

JARED SAMPSON'S MOM

Dallas Woodburn

She died in a car crash yesterday. She was driving down Hawthorne, past the strip mall with the Benihana's, when her '05 Corolla unaccountably careened over the center meridian and into oncoming traffic.

"I just thought you should know, sweetheart," my mother says. My cell phone feels hot against my ear. "I know you and Jared were never close, but you did go all through school together. And Nanette was such a lovely woman." My mother sighs loudly into the phone. "Only fifty-three. So young. I just can't believe it."

"Me neither."

"Maybe you could send Jared a message on that bookface thing."

I'm not Facebook friends with Jared Sampson. I haven't really spoken to

Jared since eighth grade, when I asked him to dance at the semi-formal and he said, “Um—no thanks, I’m okay.” That was the first time I wore mascara, and Jared was the first boy I cried over in a musty, cramped bathroom stall, and I unknowingly wiped mascara-tears all over the front of my new white dress.

“Yeah, Mom,” I say now. “I’ll do that.”

“If I wear this bra, do I have to wear the matching panties?” Jasmine stomps into the living room and faces us, hands on hips, posing. She is always posing. Her dark red hair hangs in loose wet ropes down her shower-damp back and shoulders. She is wearing a black bra and black panties, both edged in red lace.

Sasha and I blink at her from the couch. “I like the matching,” Sasha says. “But I wouldn’t feel constrained. It’s not like Zack’s gonna notice, he’ll be so busy tearing them off you.”

I cross my legs and pull my phone from the front pocket of my jeans. 6:37. Zero missed calls. I haven’t heard from Scott all day.

“If you want to wear the bra,” Sasha continues, “it doesn’t mean you *have* to wear the matching panties.”

“What do you think, Grace?” Jasmine asks.

“What?” They’re both looking at me. “Oh,” I say, “I’ve never owned

matching underwear.” It’s true. I get my bras on discount from Macy’s and my underwear at the Jockey outlet store.

“This is my only matching set,” Jasmine says. “Oh, and the pink ones. But I never wear them.” She stretches her arms above her head and looks down at her chest. “I like this bra, but I want to wear my zebra panties.”

“Oooh, yes, do it,” Sasha says, already turning back to the fabric in her lap. She is sewing red sequins one-by-one onto a white T-shirt. Watching her jab the needle through the heart of a sequin and pull the thread taut, I think of Jared Sampson and the way his heart must have constricted when he heard about the accident.

“You know,” I say, pushing myself up off the worn couch cushion. “I’m sure you can buy a shirt like that online. You don’t have to go through so much trouble.”

“It wouldn’t be the same,” she says without looking up.

Sequins spill across the cushion beside her. So many pieces. So much red. Sasha is sewing the sequins in a spiral unwinding outward from the center. She will keep sewing until the entire shirt is covered. The red catches the light and holds it close.

Jared Sampson’s mom was driving home from picking up nasal decongestant at the drugstore. She had a cold; she was feeling drowsy. She

closed her eyes for only a moment and then—

Jared Sampson's mom was driving home from visiting Jared's grandmother at the nursing home. She was heading down Hawthorne, past the strip mall with the Benihana's, when her cell phone rang. She reached down and fumbled through her purse, taking her eyes off the road for only a moment, and then—

Jared Sampson's mom was driving home from work, where she'd been chewed out by her boss for being late with the expense reports. Her husband had called to say he would not be home for dinner, again; she was fairly certain he was having an affair. She was lonely and tired and felt the beginnings of a migraine slowly building behind her eyes. If she turned the wheel a little to the right, she thought for a moment, then a hard sudden jerk to the left, and then—

The semi-formal was held the last Wednesday of the school year. There was a stalemate on the social committee between the themes "Loveboat" and "Tarzan," so the gym was decorated with pink and red hearts and green streamers. Cut-out fish swam across the walls alongside butcher-paper tigers and gorillas. I wore my new white dress with the pearl buttons down the front and my hair pinned back in a white satin barrette. Henrietta had pilfered mascara from her mother's makeup bag and we brushed it on our

lashes in the bathroom before the dance. I had never felt so grown-up.

Henrietta and I danced the Macarena and the Electric Slide towards the front entrance to the gym; Jared and his friends stood at the back by the basketball hoop, talking instead of dancing. Time whirled past. Then the opening notes of an 'N Sync love ballad floated from the speakers. Within moments, couples around us were pairing off, hesitantly touching each other from an arm's length away, feet shuffling in a tight circle.

"Grace," Henrietta nudged me. "You should ask Jared to dance."

"Oh," I said. "I don't know..."

"It's the last dance of the year. What do you have to lose?"

"I can't. I'm too nervous."

"Just do it, Grace."

The chorus swelled as I began walking in Jared's direction, telling myself I could always change my mind and turn back. But I didn't. I wiped my sweaty palms on my dress and gently touched Jared's arm. He turned.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey."

"Do you, um, wanna dance?" The question hovered in the air between us. Jared glanced at his friends, then back at me.

"Um—no thanks, I'm okay," Jared said, running a hand through his blonde bowl cut. I felt like an egg yolk slipping out of its cracked shell. I

slinked through the crowd of dancing bodies and hurled myself into the girls bathroom, where I plopped down on a toilet seat and sobbed. Minutes passed, I'm not sure how many, when the bathroom door opened and footsteps came in. I pulled my knees up onto the toilet and tried to quiet my sniffles, but there was a knock on my stall door.

"Are you okay in there?" a woman's voice said.

"I'm fine," I choked out.

"You don't sound fine."

"It's not a big deal."

"Here. At least let me give you a tissue."

I waited in silence, hoping she would leave, but she knocked again. "Please, honey, open up." I wiped my eyes and undid the lock.

In front of me stood Jared Sampson's mom, with her red lipstick, short blonde perm and flower-patterned capri pants. She wore a "Parent Chaperone" sticker with her name written out in green marker. Seeing her, I crumpled anew into fresh tears. "Honey, it's okay," Mrs. Sampson said. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"I asked a boy to dance," I sniffled, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. "And he said, 'No, thanks.'"

"Oh, sweetheart." She handed me a tissue from her purse. "I can't tell you how many times I heard 'No, thanks' growing up."

“You did?”

“Of course! Boys can be stupid at your age. All they care about is looking cool—and dancing isn’t cool to them.”

“I wish I hadn’t asked him.”

“Don’t say that—you should be proud of yourself.” Jared Sampson’s mom squeezed my hand. “You were brave, and this boy was silly. His loss. So move on. You don’t ever have to talk to him again.”

I have a toothache and my ear is itching, one of those deep inner-ear itches that you try to gouge out with a Q-tip but even that doesn’t help. My bedroom window is open. The sounds outside, everyday neighborhood sounds—a burst of rap music, a car rumbling down the street, a woman pleading with her dog, “C’mon Henry, that’s a good boy, you have to go potty, don’t you?”—feel closer than usual. Even the wind blows more intensely, a rush of air like a sharp exhalation of breath. The room is cold. I could close the window, but then it would get stuffy.

I don’t know where my roommates are. The kitchen light wavers, then blinks on. The bag of salad I bought last week is already old and mulchy, the lettuce limp, the dressing sour. I’ll probably end up ordering a pizza for dinner, or maybe I’ll just consume the half-empty package of Oreos lurking in the pantry. *If I eat them all now*, I think, grabbing the package off the shelf, *I*

won't be tempted to eat them later.

Jasmine comes home as I'm demolishing the final row. "Oooh, Oreos!" she shrieks. "Can I have one?"

I hold the tray out to her. She takes three.

"How was your date last night?" I ask.

"It was fun," she says, plopping down beside me on the couch. "We went to dinner—he paid—and then to a movie—he paid—and then he took me back to his place. He has a really nice TV in his room." Her cell phone rings, Justin Timberlake crooning a love ballad. Jasmine rummages in her oversized leather purse and pulls out her phone. She flips it open. "Hi babydoll! I'm so sorry I didn't call last night—I was out on a date with Zack."

She stands up and blows me a kiss before disappearing down the hall to her room. I hear her say, "It was okay, but he's not as fit as you are..." as the bedroom door clicks shut.

Jasmine has been dating her "babydoll" Anthony long-distance for three years. He goes to Ohio State, where they start classes a few weeks after we do, so he always drives down to help Jasmine move in and stays at our place for a week before flying out to Columbus. Usually during these visits Jasmine and Anthony seem almost like one person, curled up on the couch together watching TV, holding hands to walk to the kitchen for a glass of water. But on Anthony's last visit they moved through the apartment on separate

tracks. Anthony spent hours alone in Jasmine's room, surfing the Internet, while Jasmine grabbed coffee with friends from her yoga class. On the morning Anthony left for Ohio, they ate bowls of cereal in different rooms, and Jasmine came back from the airport singing the new Fergie song instead of fighting her tears.

Still, I was surprised to log onto Facebook a week later and see Jasmine listed as "Single."

"I love Anthony," she said when I asked her. "I just want to live the single life for a bit."

"So you guys broke up?"

"Well, not really. Just on Facebook. You need to be single to get dates."

"Isn't that kind of lying?"

"No. I mean, Zack knows I'm only into casual dating."

"What if he wants to get serious?"

"Then I'll end it with him. I told you, Anthony's the man I want to marry. I just want to sleep with other people in the meantime, while I'm still young."

"I can't believe Anthony's okay with this," I said.

"Why wouldn't he be? He gets to live the single life, too. We're both allowed to date three other people, and then at Winter Break we'll reassess."

I'm gonna miss you so much, Scott.

I know. But we just gotta make it to Winter Break. Then we'll have three weeks together.

Yeah.

Don't worry. We can make it work, Grace. I know we can.

"Besides," Jasmine continued, "there's this girl at school Anthony's really good friends with. Melissa. He talks about her all the time. I've always been suspicious there's something between them."

"Maybe they're just friends."

"Oh Grace, you're so naive sometimes."

"People can just be friends."

"Well, Anthony said he'll probably make a move on Melissa now."

"Aren't you—" I squeezed my fingers. My hands felt cold. "Isn't there a little part of you that's worried?"

Jasmine tugged out her ponytail. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders like a shampoo commercial. "No," she said, smiling radiantly. "I know he loves me best."

Scott, do you love me best?

Of course I do. I love you.

But best? Do you love me best? Out of everyone?

Grace, I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you. How many times do I

have to say it?

Now, I eat the final Oreo and crumple the empty wrapper in my fist. Sometimes I miss him so much it becomes a physical pressure building behind my eyes.

He answers on the second ring. “Hey Grace, can I call you back? I’m at Becky’s.”

I can hear Becky’s voice in the background, but I can’t make out what she’s saying.

“Sure,” I say. “That’s fine—okay, bye.”

The driver’s door crushed like a beer can. The windshield a sickening spider web of broken glass. Blood. Her body slumped lifeless against the steering wheel.

I’m having trouble sleeping.

Scott has a paper due tomorrow. Eight pages. Twenty citations. It is 1:14 a.m.

“So what’s your thesis statement?” I ask, pressing the phone against my ear, as if to get closer to him. “Maybe if you talk things through, it’ll help clear your head.”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“Just try. What’s your thesis?”

“I mean I don’t have one yet.”

“You don’t have a thesis?” 1:15 a.m. The paper is due in less than eight hours. Supposedly, he’s been working on it all afternoon.

“I just—I’m having trouble focusing,” he says. “I know what I want to say, I’m just having trouble saying it.”

“You’re a brilliant writer, Scott.” And he is. He once wrote a short story from the perspective of the Mississippi River that had me in tears. “You’re just overthinking. You’re making this too big a deal.”

“I know.” His tone makes me think of fallen leaves mushed in the gutter. “I just—every sentence I write, I see everything wrong with it. All the ways they can rip my argument apart.”

“But that’s how it is with writing,” I say, shifting the phone to my other ear. “Every point you make can always be argued. You’re gonna drive yourself crazy trying to search for some airtight argument that doesn’t exist.”

“You’re right, you’re right. I need to buckle down and *do it*.” He sighs. “I’m never gonna get it done in time.”

“Yes you will. You have to. You have to turn in *something*.”

“You’re right.” He pauses. I watch the clock on the wall tick seconds away. One, two, three. “But, you know,” he says, “if I don’t turn it in, I’ll still

be okay. If I do all the other work in the class. It's not like I'm gonna flunk."

"Scott—"

"I'm not gonna flunk, Grace."

"Why don't you just try talking it out to me? Please. I can help."

"It's no use—it's not going anywhere. I didn't give myself enough time. And I got the book late. Remember, how the mail took forever to bring it? So I'm behind on the readings..."

Frustration burns hotly in my chest. "Maybe if you weren't hanging out with Becky all the time," I hear myself saying, "you would have it done."

His voice hardens. "What? What does Becky have to do with anything?"

"You've been spending so much time with her lately. It seems like every time I call, you're with her."

"Grace, I know you're jealous of Becky, but seriously—"

"I'm not jealous!"

"—it's kind of getting ridiculous. She's my friend, okay? You're my girlfriend. She's the one who should be jealous of you."

I know this is supposed to reassure me, but it doesn't. I pick at a scab on my arm and don't say anything.

"I mean," he continues, "it's not like you're around for me to hang out with."

"You act like that's my fault."

“It’s not your fault. It’s not anyone’s fault. It is what it is.”

Words fill my throat like grains of rice expanding in water. So many words that I can’t get a single one out.

“Anyway, I’m gonna try, okay?” Scott sighs. “But I just don’t think I’m gonna finish this paper in time.”

I have never felt farther from him. “Scott,” I whisper. “I don’t know if I can do this anymore.”

“Grace?” he says after a moment. “Hello? Grace? You still there?”

I met Scott at summer camp last year. We were both counselors for the third graders, which meant we were on the same schedule for practically everything—hiking, horseback riding, swimming in the lake. Trying to keep track of sugar-crazed nine-year-olds all day made Scott and me inseparable. We had secret nicknames for all our campers and swapped mealtime shifts to give each other nap breaks. I had only known him four days when he kissed me, the two of us wedged in the supply closet looking for extra Boondoggle lanyard for the campers to make key chains during arts and crafts. A week later, we were officially dating. And at the end of the summer, Scott told me he loved me.

“There’s no one else I want to be with,” he said as we walked hand-in-hand around the lake. All the campers had gone home; this last week was

spent cleaning out the cabins and preparing the camp for its winter hibernation. "I really think we can make long-distance work."

"I do, too," I said. Looking back, I'm not sure I fully believed the words as they came from my lips, but I did love him, as wholly and deeply as you can love someone you've only known in an isolated camp-world for nine weeks. To my summer-self, armed with that steady, untested love, L.A. and Denver didn't seem far apart at all.

Then Scott went to school and met Becky in his history class. Jasmine and Anthony started dating other people. Jared Sampson's mom died in a car crash. Nothing seems certain anymore.

Henrietta calls me. She goes by Henri now. We were good friends all through middle school and high school, but college changes people. It changed Henrietta. She smokes and drinks and occasionally leaves messages on my cell phone at 4 a.m. on random weeknights. I usually can't hear much other than shouting and thumping bass music, though sometimes Henrietta will shout into the phone, "I loooove you, Grace! You're awesome! Don't ever change! Okay? Okay? Call me! I loooooove you!"

One time I did call her, but she didn't remember leaving the message. "I said that?" she laughed. "I was so wasted last night, my god."

This time she's calling because she heard about Jared Sampson's mom.

“Can you believe it, Grace? I can’t believe it.”

“Me neither.”

“She was such a nice lady. Remember that time in middle school when she brought in cookies for everyone? She must have baked three-hundred snickerdoodles. It was during that week of standardized testing. She knew we all could use a cookie.”

“Oh, yeah. I’d forgotten about that.”

“Poor Jared. Can you imagine? I can’t imagine. Have you talked to him?”

“Me? No.” My heart pounds. “Why would I talk to him?”

“Oh, I dunno. Hey, I went home last weekend for my mom’s birthday, and guess who I ran into?”

“Ummm...”

“You’ll never guess.”

“Okay, who?”

“Actually, I don’t even remember his name! That annoying nerdy kid—he’d play hackey-sack by himself in the corner of the caf? Eugene?”

“Eric.”

“Anyway, I saw him at the grocery store, but I just ducked my head and walked by—didn’t want to get caught in some awkward conversation, you know? Ha, remember, if you went up to him he’d always try to lecture you about European history or some crazy shit?”

“He wasn’t that bad. I heard he’s going to Yale now.”

The line hums quietly. “Give me a minute!” she shrieks to someone.

“Hey Grace,” she says. “Are you going to our high school reunion?”

“What?”

“When we have our high school reunion, will you go with me?”

“Um, yeah—sure. But it’s not for a while, right? I mean—”

“God, I think about myself back then and it makes me cringe. I wish I could go back to high school the way I am now. I could win Prom Queen.”

“Yeah, I bet you could.”

I have a four-year-old voice mail saved on my cell phone. Not anything special, really—high-school Henrietta calling to see how I was feeling. I was sick with the flu and missed three days of school. She went to all my classes and picked up my homework assignments and lent me season five of *Friends* on DVD. “Get well soon, Grace,” high-school Henrietta says in the voice mail. “I missed you sooo much today. School totally sucks without you.” When we first went away to college, I saved it on my phone so I could listen to Henrietta’s voice in case I was ever really homesick and couldn’t get a hold of her. Now, I listen to it sometimes, but only when I’m feeling particularly nostalgic. That girl on the voice-mail is all I have left of my best friend.

“I talked to Henrietta today.”

“Who’s Henrietta?” Scott asks.

“My friend from high school. I’ve told you about her.”

“Sorry. Her name doesn’t ring a bell.”

“I know I’ve mentioned her.”

“Are we really gonna argue about this, Grace?” Scott sighs. I can hear muffled sounds in the background, but it’s probably just the TV. “Okay, you told me and I forgot. My plate’s been pretty full lately, you know.”

My gut sinks, as it always does when his voice congeals to aloofness.

“Never mind,” I say.

“Babe, c’mon, don’t be this way. Finish your story.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Finish your story, Grace. Please.”

“It’s nothing—she just called because of a kid we went to school with.

His mom died last week.”

Something clatters in the background. “Shit,” Scott says.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I dropped a glass.”

“Did it break?”

“Yeah, there’s glass everywhere.”

“Be careful.”

“Hold on a sec,” he says. I count to twelve. “Sorry, I’m back. So what

were you saying? Your friend's mom died?"

I wish I hadn't told him. "Not a friend, really. This boy from my hometown who I went to school with. We weren't friends or anything—I haven't talked to him in years—"

"How'd his mom die?"

"Car crash."

"That sucks," Scott says.

"I know."

Silence. We have run out of words. I want to ask Scott if I've changed since the summer. I want to ask if he still loves me. I want to ask if he feels like something is wrong, like the world is slowly drifting apart, tugging us all away from each other.

"When can I come visit?" I ask. We spent many midnight hours at summer camp, huddled on the damp ground by the mist-shrouded lake, dreaming about visiting each other at school. "You feel so far away."

"I have to check my work schedule," he says. "I'll let you know, okay?"

Jared Sampson is smiling in his Facebook picture. I'm not sure I would recognize him if he wasn't smiling. His blonde hair is now light brown and cut short; he wears a UCSB hooded sweatshirt and holds a can of BudLite. But his smile is the same smile that gave me butterflies in eighth grade.

I click on the “Send a Message” button. *Dear Jared*, I write, then immediately press delete. Too formal.

Hi Jared, I write. Better.

I am so, so sorry about your mom. I’m thinking of you.

If you need anything, let me know.

– Grace

I leave the message window up on my computer screen. I don’t click send. I don’t press delete. I just let it stay there, open and unchanging. Waiting for me to do something.

I dream that Jared Sampson’s mom and I are at a tea party. I’m so happy to see her that I start to cry. She thinks I’m crying over something else. “Honey,” she says, “it’s okay. It’s his loss.” She pours me tea and hands me a scone. I feel better. But then I realize we’re sitting in the bottom of an empty pool. The concrete walls rise up all around us. We’re in the deep end. Slowly, the pool fills. Water soaks into my shoes, my socks, the cuffs of my jeans. I bite into the scone, but it’s turned to plastic. The water rises past my knees, my hips. Jared Sampson’s mom smiles at me, buttering a plastic muffin. “Don’t worry, Grace,” she says. “You don’t ever have to talk to that boy again.” The water is at my shoulders now. I close my eyes. It rises up past my nose, my forehead. It soaks my hair. I’m going to drown.

I wake up gasping for breath.

Moments later, Sasha prances into my room.

“Grace!” she shrieks. “You’re awake!”

“Good morning.” I rub a bit of sleep from the corner of my eye.

“How do you like it?”

“Like what?”

“My shirt! I just now finished it!” She raises her arms and turns from side to side. Her torso is a glittering sea of red.

“It’s very...eye-catching,” I say. In the dream, Jared Sampson’s mom was wearing red lipstick. It outlined her smile like boldfaced type.

“Hey!” Jasmine lounges against the doorframe. “Cute shirt, Sash. Can I borrow it for my date on Friday?”

You look good in red, Grace. You should wear it more.

I don’t know, Scott. It’s not really my color. Too flashy.

Red’s not flashy—it’s vibrant.

There’s one picture of Becky on Facebook that I really hate. She’s with Scott, of course. They’re standing very close together. He has his arm around her, and she’s wearing a red dress.

I dial Scott’s number and he answers. “Listen, Scott,” I say. “I don’t think things are working out.” He cries and begs me to stay with him, but I remain

steadfast. "I know it's hard, but I really think it's for the best—"

I dial Scott's number and he answers. "Listen, Scott," I say. "This long-distance thing is just too hard." He cries and promises to try harder. He swears we can make it work. He wants me to come visit next weekend. "I don't know," I say. "I'll have to think about it—"

I dial Scott's number and he answers. "Listen, Scott," I say. "I know you're cheating on me with Becky." He cries and admits to everything. He says it was a stupid mistake. He's not seeing Becky ever again. "You, Grace," he says. "You're the one I love best—"

I dial Scott's number. He doesn't answer.

In middle school, Jared Sampson and I rode the same bus. One day in eighth grade rainclouds called a conference between fifth and sixth period, and by the end of the day the gutters were rivers. My hair was drenched walking from my locker to the bus. At my stop I climbed down the steep bus steps, gripping the railing so I wouldn't slip. Jared Sampson clambered down right behind me.

I turned and waved. "Bye, Jared!" I said, heart pounding. Before he could respond (or not respond) I ducked my head into the rain and resigned myself for a cold, wet walk up the hill to my house.

I hadn't trekked half a block when a green minivan with wood paneling

pulled up beside me. Jared Sampson's mom rolled down the window.

"Grace, honey," she said. "Isn't your mom or dad picking you up?"

"They're at work," I said.

"Oh, sweetheart. Get in. We'll drive you home. Jared, open the door for her."

Eighth-grade Jared wore cargo shorts with lots of pockets. I thought the way his hair curled over the back collar of his shirt was cute. He had a quiet way about him. When he smiled at me, I felt a personal sense of accomplishment.

Jared heaved open the minivan door. I climbed in and slammed it shut. The radio was tuned to a classical station. Jared's younger brother lounged in the back, engrossed in his Gameboy. Jared slouched in the middle row: a bench seat, with only room for two.

"You're half-soaked already," Mrs. Sampson said. "I've got the heater on high. Jared, make room for Grace." He drew his knees together. I plopped down beside him, slinging my bulging backpack on the floor next to my feet.

"Now Grace, remind me what street you live on?"

"Hayward. Keep going up this street and take the fourth left."

The minivan lurched forward. "Buckle up, kids!"

Jared moved his arm out of the way so I could snap in my buckle. We

were sitting very close. I was acutely aware of Jared's breathing, his boy smell, his right knee inches from my left. In that moment, life was limitless. I wished I could stay in that minivan forever, warm and out of the rain, sitting beside Jared Sampson on that narrow bench seat. At one point, as we turned a corner, his body leaned my way and our knees and shoulders touched. I wanted us to just keep driving—past my house, past my street, past my neighborhood, going around lots of turns. I didn't know where we'd end up. But Jared Sampson's mom was driving, so I felt safe.

Dallas Woodburn is the author of two collections of short stories and editor of *Dancing with the Pen: a collection of today's best youth writing*. Her short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the Dzanc Books "Best of the Web" anthology and has appeared in many publications including *Monkeybicycle*, *Arcadia Journal*, and *Diverse Voices Quarterly*. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Fiction from Purdue University, where she also teaches and serves as Assistant Fiction Editor of *Sycamore Review*.