Spectators

My sister pokes me with the long end of her sundae spoon. Learn anything in school today, she asks, with a friendly smile in her eyes because her mouth can't yet. I move my head to answer but it's not a yes or no movement and I can't answer. My mother is out of it. They sit side by side across from me in the booth at Friendly's, my sister to my mother's right always. The waitress delivers our order without us having to order. It's the same every day.

Our sorrow is overwhelming.

One of us always come through. Usually it's my sister, Amy, because she's a doer, not a watcher. Her role has always been to entertain. She's still entertaining. It's just that no one can look at her anymore.

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Mom's not out of it today. You're studying Aristotle now, she says to Amy. Isn't that exciting! Remind me, what was he all about? But she doesn't wait for an answer, she doesn't look too

long at Amy even though from where she sits she can't see it. Which is why she always sits there. Isn't that wonderful to be learning all that Junie? she asks me. I did, she says, you will, and Amy is, right now. It's so exciting, don't you think Junie May? Your sister is doing so well, she's going to go so far, she'll be, what will she be, a scholar, a chemist, a. She stops. Because no matter what Amy becomes, she'll always be what she is. Burned. Damaged. Ugly. And a constant reminder of all that we've lost.

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Mom picks me up from school. Then we drive to the bus station and wait for Amy. We never know which bus she'll be on. We wait. Some days Mom gets out of the car, walks to the newspaper boxes, and reads the headlines. Then she walks back to the car. She doesn't talk to the other ladies -- it's not as if she doesn't know them, she does -- who drop off their maids and wait for their husbands to get off the bus from Manhattan. It's not that she's rude. She just can't chat anymore.

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The dream varies, but the outcome is always the same: Pete lives. In the first dream, Pete stays home and I go sailing with the rest of them. In the second dream, Pete stays home with

me. Everyone else is on the boat.

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It doesn't matter our moods, or whose grief is greatest. We always go to Friendly's after we pick up Amy. We always get ice cream, never a hamburger or fries or a grilled-cheese sandwich, which is what we should get because this is our dinner. But we're not hungry. We don't even enjoy the ice cream. We eat it because it has become a part of our ritual: the scrape of the bumper as we enter the parking lot, sliding into our places in the booth, waiting for our order to arrive without ordering. Sometimes the order gets mixed up at the table, and I eat Mom's hot fudge sundae while she eats my butterscotch crunch supreme. She doesn't notice the difference because she doesn't notice anything. She hasn't noticed how thin she's become, that her watch is always face down because her wrist has become too small for the band. She must eat sometimes because Winnie, our housekeeper, still makes her a bowl of tuna every day.

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In my mother's dream, we're all on the boat. Even Winnie.

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Amy flutters a napkin in front of my face. She doesn't say it, but what she's saying to me is I can't do it today. And Mom's out of it again, she's nodding in agreement to some conversation she's not having.

"Want to hear a question from my health test?" I ask loudly.

Amy smiles her half smile but in her eyes I can see the whole. She nods yes. She's happy to get a response from me. Anything is welcome.

"When does the heart rest?"

Amy looks confused, like it's a trick question. (It is.) She's not sure how to answer, and Mom's not listening.

"Between beats."

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At first, Winnie tried to bolster our spirits. She'd shake our beds and say, "Wake up my little sunshine girls," even though we weren't asleep and we were anything but sunny. She'd hum a pleasant tune as she helped Amy change the bandages. She'd pack a lunch for me big enough to feed Richard and Larry both. She'd usher me out the door with a light spank. Then one day she stopped -- the sunshine girls and the pleasant tune, the spank at the door. Because she missed them, too. I remember Dad taking the broom from her and using it as a microphone, crooning for her. All of a sudden she'd be in Larry's arms, dancing to Dad's croons. Richard would make a big fuss, cutting in.

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This is what Amy faces every day with her face. One side looks like a flame-broiled Whopper that's been taken from the grill too soon. The other is just as beautiful as before, white pink skin with freckles and her brown eyes with a light that even the Whopper hasn't extinguished. I think it would be better somehow if the burn covered her whole face, or somehow traversed it. Because men follow her -- she's that pretty -- they tap her on the shoulder and ask her if she'd like to grab a cup of coffee then gasp when she turns to answer.

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Mom was the ultimate spectator. She went to games laden with thermoses of soup or coffee, ice water or Gatorade. Rows of sandwiches lay under seat cushions and lap blankets and field glasses. She had spectating down to a science: she could read storm clouds, she knew the right number of socks to wear to an ice hockey rink.

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Today at Friendly's I watch Mom's eyes fill -- though she doesn't cry -- and I feel like I'm below deck again,

watching the water rise and fall against the portholes.

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In Amy's dream, her whole body is burned by the burning sail. But no one dies.

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We all lost, but it seems to me that Mom lost the most. Which is why it's okay for her to be out of it more often than Amy or I. I look at it in terms of numbers. Mom had 22 years with Dad, more if you count the time they dated, 21 with Richard, 19 with Larry, 14, Pete, that's 76 years of memories. I think of how bad I hurt and I think of the numbers, eleven years times four of them and that's cheating because I'm counting years I don't even remember.

Even though there was an odd number, there were always pairs in our house. Mom and Dad, of course, but other pairs, too, like me and Richard, the youngest and the oldest, or Larry and Richard because they were athletes, stars. Or Larry and Amy because they were like twins the way they looked. Or Amy and me because we were the only girls, or me and Pete because we were the youngest, born spectators. Despite the pairs, there was never an odd man out. Because someone was always out of the house, at school or at work, on a date, but most likely at one of any number of playing fields. Rinks, too. Later, stadiums. Because our family was made up of

athletes -- Dad, Richard, Larry, Amy -- and spectators -- Mom, Pete, me. Actually, it wasn't that strict a division. Pete was an athlete sometimes, Amy a spectator. They were the crossovers. Pete was a long-distance runner, so no one could really watch him, just the beginning and the end, or some point along the way. And Amy was the kind of spectator that never sat still, the one who received as much attention as the players. Because she was pretty, but also because she was always the one in the crowd screaming for a touchdown or the beer vendor, taking someone else's horn and yelling down the field to one of our brothers: Rip off their heads, Richard! Or she'd yell down to Dad, who always stood on the sidelines, never in the stands, even if he weren't coaching. Dad, she'd yell, get these guys going! He wouldn't hear her so she'd start a chant in the crowd: Rich-ie, Rich-ie, Rich-ie. My father always went by that name. A grown man, Richie.

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I was alone two days. Two days alone in that big house. Winnie wasn't there. Monday was her day off. And no one was there to pick her up at the station on Tuesday.

I went to school. It seemed the logical thing to do. I wasn't sick. I loved school. I walked to school that first day same as I always did. Pete would have walked in the opposite direction because he had just started high school. Pete and I were the only kids left at home. Richard and Larry were at the

University of Pennsylvania. Amy had started at Barnard two weeks earlier.

Richard and Larry were home that weekend because of the Columbia-Penn game. Richard was the quarterback, Larry the tailback. They were stars. Just like Daddy, Mom said smiling. It's a beautiful day, she said, looking out from the stands to the Hudson River. We should go for a sail tomorrow, if the weather holds up.

It was the second Sunday of September. It was a beautiful day. We were all going sailing. Then Amy backed out because Frank Lessing had come up for the weekend, and they had a date. Mom had forgotten about the appointment with the new interior decorator. I was swimming at Kim Trables' house, but only until we were supposed to leave. I asked Larry to come get me, but he must have forgotten. When I got home I was mad. I wanted to go, too, I said to my mother. She looked at her watch and shook her head: I'd take you down but they left an hour ago, she said. They're out on the water by now. I went back to Kim's.

When I came home a few hours later there was a note from Amy: she and Mom had gone down to the boat basin to get the guys, then they were driving into the city to drop her off at school, and put Richard and Larry on the train to Philadelphia. Daddy and Pete would come by for me and we'd all go for hot dogs at Callahan's.

The longer they didn't come home the longer I stayed up. I kept the television on. I ate an entire bag of Wise potato chips by myself.

I woke up in front of the television set, which was still on. That was the first moment I thought something might be wrong. No one had led me up to bed.

I dressed for school and left the house. I got caught up in square roots. I ate all of Kim Trables' sandwich. I discussed the difference between a tailback and a running back with my male classmates. At recess, I played soccer with the might and fury of my brothers, who were stars.

I walked home after school fully expecting to see the car in the driveway and Winnie sweeping the front steps. I saw neither. I pushed open the door. No one, still. I turned on the television and waited.

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I woke up in front of the TV, again. I dressed and walked to school. I sat at my desk. I stared at the long cardboard strip taped to the top of my desk, with my name in fancy calligraphic letters, JUNE MAY. I heard the heels of my teacher's shoes approaching. I looked up at her, and slipped out of my chair. I stood against the smooth closet door. As she came closer, I sunk so I was squatting and looking straight at her nyloned knee. As she leaned over I sunk lower and covered my face with my crossed arms.

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If my mother had to choose, she would go first. Then my father. Then Richard, Larry, Amy, Pete, and me. She would be diplomatic. Then again, maybe she'd reverse it. Maybe I'd be the first of the kids to go, then Pete, Amy, and so on. In a way, it would be better. Richard would be more of a help than I am.

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Our waitress is gone. We have to order. The new girl, the one who will have to take our order, was Larry's girlfriend. You can tell she doesn't want to take our order. But she's new, what's she supposed to say to her supervisor? That she can't take our order because we're too sad? So she comes over. She tugs at her too-tight uniform. Wisps of her golden hair curl at her neck, and at her temples. You can see why Larry liked her. She stands ready to take our order but she hasn't asked us what we want. And we can't volunteer that information. Mom is staring out the window and tugging on the one earring she's wearing. Amy is looking straight ahead, her good side flushed red. Her bad side is always red. I should order for us but all I can think is that Larry kissed this girl. I'm twelve now, I know what goes on. My bedroom looks out on the driveway. I know these things.

Amy orders for us without looking at the girl, looking instead at me. The light in her eyes is like the light that flashes from the spatula when someone flips a burger. They must

have been friends, I decide, because Larry and Amy did everything together. Amy finishes ordering, but never looks at the girl, which doesn't matter because the girl can't look at Amy.

The order arrives. Larry's girl places the dishes in front of us, none of us caring who gets what. She puts down the last dish, in front of me, and as she turns, I hear a strange sound coming from her, a kind of cry cut short. I slip my spoon into Amy's mint chocolate chip sundae and look up at Mom, who's nodding at the wall. Amy's hands shake as she unfolds her napkin.

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I was named for my grandmothers, June and May, both of whom died the year I was born. My mother loves my name. It makes her happy. The sound of it, she used to say. May, June, July. Lovely months.

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For a few days, Mom seemed to be back for good. She noticed the down slipping out of the tear in her parka, and at the bus station she seemed like all the other mothers, talking for awhile to Mrs. Trables, probably telling her about Amy winning the chemistry award.

But today, Mom's out of it again, she's hasn't heard the story I've been telling them, about the battle brewing over our

class trip: the U.S.S. Ling vs. the Statue of Liberty. Amy is out of it too, the light in her eyes barely lit. I guess there's been a repeat of the man tapping her shoulder, then gasping. But it could be something else. Later I find out it is. But right now, as we sit in the booth at Friendly's, my mother and my sister side by side opposite me, Amy to my mother's right always, I wonder if our grief would be any less if fewer had died. Let's say Pete is still with us. Four of us, three of them. Would we be any less sad? Would we be even a little bit hungry? Would we be able to have a conversation? I don't think so. In fact, I think it would be worse. There would be more of us grieving.

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I was presumed dead. They figured I was with Pete, under the water. The ones who'd burned they had. And Mom and Amy were in the hospital, unconscious. We were a family that did things together, so it was a logical assumption, that all of us were there at the dock as my father steered our sailboat to its mooring while Richard and Larry fought over the last beer and Pete stood at the bow, fending off and throwing Amy a line, the motorboat crashing fast into our boat, then exploding. Pete flew off, hitting his head on a mast or a boat or a buoy, dead before he drowned. The rest burned.

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As bad as it is, I don't think Amy wishes she were dead. Because of us. We need her, and she knows that. It would be too much between two. Three is a good number. One of us always comes through, with a question or a story from school. As I said, usually it's Amy. But that's because it was always her role to entertain. We were the audience. And now we need her more than ever. (She needs us, too.)

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The phone rings one night after we come in from Friendly's. The sound of the phone ringing is absolutely foreign to us now. It rumbles like the stirrings of a volcanic eruption, foreign indeed on a hillside in Tenafly. Because no one calls anymore. You have to understand, there used to be seven people living here, three of whom were very popular teenagers. Two of the popular three are gone, and the third does not get calls. Amy doesn't make them, either.

The fellow on the phone doesn't know how bad it is. He liked her in high school, but he wasn't able to steal her from Frank Lessing. Where's Frank Lessing now? Only as far as Princeton, but too far to come up on weekends. This fellow must have asked his mother, he must have said, how badly burned could she be? One side of her face destroyed, his mother must have said. The other half? he probably asked. Same as before, she would have

said, as beautiful as ever.

And that must have been enough for him. Then again, maybe he would have called if her whole face were burned. There are people like that. They just love the person.

Tom comes to our house. Not the same night as the phone ringing like a volcanic eruption. Not that night when Amy said no so many times and cried and finally said “You don't understand, I'm a freak.”

The night he comes to our house my mother graciously answers the door. She leads him into the den where I'm watching television. In deference to Amy I don't look at him. When Amy walks down the stairs and into the den she doesn't look at him either. She doesn't look at anyone anymore because she can't stand to see what she sees people seeing. Who can blame her? The light in her eyes isn't out but it may as well be because she doesn't look at you so you can't see it, so, in a way, the light is out.

But he doesn't gasp. And this I watch. He walks over to her, and stands in front of her, his hands deep in his pockets, until she looks at him. “Are you ready?” he asks quietly, his shoulders rising in a kind of shrug. “The show starts in ten minutes,” he says.

Amy turns to walk out of the room, and he follows her. I hear the door open, then close, and that's when I cry.

It's the first time I really cry, long and hard and hot. I cry so hard I shake, I cry so hard I don't hear my mother walk into the room, don't feel her sit down next to me. I do feel her

gathering me in her arms, as though she would carry me up to bed. But we don't go anywhere. She just holds me as I choke in breaths of air, crying like I never have and never will. Mom cries too.