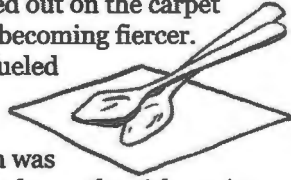


CONTRITION

Rachel Gaddis

I looked around the circle of girls, all sprawled out on the carpet of the basement floor. Our game of spoons was becoming fiercer. The Dr. Pepper and M&M's we had consumed fueled our aggression. Someone stopped the game to read a Facebook post, and everyone quieted.



Despite the reader's snarky tone, humiliation was evident in the words of the writer. My eyes looked over the girls again. She was the only one not there.

I had noticed when I arrived hours ago, but I reasoned she did not know. A knot formed in my throat and my stomach churned. Grabbing my stuff, I took my hostess aside and told her I was leaving.

She looked at me like I had spit in her face. With my sleeping bag tucked under one arm and my overnight bag on the opposite shoulder, I tried to move around her.

"What am I supposed to tell the others?" she asked coldly.

"Tell them I'm not feeling well."

I pushed past and made my way up the stairs, mumbling a brief goodbye to her stepmother in the kitchen before walking out into the warm night.

Driving home helped me relax, relieved the tightness of my muscles and spirit. What happened back there? Why did I snap? My car bumped over the railroad tracks, and I braked as the light at the intersection turned red. Habit, I guess. No one was out this time of night, I could have kept moving. I took in the road and the buildings of Main Street, empty. Maybe I wanted to know I could at least trust myself, if no one else. The light shifted to green, and I continued driving.

I leaned over the steering wheel and peeked into the dark sky. There I found what I hoped to see. The moon was aglow off to the right, encircled by stars. The cool lights softened the darkness, made it peaceful. Glancing back to the road, I was not angry anymore—I was broken.

My parents, confused, opened the front door when I pulled into the driveway. They followed me silently into the living room and watched me pick up the phone. Dialing the number, I waited through four rings before hearing a short hello.

"Um, Mrs. Vicki? I need to speak to Sarah, please."

She shuffled the phone and spoke quietly to her daughter. When Sarah answered, I could not suppress the shame anymore.

"Sarah," I cried, hoping my words would be coherent, "I am so sorry. There was no reason for the girls, for me, to do what we did. I should not have gone to that sleepover."

The tears felt so good sliding down my cheeks, like I was emptying myself of the guilt. I think she felt a sense of relief in crying too, but her whimpers and sniffles only brought the anger back to my throat.

“I love you, Sarah.”

“I love you, Rachel.”

Despite everything, she still loved me. I hung up the phone.