

Kirsten knew it was her Uncle Tim on the phone before she looked at the screen. The thin music of her ringtone began as she was pushing open the door to her apartment, and she answered the call while she hung her purse on the door handle and kicked off her heels.

“Hello?” she said, settling onto her couch, bare feet on the coffee table. Tim had taken to calling every Thursday that summer, his Missouri phone number blinking onto her iPhone screen just as she returned from her packed daily schedule of photo shoots. And from the whirl of New York City, she’d answer him, pressing the calm background sound of her birthplace to her ear.

“Hi, Kirsten, it’s me,” Tim said.

“I know, Uncle Tim,” Kirsten said.

“I was just talking to your mother,” Tim said. “And I thought I’d call to check in. She worries about you living alone in the city, but she said you won’t let her call more than twice a week.” This wasn’t a lie. He had been on the phone with Clare that afternoon, in between house showings, while she scurried through errands, forming tentative plans to meet up at the beach in late August. But he knew that even if Clare hadn’t said anything, he probably would have called Kirsten anyway. He felt bad bothering her, but after work, right at 6:30, his suburban house offered only silence while the neighbor kids ran zigzags in the square backyards, shrieking as they played tag and football before dinner. His friends were sitting down to eat with their families, setting the final dishes on the table and retrieving their young kids from the corners of their house. His parents, a few suburbs over, were together for their nightly meal, and Clare, in Connecticut, would be eating with her fiancée.

So once a week, he gave in and called the one other person he knew would be coming home to empty rooms. He knew his niece would answer him, dutifully, never letting the annoyance or pity slip into her voice. Tim had been 16 when Clare, just 19, brought Kirsten home from the hospital. He hadn’t admitted it to his friends on the football team, pretended that “the baby” was a drag, but he’d liked babysitting for her, watching the marvel of life unfold, this being with tiny fingernails inching into someone who walked, who drew elaborate pictures with Crayons, who’d one day move off to New York and lease her own apartment.

“I know she worries,” said Kirsten. “But I’m 23 now. Tell her I’m fine, okay?” Kirsten felt bad for her mom, who couldn’t understand why Kirsten didn’t want to live with friends again. But she wasn’t giving in this time. There was something satisfying about walking into a quiet apartment after a day of flashbulbs and loud voices, hanging her choice of pictures and paintings on the walls, hearing the clack of shoes on the ground and knowing they were her own. She liked to come home from work and sit on the couch for a few minutes, still and silent, before she got up to put on her own music as loudly as she liked.

“I will,” he answered. “How are art school applications going?”

“Not really going,” Kirsten said. “I can’t start anywhere till winter semester, now, anyway. So I’m taking my time. I think I want to stay in the city, so I’m deciding which place around here would be best.” She didn’t mention the calendar she kept on the wall, the one she purchased at the overpriced gift shop at the Museum of Modern Art. On it she had made no markings except to circle the day, at the end of the year, when she could finally quit her model job. When she walked by, she often lifted her hand to flip through the months, turning the photographs of paintings into whirl of shapes and colors, until she reached the red-penned circle. How relieving it would be to be artist instead of subject, to look at the world instead of be looked at.

“I see, then,” said Tim. “Well, good luck.”

“How are you?” asked Kirsten. “How’s work?”

“Same as always,” said Tim.

“How about Marvin?” said Kirsten. “Still best friends?”

She hadn’t intended this question as a punch to the stomach, but that’s how Tim received it, leaning back in his armchair with his eyes squeezed shut. Like so many of their high school friends, Tim and Marvin had been unable to shake off their ties to the suburbs of Kansas City and had moved back after college. When Tim had broken off his engagement with Julie a week before the wedding invitations were supposed to go out, Marvin had been there to say, “It’s okay, man.” Since then, the constant in Tim’s life had mostly been Marvin, with whom he’d play golf and meet up with at the bar weekly, as around them, their friends dropped one by one into marriage.

“He’s found the one,” Tim said, swallowing. “He’s getting married. To Andrea.” Marvin had broken the news two nights ago, at the bar after dinner. He’d been nervous,

speaking quietly in between swigs of beer, not meeting Tim's eyes. Tim had seen this coming—Andrea and Marvin had been dating for a year and a half—but since the news he hadn't much felt like talking to or seeing Marvin. Marvin had called the day before about golfing that weekend, but Tim hadn't called back yet.

"Wow, that's wonderful!!" Kirsten said. "Good for Marv. Tell him I said congratulations." Just then, her phone beeped; someone was calling through. She looked at the name. Nicklas.

"Do you want to take that?" asked Tim. He was relieved to change the subject.

"No, it's okay, minor work call," she lied. "I'll call back later." Maybe she would call Nicklas Hansen back later. Then again, maybe she wouldn't. She'd been having this argument with herself for days, switching back and forth across the battle lines, as Nicklas's name popped onto her caller ID again and again. The last time Nicklas had seen her was Saturday night, after she'd abruptly left his apartment, where he'd laid out a blanket on the balcony so they could watch the stars. She'd sprinted down all the stairs that night. He'd tried to follow her out, calling her name, but she'd kept on walking, looking down at the pavement and away from the stars, until she was back at her apartment, blocks away, breathing heavily as she closed the door behind her.

"Alright, if you're sure," said Tim.

"I am," said Kirsten. She wasn't. The problem was that she liked Nicklas, really. She'd liked him since they met, in early June, when she agreed to go to the club with her friends, and there was Nicklas with his friends from the NYU astronomy research internship. Since then, they'd met up with the guys at least weekly, a spontaneous group of summer friends.

She'd noticed Nicklas right off: there was something that stood out about the contrast between his wavy, seldom-brushed brown hair and his clean, unwrinkled polos. She liked his slight Swedish accent, which had been almost entirely swallowed by his six years living in the States but slipped through whenever he got excited about something. He was loud, making fun of his friends, telling jokes and winding stories; she was a little more reserved, making him work for her laugh. At first, he playfully made fun of her for being a model, but she'd impressed him with her knowledge of Renaissance art. Astronomy, he'd said, was sometimes like art too, the bright stars and planets against the black canvas, the shapes of the constellations clear in the sky as if painted there.

Kirsten shook her head slightly to get rid of the image.

“Anyway, back to Marvin getting married,” she said. “That’s great, but he can’t forget you. When is he going to set you up with one of Andrea’s friends?”

“I don’t know,” said Tim, forcing a laugh. “I’ll have to remind him.” He knew Kirsten was teasing, and yet wished she hadn’t brought it up. The problem was that he thought maybe he knew what was wrong with him, why he had sent Julie away all those years ago after a relationship that had lasted since senior year of school, why he’d pushed a lie through his teeth to tell Marvin how much he liked Andrea. But to give the secret a voice, to let it echo in the silence of his house, was another thing altogether. He was aware Kirsten, young as she was, would not mind if he told her what he could be, what he might be (it was still difficult to think about, like digesting something disagreeable). He felt a surge of hope at the thought that she might even reassure him. But still, he pushed the words back down, away from his guarded throat.

“Right,” said Kirsten. “You should ask.” She was still a little distracted. Why, why had she run from Nicklas? After all of that, the long conversations they had while drifting away from the rest of the group, the text messages she began to look forward to during work. He’d finally gotten her on her own, kicking his roommates out of the apartment for the night. When he called a few days ahead to invite her, she hung up the phone and spent the evening dancing all around the apartment to the thumping beats of hit songs on the radio that she usually hated. And it had been perfect, the date. He cooked dinner (the pasta was a little too soft, but she could tell he’d tried) and afterwards he lay next to her on the blanket on the balcony and pointed out constellations. It was like she was a kid again, living a simple life, like the days when her father, before he left, had taught her to recognize the Big Dipper and Orion’s belt. If she focused enough on the stars, it was like the balcony had de-attached from the building and floated away, and she and Nicklas were drifting through the sky, as if pulled by the current of a slow river. He had turned and leaned in to kiss her, and she had made no protest, wrapping her arms around him in return. Then she shut her eyes, and in the darkness forgot where they were floating to, the gentle water below them suddenly wide and endless. She opened her eyes and felt the raft beneath her slam back into the building. The stars that she had reached up to touch moments earlier now looked like cold-eyed residents of a different world. She pulled away suddenly and sat up, tucked a

piece of flat-ironed shoulder-length blonde hair behind her ear, and reached instinctively for her purse a few feet away. "I can't," she'd said before she'd left. "I'm sorry."

"How's life in the city?" asked Tim, after a brief silence. *City*, he thought, as if reminding himself that such a thing existed. Weren't there a lot of places now that kept their arms open for him? Maybe everything would be fine. Maybe he'd move somewhere like New York or San Francisco, without having to tell any of his old football buddies or neighbors anything. He'd start over, figure out some job, see what happened, decide what he wanted. Yes, maybe he'd do that. But then again, he'd always assumed the future would mirror his childhood. He'd play football with his kids on the square front lawn, host summer barbecues in the backyard among fireflies, walk his kids to school on clean white sidewalks.

"Great as always," Kirsten said. "Loud, I guess. But rarely boring." Her mind wasn't really on the breathless storm of a city outside her window; she thought instead of a night in June, at her friend Allison's apartment. While the others crowded around the counter in the small kitchen, digging into cartons of takeout Korean food with plastic forks and sipping from bottles of beer, Kirsten and Nicklas slipped into the other room and sat together talking. He took her hand and held it between both of his, and they played Truth or Dare. Halfway through, he asked her about her previous boyfriends. She let a few beats of silence go by and admitted, eyes down, that she hadn't really had any. He didn't believe her, reaching to twirl a strand of her glossy, straightened hair. "Sure" he'd said. "Whatever you say."

"How's Missouri, then?" Kirsten asked her uncle, while her mind rested on Nicklas's words. Models were assumed to have a lot of boyfriends, she knew. That night, sitting on Allison's ragged blue couch, she told Nicklas that yes, there had been flings and first dates, a few one-night stands she regretted and a few she didn't. She didn't say out loud again that there had been no lasting relationships. Sure, she always tried at first, humored those who asked her out for dinner and drinks, kept up with conversation, but by the third date she felt an urge to break free. She'd end it, giving away the flowers the latest guy sent, politely declining his next call.

"Missouri? It's the same as the way you left it," said Tim, and here for the first time, Kirsten detected, behind her uncle's conversational tone, a note of sadness. She was

ashamed that she made him answer questions about his monotonous life, and at the same time she realized something, suddenly, clearly. Yes, Nicklas would, at the end of August, return to University of Colorado to finish his astronomy degree. Like her father in their Missouri backyard years ago, Nicklas had lifted a careful hand to point out constellations, and like her father, who walked out a few years into the young marriage he couldn't handle, Nicklas would say goodbye. But so what? Although Kirsten didn't want to end up like her parents, who sometimes even now couldn't stand to hear one another on the phone, she didn't want to end up alone like her Uncle Tim, either. The end of summer was a month and a half away, and she didn't have to think about it now.

"Uncle Tim," she said, a little exhilarated by her racing thoughts, "I think I have to go."

"I should, too," he said, although no plans awaited him. He looked around at the clean but empty house. Maybe he would put some music on, the old Bruce Springsteen record he still had somewhere. And then, he supposed, he would call Marvin about golf. "Bye, Kirsten, talk to you soon."

She hung up, set the phone on the table, picked it up again. She had to do it now, because two hours later she might forget the triumph of her epiphany, convince herself to let it go, come up with a list of ten flimsy reasons to kick Nicklas Hansen to the curb. She stared at down at the iPhone sleeping innocently in her palm. Only a phone, only a call. Without stopping to plan what she might say to the boy on the other line, she pressed the buttons, lifted the rectangle phone to her ear, crossing her fingers as it rang.