because my friend Jazz said she'd meet us there.

I throw one of Matt's Prout sweatshirts over my bikini, then dig around in the bathroom drawer for makeup. In the mirror, Bridgette watches with fascination as I pat concealer onto my undereyes, taking care to cover the blueish bruise that radiates out from my temple. It's already a week old, and luckily not very noticeable. Still, I see Bridgette's brows furrow when she sees it.

"How'd you get that bruise?" she asks. I lean in close to the mirror to curl my lashes. "Oh, that was Matt," I reply absent-mindedly. A fleck of mascara gets caught near my pupil; I blink it away, eyes watering.

In the reflection, Bridgette's eyes widen. It takes me a second to realize what she must be thinking.

"No, not like that," I backtrack quickly. "He was shutting his pickup door last week and didn't see me getting out. It was an accident, I promise."

"How do you not see someone getting out of your car?" Bridgette mutters under her breath, swiping one of my eyeliners to doodle on her arm. A wobbly smiley face comes to life in black charcoal. "Your boyfriend must be a real idiot, Ceej."

My stomach flips. "It was an accident," I repeat, more firmly this time, and snatch my eyeliner out of her hand. Bridgette takes a step back.

"I was just wondering," she says, her voice very small. Two thick braids snake down her back in a style reminiscent of the Wendy's logo, though I don't think she would ever forgive me if I made that comparison out loud. Standing across from her in the bathroom, it strikes me then how painfully young she is.

"Sorry," I say, flushed with sudden guilt. "I didn't mean to snap at you. Thanks for tying my bathing suit."

Before she can respond, my mother sticks her head in the doorway. "Sorry to bother you guys,"

she says, in a tone that tells me she's bracing to deliver bad news. "CJ, I need you to take Bridgette with you to the beach tonight. She can't stay home by herself."

I open my mouth to argue, then shut it again.

The smell of saltwater follows us to a table on the pavilion, where we divvy up the cold doughboys Jazz picked up from Iggy's. Water drips from the ends of my hair onto my bare skin. With pruny hands, I wring out the excess.

"Bridge, don't you want to go for a swim?" I suggest gently, gesturing out at the seawall. "It's so nice out."

Bridgette's glance darts between me and Matt, side by side on the picnic bench. "No, I think I'll stay," she says, shifting in her seat.

Jazz, oblivious, wraps an arm around Bridgette's shoulders and squeezes. "Here, you can have some of mine," she offers, pushing what's left of her doughboy toward my sister. Matt clears his throat. "Then maybe CJ and I will head back down to the water," he says, with a meaningful look in my direction. "You'll keep an eye on the kid, right, Jazz?" Bridgette frowns at him. Jazz shrugs, still licking powdered sugar off her fingertips. "I guess," she says, as I climb reluctantly off the bench, dusting sand off my thighs. "Wait a second, Ceej."

I stop in my tracks. "What's wrong?" I ask with surprise. "What, do I have something on my face?"

"No," Jazzy says, and leans over the table, brushing her thumb very lightly over my leg, where marks have formed in the shape of Matt's fingerprints. "You've got a killer bruise here. You didn't know that?"

Matt goes very still. I feel my cheeks flush red with embarrassment. "Oh, it's nothing," I say awkwardly. "He was just—"

Matt slaps me.

A sudden hush falls over the picnic table. I look down at my arm like it belongs to someone else. A handprint lingers there, splotchy and pink. Jazz blinks a few times but doesn't say anything, like she can't quite process what just happened. The beach suddenly exists in a vacuum. It's so quiet you'd think he backhanded me across the mouth.

"What?" Matt says, breaking the silence. His voice is reedy, like he's barely suppressing a laugh. This is funny to him, I realize. "There was a mosquito. Don't worry, I got it."

I sink back down to the bench, landing gracelessly on its rough wooden surface. My arm stings with the memory of Matt's knuckles. I don't remember what we were talking about before he slapped me. Maybe that's exactly why he did it.

Bridgette's eyes are wide and nervous. "I want to go home," she says suddenly, untangling herself from Jazz's embrace. "CJ, can we leave?"

Blood rushes past my ears like static. "Sure," I say, avoiding Matt's gaze as I start gathering my things; keys, towel, backpack, what's left of my confidence. "Sorry guys. I'm gonna drive Bridgette home."

I plant a light kiss on Matt's cheek, but he tolerates my affection like an inconvenience. Jazz starts stacking our paper plates, mumbling something about needing to clean up. I ask Matt if he wants me to drop him off at home, but he says he'd rather stay for the sunset. "You guys go," he says, smiling like nothing's wrong. In this fading light, his eyes remind me of melting honey.

"It really is mosquito season, you know," I tell Bridgette as we walk toward the car. She hugs her folded sweatshirt to her chest like a pillow. "And I wasn't wearing bug spray."

I move to open the passenger door, but Bridget nudges it shut with her elbow. "Here," she says, holding out her hand. "Matt must have missed."

In her palm lies the bloodless corpse of a mosquito, one broken wing fluttering in the breeze.