

*I am jealous of my brother, Lou.
The doctor tells Lou he has four months left
to live when he is ten years old. Lou says,
“That’s fine.”*



Lou

My mother cries; I do not, because Lou says it’s fine. He explains it to me one night, cross-legged on the bed across from mine: twin beds in a twin room, twin sets of blue-green striped sheets, twin boys sitting with twin hands knotted in twin laps. “It’s fine,” he says, “I’ve done the math.”

He’s a very serious ten-year-old, gaunt and skinny, ribs kicked out hard against skin that stretches taut across a wheezy chest. His eyes are always bruised underneath like there are two sucker-punches smashed permanently into his face. “The way I see it,” he says— he has a composition notebook and everything, the calculations sketched out in red and purple crayon— “I’m living twice the life that other people live.”

I look at the equations; I’ve never

been good at numbers, not like Lou, but after a few minutes I decide the math checks out. “Alright.”

“So I’m fine,” he says. “In a couple months I will have been done anyway. You’re moving slower, so you need more time.”

I nod; it makes sense. It is nine P.M., and I am getting tired. Lou, who is always exhausted and can never sleep— no rest for the weary— watches me tuck myself into bed and droop my head onto the pillow.

“Night,” he says.

“Night,” I echo. He watches me fall asleep, dry eyes fixed on my face. I’ve been dozing off to that empty stare for weeks now. It’s as much of a comfort as the soft blue blanket wrapped around me.

His hallucinations are more vivid than my dreams; his days contain hours mine do not. Sometimes, when I wake up, he smells like cold and earth. Lou is living twice the life I am, and I am jealous.

Lou started screaming in English class last semester. I was in a room down the hall, and I didn't hear him through the cinderblock walls, but the story goes like this: Lou is pinned down by a teacher, screeching hysterically about worms eating through the walls. Our mother was called. When she came in, hair disheveled and mascara a little smeared, Lou was calmed down from the hallucination, sitting plunked down on the nurse's couch with a bottle of water clutched in his clammy palms.

He told her, "I haven't slept in three weeks," as droll as a ten-year-old could possibly be, and unknown to the assembled watchers the countdown starts, sliced into precise ticks by the dull-faced school clock facing them from across the wall. No one with Fatal Familial Insomnia lives more than seven months after the diagnosis.

The nurse blanches. Lou says, "It's fine."

On our eleventh birthday, Lou sits down on the swing next to me and kicks his legs out. "Four more months," he says, like he's counting down to a particularly awesome party.

"Yeah," I say. Whenever I think about

it too hard, I get a sort of sick swooping feeling in my stomach, so I don't think about it.

Lou must have seen my face, because he says, "It's fine."

"I know," I say. "It's fine."

"I get twenty-four hours in a day," says Lou. "You only get fifteen."

I count for a moment. He's right.

"I'm lucky," says Lou. "I'm really lucky." He stares out at the trees for a moment, and just for that second he looks old, like a grandpa, like the man we saw in the waiting room of Lou's hospital with gray hair and shaking hands and thin white films like milk sitting out too long stretched across both of his empty eyes. "Not many people get a chance like this."

"Yes," I say, "it's fine."

The swings creak quietly underneath us, and Lou kicks his legs up as high as he can— he's been getting weaker, thinner; his hair is shaking out in clumps at the back of his skull— and pushes off the ground. It has been eight weeks since my brother has been able to sleep, and while I've been wasting hours every day in my bed he's been outside, exploring. He's been alive. He gets to live twice the life I do in a fraction of the time I get to live it. Time passes fast for him and I am left behind, in his dust, in his wake, watching as he gets away. Lou has always been luckier than me.

I am jealous of my brother Lou. ♦



Clockwork, Kieran Rundle, Photography