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THIS HAPPENED back in March of 2010, when the Philadelphia train station still had the kind of information board that clickety-clacked as the various gate assignments rolled up. Serena Drew stood directly in front of it, gazing intently at the listing for the next train to Baltimore. Why did they wait so long to post their gates here? In Baltimore, they told people farther ahead.

Her boyfriend was standing beside her, but he was more relaxed. Having sent a single glance toward the board, he was studying his phone now. He shook his head at some message and then flicked on down to the next one.

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The two of them had just had Sunday lunch at James's parents' house. It had been Serena's first meeting with them. For the past two weeks she had fretted about it, planning what to wear (jeans and a turtleneck, finally—the regulation grad-student outfit, so as not to seem to be trying too hard) and scouring her mind for possible topics of conversation. But things had gone fairly well, she thought. His parents had greeted her warmly and asked her right away to call them George and Dora, and his mother was such a chatterbox that conversation had not been an issue. “Next time,” she'd told Serena after the meal, “you'll have to meet James's sisters too and their hubbies and their kiddies. We just didn't want to overwhelm you on your very first visit.”

Next time. First visit. That had sounded encouraging.

Now, though, Serena couldn't even summon a sense of triumph. She was too limp with sheer relief; she felt like a wrung-out dishrag.

She and James had met at the start of the school year. James was so good-looking that she'd been surprised when he suggested going for coffee after class. He was tall and lean, with a mop of brown hair and a closely trimmed beard. (Serena, on the other hand, came very close to plump, and her ponytail

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was almost the same shade of beige as her skin.) In seminars he had a way of lounging back in his seat, not taking notes or appearing to listen, but then he would pop up with something unexpectedly astute. She had worried he would find her dull by comparison. One-on-one, though, he turned out to be easy company. They went to a lot of movies together and to inexpensive restaurants; and her parents, who lived in town, had already had the two of them to dinner several times and said they liked him very much.

Philadelphia's train station was more imposing than Baltimore's. It was vast, with an impossibly high, coffered ceiling and chandeliers like upside-down skyscrapers. Even the passengers seemed a cut above Baltimore passengers. One woman, Serena saw, was followed by her own redcap wheeling a cartload of matching luggage. As Serena was admiring the luggage (dark-brown, gleaming leather, with brass fittings), she happened to notice a young man in a suit who had paused to let the cart roll past him. "Oh," she said.

James looked up from his phone. "Hmm?"

"I think that might be my cousin," she said in an undertone.

"Where?"

"That guy in the suit."

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“You *think* it’s your cousin?”

“I’m not really sure.”

They studied the man. He seemed older than they were, but not by much. (It might just have been the suit.) He had Serena’s pale hair and her sharply peaked lips, but while her eyes were the usual Garrett-family blue, his were a pale, almost ethereal gray, noticeable even from several yards’ distance. He was staying where he was, looking up at the information board now, although the luggage cart had moved on.

“It might be my cousin Nicholas,” Serena said.

“Maybe he just resembles Nicholas,” James said. “Seems to me if it was really him, you could say for certain.”

“Well, it’s been a while since we’ve seen each other,” Serena said. “He’s my mom’s brother David’s son; they live up here in Philly.”

“So just go ask him, why not.”

“But if I’m wrong, I would look like a fool,” Serena said.

James squinted at her dubiously.

“Oh, well, too late now anyhow,” she said, because whoever it was had evidently found out what he needed to know. He turned to set off toward the other side of the station, hitching the strap of his overnight bag higher on his shoulder, and Serena

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went back to consulting the board. "What is the gate number usually?" she asked. "Maybe we could just take a chance and head on over there."

"It's not as if the train will leave the minute they announce it," James told her. "First we'll have to line up at the top of the stairs and wait awhile."

"Yes, but I worry we won't get to sit together."

He gave her the crinkly-eyed smile that she loved. "Isn't that just like you" was what it meant.

"Okay, so I'm overthinking this," she told him.

"Anyhow," he said, switching the subject. "Even if it's been a while, seems like you'd know your own cousin."

"Would you know all *your* cousins, out of the blue?" she asked.

"Yes," James said.

"You would?"

"Well, sure!"

But he had lost interest, she could tell. He sent a glance toward the food court along the opposite wall. "I could use a soda," he told her.

"You can buy one on the train," she said.

"You want anything yourself?"

"I'll wait till we're on the train."

But he missed her point. He said, "Grab us a place in line if they post the gate while I'm gone, okay?" And off he went, without a thought.

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This was the first time they'd taken a trip together, even this little day trip. Serena was slightly disappointed that he didn't share her travel anxiety.

As soon as she was alone, she drew her compact out of her backpack and checked her teeth in the mirror. Dessert had been a sort of fruit crumble with walnut bits in the topping, and she could still feel them lingering in her mouth. Ordinarily she'd have excused herself after lunch and ducked into the powder room, but time had gotten away from them—"Oh! Oh!" Dora had said. "Your train!"—and they had all left for the station in a flurry, James's father driving and James sitting next to him, while Dora and Serena sat together in back so that, as Dora had put it, "we gals can have a nice cozy chat." That was when she'd said what she'd said about Serena's meeting James's sisters. "Tell me," she had said then, "how many siblings do *you* have, dear?"

"Oh, just a brother," Serena said. "But he was nearly grown before I came along. I've always *wished* I had sisters." Then she had blushed, because it might have sounded as if she were talking about marrying into James's family or something.

Dora had sent her a little tucked smile and reached over to pat her hand.

Serena had meant that literally, though. Ensnconced in her parents' small household, she had envied her

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school friends with their swarms of relatives all mixed up and shrieking with laughter and fighting for space and attention. Some had stepsiblings, even, and stepmothers and stepfathers they could pick and choose at will and ostracize if things didn't work out, like rich people discarding perfectly okay food while the undernourished gazed longingly from the sidelines.

Well, you just wait and see, she used to tell herself. Wait until you see what your *future* family's going to look like!

The train to Baltimore was five minutes delayed now, according to the board. Which probably meant fifteen. And they still hadn't posted the gate number. Serena turned to look for James. There he was, thank goodness, walking toward her holding a drink cup. And next to him, lagging slightly behind, was the man she'd thought might be her cousin. Serena blinked.

"Look who I picked up!" James said as he arrived.

"Serena?" the man asked.

"Nicholas?"

"Well, hey!" he said, and he started to offer his hand but then changed his mind and leaned forward, instead, to give her a clumsy half-hug. He smelled like freshly ironed cotton.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked him.

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"I'm catching a train to New York."

"Oh."

"Got a meeting tomorrow morning."

"Oh, I see," she said. She supposed he meant a business meeting. She had no idea what he did for a living. She said, "How are your folks?"

"They're okay. Well, getting on, of course. Dad might have to have a hip replacement."

"Oh, bummer," she said.

"What I did," James told Serena, rocking slightly from heel to toe, "I noticed him by the newsstand, so I stopped a few feet behind him and said, very low, 'Nicholas?'" He looked pleased with himself.

"First I thought I was imagining things," Nicholas said. "I kind of glanced sideways, not turning my head—"

"When it's a person's own name they're quicker to catch it," James said. "You probably wouldn't have heard me if I'd said 'Richard,' for instance."

"My mom's having hip trouble too," Serena told Nicholas. "Maybe it's genetic."

"Your mom is . . . Alice?"

"No, Lily."

"Oh, right. Sorry. But it was you I sat next to at Grandfather Garrett's funeral, I think."

"No, that was Candle."

"I have a cousin named Candle?"

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"You *guys!*" James said, disbelievingly.

"Kendall, her name is really," Serena went on, ignoring him. "She just couldn't say her own name when she was learning to talk."

"You were there, though, right?" Nicholas asked.

"At the funeral? Oh, yes."

She'd been there, but she'd been twelve years old. And he had been, what? Somewhere in his mid-teens; a world of difference back then. She hadn't dared to exchange a word with him. She had studied him from afar as they all milled in front of the funeral home afterwards—his self-contained expression and his pale gray eyes. The eyes came from his mother, Greta, a standoffish woman with a limp and a foreign accent, or at least a not-Baltimore accent. Serena remembered those eyes very well.

"We were supposed to go to lunch with everyone after the service," Nicholas was telling her, "but Dad had to get back for a school play."

"Speaking of getting back . . ." James interrupted. He jabbed a thumb toward the board above them. "We should head to gate 5."

"Oh, right. Okay, we'd better be going," Serena told Nicholas. "I'm so glad we ran into you!"

"Good seeing you too," he said, and he smiled at her and then lifted a palm toward James and turned to walk away.

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"Tell your family hello, hear?" she called.

"I'll do that," he called back.

Serena and James gazed after him a moment, although a line was already forming next to the sign for gate 5.

"I have to say," James said finally, "you guys give a whole new meaning to the phrase 'once removed.'"

As it turned out, their train was not all that full. They easily found two seats together—Serena next to the window, James on the aisle. James unlatched his tray and set his drink cup on it. "Now do you want a soda?" he asked. "I think the café car's open."

"No, I'm okay."

She watched the other passengers making their way down the aisle—a woman prodding two small children who were dawdling in front of her, another woman struggling to heave her suitcase into the overhead rack until James stood up to lend her a hand.

"He had your coloring, sort of," he said when he'd sat down again, "but I never would have picked him out of a crowd."

"Excuse me? Oh. Nicholas," Serena said.

"Have you got just a huge multitude of cousins, is that it?"

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“No, only, um . . . five,” she said, mentally counting first. “All of them on the Garrett side. My dad was an only child.”

“I’ve got eleven.”

“Well, lucky you,” she said teasingly.

“Still, I’d know any one of them if I happened to see them in the train station.”

“Yes, but we are just all so spread out,” she said. “Uncle David up here in Philly, Aunt Alice out in Baltimore County . . .”

“Ooh, way far away in the county!” James said, and he gave her a dig in the ribs.

“I mean, we tend to see each other only at weddings and funerals and such,” she said. She paused, considering. “And not even all of those. But I don’t know why, exactly.”

“Maybe there’s some deep dark secret in your family’s past,” James said.

“Right.”

“Maybe your uncle’s a Republican. Or your aunt belongs to a cult.”

“Oh, stop,” Serena said, and she laughed.

She liked sitting close to him this way—the armrest between them raised so that their bodies were lined up and touching. They had been going out for eight months now, but he still seemed blessedly new to her and not to be taken for granted.

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The train gave a preliminary lurch, and the last of the passengers settled hastily. "Good afternoon," a conductor said over the loudspeaker. "This is train number . . ." Serena took her ticket from her backpack. Outside her window, the darkened platform slid by and then they emerged into daylight; they picked up speed; crumbling concrete structures passed, every single inch of them splashed with graffiti that looked like shouting.

"So, what did you think of my folks?" James asked her.

"I liked them a lot! I really did." She let a pause develop. "Do you think they liked *me*?" she asked finally.

"Of course they did! How could they not?"

This wasn't as satisfying as it might have been. After a moment, she said, "What did they like about me?"

"Hmm?"

"I mean, did they say anything to you?"

"They didn't have a chance to. I could tell, though." She let another pause develop.

"You two board in Philly?" a conductor asked, looming over them.

"Yes, sir," James said. He reached for Serena's ticket and handed it to him along with his own.

"My mom went all out on the lunch," he said, once
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the conductor had moved on. "That chicken dish was her pride and joy. She serves it only to special company."

"Well, it was delicious," Serena said.

"And Dad asked in the car if I thought you'd be sticking around awhile."

"Sticking . . . oh," she said.

"I told him, 'We'll just have to see, won't we!'"

Another dig in the ribs, and a sly sideways glance.

Over dessert, his mother had hauled out the family album and shown Serena James's childhood photos. (He'd been a cute little thing.) James had grimaced apologetically at Serena but then had hung over the album himself, alert to all that was said about him. "He ate nothing but white foods until he was in his teens," his mother had said.

"You're exaggerating," James told her.

"It's a wonder he didn't get scurvy."

"He seems pretty healthy *now*," Serena had said.

And she and Dora had looked over at him and smiled.

Their train was speeding through a wasteland of scratchy yellow weeds and rust-stained kitchen sinks and tractor tires and blue plastic grocery bags, endless blue plastic grocery bags. "If you were a foreigner," Serena told James, "and you'd just landed in this country and you were taking the train south, you

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would say, "This is *America*? This is the Promised Land?"

"Well, you're a fine one to talk," James said. "It's not as if Baltimore's such a scenic paradise."

"No, I just meant . . . I was talking about the whole Amtrak route," Serena said. "The Northeast Corridor."

"Oh."

"I didn't realize it was a competition," she said in a joking tone.

"Oh, I know how uppity you Baltimoreans are," James said. "I know how you guys sort people out by what high school they attended. And then *marry* someone from *your* high school in the end."

Serena made a big show of looking to her right and left. "You see anyone from my high school sitting here next to me?" she asked.

"Not at the moment," he admitted.

"Well, then!"

She waited, curious to see what he would say next, but he didn't pursue the subject, and they traveled awhile in silence. Behind them, a woman with a soft, coaxing voice was talking on her phone. "So how are you *really*?" Serena heard her say. And then, after a pause, "Now, hon. Now, sweetie. Go ahead and tell me what's wrong. I can hear there's something."

"Just look at poor Nicholas," James said all of a

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sudden. "His dad moves him away from Baltimore, and so the rest of the family stops speaking to them."

"That's not *us* doing that!" Serena said. "It's them. It's Uncle David, really. My mom says she can't understand it. He used to be so outgoing when he was a little boy, she says. Aunt Alice was kind of a killjoy but Uncle David was one of those sunshine children, all happiness and glee. And now look: he left early from his own father's funeral."

Grandfather's funeral, Nicholas had called it: "Grandfather Garrett's funeral." But Pop-Pop had never been "Grandfather"! How could Nicholas not have known that?

"And then your aunt," James went on. "The farthest *she* moved was Baltimore County, but *oh*, no. *Oh*, no. Never going to speak to *her* again."

"Don't be silly; we speak to her all the time," Serena said, exaggerating only a little.

She didn't know why she felt so defensive. It was the stress, she supposed. The stress of meeting his parents.

When the subject of this trip had first come up, the idea was that they'd go for a weekend. James had talked about where they could get the best Philly cheesesteaks, and whether she'd like to visit the art museum. "You're going to love the Chamber of Horrors," he'd told her.

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“Chamber of Horrors?”

“That’s what my family calls my bedroom.”

“Oh. Ha.”

“Wall-to-wall Eagles posters. Sandwich crusts under my bed from 1998.”

“But . . . not to *stay* there, though, right?” she asked him.

“Stay?”

“I mean . . . not to sleep in the Chamber of Horrors overnight.”

“Hey. I was kidding,” he said. “Well, at least about the sandwich crusts. I believe my mom did come through with the vacuum cleaner once I’d moved out.”

“But I would be in the guest room,” she said, meaning it as a question.

“You *want* to be in the guest room?”

“Well, yes.”

“You don’t want to stay with me in my room?”

“Not in front of your parents,” she said.

“In front of my—” He stopped. “Look,” he said. “I guarantee they assume we’re sleeping together. You think they’d make a fuss about that?”

“I don’t care if they assume it or not. I just don’t like to be so public about it when I’m first being introduced to them.”

James had studied her a moment.

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"They do *have* a guest room, right?" Serena asked.

"Well, yes."

"So what's the problem?"

"It just seems kind of . . . artificial, saying good night in the upstairs hall and going our separate ways," he said.

"Well, I'm sorry," Serena said stiffly.

"Plus, I'll miss you! And Mom and Dad are going to be baffled. 'Good grief,' they'll say, 'do these kids not know about sex?'"

"Ssh!" Serena had said, because they'd been sitting in the library where anyone might be listening. She glanced around the room and then leaned across the table toward him. "We'll just go on a Sunday, then," she said in a lower voice.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"We'll say we're tied up on Saturdays and so we're coming in on a Sunday, and since I have a class Monday mornings we'll have to make it a day trip."

"Geez, Serena. You're saying we'd travel all that distance just for a few hours? Just to pretend we're not really so much of a couple after all?"

But that was what they'd ended up doing. Serena had gotten her way.

She knew she had disappointed him. He probably thought she was a hypocrite. But still, she felt she'd made the right decision.

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They were nearing Wilmington now. Scattered, abandoned-looking houses were gradually giving way to clean white office buildings. The conductor passed down the aisle collecting ticket stubs from the slots above certain seats.

"Take that thing your mother said about my brother-in-law," James said suddenly.

"What? What thing are you talking about?"

"Back when I first came to dinner, remember? I told your mother that one of my brothers-in-law came from Baltimore, and she said, 'Oh, what's his name?' and I said, 'Jacob Rosenbaum, but everyone calls him Jay.' 'Oh,' she said, 'Rosenbaum: he's probably from Pikesville. That's where most of the Jewish people live.'"

"Well, Mom's a little behind the times," Serena said.

James gave her a look.

"What?" she asked him. "Are you calling her anti-Semitic?"

"I'm just saying Baltimore can be kind of us-and-them, is all."

"You're still going on about *Baltimore*?"

"Just tossing it out there," he told her.

"Your brother-in-law's folks might certainly live in Pikesville," Serena said. "But they might also live in Cedarcroft, right next door to my parents.

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It's not as if our neighborhoods are *restricted* or anything."

"Oh, sure, I know that," James said hastily. "All I meant was, seems to me that Baltimoreans like to . . . categorize."

"Human beings like to categorize," Serena told him.

"Well, okay . . ."

She said, "How about what *your* mom said, when we were leaving?"

"Huh?"

"'Next time you should come for a weekend,' she said. 'Come for Easter weekend! All of us get together then, and you can see what a big family feels like.'"

Without intending to, Serena adopted a perky, chatty-housewife tone, although in fact that wasn't at all what Dora had sounded like. And James caught it; he sent her a quick, sharp glance. "What's wrong with that?" he asked her.

"It was just a little bit judgy, is all," Serena said. "Like, 'Poor, poor Serena. We're the ones with the *real* family. You're the poor little *pretend* family.'"

"She didn't say 'real family.' You just now told me she said '*big* family.'"

Serena didn't argue, but she let the corners of her mouth turn down.

"We're the ones with the wide-open family; you're

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the poor little narrow family”—that was what Dora had actually been saying, although Serena wasn't going to argue with James about it.

The trouble with wide-open families was, there was something very narrow about their attitude to *not*-open families.

The train was slowing now. “Wilmington!” the loudspeaker said. “Watch your step, ladies and gentlemen, and be sure to check around for . . .” Outside Serena's window, the sunlit platform glided into view, dotted with passengers looking so pleased and anticipatory that it seemed they believed that boarding this train would be all they had ever hoped for.

Serena was remembering the Christmas present her parents had given James. He had come to their house for dinner the day before he went home for the holidays, and when they sat down at the table a slender, flat, gift-wrapped box had been waiting on his empty plate. Serena had cringed, already embarrassed. Please let this not be something too personal, too . . . presuming! Even James had looked uncomfortable. “For me?” he'd asked. But when he opened it, Serena had been relieved. Inside was a pair of very bright orange socks. A black band ran around the top of each reading BALTIMORE ORIOLES, with a cartoon Orioles mascot at the center.

“Now that you live in Baltimore,” Serena's father

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explained, “we thought you should dress the part. But we didn’t want to get you in trouble with folks in Philly, so we chose a pair that hides the evidence as long as you keep your pants cuffs down.”

“Very considerate,” James had said, and he insisted on putting them on then and there and strutting shoeless around the dining room before they started eating.

He’d had no idea that in fact, neither one of Serena’s parents was a sports fan. They probably couldn’t tell you the name of a single Oriole—or Raven, either, for that matter. The sheer effort they must have expended in thinking up this gift for him just about broke Serena’s heart.

Next to her, James said, “Hey.”

She didn’t answer.

“Hey, Reenie.”

“What.”

“Are we going to start fighting about our relatives now?”

“*I’m* not fighting.”

The train gave a lurch and began rolling forward again. A man with a briefcase walked down the aisle looking lost. In the seat behind them, the woman with the coaxing voice said, “Sweetheart. Honey Pie. We’re going to bring this up with management on Tuesday. Hear what I’m saying?”

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"I can't believe she's still on the phone," Serena murmured to James.

It took him a moment, but then he answered. "I can't believe it's a business call," he murmured back. "Would you have guessed it?"

"Never."

"You can't tell *me* women in business behave the same as men."

"Now, now, let's not be sexist," she said with a laugh.

He reached over for her hand and laced his fingers through hers. "Face it," he told her, "we've both been under a strain. Right? Parents can be such a drag!"

"Tell me about it," she said.

They rode along in a comfortable silence awhile.

"Did you catch that thing my mom said about my beard?" he asked suddenly. "Talk about judgy."

"What thing?"

"When she was showing you the photo album. She gets to my high-school days and 'Here's James at his graduation,' she says. 'Doesn't he look nice? It was before he grew his beard.' She cannot let it go about my beard. She hates it."

"Well, she's a mother," Serena told him. "Mothers always hate beards."

"The first time I came home with it, freshman year

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in college, my dad offered me twenty bucks to shave it off. ‘You too?’ I asked him. ‘What is this?’ He said, ‘I personally have nothing against a beard, but your mother says she misses seeing your handsome face.’ ‘Fine,’ I told him, ‘let her pore over my old photos, if she wants to see my face.’”

“Well, you did look very attractive in your graduation picture,” Serena told him.

“But *you* don’t think I should shave my beard, do you?”

“No, no. I like your beard.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “I was glad to see the Before version, though.”

“How come?”

“Well, now I know what your face looks like.”

“You were worried what my face looks like?”

“Not *worried*, but . . . well, I’ve always thought that if, let’s say, I grew up and met the man I was going to marry and he happened to have a beard, I would ask him if he’d mind shaving it off one time before the wedding.”

“Shaving it off!”

“Just one time. Just for two little minutes so I could see his face, and then he could let it grow back again.”

James released her hand and drew away to give her a look.

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"What," she said.

"And how about if he said no?" he asked. "How about if he said, 'This is who I am: a guy with a beard. You can take me or you can leave me.'"

"But then if he . . ." She trailed off.

"Then if he what?" James asked.

"If he . . . turned out to have a weak chin or something . . ."

He went on looking at her.

"Well, *I* don't know!" she said. "I'd just want to find out what I was getting into, is all I'm saying."

"And if he had a weak chin you'd tell him, 'Oh, *I'm* sorry, it seems I can't marry you after all.'"

"I'm not saying I wouldn't still marry him; I'm saying I would go into the marriage *informed*, is all. I would know what I was dealing with."

James stared glumly at the back of the seat ahead of him. He made no move to take her hand again.

"Oh, *Jaaames*," Serena caroled softly.

No answer.

"James?"

He turned toward her abruptly, as if he'd come to some decision. "Ever since we started planning this trip," he said, "you've been putting up little . . . walls. Setting limits. No staying in the same room together; has to be on a Sunday . . . Four measly hours we were there! We spent more time traveling than

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visiting, pretty near! And I don't get to see my folks so very often, you know. I'm not like you, living in the same city with them and practically in the same neighborhood, dropping in on them whenever you need to run a load of laundry."

"Well, that's not *my* fault!"

As if she hadn't spoken, he said, "You know what I was thinking when we were riding up to Philly? I was thinking that once you'd met my parents, you'd decide we might as well stay over. We could take an early-morning train back in time for your class, you'd say, now that you'd seen they were okay."

"I already knew they'd be *okay*, James. I just felt—and besides, I didn't bring my toothbrush! Or my pajamas!"

He didn't so much as change expression.

"Well, next time," she promised him, after a pause.

"Fine," he said, and he drew his phone from his pocket to check the screen.

They were passing a stretch of the Chesapeake Bay now—a wide sheet of water, matte gray even in sunlight, with lone birds hunched motionless on posts sticking up here and there. The sight made Serena feel melancholy. Homesick, almost.

This was all because of her cousin, really. Running into him had sent a kind of jagged feeling down the center of her chest, a split between the two

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parts of her world. On the one side James's mother, so intimate and confiding; on the other side Nicholas, standing alone in the train station. It was like taking a glass bowl from a hot oven and plunging it into ice water: the snapping sound as it shattered.

"Could we ever maybe have a family reunion?" Serena had once asked as a child.

And her mother had said, "Hmm? A reunion? I suppose we could. Though it wouldn't be a very *big* reunion."

"Would Uncle David and them come?"

"Uncle David. Well. Possibly."

Nothing about that reply had sounded promising. Oh, what makes a family not work?

Maybe Uncle David was adopted and he was mad that no one had told him. Or he'd been written out of a will that had included both his sisters. (Even in her childhood, Serena read a lot of novels.) Or some sort of family argument had spun wildly out of control, the sort where outrageous remarks were made that a person couldn't forgive. That seemed the most plausible explanation. You can't think later what the argument was about, even, but you know that things will be changed forever after.

"Well," Serena had told her mother, "at least Aunt Alice might come."

"Maybe," Lily had said. "Although you know your

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aunt Alice. How she's always tut-tutting me whenever we get together."

Serena had given up.

The fact was, she reflected, that even when the Garretts did get together, it never seemed to take, so to speak.

Without moving, she slid her eyes in James's direction. He was reading a screenful of text. (He had the most extraordinary ability to read entire books on his phone.) Absentmindedly, he was chewing his lower lip.

Serena's best friend in high school had been a boy named Marcellus Avery. This wasn't a romance; it was more a kind of mutual aid society. Marcellus had weirdly white skin and very black hair, and everybody made fun of his name. And Serena weighed about ten pounds too much and could not for the life of her cope with any sort of ball—baseball, tennis ball, soccer ball, any sort at all—in a school where sports were paramount. At lunch they would sit together and talk about how shallow all their classmates were, and on weekends he would come to her house and they would watch foreign movies in her parents' TV room. Once, though, he had let his hand settle oh-so-casually next to her hand on the couch between them, and when she didn't move hers away he had leaned imperceptibly

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closer and planted a soft, shy kiss on her cheek. She still remembered the velvety feel of the fuzz above his upper lip. But nothing more had happened. In a moment they had drawn apart and stared fixedly at the TV again, and that was the end of that.

The funny thing was, though, that now Serena realized he had been absolutely beautiful to look at. His head had had the most perfect shape, like a marble statue's head, and for some reason it had always made her think of how much his mother must love him. She wondered where he was today. Probably snatched up in marriage by someone, she thought—some woman smart enough to recognize his worth. And here Serena sat, next to a boy who was no different from her classmates back in high school.

All she could think about was how long it would be before this train ride came to an end and she could be on her own again.