

*Kelly Grogan*

## Weightlessness

AIDAN PRESSED HIS EAR against his brother's door, listening to the quiet on the other side. He couldn't tell if Peter was asleep or just lying in his bed, eyes trained on the ceiling, unmoving. The night before Aidan had stayed up as late as he could waiting for the taxi, but sometime after midnight he fell asleep and missed it. He lingered a moment longer, then turned from the door and trailed his hand along the wall down the stairs, over the staggered rows of picture frames along the walls. Neither of his parents said anything when he sat down at the kitchen table. His mother was washing dishes, his father hidden behind his newspaper.

"Have you seen Pete?" Aidan asked, the question louder than he'd meant it. The newspaper across the table lowered and his father raised an eyebrow. Aidan's mother dropped a bowl in the sink. She shook her head.

"When did he get here?"

"He got in around two," his father said. "And he went straight to bed."

"Can I go wake him up?" Aidan asked.

His mother picked up the bowl and set it in the dishwasher, wiping her hands on a towel. "It's such a long trip," she said. "Let him sleep."

Aidan's father set the newspaper down, the palm of his hand thumping against the table, and stared out the window. That meant the conversation was over. Aidan followed his father's gaze, looking at the dreary sky and the cramped row of houses across the street, a scene made grayer by dusty windowpanes.

Aidan sighed and poured himself a glass of orange juice, and his mother carried over a plate with two eggs, scrambled even though he'd preferred them sunny side up for months.

He picked the sports section out of the paper and scanned the headlines and scores while he ate, thumbing through the pages without remembering any of the words he read. His mother sat between Aidan and his father, picking at a small bowl of fruit.

When his brother finally appeared, it was as though a ghost stood suddenly before them. He made no sound walking down the stairs or entering the kitchen, but as Aidan glanced up from the paper to look again towards the clock, there stood Peter. Almost like he'd never even left.

"Pete!" Aidan said, jumping to his feet and clasping him in a tight hug.

"Hey," his brother said, rustling his hair and giving him two hard pats on the back, then holding him at arm's length, measuring. He still wasn't as tall as Peter, who seemed to have grown taller while he was away. Peter looked lean but strong, wiry through the folds of his gray army t-shirt. Next to Peter, his mother looked small and frail, his father soft and old.

"Sit down, Peter," his mother said. "Want coffee?" She darted back into the kitchen.

"How did you sleep?" Aidan's dad asked, picking the paper up again.

Peter leaned back in his chair and ran his hands over his face. "Slept alright," he said.

"Are you tired?" his mother asked from the kitchen.

"A little," Peter said.

"I'm sure it was nice to sleep in your own bed," she said, coming back to the table and placing Peter's breakfast in front of him.

Aidan picked up the sports section right where he left off and he watched over the edge of the page as his brother drank his coffee black, moving the eggs in circles around his plate. His hair was cut short, near to his scalp, and Aidan could see a long scar winding from his ear to his neck. Shrapnel, Peter had written in his letter earlier that year. He'd said it wasn't too

deep, that he'd been lucky, but it looked to Aidan like it must have hurt.

His mother was telling Peter about a dinner party she'd planned. "They'll be over at six tonight, will that be alright?"

Peter's jaw clenched for a moment and he looked at his mother. "Sure, Mom," he said. "Whatever you say." The edge was barely detectable, but unmistakable. Aidan's dad cleared his throat and stood with his plate.

"Let me help you with those dishes," he said.

His mother's hands fluttered over the table collecting the plates and glasses, and she knocked the salt shaker over in her hurry. It thudded against the floor and Aidan saw Peter flinch, barely, an almost imperceptible movement, his hands rising. Only an instant, and then his mother swooped to the floor to pick up the saltshaker and Peter put his hands in his lap, the blood returning to his face.

"Hey Pete," Aidan said. The name felt foreign. "I'm hiking up to the falls today, going for a swim. Wanna come?" He tried to sound casual, like he hadn't been waiting to ask for weeks, ever since he learned that Peter was coming home.

"Sure," Peter said, looking up at Aidan. "Sounds good." His smile made Aidan feel a little better. As he stood up from the table to get ready, he was almost able to ignore the glimpse of his mother, staring over the sink at Peter, looking small and lost. He was almost able to ignore the weight that grew heavier inside of him, the feeling that everything had changed.

PETER WANTED TO DRIVE even though Aidan's mom offered. It took a few tries before the engine turned over, and then Aidan's brother twisted the radio dial through static until he found some music. Driving together along the winding roads to the mountains, Aidan pointed out where small businesses downtown had changed hands in the two years since Peter had gone away, and where the new housing development was being

built. With Peter beside him, the same roads that he drove on with his mother every day seemed more interesting, the colorless neighborhoods felt less small.

When they reached the trailhead Peter pulled off to the side of the road and popped the dashboard open to pull out his old baseball cap, ragged and faded from the sun. Peter had worn that hat for as long as Aidan could remember. Once, when Aidan had been home alone, he'd snuck into Peter's truck and taken the hat into his hands, the scent of his brother so strong when he raised it to his face that it felt like Peter was right beside him.

Aidan was about to ask Peter how long he'd be home for, but his brother swung the door open with a creak and hopped out of the truck, slamming the door behind him. Aidan sighed and grabbed his own cap from his backpack, not as faded or as used, and pulled it on before climbing out of the truck. Without the rumbling of the engine and the scratchy songs from the radio, the woods outside felt hushed and expectant. Aidan and Peter followed the path to the creek in silence.

The air was warm and thick, clouds hanging low and heavy, and Peter stopped halfway and pulled his shirt off. Aidan glimpsed a patchwork of newly formed scars running down his brother's ribcage, the yellowish cast of bruises on his back. Peter glanced at him and Aidan looked down quickly, pretending he hadn't noticed anything. Nobody had mentioned Peter being hurt. But then, maybe nobody knew about it.

"Been pretty dry this summer," Aidan said, kicking a stone across the trail while his brother pulled his water bottle from the backpack and took a long gulp. "But we had some rain last week. Should be good swimming." Aidan turned to look at Peter again and his brother nodded, soaking his hat with water and pulling it over his head before stuffing the water bottle back into the pack. He gestured back to the trail and they walked on for a few minutes before Peter asked how things had been.

“Fine,” said Aidan. The answer came out automatically. “I’ve been getting pretty good at skateboarding. We should go to the skate park.”

“Cool,” Peter said.

“Mom doesn’t like it much. She says it’s a hospital visit waiting to happen.”

“Sounds like Mom.” Aidan heard him sigh. Overhead, the keening call of a hawk circling and the rustle of leaves in the breeze, the scent of rain. Aidan wondered if the sky would hold, if they’d get caught in a storm. When they were kids, he and Peter had loved thunderstorms—they’d sit on the porch and listen to the pounding rains on the roof, watch the flashes of lightning crawling across the sky.

“Hey, Pete?”

“Yeah?”

“I missed you.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Aidan didn’t say anything more until they reached the creek, when he heard the churning of the upper falls. He called out and waved Peter forward, climbing over the boulders with ease. A mist hung over the water where the sun warmed the stones, and the swimming hole at the base of the waterfall was deep and clear. Aidan stuck his hand in the cool water. It was perfect. He turned and saw his brother setting the backpack down and stretching his back.

“Wanna swim?” Aidan said.

“Go ahead,” Peter said. “I’m just going to sit down a minute.” He stretched out on a flat slab of rock and pulled his hat low over his eyes.

Aidan folded up his shirt and draped it over a low branch. For a while he sat beside the pool kicking his feet through the water. He waited for Peter to look at him, to lift his head or say something, but his brother ignored him. The moment he’d envisioned, all that time Peter had been overseas, was nothing

like this moment he encountered. His brother should have been laughing and wrestling with him, taking long and graceful dives into the water or splashing him with cannonballs.

Aidan glanced up to the top of falls, the smooth wall of stone jutting against the sky. He stood up from the pool and walked to the rocks, tracing a visual path from where he stood to the top. After a quick glance at his brother, he started climbing, slowly and carefully, waiting for Peter to notice. He jammed his toes into the narrow crevices and gripped the ledges with his fingers. One movement and then another, balanced, strong. Aidan looked down, once, but Peter still wasn't looking at him.

At the top, someone had hung up a sign warning swimmers away, dangling from a rope stretched between a few rough sticks and blocking the way. He'd heard stories at school of children who'd fallen from the top of the falls, ending up drowned or broken into pieces. Aidan slid under the makeshift fence and perched at the edge of a smooth overhang directly above the pool, twenty feet or so above his brother. His feet dangled into the air, the cold splash of water tickling his legs. Up there he could see the whole path of the creek winding down through the hills, carving a back-and-forth line across the valley until it disappeared into the east side of town. Twisting oak trees grew on either side of the water, patches of tangled brush spreading through the canyon.

"Hey Peter," he called down. "Come up here."

Peter lifted the rim of his hat and squinted up at Aidan. "Jesus Christ, Aidan," he said, sitting up. "What the hell are you doing up there?" But he finally got up and walked over to the waterfall, grabbing onto the rock ledges and climbing them effortlessly to the top. He sat cross-legged next to Aidan and looked out over the landscape before them.

"Pretty cool view, huh?" said Aidan, grinning, happy to have his brother join him.

"Yeah. I guess," said Peter. He shrugged. "So, you gonna

swim or what?" There it was again, the coldness of his tone. Like he didn't care one way or the other.

Aidan stood, heat rushing through him, his hands clenched. "Yeah, I think I am," he said. He looked out over the pool and then he took three steps backward from the edge.

"What are you doing?" his brother asked. Aidan didn't answer. He took a deep breath.

"No way," said Peter. "Stop, Aidan. The pool's too small."

"I've done it before," said Aidan. Even though he hadn't. But he felt like could do it now. Certain, even, that he would leap into the air in a perfect arc and then fall with a splash right into the center of the blue bowl beneath him.

"You could really hurt yourself. I mean it Aidan. Don't." Peter's voice was rising and Aidan saw a flash of movement as his brother stood and took a step towards him, hand outstretched.

"It's ok, Peter. I'm not scared."

In a fluid motion, Aidan dodged Peter's arm and pushed himself forward on the soles of his feet, launching skyward over the edge of the rock. For a moment everything hung suspended before him—the half circle of sky brushed with clouds, the birds flitting from tree to tree, houses dotting the hillside and the faraway view of town. Peter's hands stretching out into the empty space between them and the water glistening below. Then with a rush he plunged into the cold, blue deep, the water wrapping around his skin. A distant roar filled his ears, the churning of the falls, but everything else was silent. Like time did not pass beneath the running waters. Like he was sinking deep into a place where nothing ever changed.

He broke through the surface with a gasp and swam to the edge of the pool. He climbed out and called up to his brother. "See that, Peter?" he said. "I told you I could do it."

But Peter didn't respond. Aidan could see his brother standing frozen at the edge, looking down, his face blank. His body shook and his mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping

for air. Like he was hit with something, hard, right in the chest. Aidan didn't want to shout, afraid Peter would startle and slip over the edge. Aidan ran back to the rock wall and called up to his brother, his voice barely rising above the rushing water.

"It's ok, Peter," he said. "Just stay right there. I'm coming."

Aidan's bare feet were slick against the rock and the urgency made him clumsy. He slipped and drove his shin into a sharp rock, and bit his lip to keep from crying out. He looked down and saw a rivulet of blood trickling over his ankle, and then he grabbed the top of the ledge and pulled himself up and over, scrambling to reach his brother. Stepping close behind him with his hands outstretched, until his fingertips were brushing Peter's shoulders and he was pulling him backward, step by step. He felt the frightened beating of his brother's heart against his hands.

"It's ok, Pete," he said. "It's ok."

"DON'T TELL MOM or Dad, ok?"

It was the only thing that Peter said to him the whole way home, rain speckling the window and the wind picking up speed. And when Aidan's mother asked how their hike had been, Aidan told her they'd had fun. She squeezed him in a tight, quick hug before sending him off to shower and change into clean clothes. The hot water and soap burned the cut on his shin and Aidan winced when he toweled it dry.

The door to the bathroom flew open as Aidan pulled on his clothes and Peter halted. "Sorry," he said. "Didn't know you were in here."

"It's fine," Aidan said. "I was just leaving."

"Jesus, look at your shin," Peter said, bending down.

Aidan ignored the comment, glancing in the mirror. The glass was thick with steam and his brother's reflection was faint and smudged.

"Hey, Peter?"



“Yeah?”

“What happened out there?”

Peter stared down at him in a funny way and he leaned against the sink. “Nothing happened,” he finally said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Peter wiped his hand over the mirror, clearing the steam, and leaned in close to his own reflection.

“C’mon Peter.”

His brother sighed and narrowed his eyes, turning to face Aidan. “Nothing happened, ok?” he said.

“What if it happens again?” Aidan said, pressing on. “What if you’d fallen?” His voice took on a whine of worry not unlike his mother’s fretful questions. But he stared at his brother and tried to pretend he was older, smarter, able to understand whatever it was Peter couldn’t say.

Peter glowered and raised his hand from his side. “What if I’d fallen?” he repeated, his voice rising. “You were the one that climbed up there and jumped.” Aidan flinched, thinking Peter might hit him. But all he did was spin on his heel and march back to his room, slamming the door shut behind him.

The chime of the doorbell rang out downstairs and Aidan groaned. He’d forgotten about his mother’s dinner, the welcome-home dinner for Peter. He wished he could become ill, or have an emergency, anything to get out of it. The doorbell rang again and Aidan sighed. He heard Peter’s door open and close, the thump of his brother’s footsteps down the stairs, and a high-pitched squeal, “Oh Peter, look at you.” His father called Aidan’s name up the stairs, and trudged down the hall and to the kitchen.

Squeezing the extra guests around their small kitchen table was no easy task, and Aidan ended up crammed between his mother and her friend, Wendy, whose perfume was so strong it made him queasy. Aidan pushed his food around his plate and tried not to breathe, the room stifled and heavy with pauses.

Aidan's mother kept refilling her wine glass, laughing too loud at all the wrong times. Peter barely said anything at all, but kept glancing at the door like he was planning on leaving at any moment.

"So, Peter," said Mr. Robertson, his voice booming through the dining room. "How long are you home for?" Aidan looked up, quickly, trying to catch the look on Peter's face.

His mother paused, her fork suspended halfway to her lips, and Aidan could feel her tense up beside him. After a minute, Peter shrugged, not making eye contact with anyone. A long pause stretched through the room before Aidan's mother set her fork down, clinking it loudly against the plate.

"He knows he can stay as long as he'd like," she said, her pitch rising.

Aidan saw a flicker of something in Peter's eyes, something like annoyance or boredom, an unforgiving impatience. But just as quickly it was gone, and Peter stood up and started gathering dishes, carrying them in a stack to the kitchen where he set them in the sink with a clang. Aidan's father cleared his throat, addressing the table. "We're just so proud that he served his country," he said, "and grateful to have him home safe." The guests nodded and murmured, and Aidan thought he saw tears welling up in his mother's eyes but she turned and wiped them away before anyone else noticed.

They'd had a similar dinner over a year ago, before Peter left, and now Aidan started to wonder if it had been just as heavy with things unsaid. Maybe he just hadn't seen it then, like he could see it now, the thin fracture lines between each member of his family. At the going-away dinner, Mrs. Robertson had asked Peter why he'd signed up, and she'd been met with the same expectant pause. Now, Aidan wondered, why had Peter signed up? He'd always suspected Peter just wanted out of this place, this too-small town with its rows of houses and familiar faces—now he couldn't help but think that maybe it wasn't just

the town Peter was trying to escape.

When everyone had gone, Peter thanked his mother for the dinner and said he was tired and going to bed. "Do you think he enjoyed it?" she asked Aidan's father after they heard Peter's door click shut upstairs.

"Sure," Aidan's father said.

And even though Aidan wanted to tell them about the waterfall, wanted to yell that of course Peter hadn't enjoyed it and that it might not even matter because Peter wasn't really his brother anymore, he found himself hugging his mother and saying, "Yeah Mom. I think it was good for him."

AIDAN COULDN'T SLEEP that night. He lay on his bed and stared at the patterns in his ceiling, his mind wandering back to the moment beneath the water. The turquoise glimmer of the surface dappled with daylight. Currents carrying him far away, deeper and deeper into the stillness that had surrounded him.

He heard a noise through the wall adjoining his brother's room. Aidan sat up straight in his bed, then tiptoed over to the wall and knelt beside it, listening. A cough, some rustling. For a moment he wished he could just fall asleep and start over the next day. Ignore everything, pretend none of it had ever happened. Another cough, choked sounding, then a thump, something heavy. Aidan crept out to the hallway.

He slipped into Peter's room, closing the door gently behind him. His brother was crouched beside the bed, a backpack on the floor next to him and lamplight throwing long shadows across the room. There was a near-empty bottle on the table beside him, wine from dinner, and a red stain blossomed across the carpet below.

"Are you alright?" Aidan asked.

Peter nodded. He looked at Aidan and hesitated, like he was figuring something out. Aidan took a few steps closer and sat down on the foot of the bed, crossing his arms. His brother's

eyes were bloodshot and distant, his skin glistening with sweat even though a cool breeze drifted through the window. Aidan looked around and wondered, not for the first time, at the way Peter's room had not changed since high school. The same stupid posters, the trophies and medals from track meets, a detention slip tacked to the wall by his desk. There was even an open social studies book on top of his bookcase, like he'd left midsentence.

Aidan turned back to his brother and waited for him to speak. Peter stared just past him and took a deep breath. Swallowed, like he was trying to find the right words.

But all he said was, "Sorry," and then shook his head.

"Are you going somewhere?" Aidan asked.

"I gotta...I'm sorry." He said it again, and Aidan thought he almost sounded sincere. "I just can't be here right now."

Aidan said nothing, just stared through the space between them, the distance growing wider.

"Just, please," Peter said, meeting his eyes. "Please don't tell Mom or Dad you came in here. I'll be back, I just need a couple of weeks. I just want them to think I'm going to visit some friends or something. Ok? Can you say that? I wrote them a letter. Here." He grabbed an envelope from the desk and handed it to Aidan, his hand shaking.

"Promise you'll be ok?" Aidan said.

"Promise."

"Ok," Aidan said. "I won't tell them," and he took the envelope from Peter. But he wasn't entirely sure either of them meant what they said.

Aidan paused for a moment. Then, "I didn't know what was going to happen when I jumped today."

"It's ok." Peter patted him on the arm and grabbed his backpack.

"I really wasn't scared."

"I know."

Aidan watched his brother walk to the door, the bag slung across his shoulders and his shoes in his hand. He stopped at the door, his hand on the wall.

“Hey, Pete?” Aidan said.

“Yeah?” his brother said.

“Where are you going?”

Peter shrugged. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Everything’s going to be fine.” Then he slipped through the door, the click of the latch almost noiseless behind him, and was gone.

Aidan listened to his brother’s shuffling footsteps creeping down the hallway, the quiet groan of the front door opening and closing. The soft rhythm of Peter’s footsteps down the sidewalk, the truck engine rolling over. Headlights beamed across the room as Peter pulled around the street and drove away, a rumble fading into the night. Aidan lay down on his brother’s bed and pulled his blanket over his head. Willing himself to succumb to the sleep that tugged at his eyes. Falling through all that empty space in a perfect curve towards the water, the rush of cold embracing him. The feeling of weightlessness.