

—WE FALL ON EACH OTHER

by Paul Walther

Wednesday

All the way up to the cabin, they drove past rural houses whose flat front yards, facing the highway, were filled with plastic Christmas decorations. Justin, sitting in the passenger seat and already wishing he'd said no to this, was astounded by the size and quantity of figurines and objects, each display completely overshadowing the low ranch style houses whose front yards they filled. Miles upon miles of them, glowing faintly from within now that the sun was setting, as if owning a house along the highway required that you amuse the highway passersby; regale them with the symbols of the season.

The next season, actually. Everyone seemed to have forgotten that a holiday existed between Halloween and Christmas, the holiday Justin was escaping from, though his lifeboat was seeming less and less seaworthy the closer they got to it. He had to remind himself, though, that the medication skewed his perception of reality.

"Are you comfortable?" asked his mother.

He shrugged and winced.

"Do you need some of your pills?"

"Not for two more hours," he said, and his new face slurred the words a little so that the last word was "hoursh."

"I think you can cheat on that schedule a little," she said for the thousandth time.

"Forget it."

"It'll be nice to see Gwen again, won't it though?" she said cheerfully, stupidly.

As if it were a social call. As if cousin Gwen hadn't been kidnapped four months ago. Five men. They kept her in a basement for two weeks before they were caught. Five men. In the family there were no facts, only hints and whispers. She'd needed six surgeries when she was rushed to the hospital. Do you understand?

This was *Gwen's* reason for not wanting to face the family across the Thanksgiving table.

"Well," said his mother, "I think it will be good for her to have you there. I think she'll be glad not to be alone. It was very generous of you."

Do you suppose, he wanted to ask her, *that she isn't insane?* Justin wondered which sister had called the other; which had suggested their wounded children escape the prying Thanksgiving eyes of the family together in her cabin.

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"Where is the map?" she asked. "I think this is the road."

They were climbing up a two-rut road between close walls of pines and hardwoods. Ahead, at the top of the hill, the large A-frame cabin glowed with soft yellow light like a jewel. "Here we are!" she said stupidly.

In a photo album at home there is a washed out snapshot of Justin and Gwen sitting in a plastic wading pool together, the soles of their bare feet touching--a skinny brown haired boy with a worried look on his face and a winsome blonde girl of five or six, smiling confidently at the camera. Justin could not remember being there when it was taken.

They pulled into the circular driveway and there she was at the door, waiting. Slim, blonde, framed in the yellow doorway, she looked completely normal.

His mother waved. "Hello, dear!"

She parked behind Gwen's Jeep Cherokee. "You are not to talk about it, remember?" she whispered.

"About *what*?"

"Can you get out?"

"Yesh."

She followed him to the door, rolling his suitcase behind her over the rough gravel drive. At the door she made a move to hug Gwen and then thought better of it, making for an awkward moment.

"Come on in," said Gwen. She held the door for them. She looked normal. It was bright and cheerful inside, and warm. "I'm set up in my folks room, so Justin can have the room upstairs, if that's okay."

"It's fine. You look great! Justin, come on up and we'll get you settled." His mother pulled the heavy suitcase up the stairs, bump, bump, bump, struggling with it a little, and he had to follow behind uselessly.

It was a nice enough room, with a steeply peaked ceiling and two windows, one overlooking the lakefront and the other angled out from the roof in a small dormer, looking into the woods at the back of the lot. He looked around. It was Gwen's room--there were trophies from tennis and hockey, team photographs, pictures of girls stuffed in the frame of a mirror, and pictures of Gwen, a younger Gwen, posing with a tennis racket or in a prom dress. The single bed had a frilly pink bedspread. His mother was opening his suitcase.

"I can do that."

"I'll just unpack you."

"I can do it. Just leave it!"

"All right."

When they got back downstairs, Gwen was still standing in the kitchen. "Find it okay?"

A feeble joke. There was only one room on the second floor, a narrow one tucked under the steep eaves of the 'A'.

"Well," said his mother, "I'll be going." She kissed Justin on the forehead. "I'll see you Sunday afternoon. You just relax. Both of you."

And then she was gone. Justin stood in the door and watched her taillights disappear over the lip of the hill. He turned and smiled at Gwen.

"We don't have to spend every minute together," she said. "I'm not going to