After two hours of Halo 3 all the Sprite and corn chips are gone and it’s time for sundaes. You put all the chocolate ice cream in the fancy bowls your mom uses for edamame because you’re a good host. You balance them on your hands like a waiter and walk out of the kitchen calling, “Ice cream, bitches!” and Gifford and Ryan and Brian and Sam all whoop in assent.

“That’s pretty chill,” says Gifford, laughing at himself.

Ryan and Brian high-five.

Everything’s louder because you can be wild because you’re the only ones home. Your mom’s gone over to Sam’s house for the evening to help Sam’s mom clear out Sam’s dad’s furniture, which is sad because Sam’s dad is nice and a good doctor – when you had a woodchip lodged in your foot he injected an entire syringe of lidocaine and then cut it out with scissors – and he can’t even muster a smile anymore when he picks Sam up from school. But on the bright side all the boys get to come over and eat on the living room floor and swear as much as they want.

“Dude, do you have any toppings?” says Gifford.

“Hell yeah I do,” you say. “Chocolate sauce and whipped cream coming right up.”

“Sick,” says Ryan.

“Yeah, sick,” says Brian.

You grab the chocolate sauce and Reddi-Wip from the refrigerator, head back into the living room, toss the chocolate sauce to Gifford. You do a slide on both knees onto the carpet and hold the can above your face like a rock star’s microphone, shake and spray
sweetness. Somebody howls. You crawl up behind Brian and stick the nozzle in his ear. He squeals. Everybody laughs. You spray a little in Brian’s mouth, turn, spray some in Ryan’s, spray some in Gifford’s, don’t stop, watch Gifford sputter, laugh, gulp down clouds. It’s great. You try to spray some whipped cream in Sam’s mouth but he’s not looking. As you push the nozzle down Sam turns his head so whipped cream goes half in his mouth and half on his cheek.

“You bitch,” Sam says, “get it in my mouth next time.”

You raise the can, laughing, but Gifford waves a quieting hand. “Hey,” Gifford says. “Hey, that’s a little gay.”

Ryan and Brian hastily swallow their mouthfuls. Sam wipes his cheek with his wrist. Gifford licks Cheeto dust from his fingers, scrapes his hair back. “Yeah, you know?” he says. “It’s like sucking dick. It’s like you” – he points at you – “are getting it from Sam, and he came all over your” – he points at Sam – “face.”

Ryan and Brian high-five.

“Wait a second,” you say. “I’m not gay.”

“Nobody ever said you were gay,” Ryan says. “He just said it was like you were gay.”

“Yeah,” says Brian.

“Whoa,” you say. “I’m not gay, and Sam’s probably not gay, but if he were, it wouldn’t matter.”

“I know,” says Gifford. “I was just kidding.”

“I don’t like guys,” Sam protests. “I touched Audrey’s chest under the bra.”
Walker Caplan

Brian raises his hand. “Can we talk about something else? The ice cream’s melting.”

“Who’s Audrey?” says Ryan.

“You don’t know her. She was on a cruise my family went on. I touched her chest under the bra. She was a B-cup at least. Then we went back to her room and saw her naked. Then I kissed her best friend. Her name was Lily. She was prettier than all the girls at our school, prettier than Audrey too. But I didn’t keep in touch with them because I couldn’t choose between them and I didn’t want to be tied down.”

Everyone takes a moment to digest this.

“Nice,” says Ryan.

“That’s bullshit, Sam,” you say. “Your family hasn’t gone on a cruise. Your mom and dad don’t even like each other. How could they go on a cruise together?”

Sam says, “You know what? I kissed Lily and Audrey at the same time. They were so hot for it. They were screaming and screaming.”

“Stop lying,” you tell Sam.

“Simmer down, guys,” says Brian. “What’s with the name Reddi-wip, anyway? Why’s it readier than any other whip?”

“Cause it comes in a can, you dumbass,” says Gifford.

“Why were the girls screaming? Because they were so turned on?” asks Ryan.


Sam’s eyes are wide and shining like marbles. He blinks hard. He says, “Fuck you. Your whipped cream sucks. My mom makes whipped cream from a carton.” He stretches out his leg and kicks your bowl of half-melted chocolate ice cream and it pools
on the carpet. He swings, catches you in the ear. You taste salt and metal. Your mouth
might be dripping red, or it might just be spit. You blink and swallow and it hurts and
Gifford and Ryan and Brian are staring. It’s embarrassing. You know you should back off,
but instead you laugh. You laugh and you keep laughing until Sam says, “Fag.”

You know it’s an insult, but you don’t know enough to formulate a response. You
and Sam blink at each other. “You’re a fag,” Sam repeats.

Your heart beats in your face. You don’t know what to do, but you’ve got to do
something. It’s just like someone said there’s gullible written on the ceiling and you
looked, you looked so you have to keep going like you did it on purpose. You feel the
Reddi-wip can’s heft in your hand. You shake the container and climb on top of Sam,
your legs on either side. You push his head back into the pool of chocolate ice cream and
pry open his mouth. You push the nozzle down and watch the cream spiral into him, and
you keep spraying, you keep grinning and saying, “See? It’s okay,” because you can’t let
on that when everybody leaves and your mom’s still not home you’re going to eat the last
bag of Doritos and cry on the floor, that you’re going to Google “definition of fag”, and
“Reddi-wip”, and “how to keep friends”, and clear every search, so you flash your teeth
and laugh in Sam’s sticky face like a pal as you shake the red cylinder, and shake, and
spray, and shake harder, until the spraying sounds like a vacuum and you can only see
half of Sam’s face under the pile of whipped cream, Sam who is now motionless and
wide-eyed, and you think this is because he knows that you’re both too far gone, too old,
that you are all hardened versions of yourselves, you’ll never open your mouths without
looking up, and you think you’re sharing a silent understanding, you’re in this together,
you think that’s why Sam’s not struggling, the carpet beneath his head staining brown, for
how are you to know that once Gifford shaves his head and gets hazed at Carver Military, that once Ryan starts winking at blue-haired girls and Brian gets caught with a dime bag, when you open the door to Sam’s room before homecoming and see Sam kneeling small and shirtless by his father, when he whips around, sticky-mouthed, spits white onto the carpet, and you remember his father picking him up after school, hair stringy with oil, eyes puffy and sad, and you don’t say anything, you just look at Sam’s shocked face, how are you supposed to know that he’ll look no different than right now, when you drop the can of whipped cream, when you push back his sticky hair and lean down to kiss him, for it’s that very same face beneath you, startled, big-eyed, blinking through the white?