

THE YEAR OF _____

by

Lina Patton
A Thesis
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Fairfax, VA

The Year of _____

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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DEDICATION

For my parents—for more than I know how to say.

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I would like to thank the many friends, family, and supporters who have made this thesis possible. My parents, for their constant love, support, and encouragement. Ryan, for his understanding and inspiration. And finally, thanks to my many classmates and professors, whose talent and insight made this work possible.

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ABSTRACT

THE YEAR OF _____

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George Mason University, 2016

Thesis Director: Susan Shreve

This thesis is a short coming-of-age novel following the life of a twenty-three-year-old girl as she moves from Minnesota to Washington, DC and desperately seeks to become the worldly, venerable person she imagines as her future self. But, as she struggles through graduate school (where her project is to help the state lottery reach out to younger players), begins a love affair with an older military officer (who holds more at stake than she first thought), and tries to navigate her own psyche (which is constantly pulled between her head and her heart), she realizes her plans—and life—may not be as simple or straightforward as she first thought.

Elle stood naked in front of the mirror. She had decided to sleep with him, and now she was trying to picture what she would like to him tomorrow. Only two guys had ever seen her naked before—at least, in that way—and she was trying to prepare herself. She kept blinking hard, holding her eyes closed until the remnants of light started to move and swirl behind her eyelids, then opening them again, fast, trying to surprise herself—see herself anew, like glimpsing a stranger. But it didn't work. Not really. It was always just her: same narrow nose and dark blonde hair, bony hips and kneecaps, same wide, large mouth that seemed to take up her whole face when she smiled. She smiled now at herself, then stopped and shook her head. Don't be stupid, she said out loud.

Elle grabbed a T-shirt from the bathroom floor and pulled it up over her head, at the same time reaching to turn on the faucet. It was late, she had just gotten home from class, and she pushed water to her eyes to wash away her mascara, her lashes growing soft between her fingers. She squinted slightly into the sink as the water ran, watching the inky black lines disappear, then stood back up, looking at herself again, water dripping from her chin. She leaned closer to the mirror, this time her face just inches from it, and stared into each of her eyes one at a time, her image reflected back in their small, glossy pools of black. She wondered if he even remembered what she looked like—his image already blurring in her mind.

Elle dried her face and walked back to her room. She was still getting used to having her own apartment—she had lived at home or stayed at Sam’s during undergrad when she went to the small state school nearby—and it felt strange now to have so much space. She liked it, though, even if at times, it was too quiet—the silence too loud. Sometimes, she swore she could actually hear it growing louder, deeper, more full and metallic until it was ringing in her ears.

Elle pulled on some sweatpants and checked her cell phone. KC was supposed to call when her shift was up, which, with the time change, was in fifteen minutes, and Elle hoped she’d remember. She wanted to discuss her decision, her final theory about why she should just do it, and she needed her approval, because their date was tomorrow. Tomorrow. The word made her insides jump, her temperatures rise, and Elle picked up her cell phone and went into the living room. She sat down on the couch and waited.

“You’re done early,” she said when her phone rang a few minutes before nine.

“Well hello, hello,” KC said. “Yes I am. Hold on.”

Elle pressed the phone harder to her ear and settled into the couch cushions. She listened to KC call goodbye to some of her coworkers and pictured her walking across the Kohl’s parking lot, the white letters glowing above her.

“Okay, how goes it?” KC said, the car door closing behind her.

“So I’ve been thinking,” Elle said.

“No way.”

“I’m going to sleep with him. I’ve decided.”

“Oh, really.”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Elle moved the phone to her other hand, her other ear, and began to explain her latest theory: science fairs. How she’d been thinking about how in elementary school, middle school, even, whenever they were testing the best kind of laundry detergent or toothpaste or the strength of a magnet or whatever, they always had to test each thing—like the toothpaste against the stained eggshell, the magnet with the whatever, you know, the experiment, she said—three times, perform three trials. Because, as Elle recalled, picturing herself back in Ms. Abernathy’s fourth grade class, test one or two could be a fluke. You wouldn’t really know until the third.

“I don’t get it,” KC said as Elle paused, waiting for her reaction.

“I mean, three trials. Test something three times. That’s how you know you have the average. That’s the important part.”

“Okay,” KC said.

“Well I think sex could be the same.”

“I don’t get it,” KC repeated.

“Like three people. Try it three times.”

“Pretty sure you’ve had sex with Sam more than three times.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Elle sat still for a minute, then got up and walked back and forth across the living room, continuing to explain, trying to help KC envision the table she’d drawn in her notebook during class, unable to focus:

Independent Variable	Responding Variable			
	Trial 1	Trial 2	Trial 3	Average
Me	Steven - sophomore year of high school – awkward, short	Sam - last five years – varied, normal?	Tyler – Friday?	?

“I don’t know here, Elle Bell,” KC finally said. “Sounds like a flawed experiment to me.”

Elle now stood by the window, gripping the band of the blinds and twirling it back and forth between her thumb and forefinger, opening and closing them, watching the moon and streetlights blink brightly then disappear.

“I know it doesn’t make sense one hundred percent, not exactly, but I think it does make some sense, somehow,” she said. She twirled the band again and stared outside. It was dark out, the last shade of blue before black, the trees just a shade darker, and she kept her eyes focused on the sky as she chewed the insides of her cheeks.

“But didn’t you have enough sex with Sam to know what it was really like? I mean, isn’t sex just sex? Is it really that different with different people?”

Elle left the blinds open and dropped her hand away.

“I don’t know,” she said. That’s the point.”

It was quiet for a moment and neither said anything. Elle sat back down on the couch and folded her legs under her.

“Well,” KC said, her voice dropping into the silence. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Elle said. She exhaled.

“I mean I love you. I guess I do get it. And who knows, maybe it’s just the same with the boys around here. That’d make sense, you know? You should go for it. I’m all for it. Kick off that new, single life of yours.”

“Exactly,” Elle said. She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Just don’t do it if he’s a jerk, okay? At least promise me that.”

Elle laughed. “I won’t.”

“And what’s even his name again? I know you told me.”

“Tyler.”

“Tyler. Well, lucky Tyler. Number three.”

Elle laughed again and felt the soft pain of missing her in the space where her lungs came together. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, and brushed the hair out of her face. She closed her eyes and listened to KC driving, imagining she was sitting in the passenger seat, staring out the window, watching the almost-bare October trees pass by, the glints of lake between them. She could almost feel the way the cold would be getting stronger now, seeping in through the car doors and the crevices of her jacket. It made her feel like she was back home, back in Minnesota. She opened her eyes.

“How is everyone?” she asked.

“Good, good. Missing you. How’s school?”

“Good.”

“Good.”

Elle rubbed her forehead with one hand and swallowed hard. “Am I an asshole?” she asked.

“No.”

“It hasn’t even been a month.”

“It was the right thing to do.”

Since the breakup, Elle had been repeating this question and all its many forms: Am I an asshole if I still wear the pajamas his mother bought me? Am I an asshole for not ending it until now? For throwing out his boxers with the printed eggs and bacon? For keeping the rest—the earrings, that panda thing, the notes—in the highest cabinet about the fridge? Does our dog miss me? Hate me? Will they be okay?

Elle had met Tyler one week earlier on the metro, which was only three weeks since she had moved from Minnesota, two weeks since she had broken up with Sam, and only one day since she had finished setting up her apartment. She had planned to metro into the city earlier, explore, but the breakup had left her crippled for a few days, unmoving, and then getting the apartment ready was more complicated than she'd first thought (she wasn't used to things like meeting with landlords, setting up utility bills, buying things like trash bags and pillows and bathroom rugs), and then classes had started. But she had appreciated it all—the balancing of it, how at twenty-two, she finally felt like an adult.

Still, she had made it all sound simple to her mother, who didn't think she should have left Minnesota in the first place. "There's no real point," she'd said when, back during Elle's junior year of college, she began applying to graduate programs for marketing. "You could get a job in Minneapolis," her mom had repeated, "people don't go to grad school for this sort of thing. Don't listen to your aunt."

But Elle did listen to her aunt, her mother's sister, Corinne, who worked in advertising in San Francisco. They had both moved to Minnesota when they were young, and Elle's mom had fallen in love with Elle's dad, become a teacher and stayed, while Corinne left right after high school. She came back to visit on holidays, sometimes, but even then, they didn't speak much. She was closer to Elle now, even called her some

nights without her mother knowing. Elle loved both of them with different parts of her heart.

Elle knew her mother was right in some ways, but she didn't want to wait for graduation to apply for jobs, was anxious to have a clear path out of Minnesota. She'd been talking about it forever, had even wanted to go to college out of state, but it was cheaper to go to UMDD, which in some ways relieved her, and she'd promised herself after graduation. After graduation. And then it was approaching, and she hadn't made any plans. It had all hit her one night when she was over at Sam's. She had been making pasta for dinner, pointlessly stirring the boiling water, the steam flushing her face, when she'd pictured herself doing the exact same thing two years in the future—ten years in the future. It had made her face grow hotter.

So she had talked to her professors, Corinne, researched and found a graduate program no one could refuse: it was in Washington D.C., fully funded, and worked with real clients—even promised jobs in the city after, and she had accepted as soon as she received the offer. Still, she had waited a week to tell her parents. Two weeks. And then she did, one Tuesday night when they were all getting back from her brother's football game. They were taking off their coats, pulling leftovers out of the fridge for a late dinner, when she'd said it. Her mother had kept moving, staring into the fridge and not responding, while her brother reminded her that she'd miss all his sophomore year games—that that year, he may even get pulled up to varsity. Her dad was the only one to congratulate her. "Well, sounds good," he'd said, hugging her to his side, squeezing her shoulder while staring at the back of her mother. "But I'll miss my Employee of Forever,

my customer favorite,” he’d added, again squeezing her shoulder. He owned two convenience stores in town where Elle had worked since she was twelve. “Sounds good,” he’d said again.

It was hardest to tell Sam. He’d simply said, “Okay.” They’d agreed to stay together.

While her school wasn’t technically downtown, since the moment she’d accepted, Elle wanted to see everything. At first, she’d pictured herself living in some high rise a block from the Capitol, walking past monuments each day, but she quickly realized her school was in an area more surrounded by grocery stores and gas stations than famous landmarks or buildings. And, as her classmate Billy Harrington had reminded her during their first week of classes, “it’s the law no building can be more than twenty feet taller than the width of the street it faces.” There were no high rises. Elle had nodded.

But still, the city was close, and she had already figured out all the metro routes that went downtown, the map bright and colorful, each metro line snaking around the center, the whole thing like some tangled, flattened rainbow. So finally, after the first few weeks, she headed downtown. And it was there, on the metro, navigating her way to the National Monument, that she first met Tyler.

Green. A glimpse of it. It was what she had noticed about him first.

Elle had just switched metro lines even though she realized later she hadn't needed to, and now she sat on a crowded train, trying to blend in, trying not to stare at any one person too long. The car was packed, people standing together, holding onto the slippery metal railings above, and Elle made herself smaller in her seat as the train lurched forward, pulling people's bodies with it, making the whole crowd sway.

She saw him first then—the green, a gap in the crowd. She had been looking straight ahead, her eyes moving across everyone's torso, when she noticed the different color—not bright, but muted, olive. It was a uniform, she realized as the train gained speed, growing louder. One of those ones she had only seen in movies: the camouflaged pants; jacket; heavy, tan boots with the pants tucked into them. The army. Military. She scolded herself for not really knowing the difference. She stared.

The train pulled to a stop at the next station and people turned sideways, sliding past each other as the doors dinged open, and Elle lost sight of him, the color. Still, she kept her eyes locked in place, and when the doors dinged shut again and the last person in the aisle moved into their little sliver of space, she could finally see him fully, and she noticed he was looking at her too.

When she met his eyes, Elle turned fast to the window, which was now blackened by the tunnel and only showed a dark reflection of herself, and held her breath. Her insides were hot, had spiked when she saw him—his thin, tanned face; short, brown hair; tall, long body—and she waited for her blood to settle. She exhaled.

Minutes later, the train stopped again, and Elle finally glanced back to where he had been, her head still bent slightly toward the window. It was emptier now, the majority of the crowd and the old woman who'd been sitting beside her gone, and she turned fully back to the center of the car, searching, but didn't see him. And then he sat down next to her.

Elle held her bag tighter in her lap.

“Sorry,” he said as he shifted in the seat, his shoulder bumping hers just slightly.

“No problem,” Elle said, a little too loud, breathless. She turned back to the window and looked at herself. She ran her hands hard down the back of her head.

They rode to the next stop in silence. He adjusted his legs in the aisle. Elle moved a little toward the window, tucking her hair behind her ears.

The train sputtered on the track, slowing down then speeding up, and again, with the momentum, his shoulder brushed against hers.

“Sorry,” he repeated, laughing once under his breath, the kind that was directed at himself. Elle looked at him fast.

He was smiling, shaking his head and scooting away from her, but then he turned and looked at her too. His eyes were bright, wrinkled at the corners.

“No problem,” Elle said again.

He held his smile in place and nodded.

From up close, Elle could tell he was older than she was, could see a few silver hairs at the soft sides of his temples. She didn't think it could have been more than a handful of years, but he was handsome in a way the boys her age weren't yet. She stared at him a moment longer, noticing how his thin cheeks folded in creases around his smile, how his teeth were bright against his skin, how his hair was buzzed on either side, so short, she could see his scalp through it. She had the sudden urge to touch it. She looked away.

“Probably shouldn't be sitting in a seat, taking up all your space,” he said, shrugging. He clasped his hands together in his lap and pushed on his knuckles. “But it's been so crowded today, I don't even know why,” he said. “Thought I'd take the opportunity.”

Elle nodded.

“It's not always this crowded?” she finally asked, the question coming out of her mouth before she'd really thought about it. This happened whenever she was nervous, numb, she knew. She'd go on autopilot, which luckily, made her seem like a normal person, outgoing, even—masked her nerves. It was why she was so good at marketing pitches, presentations, interviews—talking to customers at her dad's stores. She'd been working on it since high school, she'd guessed, since the day her marketing teacher, Mr. Jurek, had made them pass the Meet and Greet Handshake Test. They all had had to go out into the hall and come back in one at a time, greeting him as if he were some client, businessman—anyone they wanted to impress. If it was awkward, tongue-tied, or

confusing at all, they failed. They had to do it till they passed. Elle had failed the first time. Passed the second.

“Not usually,” he said. “Not at this time. Rush hour, of course, but not at,” he paused to check his watch, “one.”

Elle nodded again. She swallowed.

“Where are you headed?” he asked, still pushing on his knuckles.

“The Monument,” she said. “Just moved here, so I’m out exploring today. Seemed like a good place to start.” She touched the top of her bag and then put her hands at her sides.

“Oh yeah?” he said. He shifted in his seat, facing her more fully. “From where?”

“Minnesota,” she said, at once embarrassed of the Midwest but glad it was at least far away. She was careful with the vowels, too, had worked not to have an accent.

“Ah,” he said. He smiled, his cheeks creasing again. “Cold.”

“Yes,” Elle said. They stared directly at each other for a moment, then looked forward as the train stopped. Elle paused, waiting to see if he’d get up, get off, but instead, he looked back to her and asked her why she moved.

“Graduate school,” she said. “For marketing. It’s actually out in the suburbs, but I like the program.” She leaned slightly against the window as she spoke.

“Nice,” he said.

“But what do you do?” Elle asked, her voice rising. She glanced back at her reflection and sat up straighter.

“I’m in the Army, as I guess you can guess,” he said, rubbing his hands up and down his thighs, his uniform. “I actually hate to leave work in my ACU’s, but I forgot my bag this morning. I’m at the Pentagon now.”

Elle pictured the Pentagon, the images she’d seen on TV, online, during 9/11. She wanted to ask what he did there, but was too worried it was implied. “How long?” she asked instead.

“I’ve only been here a few months, actually. So I guess we’re both kind of new to DC.”

Before she could respond, a new crowd of people stepped on the train, and he scooted closer to her, making room in the aisle, his shoulder now fully against hers. She could feel the heat from it, the space it had been when he pulled away.

“So, where else are you going today?” he asked, looking at the aisle then back to her. His voice dragged a little at the start, like he was searching for a question.

Elle rolled in her lips and fixed her voice. “I guess, probably, everywhere. Well, hopefully. Lincoln. Jefferson. World War Two. Museums if I have the time. That’s what I read to do, anyways.”

“That’s a full day,” he said, smiling. She noticed how well his teeth fit together. She clenched her jaw.

“Well, when in Rome,” she said, immediately wishing she hadn’t. He laughed, and they both turned to watch a couple with a stroller push their way into the aisle. The baby screamed and he smiled, looking back to Elle and raising his eyebrows. She laughed even though she wasn’t exactly sure why.

The train picked up speed then and Elle moved her hands back on top of her bag. She could feel his eyes on them, and she stared at her fingers too as if she'd never seen them before.

“Well I hope you get to see it all,” he said. He cleared his throat. “I guess you’re the next stop, then, right?”

Elle didn't want to take out her map, but she thought he was right.

“Smithsonian?” she said.

“Yes,” he said.

People were standing around them now, getting ready to exit, and something sank in Elle's stomach as she thought about leaving. The train hummed, slowed, and Elle could feel the space between them in the silence, how heavy it was.

He leaned back in his seat, looking out the window, and back to her. “Well, alright,” he said. “I hope you have fun.” He smiled a different smile now, fast, his mouth closed, and stood up, making room for her to leave.

Elle got up and stared at him. He was taller than she expected, and she noticed for the first time how he had the exact same eye color as her—the dark blue she got from her mother and people always complimented. It made him feel familiar in a strange way. She dipped her head and stepped past him, their bodies just skimming, and went to the door. She turned to him and waved, pausing for a moment, her pulse hard, then stepped out.

On the platform, Elle breathed and looked up at the waffled cement ceiling. She pulled her bag higher on her shoulder and shook her head. You're going to have to get better at this, she told herself, as she stepped forward, her insides still electric, blood still

buzzing. She took another step—but then she felt someone touch her shoulder, and when she turned around, there he was.

He had his hands in his pockets, was shaking his head too, looking down for a second, then up at her.

“Would you like to go out sometime?” he asked. “You know, I just thought I had to ask.” He shrugged, smiling. “I don’t know.”

Elle stared at him, her eyes moving over the details of his uniform, focusing on his left breast pocket, his last name stitched in small black thread: Clery.

He must have noticed, because the next thing he did, as people pushed past them on either side, was hold out his hand and say, “I’m Tyler.”

The day of their date, Elle researched her theory about the power of three, jotting down anything that could prove important:

- “For a typical experiment, you should plan to repeat it at least three times, although the more trials, the better.” (ScienceBuddies.com)
- “Think back to Goldilocks. Three choices enable us to avoid ones that are too hot and too cold, too big and too small, and select the one that is just right.” (ModernMarketer)
- “The Earth is the third planet from the sun. It makes for the perfect climate.” (Multiple)
- “The English language assigns greater importance to the first three by giving them unique endings – 1st, 2nd, and 3rd.” (Business Insider)
- The human brain either does not care or does not remember who is beyond third. In many contests, people stop counting after third place. For example, the Olympics.” (Marketing Corner)
- “Three events going the same way three times in a row causes people to believe they are observing a streak when applied to such incidents as coin tosses, basketball shots and stock index movements (or the deaths of legendary Hollywood actors). ‘You reach maximal streakiness at three events,’ Professor Carlson said.” (New York Times)

When she was done, she stared at the list until her eyes blurred, a metronome counting in her head, one, two, three, one, two three, one, two, three, one.

When Elle left for his house, she knew she'd be early. Tyler had given her careful directions—which metro line to take, which stop to get off at, which end of the station to use, how to walk to his house, but even so, Elle had built in time to get lost, which she did, at first, after walking out the wrong end of the Dupont Circle station. She had stood in the middle of the circle, the empty fountain behind her like the center of a compass, and had spent ten minutes orienting herself. It didn't make sense to her yet, the alphabet streets and blocks, the diagonals and one-ways, and she was thankful for her careful planning, glad she had had time to figure it out, wouldn't have to call him and admit she was clueless.

But now she knew where she was and still had twenty minutes to kill. She didn't want to be early, so instead, she walked around the city blocks, trying not to trip on the sidewalk as she stared up at all the tall, brightly colored row houses, their glossy doors, and square patches of lawn, which everyone seemed to decorate differently: some were overgrown, some manicured, some filled in with gravel, bricks. She loved all of it, though, smiling to herself as she walked down each street, passing people who probably thought she lived nearby. She smiled at each of them as she went, too, even as she walked faster, warming herself against the cooling October air, the wind, which seemed to be

growing stronger and pulled her hair up over her head, in front of her face, in and out of her mouth.

Minutes later, Elle checked her phone and decided it was time to arrive. Her heart hit her chest harder at the thought, but still, she knew she wasn't nervous in the same way she had been on the metro. She was prepared this time, ready, her autopilot, Meet and Greet persona already prepped. It was like an interview, almost, she thought. She had never been on a real first date, not like this one, and it felt easier to think of it that way. She had dressed the part too, had finally found an outfit she had never worn with Sam: the silky, blue tank top Corinne had given her, the heeled boots she had promised her mother she'd actually wear but never did. She straightened her top now as she walked down Eighteenth Street, the numbers climbing closer to 1826.

But when she got to his house, she paused. He had explained he lived in the top floor apartment of a row house, but as she looked at the narrow, dark green house in front of her, she was confused. It looked just like all the others, there were no separate entrances, and Elle felt hot and looked back down at the number she had written, afraid she'd gotten it wrong. She kept staring at the house, hoping to notice something different, but as her eyes traced over the green painted brick, the sloping iron stairs, the royal blue door, she didn't.

Elle inhaled sharply and stepped toward the house, pushing open the iron gate from the street. Worst case, she'd be wrong, she told to herself. It'd be fine. She'd have to call him. Not the end of the world, she repeated, although she knew she didn't believe it. She walked up the steps and knocked on the door, stepping back and looking down the

street as she waited. The sun was just setting over the tops of buildings, the low skyline forming a mismatched pattern across the orangey-pink sky, and she could see her breath in the air.

“You made it,” he said as he opened the door.

Elle turned to him. She smiled.

“Hi,” she said brightly. “This is a great place,” she added, not letting any silence settle in.

He moved aside and she went in, taking off her jacket just as he went to kiss her on the cheek, making her arm hit him in the chest. He laughed and pulled away, reaching back out to take her coat.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Of course. I’m upstairs.” He nodded toward the steps. They were in a hallway, little mailboxes in the wall to one side, and Elle felt stupid for not realizing how the apartments fit together. She walked up the stairs, stepping carefully on the heels of her boots.

“Right there,” he called over her shoulder as they stepped up to a new landing, pointing to a door that was already open. “I leave it open so I can hear the front door,” he said as Elle went inside.

The apartment was nice, Elle thought, as she looked around. Nicer than she’d expected, although she didn’t know why she hadn’t expected it to be nice. But it was anyhow: large and open with tanned, wooden floors, a white and gray kitchen along one side that opened to the living room. There were framed pictures everywhere, too: a black

and white photo of a farmhouse, cityscapes, some modern looking, bright collage above the large TV. She swallowed and fixed the bottom of her shirt.

“I’m glad you could make it,” he said, hanging her coat behind the door. “Any problems?” he asked.

Elle turned from the apartment back to him. She made her voice even, pausing for a moment and staring at him before she told him it was fine, that there was no trouble. He wore a blue button down shirt, dark jeans, expensive looking brown shoes. He looked different than she remembered, somehow, even more handsome, intimidating in the way his shirt was so neat and pressed, his hair so neat and short, how he stood up so straight, like he had ironed posts running down his shins, planting him into the ground. For the first time, Elle wondered exactly how old he was.

“I’m glad,” he said. He stared at her and smiled. “Okay,” he said. He walked into the kitchen. “You hungry?”

“Yes,” Elle said, although she wasn’t, her stomach still in knots. When he turned away, she looked at herself in the mirror by the door and twisted her hair away from her neck. She did look pretty, at least, she thought. It’d been a while since she’d dressed up, put on more makeup in the way KC had taught her, and she was glad for it now.

“But how have you been? Thanks for having me,” she said as she walked into the kitchen, taking a seat at one of the stools at the island, keeping her back straight.

“Thanks for coming,” he said as he leaned into the fridge, taking out two bowls of something. He took it to the counter, taking off the cover, then grabbed another bowl, some chips, and slid it all in front of her.

“I made guacamole,” he said. “Everyone likes guacamole.” He shrugged. “But this one’s spicy and this one’s not. I didn’t know. Jalapenos,” he said.

Elle smiled and looked at him. “Thanks,” she said. She paused and took a chip. She took a small bite.

“Oh, sorry, and yeah what can I get you to drink?” He ran his hands down the front of his shirt. He pointed to the fridge and the cabinet. “I have everything. Well, mostly.”

Elle noticed a beer can on the counter and looked back to him.

“Beer’s fine. Whatever’s fine.”

He laughed and looked at the beer can. “You can have whatever. Don’t feel like you have to drink this crap.”

Elle half smiled and shrugged.

“I have wine opened, too?” He opened the fridge and looked at her.

“Sure,” she said, and he poured her a glass.

The air seemed to shift then as they looked at each other and cheered, like a taut rope loosening. Or, Elle thought, at least for her it did. She always wondered that—when she felt nervous or relaxed with someone, if it was just her, or because they both did. It was like back when she was young and had sleepovers with girls she didn’t know well. There was always that silence right before they went to sleep. It was awkward at first until her mind wandered and she forgot about it. She never knew if it was just her or if it was because the other person felt the same. Still, now, whatever it was, it felt different,

and they took another sip, still smiling and looking at each other over the tops of their drinks.

Tyler set his beer down and leaned on both arms on the other side of the island. He looked down at her and laughed once.

“You know, I wasn’t sure if you would come,” he said.

Elle laughed and crossed her legs.

“Why wouldn’t I?” she said. The wine gave her courage, and she took another sip, setting the glass down gently.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Just a funny way to meet someone, you know? Hope you didn’t meet any other guys on the way down?” His face looked warm. Elle smiled.

“No,” she said. She pulled her wine closer.

He laughed.

“Okay,” he said, hitting the counter and stepping away from it. He rolled up his sleeves. “Let’s get this going.”

Tyler turned back to the fridge and opened it, taking out several packages wrapped in tan paper. He set them on the counter, and from behind him, Elle could see the slick pink of salmon, the marbled brown of steaks.

“I didn’t know what you liked, so I got everything,” he said, his back still to her. He opened a cabinet and grabbed some spices, rubbing them into the meat.

“I like everything,” Elle said.

“Good,” he said, looking at her over his shoulder and then back down to the meat.

“Can I help with anything?” Elle asked, even though she knew what he would say. She stood halfway up.

“No, no,” he said, turning around, his fingers slick with spices. “Just sit. Relax.”

Elle sat down, and as he turned away from her again, she leaned back a little to see herself in the mirror again. She pressed on her eyelashes and smiled at herself without meaning to. She wished KC could see her, the apartment, all of it.

“Alright,” he said, washing his hands and looking at her. “Alright.”

Elle hadn't noticed it at first, but there was a little deck off the living room where Tyler kept a grill. It was small, not more than a few feet wide, but they could both stand there as he flipped the meat, checked on the salmon, and Elle liked it. It faced the alley, didn't have any spectacular views, but she loved seeing the blurs of people pass by on the streets on either end, looking into the windows of the other houses nearby, feeling the cold air move underneath her shirt. She leaned against the railing as Tyler flipped the meat, leaning past her to reach for another set of tongs. His arm brushed her back as he moved.

“Almost done,” he said.

“No rush,” Elle said. She watched him close the grill, the wide plane of his back. It was dark out now, an inky royal blue, but it was still easy to see with all the streetlights, the half moon. She looked up at it as Tyler finished cooking, her neck craning, hurting just slightly.

“I'd say sixty-two percent,” Tyler said.

“What?” Elle said. She looked at him. He was staring up too.

“The moon,” he said. “Sixty-two percent.” He pointed up.

Elle nodded. The wind blew, making her shirt ripple.

“Illumination. In Iraq, we’d measure it because at forty percent it gets too hard for them to see, twenty percent, they really can’t, but below fifteen and our night vision stuff is no good either.”

Elle nodded again. She leaned against the railing, not sure what to say.

“Anyways,” he said. He put his hand on the lid of the grill, still looking at her. “If I timed this right, these will all be perfect. Ready?”

Elle nodded.

He lifted the grill and looked down. “Perfect,” he said, his voice loud, echoing in the alley.

She stepped forward to look.

The rest of dinner passed quickly. They ate at a little table between the kitchen and living room, and Elle ate everything: the salmon, steak, a salad he had made earlier and pulled out of the fridge. It was the best meal she’d had in weeks—her dinners were mostly tuna sandwiches or cereal—and she had to remember to chew slowly. They both drank more, too, and her whole body felt light, like the way she had that one time Sam’s friend from Chicago had visited and told her she was perfect—a compliment she was sure she would remember for the rest of her life.

“More salmon?” he asked as she finished the last bite on her plate.

She shook her head no, chewing, pausing in her story about why she had decided to go to UMDD, even though he hadn’t asked.

It was a story she'd repeated often, and was thankful for now as she had tried to change the subject. He had just been telling her about how he went to Maryland, majored in engineering, but hadn't done anything related to engineering in the nine years since he graduated. Elle had done the math in her head instantly: thirty-one. It surprised her, shocked her, slightly, but she didn't flinch. And she didn't want him to think about it, ask her when she'd graduated, find out how old she was, so instead, she'd started in on the story.

"And then eventually, I decided to leave," she said, using the word eventually to mean the summer between graduation and graduate school, although she figured to him, it could mean a few years.

"That's nice, though," he said, leaning back in his seat, then forward, adjusting his elbows on the table. His napkin was on his plate. "To stay in one spot."

Elle chewed her lips and shook her head, looking at him. "It gets old."

He laughed. He had already told her how he lived in Georgia and Nashville and Kentucky, although she hadn't asked too much about any of it, wasn't sure what was polite, what was probing.

Elle leaned back in her seat and breathed slowly. The radio playing from the kitchen grew louder as the song changed and Elle reached for the last sip in her glass.

"I have a confession to make," Tyler said, half smiling and leaning forward on his elbows, dangling his beer can out in front of him.

"What?" Elle said. Her chest tightened.

Tyler nodded toward the kitchen. “I love this song,” he said. He finished his beer in one sip and set it down, the can light and wobbly on the table.

“What?” Elle smiled.

“Can’t help it.” Tyler reached for his beer again, smiling, even though it was still empty as he brought it to his lips again.

Elle paused, leaning forward a little, and listened. It was that bad, top ten pop song that’d been playing on the radio for a few weeks now, the one from some eighteen year old girl that had just moved from being cute to sexy, which Elle felt old enough to think was odd.

“Really?” she asked, tucking her hair behind her ears, her head still tilted toward the kitchen.

Tyler mouthed some of the words and Elle laughed her real laugh for the first time. They listened to the rest of the song.

“Well,” Tyler finally said when it had ended, “I guess I should put this away.” He moved his napkin around on his plate.

“Yes, thank you,” Elle said. She sighed. “It was delicious.”

They stared at each other for another second over the empty plates, the dishes, and then finally Tyler stood up. “Good,” he said. “I’m glad.” He picked up two servings plates and walked into the kitchen.

Elle stared back at him and smiled. Then she nodded to herself and stood up too, picking up some more dishes, following him.

It felt darker in the apartment now, the few lights glowing overhead, the dim lamps in the corners of the room, and Elle stepped over the shadows on the floor as she helped clean up. She insisted on filling the dishwasher, which was always her job at home, even though she had to be careful as she leaned down, the wine and her heels making her legs loose. Still, she felt even more aware of everything: the muffled voices and cars outside, the sharp angles of the apartment, the curves of Tyler's shoulders. She made herself concentrate on the dishes, though, noticing how he had a full set of plates, matching white ramekins and mugs, an entire set filling up the racks.

When she was done, she stood up and wiped her hands on her thighs. Tyler was still at the sink washing a pan, and Elle folded her arms together and turned to the fridge. There were three pictures, and she leaned closer, looking at each: a woman with red hair and a child; a couple standing on some steps, announcing their engagement; an image of a restaurant Elle realized was a menu.

Tyler looked at her from the sink and paused, turning off the faucet and wiping his hands on a towel.

"Don't worry," he said. "Not my kid."

"No, I didn't—" Elle laughed. "I know." She rubbed her hands over her forearms and Tyler came up behind her, his body leaning into hers.

"My sister and her kid, they live in Sacramento, friends from school, and the best pizza," he said, his finger dancing in arcs from one photo to another.

"Nice," Elle said. She didn't move, their bodies still touching. "They're nice photos."

They stood still for another moment, and then he stepped away, and Elle moved back so they stood facing each other in the space between the kitchen counter and island. Elle leaned back against the island, and a cool chill ran over her body, under her skin.

“Thanks,” he said. His shirtsleeves were still rolled up, and he pushed them higher, then leaned against the opposite counter matching her. They both looked away.

“Well, I’m glad you could come,” he said a minute later. He cleared his throat. He looked back to her. She adjusted her hips against the island.

“You know, if you wanted to go out, too, there are lots of places around here. I mean if you wanted to see the city some more, I know you said you wanted to explore. Could get another drink or something. Nightcap. Whatever you want.”

Elle nodded but didn’t move. She could feel her heartbeat in her chest, her neck, the soft insides of her elbows, and she breathed quietly, smoothing her hair and glancing down at her bare arms and shoulders.

He looked at her and didn’t say anything. The noises from outside seemed to pause then, too, the silence spreading over the room.

“Or whatever works,” he said. “If you need to leave that’s fine too. I know it’s kind of a hike.”

Elle didn’t say anything. Didn’t move. Something else was ahold of her now, not her Meet and Greet persona, not nerves, but something else, and she pushed herself off the counter, stepped forward, her legs between his, looked up at him, and kissed him.

That night she had the dream their dog died. It was technically Sam's dog—he had gotten it during sophomore year of college, but she had picked it out, took care of it just as much—loved it just as much. She'd been having the dream since the last time she talked to him. She imagined leashes breaking, cars going too fast around the curve on Asher Road. How every time, it was her fault. She'd wake up in a cold sweat, throwing silent prayers out into the universe that it wasn't true. She couldn't imagine him losing the two things he loved most.

That weekend was the warmest it had been in weeks, and everyone was outside. Elle was thankful for it, too, because she didn't want to be indoors—her mind constantly replaying the night, making her smile and keep moving—unable to sit still.

She had talked to KC the morning after, even though she had ignored her calls at first as she sat at Tyler's eating the omelet he had made her. They sat at the island, the sun streaming in through the windows, lighting up the little flecks in the granite, and she squinted at him as they sat together, joking about the fact she didn't drink coffee. They were matching, Elle thought as she glanced at him during a break in the conversation, both of them in his white T-shirts. For the first time, she wondered how many girls had been in this same position, wearing the same T-shirt, eating the same omelet. She shook the thought away. It didn't matter, she decided. This was just the type of night people had in the city—this was dating nowadays. The thought actually made her feel better, even powerful, slightly. It didn't matter if she never even saw him again, she told herself. This is what she'd wanted.

Even as he asked her if she wanted to stay, commenting on the nice day and asking if she wanted to go to the park or something, she had felt glad to say no. She said she had to get back home and finish work, even though she knew she wouldn't do anything that day, was too distracted. Plus, she'd told him, she didn't have any extra

clothes. Who plans for this sort of thing? she joked. He'd shrugged and kissed her, the taste of coffee on his lips.

On the walk home from the metro station, Elle called KC back. She explained it all: the apartment, dinner, what he was wearing, how he was thirty-one. KC had done her little scream when she'd said that, commenting that she didn't know he was that old. That's pretty old, she had said. You're set on being married for three years and having kids when you're that age. Elle had laughed but turned defensive. He doesn't look that old, or act like it, she said. Anyways, she had added. He's not me.

KC had asked all about the details, the sex, how it had happened, what it was like, but as Elle fiddled with her keys, unlocking her apartment door, she didn't say much. It was better, she told her, not explaining about the kissing in the kitchen, up on the counter, how'd they'd walked half-dressed back to his bedroom, kissing all the way and then not, their mouths just overlapping, breathing into each other. It was just a one night stand, she said instead, the phrase strange yet familiar on her lips. Then she changed the subject, asking KC about her their friends Hannah and Ash, her work, whether or not they were all going to the cabin that weekend.

Finally, still disappointed, KC hung up to go to work. Elle felt strange being in her apartment, the quiet, her body and mind still anxious, so she changed her clothes and went on a run. It was something she'd always done, especially in Minnesota where there was no good place to be alone. There were trails everywhere there, and there was even one that ran straight through the woods from her house to her dad's store on Poplar Street, the one where both she and Sam had worked. Sometimes, they'd walk home

together after a night shift, taking turns closing their eyes, walking forward in the dark, even though most times, she just ran on it alone. She missed the trails there now as her feet pounded on the pavement around her apartment complex, her school, but the feeling was still the same. The emptiness. People always told her it was such a good habit to run, the best time to think, but Elle went running not to think. It was the one time she wasn't.

When she got back to her apartment an hour later, the sun still strong in the windows, her skin glistening with sweat, the hair around her face stuck to her cheeks and forehead, her phone rang. She ignored it at first, heading straight to the kitchen and drinking from the faucet between hard breaths, but then grabbed it from the counter. She figured it was KC, bored or on break, wanting to chat some more, then had a sudden flash that could it be Tyler, that maybe she forgot something, but when she grabbed it and looked at the screen, it said "Home." Elle watched it ring a moment longer then answered.

"I've been thinking about Thanksgiving," her mother said after her hello. "It's almost the end of October and flights are just going to get more expensive, so we need to figure out what you're doing."

Elle held the phone to her ear and filled a glass with water. She drank it all before she replied.

"Okay," she said.

"I've been looking, and it's already expensive. Did you check your class schedule? I think we need to figure this out, Elle. It's already the end of October."

Elle moved into the living room and sat down on the floor, stretching out one of her legs and grabbing her toes.

“Okay,” she said again. “I’ll look.”

“Okay,” her mother said. Elle could picture her moving around the kitchen, putting away dishes or flipping through the mail, always doing something productive.

“What’s up?” Elle asked.

“Just getting back from Emily’s. She’s been having a hard time this year, horrible class. Been trying to help her get ahead a little.”

Elle readjusted her legs, stretching out the other.

“I told her she could have avoided this. Told her to teach third and not fifth but here we are. Your dad’s at the store. Been busier this time of year. Not sure why, kind of odd. People coming back from the lake, I guess. Been a line at the pump every afternoon.”

Elle heard her open and close a door, the familiar squeak of the pantry.

“And Tommy’s at Ross’s. Doing some history project, although I’m sure they’re not.”

“Funny,” Elle said.

“What have you been doing? How was class this week?”

Elle swallowed and sat up straighter. “I’m good,” she said. “Classes are good. Still working on our client projects.”

“That’s good. Keep busy. What’re you doing now?”

“Was just talking to KC.”

“Oh, yeah? How is she? I saw her mom at Lund’s the other day. She asked about you, of course. Told her you were living the dream, doing your thing.” Her voice held the familiar, sarcastic tilt Elle had learned to ignore.

“That’s nice,” she said.

“You doing anything else? Anything special this weekend?” her mother asked.

Elle rolled in her lips and held them there, crossing her legs and leaning forward, picking at the carpet. “No,” she said. “Been relaxing. Been busy.”

“Well, that’s good. Glad you have the project.”

It wasn’t the first time she had lied to her mother, even if it wasn’t really lying. Still, it felt different now. There was no way she would find out, hear gossip at school or the store, catch a glimpse of Tyler in the driveway. Elle didn’t like avoiding the truth, but in a way, she did like having something separate, new. And it would be ridiculous to tell her, Elle thought. That would be embarrassing, childish. It was a casual thing. Plus, she would ask too many questions, bring up Sam even though Elle had told her to please, please not mention his name.

“But how are you?” Elle asked. “What’s new? How’s school? How’s your class?”

“It’s fine,” her mom said. “Same old.”

Elle nodded even though she knew she couldn’t see her.

“Nice,” she said. “That’s nice.”

On Monday she was still thinking about him, even though she had moved into the area of actively trying not to think about him, which made it all the more difficult. It wasn't that she had expected to hear from him, knew it'd only been two days, and that again, this was all normal, her first fling—she didn't even want to like him—but still, she wanted to know it wasn't her. She'd done everything right. Even if she was nine years behind.

[She had debated about texting him, too, saying thank you, but she thought it was too formal. Even if it was polite, it could seem desperate at the same time. Send the wrong message. She'd gone back and forth for so long, it became too late to do it anyways.]

So that night she went to class early, happy for a real distraction. They were one month into their client projects now and were just wrapping up secondary research on their target markets, would start mapping out their plan for collecting primary data soon. Elle and her group were working on the State Lottery, trying to figure out why young people in the area weren't playing the lottery, which would eventually fuel a promotional campaign next semester. Basically, as their professor had explained as they read over their client objectives, the lottery was afraid its clientele would die out if they didn't make a change. Younger people weren't playing. It scared them. It had all seemed so dramatic to Elle, but true, she realized, when she thought about the fact she had never

played the Lottery, never even thought about it, even though she had sold plenty of tickets at the gas station. When Mr. Cunningham came in to buy one everything Thursday, she'd always just smiled and said good luck, always feeling a little bit bad for him.

Still, it was a fun project to work on, especially when she compared it to other groups' clients (a dry cleaners, preschool, medical insurance firm). And she liked her group, too, Leila, the blonde from Kentucky who'd lived here for years and Elle had hung out with a few times, and a few other people they'd sat near the first week of class. It'd all been easy so far, hadn't demanded too much of her time, and now they were all just summarizing, sharing their research from the past few weeks, categorizing their insights. They sat in the corner of the room filling out a chart for their target market, which Elle couldn't help completing mentally, just for herself:

Demographics (Age, geographic region, education, income, etc.)	Psychographics (Values, attitudes, lifestyle, emotions)	Behaviors (What they read, watch, who influences them)
22, DC, (MN?), grad school, stipend, single, Caucasian	Exploration, positive, Busy, happy, guilty	Fiction, magazines, news (sometimes), TV/film, mom, dad, Corinne, Tommy, KC, Sam, Tyler?)

“Thirty-three percent?” Leila said.

Elle looked up fast.

“What?”

“Thirty-one percent? The number now choosing to live at home? Isn’t that what you said earlier?” Leila asked. She smiled, her head of curly blonde hair tilted toward her, eyes open so wide Elle could imagine them as eyeballs and not just eyes. Elle felt hot as the rest of the group turned to look at her.

“Yeah, I think, yeah,” Elle said, flipping back through her notebook, her power of three table and notes sending a different wave of heat through her body. “Yeah, that’s what I found. Thirty-one. Right. You’re right.”

“Awesome,” Leila said, leaning back over her desk. Her voice trailed off and Elle looked back down at her own notes. She breathed quietly, then scooted her desk closer, trying to pay attention, realign her thoughts.

At some point that evening, Elle missed his call. Her phone was still silenced from class, and hours later, as she stood at the kitchen counter eating cereal for a late dinner, she saw his name, saw he had left a voicemail. She stood still a moment, staring at it. The only people who left her voicemails nowadays were her parents or the dentist office, and Elle held the phone out in front of her, playing it on speaker, too nervous to hold it to her cheek:

Hi, Elle. Sorry to miss you. It's Tyler. Just wanted to call and say hi and see what you were up to this week. I'm actually headed out of town for a week on Thursday for my cousin's wedding, but, yeah, anyways, well, if you're around, your place is kind of on the way, on the way there, the airport, I mean, so I could maybe come out, Wednesday night, stop by or something. Anyways, I was thinking, if you were around. And free. Unless you have plans, no problem. Okay, well, hope to talk to you. Hope you're having a good day. Alright. Bye. Talk to you later.

Elle looked at the screen and replayed it, listening to the cadence of his voice, imagining his mouth moving around his words. She dialed.

"He wants to come over," she said as soon as KC picked up.

"Tonight?"

"No. Wednesday."

"Did you just talk to him?"

“He left a voicemail.”

“Ho, ho. Mature. No text?”

Elle laughed. She put her bowl in the sink.

“I know.”

“Are you going to let him?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s kind of serious.”

“What? No it’s not.”

“I mean, two dates in a week, coming to your place, yes.”

“Well I don’t want it to be.”

“But it is.”

“Well I don’t want him to.”

“Okay.”

“That’d be too weird. Don’t you think that’d be too weird?”

Elle opened and closed the fridge. She watched its light turn on and off.

“I don’t know. Your choice. Sounds like he likes you, though. Must have done something right Friday.”

“No, I don’t think I’m going to. That’s too much. My place is weird.”

“Whatever you want.”

“Do you think I should?”

“It’s up to you.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I know you will.”

“When do you think I have to call him back?”

“When did he call?”

“Like fifteen minutes ago.”

“I don’t know. Now?”

“No. No. I bet I can wait till tomorrow. I had class tonight. I could still be in class.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll call him tomorrow. Maybe leave him a voicemail.”

“Good call.”

“How are you?”

“Good. About to go to Riverside with Ash.”

“Ah. Jealous. Enjoy. Say hi.”

“Will do.”

“Okay. Love you. Bye. I’ll let you know what I decide.”

“Okay. You too.”

Elle hung up and went to her room. She changed and lay down on her bed even though it was too early to sleep. She closed her eyes and listened to his voicemail again. And then again, replaying it until she’d memorized it without meaning to.

She decided it wasn't a good idea. She had woken up mad at herself for thinking about it so much, obsessing over the voicemail, and she deleted it that morning. This was not the plan, she told herself as she got dressed, combing her hand hard through the knots in her hair. You need to be more casual about this, she said. You broke up with Sam to be single. Not tied down. Explore. Not simply replace him. She said part of this under her breath as she continued to get ready. They were all lines she knew well, had been her mantra during the break up, reminders during the phone calls with Sam where she wanted to forget it all, keep dating and keep everyone happy. You can see him again, she thought, but not for a while. Not at your place. He'd know how old you are.

She decided to call him back at noon. It'd be like she was on her lunch break, she thought, although she was doing work from home that day. She hoped to miss him, though. Leave a message. But hours later, after completing statistics homework for her research methods class, she dialed, and he answered on the second ring. Elle was still sitting at her desk and flinched at his voice, scooting her chair back hard.

“Hi,” he said. “Good to hear from you how are you?”

Elle said hello. That she was good. She swallowed and looked out the window, back to her computer screen. “How are you?” she asked.

“Hope it wasn’t a bad time to call. I couldn’t remember when you said you had classes.”

“No, no, it was fine. Sorry, yes, been in class.”

“Have a good Sunday? It was so nice I tried to spend all day outside.”

“Yes. Yeah, it was.”

Elle stood up. She could feel the sweat under her arms, on the back of her neck. She walked into the living room.

“So you up to anything this week?” he asked.

“Just class, kind of busy, but it’s good.”

“Ah, okay. Well no worries if Wednesday doesn’t work. I just thought.”

“Yeah, yeah I do have class.”

“Okay, no problem, when I get back maybe.”

It was quiet and Elle chewed her lip, staring down at the floor. She walked back and forth beside the coffee table.

“It’s done at seven, though,” she added, fast, pausing after and tilting her head back, eyes shut hard, cringing slightly. She hadn’t meant to say it, at least part of her hadn’t meant to, but the words were there.

“Oh, yeah? Well I’m not done here until five anyways. With traffic, probably wouldn’t get there until right around then anyways.”

“Okay.”

“So that works?”

Elle stood still, then said yes. She gave him her address, directions, and agreed to see him the next day. When she hung up, she stood in the middle of the room for another minute, mind blank, unsure what to do, how to move.

Elle tried to plan how it would go. She figured when he arrived, they'd both be hungry, so she could suggest that Mexican place she'd gone with Leila a few weeks ago. She didn't know the area well, spent most of her time on campus, but she figured it was a good option. She couldn't tell if he meant he was planning to sleep over either, as he'd explained he was leaving for the airport the next day and her place was on the way. She assumed he had, but it made her nervous to think about it, so she ignored the thought and tried on four different sweaters instead, trying to find something that would look normal in class and nice after.

She couldn't focus in class, though, which she expected, even as they shared some of their findings, and Elle had apologized to Leila and Michael for her spacey-ness and how she'd have to rush out after class. But they'd agreed to meet the next day, and Elle promised she'd be back in the game.

Now it was 6:38, and he seemed like the kind of person who would be on time, Elle thought, so she kept an eye on the clock as she fixed her makeup and made sure everything was still intact from the cleaning she'd done the night before. The apartment looked normal enough, she'd decided. She'd put away a few pictures, one of the dog, worried he'd asked if it was hers, and one of her and her family from high school where she looked kind of the same but had braces. Everything else looked passable, though. It

was nothing like his place, but she was in graduate school, she reminded herself. That was some kind of excuse—no matter how old she really was.

Still, Elle had never liked having people over to her house. Not in high school or even in college. Nothing was wrong with the house itself, it was fine, but she didn't like the pressure she felt to entertain, the way people were in her own space. She only really had KC over, or Sam, and suggested to everyone else that they hang out at her dad's store where they could take free candy and slushies. People preferred that anyways. But it made tonight feel all the more serious, as KC had again reminded her. She'd told Elle that if she was going to have him over and everything, she should tell him she wasn't looking for a relationship, had just ended a serious one, but Elle had said that was ridiculous. Presumptive. They were just sleeping together, another phrase that gave her a little thrill. Maybe if they saw each other again. You're going to see each other again, KC had said.

When Tyler knocked on the door, her whole body tensed. She waited a second, holding completely still, then, in one motion, she walked to the door and opened it.

He was holding a bottle of wine, which touched against her back as he hugged her, her body folding into his.

“Thank you,” she said as they stepped inside. She set it on the counter.

He walked to the middle of the living room and looked around.

“This is nice,” he said.

“Not really,” Elle said. She laughed and stood in the kitchen, looking at him. He wore jeans and long-sleeve, green shirt. He made the room look smaller. Seeing him, she

felt like she was back at his place, back in his bed. She wanted to be close to him but didn't move.

“It is,” he said. “Can I have the grand tour?”

Elle nodded, then finally walked to him and pointed at the couch. “That’s the couch,” she said. She smiled.

He looked at her and laughed. He grabbed her hand then let it go. Elle felt her fingers go numb, didn't move for a moment, and then caught herself and told him to follow her as she walked down the hallway. She flicked on the light in the bathroom, her bedroom. It all looked new to her too, how clean it was, everything put away in drawers.

“That’s it,” she said as they walked back to the kitchen.

“I like it,” he said, leaning against the counter, the wine bottle between them. “I do. It’s all you need.”

“I guess so,” Elle said. They stared at each other. Elle breathed and put her hands on her hips. “So you hungry?” she asked. She knew her voice was false.

“I am,” he said. He folded his hands together on top of the counter, and Elle looked at his arms, his shoulders.

She told him about the Mexican place, adding that they could go anywhere, whatever he felt like, but he said it sounded great and then he straightened up, reaching into his pocket.

“Want me to drive?”

Elle nodded, not yet wanting to explain how her car was still back in Minnesota. He pulled her against his side, then let go, as they walked out the door.

It was cold out, the sky already dark as the clocks had just turned back, the days shortened, and Elle breathed in the sharp night air. She'd always loved fall, the way it felt like the whole world exhaling after summer, slightly sad but happy in a way, comfortable, like coming home after a long vacation.

Tyler led the way across the apartment parking lot, the tops of cars puddled with orange streetlight, and finally pointed to a silver sports car in the corner. Elle paused as she looked at the car, then stepped backward, confused, as Tyler walked around to her side and opened the door. She looked up at him and slid into the seat.

"Thanks," she said. He went to his side and got in. She looked at him.

"Well, this is fancy," she said, unable to help herself.

"Well, thank you," he said. "My mid-life crisis." He laughed once and reached over to squeeze her knee. "Lead the way," he said.

The restaurant was close by and Elle kept her eyes straight ahead, taking in the stoplights and street names, thankful she remembered which way to go. Five minutes later they were there, and Elle wasn't sure if he would open the door for her again, but it felt too strange to wait and find out, so she stepped out of the car.

Elle glanced around the restaurant as they went inside, for a moment wondering if they'd run into Leila, which was ridiculous she knew and only because she had been there with her before, but still, part of her hoped they would. She'd felt too strange to bring him up to her, figured it would be an easy way. They took a red booth in the back.

The conversation was easier now that they were out of her apartment, she thought, and even easier still as they both ordered Coronas. Elle held hers in both hands in front of

her, smiling and tearing at the corners of the label as Tyler told her about the wedding he was going to. It was his for his younger cousin, Rebecca, who was marrying someone she'd only known four months and no one really liked. Still, he said, it was a good reason to go to California. He would visit his sister too. He had a lot of leave to burn, which he explained was like vacation days.

Elle had never been to California, had never been farther west than North Dakota, and she asked him what it was like. He told her each city was different, but that he liked northern California best. The mix of forest and ocean. You'd like it, he said, swallowing a sip of beer.

"You know," he said. He pushed his beer away slightly. "I figured I should mention it." He rolled his lips in, tilting his head back and then forward. "I was married once, too. Divorced."

Elle looked up at him. She was ready to say something she wasn't sure of yet, but then the waitress came, and he scooted back and greeted her, ordering the fajitas they'd agreed to split. Elle looked down at the table between them, her mind blank, then had the sudden urge to laugh even though her body tightened. She thought back to KC's suggestion to tell him about her serious, five-year relationship. It seemed ridiculous now.

"Really," she said as the waitress left, half-smiling, chewing on her lip.

"Same kind of thing. Hadn't been dating that long. It's kind of military culture, too, so, you know. I don't know." He unrolled his napkin and moved his silverware around on the table. "I hope that doesn't freak you out," he said.

“No, no,” Elle said. She took a sip of her beer. She laughed without meaning to. She paused. “How long were you married?” she asked after a moment.

“Five years,” he said. “Although I was deployed for one of them.”

Elle nodded. She looked out to the restaurant and watched a crowd of high school kids taking pictures of each other. She looked back to him and recrossed her legs. She tried to breath quietly. She sipped her beer.

“When did you get divorced?” she asked. “It’s really not a big deal,” she added, fast, at the last minute.

“No, no it’s fine,” he said. “Last year.”

Elle nodded. She unrolled her napkin too.

“It was for the best, though. It’s way better now. Wasn’t right. Anyways,” he said.

The lamp above their table moved, flashing off the silverware. They both looked at the center of the table.

“Well,” Elle said. She leaned back and smiled. He matched her pose.

“You sure you’re not freaked out?” He said, his eyes bright. He shrugged. “I figured it’d be weird not to tell you, still weird to tell you, I know. Sorry.” He laughed and leaned forward, pulling his beer toward him but not taking a sip.

“No, no,” Elle said. She didn’t want to admit it, but she liked it in a way—how much older, how different he really was. “You know, I just ended a relationship too,” she said, hoping it may make her seem more serious, too, older.

“Really?”

“Yeah, five years too, actually,” Elle said. She pulled at a thread on the sleeve of her sweater.

“So, five years, college boyfriend, then?”

“Yeah,” Elle said. She was silent for a moment, knew their thoughts were aligning in the quiet.

“Do you know how old I am?” she finally said, leaning forward, her voice fast, her hair falling to the front of her shoulders. She heard the words as she spoke them.

“Twenty-three? Twenty-two?” he said. He shrugged, not flinching.

“Yeah,” Elle said, not sure she was hiding her surprise. “Twenty-two.” She felt strangely disappointed. “How’d you know?” She sat back up.

“I don’t know, grad school, didn’t mention a job. Seemed about right. A good twenty-two, though,” he said, smiling. “All the same life stage at some point, I think. I feel like I’m twenty-two again. Even if don’t look it.” He laughed and put his elbows on the table, his hands folded in the center.

Elle adjusted in her seat and put her hands underneath her legs. She watched waitress lead another couple to a table nearby.

“Well, I’m glad,” she said.

Under the table, Tyler moved his foot next to hers, their arcs aligning, and Elle caught her breath. She pressed her foot into his, and they held them there, pressed hard together, until their food arrived and they straightened back up to eat.

When they got back home, they kissed as soon as they got inside. Tyler had reached for her as soon as she’d shrugged off her coat, and then they were up against the

back of the door, his hand climbing under her sweater, cool against her skin. It felt different now, somehow, even more urgent, and Elle tugged at his shirt, watching it mess up his hair as he pulled it up over his head, and then kissed him again and pulled away, walking back into her room, waiting for him to follow.

He got up at five the next morning. He had a suitcase in his car, which Elle realized as she heard her front door open and close and open again. At first, she thought he'd left without saying anything to her, and she'd lain in bed frozen, eyes open, staring out in the hallway. But then she heard him come back, a zipper, the sound of him brushing his teeth, and she realized he had gone out to his car. And then a few minutes later, he was back next to her. It was still dark, still felt like the middle of the night, and his face was shadowed from the moon and lights outside as he sat down on the side of the bed, dressed and ready, and kissed her, telling her to go back to sleep. He said goodbye, said he'd call, and then he left, the front door closing again, and somehow, without him, the whole apartment felt different, and Elle moved to the center of the bed, staring up into the dark.

“214 pumpkins. That’s how many we’ve sold this week,” her father said the next morning. He’d called at ten, making Elle jump, thinking for a second it might be Tyler—that he’d forgotten something, was about to miss his flight—was relieved when she saw it was her dad.

“That’s fifty more than last year,” Elle said. She bit into the toast she had just made and sat down at the counter. She was only wearing a T-shirt and shorts, goose bumps rising along her limbs, and the cold mix with her father’s voice made her feel like she was back at home, back at the store in the early morning, the cool gray light filling up the windows.

“Which one sold more?” she asked.

“Poplar.”

“As always.”

“Yes, yes,” he said, and Elle heard the sound of the cash register in the distance, the muffled noise of Jeb and Ryan talking, stocking the shelves. “One hundred more pumpkins if you’d been here.”

“Yeah, right.” Elle laughed.

She didn’t ask if Sam had been working, and she knew her father wouldn’t mention his name. Out of everyone, Elle thought he understood it all best, understood

both of them best. After the breakup, when she'd told him, he'd even sent her a song: "Different Drum" by the Stone Poneys. Listening to it had made her feel better, like she wasn't crazy. She loved him for it then and now, the realization making her heart snap against itself.

"So, Thanksgiving," he said. "That's why I called."

She imagined him leaning back in his office chair, the papers across his desk.

"Yeah, I talked to mom a little," she said. She picked up her toast and set it down.

"I looked at my schedule but it's kind of tight. There're only two weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas break. And I only have one final. I could just come home then."

"Yeah, yeah, I thought it may be something like that."

"Yeah."

"Well, I'll talk to her."

"Okay."

There was a pause, and Elle thought she heard someone come into his office, could picture him waving the person off. Elle imagined Sam and she closed her eyes.

"How is school going, my lady? You doing anything for Halloween?"

Elle looked down at her plate and breathed in slow. She had forgotten it was even Halloween, and she told him she didn't have plans yet, but that the project was going well, that they were mapping out their primary data attack now, building surveys and organizing focus groups and the like. She had once done the same thing for her dad's store when they were figuring out how to promote the sandwich bar.

“You know, you should be a pro at this. Didn’t you always sell a billion tickets to Mr. Cunningham?”

Elle laughed. “Yeah,” she said. “Always those bass scratchcard ones.” Again, it felt strange to think about now, the random connection to the lottery in what she felt were two different lives. She didn’t know how to hold it in her mind.

“Did you ever play?” she asked, surprised at her own question, pushing her plate away.

“What?”

“The lottery?”

“Ah, at some point, sure. Not in a while. I’ve got everything I need.”

Elle looked at the counter and traced the word “lottery” in invisible letters across the linoleum.

“But what would you do with it?” she asked.

“What?”

“If you won.”

“The lotto?”

“Well give it to you of course.”

Elle laughed. “No Tommy?”

“No Tommy.”

Elle smiled and her heart snapped again. She opened her mouth to say something else but her dad interrupted her.

“Okay, Ellie, I got to go. Davis is here with the ice. I’ll talk to your mom about Thanksgiving. We’ll miss you, though. But Christmas flights. I’ll send you some options. Okay, talk to you later, love.”

“Bye,” Elle said. Then she had the sudden urge to cry but didn’t.

Elle thought it was strange she'd forgotten about Halloween. It had never been her favorite holiday, but she always looked forward to it, loved handing out candy to all the neighborhood kids. They always set up a bonfire in the cul-des-sac too, and she'd run back and forth from it to the door whenever she saw trick-or-treaters approaching. Elle figured there wasn't anything like that around here, though, that the apartments probably didn't even have trick-or-treaters, so she texted Leila and asked what she was up to, relieved when she invited her to her brother's party that Saturday. Elle needed a distraction. She knew that. And Leila was excited—said that she and some friends from high school were going as the food pyramid but needed someone to be “veggies.” Elle agreed to play the part.

Even with something to look forward to, Elle tried to keep busy. She had finished all her homework for the week and went on longer runs than usual, trying not to think about him, but still, she couldn't help it. She didn't want to be this person, she kept reminding herself, but it was hard to listen to her own advice. Even when she was running, clearing her head, she'd hear that song he liked and then there he was, fully in her thoughts—and then she'd think of him listening to the song and thinking of her, and then him listening to the song thinking of her listening to the song, and it was a long, endless cycle.

So one night, as she lay awake in bed, on impulse, she pulled her computer into her lap and looked him up. She thought it was strange she hadn't thought of it earlier, but part of her was glad. The soft light of the screen glowed against her face as she scrolled through, searching. None were him at first—Tyler Clerys who were famous swimmers, people who'd died of cancer, staff at a tech firm—but on the second page, there he was. The real him. Elle adjusted the computer on top of her covers and read through the results:

- *Army Identifies 1731 Captains Selected for Promotion to Major*
- *Katerina King & Tyler Clery - Wedding Registry*
- *Army Competitions | National Guard Jobs: On Your Guard*
- *Tyler Clery | Facebook*

Elle clicked on the wedding registry first, something rising and then settling in her throat, but was disappointed when it came up empty—the site reading it had an error. She refreshed the page a few times but gave up and then clicked on the army articles, skimming through, confused by all the acronyms and lists she didn't understand. She clicked on Facebook next. She hadn't been on in a while, not since the breakup, avoiding any remembrance of Sam, any pictures of their dog, but she had never been one for posting much, anyways, thought it said more about your life if you didn't. She was the only person she had anything to prove to, she always told herself. But she couldn't help clicking on Tyler's name now.

There wasn't much at first. His profile was private, his main photo the only thing visible, which was him somewhere hiking. Still, Elle clicked on the photo and kept

scrolling through, holding her breath as more appeared, the little arrows on each side faint, but there.

They were mostly of him—hiking, skiing, sitting somewhere on a beach—one in the Middle East, in his uniform he'd been wearing on the metro, which made Elle lean closer, but as she kept going, in the next one, there she was: Katerina. Thin. Brunette. Big brown eyes. His arm was around her, both laughing. She was pretty, Elle thought, although she couldn't help thinking that in a way, they were opposites—Elle with the Midwestern blonde hair, blue eyes. And although the words didn't even form completely in her mind, somewhere inside her, there was a crack of pleasure that she was prettier.

As Elle stared at the picture a moment longer, she shook her head and looked away from the screen, her eyes dotted with light as they adjusted back to the dark. She closed the computer fast and slid it back up on her desk.

Elle blinked a few more times, then closed her eyes and turned on her side, trying to switch her mind to something else. She knew that whenever she went to bed thinking about something, in the hour or so it took her to finally fall asleep, the same thoughts would just keep replaying, spiraling deeper until they didn't even make sense anymore, like the same random clip replaying on a movie screen, only one with broken film—blurs—skips that would make you turn to the person next to you and say—I don't understand? What happened? What'd I miss? What is going on?

Elle decided to be asparagus. She thought it seemed simple enough, and she had a green dress that was straddling the line of ugly but wasn't quite there, and had taken some green paper from the supply closet in the graduate student office, too, which she'd stapled together to form a tall headdress, cutting the top into zigzags. It was good enough, she thought as she stood on the edge of her bathroom tub so she could see her whole outfit in the mirror. She turned to the side and laughed. Whatever, she thought as she half stepped, half slipped off.

Leila was twenty minutes late picking her up, which made Elle nervous as she waited in the apartment lobby, checking her phone, but then she heard honking outside, and there was a cab. She wasn't sure how much drinking they were going to do that night, exactly what kind of party it would be, but the cab was confirmation enough. She got up and went outside, the dark, cool air and sky just as it should be for Halloween.

Elle took off her headdress as she tried to open the back door, but saw it was full with Leila and her friends, and sat in the front. She glanced at the driver as she got in, smiling, and he smiled back, looking at her outfit, and Elle hoped he thought it was all funny and not sad. She couldn't tell how old he was.

"Fantastic!" Leila said, reaching out to touch Elle's shoulder. She was dressed as a watermelon—pink tank top, green skirt, lots of little beads and details—and next to her,

the girls who Leila introduced as Amy and Bev, were dressed as cheese—yellow everything, hat—and some sort of candy, maybe.

“Meat and dairy are meeting us there,” Leila said. “Onward!”

“Grain got sick,” Leila added, quieter, again touching Elle on the shoulder as they started moving.

The car ride was twenty minutes but felt longer as Elle turned back and forth from the front seat, trying to partake in the conversation—make sure the other girls knew she was friendly, but it made her carsick to look backwards, and eventually, she gave up. And then they were going up over the highway, which made Elle nervous, think about getting home, but finally, they exited, pulling into a neighborhood and stopping in front of a small white house where the music was already loud and muffled, and the adrenaline of something new came back over her. This was what she wanted. Making friends. Going out. Meeting new people. She looked into the windows and unbuckled.

“Here,” Leila yelled, throwing open the door and pushing a bunch of cash up front, which Elle put it into a pile, counting quickly and adding two dollars. She said thanks and got out, following Leila up the walkway.

The house was packed and humid, the white fluorescent lights too bright overhead, the smell of beer and sweat hovering, but still, Elle smiled as she trailed Leila into the kitchen, meeting the eyes of the people who turned to look at them as they moved through the crowd. It felt good to be surrounded by people she didn’t know. She adjusted her hat, her dress, letting it hang short above her knees.

“Hey,” a tall, slightly chubby, slightly scruffy looking guy said as he saw Leila, opening his arms and hugging her. “You made it,” he said, pulling away, a beer can in one hand, looking at all of them. Elle could tell he was the brother, even as he was dressed as some farmer, or murderer, or something Elle didn’t recognize. He still looked just like Leila. “Awesome, awesome,” he said as he looked at their outfits.

He said hi to the other girls and then Leila introduced Elle. He shook her hand and repeated her name, thanked her for coming, and Elle said thanks for having her, genuinely meaning it, feeling a little better about the whole thing. The party reminded her of ones she’d been to before in Minneapolis at the U, which KC and she would sneak away to for the night—not telling Sam or her parents, although still not exactly lying. Sam had never liked to go out, and on the nights they lay in bed watching movie after movie, Elle told herself she didn’t like to either, although she knew it wasn’t completely true—that she always had the feeling she was missing out on something, even if she wasn’t exactly sure what.

Still, this was different than those parties. There, there was nobody’s brother hosting. No one hosting period, especially someone who would repeat your name and thank you for coming, and Elle accepted a beer happily, turning to talk to Amy and Bev as they moved toward the porch outside.

It was getting colder, and as Elle stepped out onto the deck, she thought back to Tyler’s. She hadn’t thought of him for a few hours, a recognition that made her happy, proud of herself on some level, but then she was wondering about him, if the wedding was today. It seemed strange, to get married on Halloween, but who knew. She didn’t.

She shivered slightly and moved toward the girls, drinking her beer, the alcohol warming her as it moved through her body. She asked Amy and Bev where they were from, nodding as they named towns she didn't recognize.

Ten minutes later, the glitter on Bev's costume was coming undone, so they went to fix it, and because Elle still wasn't sure where Leila was—she'd gone off with her brother to say hi to someone—she stayed where she was, standing in the corner of the porch. She grabbed another beer from the cooler next to her and leaned halfway against the railing. People were out on the lawn, out on the steps, and there were enough that even if she was standing alone, wasn't sure exactly what to do with her hands, no one was paying attention. She held onto her beer and took another sip.

"I don't get it," someone said behind her, making Elle turn.

"What?" she said. A tall, thin guy with short, bristling blonde hair came up beside her, leaning his elbows on the railing, holding a cup of something.

"Queen of green?" he said, smiling, looking at her.

Elle took off her headdress and smoothed her hair away from her forehead. She wasn't sure if she should be embarrassed or flattered, but heart beat harder regardless.

"Asparagus," she said. "I'm part of a group. The food pyramid. They're in there somewhere. It wasn't my idea."

He laughed and looked out away from the porch. He took another sip. Then he stood up, turning toward her, leaning on one elbow.

"No, no," he said. "It looks great." He moved his cup around, the ice cubes rattling against the plastic.

“What’re you?” she asked, looking at his plain white T-shirt and jeans.

“I was Superman, but I got too hot in my cape. I was lazy. I wear it every year.”

Elle nodded. He had dark brown eyes, a narrow nose with a bump in the middle of it, but his smile was friendly enough, and she was glad not to be standing alone. She glanced back into the house, then asked him if he knew Leila’s brother—Derrick, she added suddenly remembering his name.

He explained they went to college together, that he lived in an apartment down the street now, that they both worked in sales a few towns over, even though they hated it.

“We commute together, though,” he explained as he finished his drink and grabbed them both more beers, even though Elle’s wasn’t empty. “That makes it a little better.”

They kept talking, and Elle explained about grad school, Minnesota. He’d said it was awesome she was from there, talked about the Mighty Ducks for too long, and then about how he’d grown up in the area, too, always wanted to go to the Midwest and was supposed to be a on a travelling lacrosse team, but had broken his knee. Elle kept nodding as he went on, asking a few questions, but finally when there was a break in the conversation and she saw the hot pink of Leila’s shirt through the window, she set her half-full beer on the railing next to the full one, and nodded toward the house.

“I should probably find my friends,” she said. She lifted her headdress halfway up to her head, then brought it down again.

“Yeah, yeah, same,” he said. He finished his beer and threw it off the porch. “Well, if you ever need a tour guide for this crappy part of town, we could hang out. Maybe I could I get your number?”

Elle looked at him, pausing for a minute, and then said yes, loud, forced. She wasn’t even sure if she wanted to, but she didn’t want it to be awkward, and she was still flattered on some level, still wasn’t used to the attention. And this was good, she thought. She needed to date around. Meet different people. It was good practice.

“Cool,” he said, digging into his pocket and pulling out his phone. “Here, I’ll call you and then you can have mine too.”

Elle said okay and moved her clutch out from underneath her arm, pulling out her phone. The unknown number lit up the screen and she cancelled it.

“I’m Travis,” he said, glancing at her screen.

“Elle.” She smiled quick. “It was nice to meet you,” she said, raising her hand in a goodbye and stepping away before Leila could disappear again.

As she walked toward the house, she looked at her phone one more time, opening her clutch to put it back, and then stopped—the door hitting her as someone else came out and she shuffled, mid-step, to the side, her blood rising and falling as she saw Tyler’s name on the screen, his text: *Happy Halloween. How are you?*

She stood against the glass door and looked at it, her heart going fast, vibrating hard against her ribs, and smiled, leaning into the door, acknowledging that this was one of those little moments—ones she remembered and kept track of throughout her life—when she felt purely happy. Nothing else. She didn’t know why or want to, but there it

was, now in the books. She looked back to the screen, started to type, and then Leila saw her, called her name, and Elle smiled and stepped back inside, her phone still held hard in her hands.

When Tyler flew back that Tuesday afternoon, he came straight to her house. It was still on the way, he'd explained, he could just drop by and say hi—and Elle had agreed, had spent an hour picking out an outfit that would look like she hadn't gotten dressed up or thought about it, had settled on some nicer sweatpants and a T-shirt, but none of it had mattered anyways. They'd talked for a few minutes, him telling her about the wedding, the pumpkin candle that tipped over during the ceremony, visiting the ocean, but then as they sat at the counter, talking and laughing after she showed him her asparagus costume, he'd touched her knee, kissed her, his hand up on the back of her head, fingers kneading through her hair, and they'd gone back into the bedroom, having sex twice, and then again, later, as they lay on the couch watching random cooking shows, and then once more, before he really had to leave, up against the wall in the hallway, her hands holding his back, moving over the small, perfect rivets in his spine.

“It’s just fun,” Elle explained to KC as she walked home from class one night. It was getting late, the last moments of light before dark, and Elle pulled her jacket tighter as she went, the wind grabbing at the ends of it, pulling it open and away from her like wings.

“Four times in one day. I’m sure it was,” KC said.

“I’ve decided it’s not a bad thing, though,” Elle said.

“Who said it was?”

“Because here’s my thought. I made another pro con list. And honestly, in ways, the pros match up with the pros of my list about why I should break up with Sam. I mean, they actually do. I even dug it out of my cabinet. Compared the two.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, I mean, in a different way, of course—but he’s so different, you know, it’s accomplishing the same things as dating around, or even being single, in some ways, you know—exploring. He’s different enough. Not like all the other twenty-something’s our age. They’re all exactly the same, you know? Like the guy from the party. I never texted him back, by the way.”

“Well, that’s good then.”

“Yeah.”

Elle brought the phone closer to her mouth and breathed into her hand, warming her fingers. Her breath made the phone go static.

“It’s still not serious, though,” Elle added as she raised it back to her ear.

“I never said it was.”

“Yes you did.”

“Alright. Well, then, whatever.”

Elle didn’t say anything for a moment, just looked down, watching her feet move across the pavement in a blur. She was freezing and walked faster.

“Yeah. It’s not.”

“Okay. Just saying, it’s just not the end of the world if it is.”

“Yes, it is,” Elle said, her voice hardening, her chin pulling in slightly.

“Okay. Whatever. You do you.”

“Okay.” Elle swallowed and looked out in front of her, the sky purpling over the apartment buildings, the clouds little wisps of white, like eraser smudges.

“So are you going to the cabin this weekend instead?” Elle asked after a moment, changing the subject. “That’ll be fun.”

“I don’t know. We’re still figuring it out. Lauren wants to bring Tony and stuff so we might all go to his grandfather’s place instead.”

“Everyone?”

“Yeah.”

“Sam?”

“Probably.”

“Yeah.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I know. Hope you guys have fun. That’ll be fun.”

“Okay, Elle, I got to go. Miss you. I’m glad dude is working out.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay,” Elle said. “Bye.”

Elle hung up and pushed her phone back into her pocket, walking even faster now until, without meaning to, she was running—her bag of notebooks hitting hard against her sides, her breath clouding the cold air, streaming behind her like a wake.

Fling with Tyler

Pro	Con
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -More experience (sex/dates) -Learn about different life/date older guy (different) -Hang out/see more of DC -Fun -Can just be a fling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Need to date around -Don't want boyfriend/to send wrong message (not trying to just replace Sam) -Too old?

Staying with Sam

Pro	Con
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Nicest guy/would be good husband/dad/provider/all things -Families would be happy -Dog -Easy life in Minnesota -Wouldn't break his heart 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -No experience/exploration -End up like everyone else -Long distance -Unhappy? -Resent him? -Resent self?

The next weekend, Elle went back to his place. He said he was throwing a barbeque, that one of his friends was being promoted and he was having some people over, and that she should come if she could. She wanted to be back at his apartment, with him, and she agreed, even coming early to help set up.

She had on her Meet and Greet persona when they all arrived, afraid Tyler had told them how old she was, that they would judge her, and she tried to act put together. Experienced. But then an hour in, the guy and girl who walked in together—who Elle, because of their age, had just assumed were married—were taking shots along the counter, and Tyler laughed out loud when she finally asked him if they were together. Then he had announced it to the group, everyone laughing, and although Elle had blushed, mad at him for a second, she'd laughed too, and didn't really worry about it from there.

She stayed over that night. And then the next night. And even Sunday, since her Monday class wasn't until four. She'd taken a few pairs of underwear in her purse along with her toothbrush, which she was thankful for on that last night when, after coming back from a beer festival a few blocks from his house, he'd kissed her in the middle of the crosswalk and said she shouldn't leave.

Now she sat at the counter in his kitchen, trying to log onto her school's email address from his laptop. She had a few documents she had to edit for class tomorrow, but she had them online, had explained it would be fine as he moved around setting up the computer and charger, giving her a few sheets of paper even though she said she didn't need them.

He sat on the couch behind her as she worked, reading some book on Russian history. She kept glancing back at him as she set up, smiling at the way the light in the living room reflected off his glasses, which she'd never seen him wear before, but turned around whenever he looked up, focusing back on the screen.

The project plan was simple: along with some basic surveys, they would conduct three focus groups of ten people from the area—hopefully across the ages of eighteen to twenty-five so it wouldn't be completely skewed, because, as Elle had reminded the group, eighteen is very different than twenty-five. All participants would complete a workbook, too, tracking their spending, their jobs, goals, anything that related to their current pastimes, values, futures. Elle looked forward to the focus groups, too, always did, the chance to pick people's brains so openly.

An hour later, Elle jumped as Tyler came up behind her. He put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed hard, then leaned down, kissing her on the space where her neck met her shoulder.

“Love having you here,” he said, his voice still slightly muffled from her skin.

Elle's hands tensed over the keyboard, her muscles tight. His words felt too heavy, puncturing the light, casual air that had surrounded them all weekend.

“It’s nice to be here,” she said, leaning back into him and turning to kiss him just as he started to say something else.

Over the next few weeks, Elle made sure every time they were together, they did something new, which was easy, because Tyler was always coming up with things to do, always commenting that he loved her enthusiasm, her “adventurous spirit” as he said to her one night. It was a compliment she’d never received before, and she knew she’d remember it, the way certain compliments pin in you, stay with you forever—like the one from Sam’s friend, or the time in fifth grade, when, once, the hair dresser had told her she was an “old soul”—even though she hadn’t been sure exactly what that meant.

Elle kept a list of the outings, too, and other things—snippets of conversations or moments that taught her something, surprised her. In a way, she felt it was all evidence she was doing the right thing. That this fling was worth it, teaching her something. That she shouldn’t feel bad about it, having broken up with Sam to be single, independent, which was what she had repeated to him again and again during the phone calls, commenting that it wasn’t him, not his fault.

The list was half mental, half in her notebook, and she grew mad at herself some nights when she’d sit down, pen hovering over the page, trying to remember that one line he said. Still, the list grew as the days, weeks, passed:

- U Street Farmers’ Market (purple cauliflower is a thing; tastes the same)
- The Tell-Tale Heart* at Source theater (Edgar Allan Poe is from Baltimore)

- Taco night (Don't store leftover beans in the tin can)
- Capitol's Game (sneak beer in; overpriced)
- Meridian Park (bocce is fun)
- Driving me back home (There's always traffic on 50 at the same time of day because the sun gets in people's eyes)
- Mount Vernon (George Washington never actually lived in the White House)
- Russian restaurant (da = yes; the copper mugs were created as kind of a promotional thing)
- Rockcreek Park Trails (Do not stick your icy fingers, no matter how cold from walking home, directly under the hot water)
- Sushi Capitol (I don't like uni)
- Random places (The Pentagon's windows look green-ish because they're designed so no one can see in; The moon has it's own time zone; It's better to cook salmon at a lower temperature for longer than a higher temperature for shorter)

It was dumb to keep track of, Elle knew, on some level, but she couldn't help it. She liked collecting each moment, each piece of information. It was like back in Minnesota when they'd stand around the edge of the lakes in the summer searching for the smoothest, flat stones to skip. Whenever she found one, she'd imagine whipping it across the flat, glassy surface of the water, but then she'd look down, and it was just there, in her hands, hers, and she'd slide it back into her pocket and save it for sometime later—sometime else.

Their first focus group was on a Wednesday. They had ten people scheduled, all who had completed their workbooks prior to the meeting, and Elle tried to match names with faces as they sat around the conference table. She hadn't seen the completed workbooks yet—they would collect them at the end—but, having organized the meeting, the participants, she knew the list of people by heart. It was an easier role than moderating, which was Leila's job, but she didn't mind. Usually, she would have, but she wasn't as absorbed in her work as usual. Not at the moment. She understood that much at least.

It had been easy to find the participants, too. Because the project was for a real client, they had a budget to work with and had promised each person a fifty-dollar gift card. Elle had thought it was a great deal, spending an hour talking about yourself, the lottery, for fifty bucks. And she was right. She had had to turn people away.

It was silent in the room for the first few minutes as people arrived. Everyone looked down at their papers, their phones, shuffling awkwardly around in the bright light of the room. Leila and her were the only members of their group actually in the focus group—they were splitting up the three rounds between them, recording and transcribing each, coming back together later to compare them all, look for patterns, insights—but because Leila was waiting for everyone to arrive to come in herself, now, Elle felt she was in charge. She smiled widely and sat up straight, shrugging on her Meet and Greet

persona and asking everyone how they were, how far they came, looking for any shred of connection to pause in. But finally, everyone was there, Leila came in, and they got started.

The questions were straightforward and the conversation flowed easily, Leila doing a good job of probing whenever anyone said something new, insightful. They talked about what everyone knew about the lottery, how they felt about it, if they every played, what they thought of people who did play—and then just focused on themselves, what they spent their money on, where they worked, what they wanted out of life. It was strange, Elle thought, to be part of this target market. She felt herself nodding along with the conversation, stopping herself from jumping in when the girl in the yellow sweater—Ava—she knew, explained how all her money went to experiences. Getting the most out of life. She hardly bought anything.

“YOLO,” the guy to the left of her—David—had joked. “You only live once.”

Everyone had laughed.

“But, kind of?” Ava had said once it was quiet again, although her voice was overshadowed by Leila, who had just started on another question.

Elle stared at her, accidentally making eye contact, then smiled, nodding and looking back down to her notes.

The focus group went later than either she or Leila had planned, the conversation rolling on, which was a good thing, although by the end, they were wiped out, tired, both taking off their sweaters and heels and leaning back in the conference chairs as the last people left.

She had three missed calls from Tyler, too, which she saw when she finally grabbed her phone from her bag. It had become a routine without meaning to that he came out to her place on Wednesday nights, since it was difficult for her to come downtown during the week, but she had warned him tonight may be different, the focus group and everything. She texted him back that she was sorry, that things had run later than she thought. He said not to worry about it. That he would see her that weekend.

“Let’s just look at these later, yeah?” Leila said as she pulled her hair into a ponytail, hooking her hair with her thumbs. She rubbed the bottom of her eyes then shuffled the workbooks into a pile.

“Yeah, yeah,” Elle said. She rolled her lips in and looked at Leila.

“Do you mind if I take them, though?” she asked. “I’m just curious.” She looked at the pile in front of Leila and shrugged.

“Yeah, sure, whatever. God knows I’m not looking at them tonight. Or anytime soon. I’m kinda getting sick of this stuff, if I’m being honest.” She slid them across the

glossy table and Elle fixed them into a pile, noticing Ava's was on top. She slipped them into her bag.

“Just bring them next week, then?” Leila said.

“Yeah, definitely. I'll do the first half of the transcription, too, right?”

“Yeah.” Leila tapped her fingers on the table, then hit it harder with her palms.

“Alright,” she said. “Let's get out of here.”

When Elle got home, she changed into pajamas and sat down on the living room floor, the workbooks spread out across her coffee table. She didn't know why, but something had twisted inside her during the focus group—the way everyone kept saying her own thoughts—the familiarity she felt in them. It unsettled her somehow.

The workbooks were twenty pages long and her whole group had developed them, but Elle turned to her favorite page—the one she had designed, one that was all about goals, where people saw themselves in five, ten, twenty, thirty years. There was a timeline across the length of the page pointing at all different ages up to eighty, and people were to write where they wanted to be in life at each point. Some people even drew pictures, which Elle looked over carefully at as she scanned through each of them, noticing patterns:

	25 Have good job I love; be around friends; live abroad; travel	40 Be good parent; continue to rise in job; write a book; travel	65 Retire; travel; sail around world; live abroad; help others	
18 Graduate high school; go to college	30 Get married; progress in job/make good money; settle down with family; have kids; buy a house	50 Children in good colleges; buy another house; continue to work; continue hobbies; travel	80 Spend time with family; relax; pursue hobbies; live until 100	

Elle swallowed hard as she read over the last few, ignoring the fact that it was now close to midnight, that with only the one side lamp on, she could barely even see—the papers all shadowed or golden. Everyone had such grand plans, she thought as she fingered through the packets one last time, the pages blurring in front of her eyes. Big goals. Dreams. Ideas of where they wanted to be. They were too optimistic to play the lottery, Elle thought, the realization making her chest tighten when she thought about how it was the real reason she didn't play, had never thought about playing, felt bad for people like Mr. Cunningham, who had no other way to change their life. But most people wouldn't get there, she thought, too. It wasn't realistic. Elle stared at the papers again and suddenly felt like she was fighting a marble in her throat. She pictured her own timeline in her head. But not me, she told herself. Not mine. It was the same mantra she'd repeated to herself once during Driver's Ed, when, one day, their high school gym teacher who had taught the class had said ___% of people would be killed in a car crash. He'd looked

around the room and said that means three of you. Dead. Elle had shifted in her seat, looking around, and could almost hear all the silent voices in everyone's head saying: Not me. Not me. But she hoped hers was the loudest. The truest. Not me. Not me. Not me.

On Friday they got oysters. One of Tyler's friends was bartending at a new restaurant in the east part of the city, so he had made them reservations and said to come by for some free drinks. Tyler had asked Elle if she even liked oysters, said they could go somewhere else if she felt like it, but she said she thought she did, maybe—had laughed and extended her legs into his lap from where they sat together on the couch. She said she'd let him know.

She didn't. Too grainy. Too fishy. It tastes like the ocean, she said, not even trying to pretend. She did like the restaurant, though—how it was all wooden beams and blue gray walls, silver chairs and white marble tables, soft booths and low lighting. Tyler shook his head at her, smiling, then made a big show of eating the rest of them, tipping each oyster into his mouth like he was drinking from a teacup.

The dinner continued and they had hake and risotto and scallops along with drinks that never seemed to end. Elle had ordered some grapefruit martini and it was so good, she drank four in a row without realizing it, her head soft and muddled as they finished eating and she stood up, stopping to say hi to his friend at the bar. Elle recognized him from the barbeque and said hello, loudly, leaning across the counter. Tyler put his arm around her as they talked, his eyes bright white and blue. He loves to be with me, Elle thought to herself as she stared at him, even in her haziness. Look at the way his eyes

light up, she said to herself, as if the drunken part of her were having a conversation with the sober part of her, which seemed to be receding into the distance. Don't be cliché, it said as it disappeared.

They had walked the mile to the restaurant, but now, with the dark settling in, the cold falling, they got a cab back home. Elle said hello to the driver and scooted to the center of the back seat, crossing her legs and sloping into Tyler, singing along with the radio—growing even louder when their song came on, the pop one. She smiled at him and sang through her teeth. He kissed her on the forehead, then slid his hand into the space where her legs crossed just above her knee, and Elle went quiet for a moment, the rush of warmth she felt diffusing the alcohol, her voice. She paused then kissed him on the forehead. Then he kissed her on the mouth. Then they were home.

They didn't sleep together that night, but they'd gotten in bed early. Elle had went straight for his drawers of T-shirts and picked out one of the light green ones he had a million of, although some were softer than others, and she padded through them until she found one she liked. Then she'd pulled off her clothes, leaving them in a pile in the corner, and crawled onto her side of the bed. He'd stripped down to his boxers and got in next to her. It wasn't even that late, Elle would realize later, probably just around ten on a Friday night, but they stayed in bed, laying sideways but facing each other, her head pressed into his chest, hot from her own breath and his arms around her.

They lay like that for a while until Elle nestled her head upwards, pulling her hair away from her forehead and looking at him.

“I'm drunk,” she whispered.

He laughed and she felt his body shake.

“Drinks were too good. I’ll have to tell Julian.”

“Too good.”

The lights were still on and Elle squinted up at them before nestling her head back into his chest, the light blocked by the covers.

“You know,” he said. “I can’t believe it’s already mid-November. I feel like I just met you.”

Elle breathed hard and nodded against him.

“Next week is Thanksgiving already.”

Elle opened her eyes into the darkness of his body, the shade of the covers. She adjusted her head, her hair moving against his chin and stubble, and felt him brush it away.

“You know, I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

She moved again. He brushed her hair away again.

“Do you have plans for Thanksgiving? Because I know you said you weren’t going home.”

He pulled away from her now, looking down at her, forcing her to look up. She picked at the inside corner of her eye.

“Not really,” she said. “I still have class through Wednesday and a lot of work that week. So just going to do work. I planned a lot of work to do Thursday.” Her voice was low and messy.

Elle could feel the air tightening above them then, rising to something, like the moment right before the top you've been twisting pops off, and she readjusted underneath the sheets.

Tyler nodded, his body still.

“Well, I was going to ask,” he cleared his throat, “if you wanted to go to my uncle's. He lives about an hour north. There won't be tons of people there, although my parents are coming in. But it'll be casual. Fun. Lots of drinks, although that's probably the last thing you want right now.” He squeezed her back and laughed his fake laugh once.

Elle swallowed and moved her elbow out from the cover, turning herself away just slightly.

“I would, but I think I need to get this stuff done.” Her head was spinning more now. She wished she could go back to two minutes ago.

“Yeah, yeah, that's fine,” he said, turning a bit more onto his back. “Just wanted to extend the invite. Don't want you to be all alone.” He kicked her lightly underneath the covers, trying to keep loosen the air again, Elle knew.

“Thanks,” she said. She nestled back into him, pulling him toward her. They weren't looking at each other, but it still felt different now.

“I think some people from class are organizing something, too,” she said into his chest. “So I'll be fine.”

He pulled her closer and ran his hand down her arm, his chin against the stop of her head.

“I know,” he said. “You will. It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Elle really was busy the next week, but no one had talked about plans for Thanksgiving. Still, she hated to lie, so she asked people on Monday what they were doing. Four people in class were in the same position as her—from out of town, not going home, too close to Christmas break—so they agreed to go to a restaurant. There, Elle thought to herself. She really did have an excuse.

And their surveys had just come back, their focus group video transcription complete, so they had meetings planned all the way through Wednesday, too, to go over their findings, make sense of all their research, boil it down to a few takeaways, which would inform the campaign strategy. This was the part Elle had always liked best: the why, the how. Putting everything together. They'd present it all after Thanksgiving break.

The surveys were straightforward, less interesting than the workbooks, but Elle still reviewed them carefully, spending all Tuesday going over the online findings, the survey questions burning into her mind:

1. What is your age? <input type="radio"/> 18-22 <input type="radio"/> 23-26 <input type="radio"/> 27-30 <input type="radio"/> 30-40 <input type="radio"/> 40 or older
2. What is your gender? <input type="radio"/> Male <input type="radio"/> Female
3. Have you ever played the Lottery? <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No

Elle worked up until dinnertime, and then leaned back in her desk chair, suddenly drained. She went into the kitchen and made a tuna sandwich. It was too quiet again, her every move too loud, so when she finished eating, she called Tyler without thinking about it. She missed him, she realized, as his phone went straight to voicemail and she thought about how he wouldn't come out this Wednesday either, that he'd be leaving early Thursday for his uncle's. She didn't leave a message.

He called back two hours later, apologizing and explaining he worked late that night—didn't get cell reception down in the basement of the Pentagon. Of course, Elle said.

They talked about nothings for the next half hour. This was a phrase KC had coined for them—their random conversations that had no real meaning, just little snippets of comments about being hungrier than usual or wishing it would just rain already or

thinking that one guy they knew looked like that other guy from that X-men movie and what was his name again? Elle found she could do this with Tyler now. She told him she'd just eaten a tuna sandwich, which he said was probably not better than oysters, but to each their own.

Finally Elle decided she should get ready for bed, should get up early and back to work, and she said goodbye as she walked back into her room, closing her laptop and moving the papers around on her desk. She glanced quickly at the stack of surveys, the first question, then without meaning to, she asked him if he'd every played.

"Sure," he said, pausing for a moment since he had just said goodbye, was getting ready to hang up. "Remember, I told you about that time I won \$200 from a scratch card?"

"No you didn't," she said.

"I did." He laughed. "We were going to the play. There was a Powerball ad on the side of the metro."

"I don't know. I would have remembered."

"Well, I did. And, yes, I have."

Elle looked out the window, focusing on the outlines of her reflection. "Why?" she asked, turning back to her desk and staring down at the surveys.

"What? Play? Or tell you?"

"Play."

"Okay, was gonna say. I don't know. I guess for the hell of it. Buy a house. Start life over a fourth time.

Elle paused. She stepped closer to the window, looking past herself to the outside now, wondering if anyone below could see her. She pressed her hand against the glass, the cold spreading across her palm and fingers.

“A fourth time?” she asked. She pressed harder.

“Yeah.”

“What were the first three times?” she asked.

“Afghanistan. Divorce. DC.”

Elle didn't say anything. A moment passed, but before there was another beat of silence, she said she hoped he won. Someday. The lottery, she meant. She stepped away from the window.

He laughed.

“Thanks,” he said.

They said goodnight and Elle sat down on the side of her bed, sitting still and feeling like somehow, her whole room, whole apartment, the whole world—was getting smaller, or bigger, she realized, like how sometimes, you feel lonelier in a crowd. She didn't move for a while, and then in one fast motion, she stood up, changed, and went to sleep.

On Thanksgiving, they decided to get Chinese. Elle knew it was a thing, somewhere—something other people did—but she also knew they all felt strangely rebellious as they sat down to eat platters of moo-shu pork and beef and broccoli, sesame chicken and the like, the bright red lanterns and gold-framed paintings dazzling above them.

Elle called her parents when she got back as promised. Her mom said they had just eaten, and she could picture them all slumped in the living room watching football, her empty spot on the couch. Her mom passed the phone around and Elle told them about the Chinese, asked about their meal, her mother commenting that the turkey was too dry, her dad and brother agreeing it wasn't.

When Elle hung up, staring down at her hands, she felt the same way she had at the restaurant when they'd gone around the table and said what they were thankful for. Everyone had basically said the same thing—their families, the grad program, that the semester was almost over, ha, ha—but when it came to Elle, she really did feel a weight of something like sadness mixed with gratitude as she looked around, thinking about how different her life was now. In the moment, she understood what Tyler meant about starting life over. She had just done it. But this would be it, she thought. She wouldn't have to again. She wouldn't mess it up. She wouldn't win the lottery, either.

Later that night, she lay on the couch and watched random holiday themed sitcoms and food shows, not really watching any of them. She wondered what he was doing right now, what it would have been like if she had gone with him. She imagined him sitting at a long table, holding his fork the way he did, smiling as he chewed, listening to some aunt. She looked down at her phone. She hadn't heard from him all night.

I'm thankful for you, she typed, watching her fingers move out of her control. But then she caught herself just before she hit send, deleting it and pushing the phone deep into the couch cushions, trying to forget that it was there.

The next week Elle had no official classes. Final exams and presentations would take place the following week, and Elle only had one other test besides the lottery presentation, having finished a few final papers the week prior. It felt strange now to be so close to the end of the semester, she thought. She felt like she had just started. Still, there was no denying that her presentation was next Wednesday, her flight home next Friday, and she tried not to think about being back in Minnesota—it was too complicated. She couldn't really feel it yet, though, was still too busy, there were too many things happening before. She'd always been like that—she could plan as far ahead as she wanted, think about it all, but she didn't really feel anything, not really, really feel it, until just before it happened.

But that week, Elle didn't have to be anywhere and was free to spend her days at Tyler's. She'd brought her laptop downtown and worked from his place as he left each morning. She had never been in his house alone before, always leaving early with him when she slept over on Sunday nights, and the first day she woke up in his bed two hours after he had left, kissing her goodbye in the early morning light, she couldn't help but smile to herself. She liked the quiet there. It was different. It didn't really belong to her.

Elle had set herself up at the kitchen counter to work. He had bought the kind of tea she liked and she made herself a cup that morning, getting comfortable and starting in

on her presentation slides. Every so often she'd take a break and go out onto the deck, too, watching people pass by and the sky, wondering if it would snow before she left. Now that it was December, it did feel strange not to have any. She thought it knocked off her internal clock—her internal rhythms that were guided with the seasons.

Elle was more productive at his place, though, and hours passed quickly, which was why she jumped when that afternoon, her screen suddenly went black. She hadn't even noticed the battery was low, and she got up and searched through her bag, hoping she had brought the charger, having packed in a hurry. But of course, she said out loud, she hadn't, and she stood in the kitchen, looking around, even though she wasn't sure exactly what she was searching for. But then she saw his old computer, the one she had used before, and she set that up instead.

Tyler had written down the password on a little sticky note on the keyboard—some basketball team name from his high school, which Elle kept spelling wrong—but she retyped it a few times, and eventually, it all finally clicked.

But as the final welcome dings sounded and Elle opened up her email, she went completely still. She hadn't noticed it before, but there on the desktop, in the bottom right corner of the screen, was a document labeled "Katerina Letter_Valentine's Day." Elle looked at it, frightened for a moment, looking around, but calmed herself and leaned back, still staring at it, taking a sip of her now cold tea.

She wondered when it was from. He had said the computer was old, but she didn't know how old. Wasn't even sure when exactly they had divorced last year. She bit down

on her tongue to distract herself and moved the screen of her email in front of it. Then she got up and went back out to the deck, thankful for the cold moving through her head.

The day went by, and she didn't open it. Even as she worked for the next few hours, she didn't touch it. That was the right thing to do, she told herself. And she knew it really was. Mature. Moral. It made her feel strangely good about herself—her control. She wanted to tell someone about it, but even if she told KC, that'd take away some of the goodness. Like when people volunteered just to brag about.

But Elle could still feel its presence—its weight. And she could almost hear his voice starting the letter, desperate, maybe, or still in love? *Dear Katerina: Happy Valentine's Day. I just wanted to say...*

It snowed that Friday and they decided to get a Christmas tree. They'd slipped into the holiday spirit slowly, at first saying it was too early for Christmas songs, and then letting the radio fill the room. Tyler had even come out of the bathroom one night wearing one of those ugly Christmas sweaters everyone wore to parties. He'd pretended it was totally normal, climbing into bed and under the covers as Elle laughed. Then she'd peeled it off and they'd had sex while "The Little Drummer Boy" played in the background. She thought she'd never think of it the same.

So that Friday when it snowed and Tyler got home early from work, snowflakes melting in his hair, he had told her to get ready. Put on the warmest clothes she had with her—which wasn't much, she thought, as she pulled on some sneakers, jeans, and a sweater, thinking of all her Minnesota gear back home.

She loved it, though, had spent the morning out on the deck watching it all. It was just cold enough, just hovering below freezing, and the snow barely stuck, but it was beautiful all the same—the sky white, sidewalks dusted like powdered sugar, everyone walking fast, excitedly, with their heads down. It was almost easier to enjoy the snow here, too, because it really wasn't that cold—not in the way it was back home where it would climb into your bones, your chest. The cold here felt gentle, seasonal, almost apologetic.

With locked elbows, they'd walked the three blocks to the grocery store and picked out a tree. The trees were all stacked up together, images of oranges and bananas and bread in the windows behind their triangular, dark green tops, but Elle didn't care. This too was nothing like home where they cut down their tree from Mr. Avery's farm, but she liked it all the same. Was glad this year, she could have both.

Still, it was a hard walk home—Elle's fingers full of sap, her sneakers slipping on the sidewalks, but Tyler carried the weight of it and kept shouting cheesy, encouraging phrases behind her: "You Can Do it! Believe in Yourself! It Always Feels Impossible Until It's Done!" She was laughing hard but with the way they held the tree and the darkness around them, she couldn't turn around to look at him. And then she hit one of her happy moments again, dipping into it, one for the books. But it didn't last long—because soon, it made her think about the fact that he was always so happy. That really, when it came down to it, it wasn't possible. She kept her head down and walked faster, planting her feet harder, and more surely, against the ground.

When they got home, after they had tackled the tree setup and changed out of their wet clothes, swept up the pine needles scattering the floor, Tyler pulled a big storage box out of the closet near the front door and they started decorating.

The tree was in his living room and they sat on the floor around it going through the decorations. He had turned on the Christmas music again, and the music combined with the sound of the wind and blurs of dark white through the windows made Elle feel like they were in a postcard. She held onto a red bulb and looked at him.

“All right,” he said. “You do the honors. The very first ornament.” He held onto a bulb too, which dangled down in front of him as he sat on the floor, leaning his back against the couch, his hands resting on his bent knees.

Elle stood up and walked around the tree, inhaling its scent. She felt a wave of home and closed and opened her eyes. She leaned up on her toes, feeling him watching her, and hung the bulb up toward the top, just off to the right. She curtsied as she turned back to him.

“Good?” she asked.

“Magnificent,” he said. He stood up and hung his bulb on the other side.

There were several different boxes inside the big one—the one of bulbs, some crystal stars which Elle liked, fingering each point in her hand and placing them in the front of the tree—and more random ones of little bears and Santas and a few crosses mixed in. He explained he got them from his Grandma, and a few from his parents, who, after all these years, just had too many.

Elle’s hair dangled down into the boxes as she dug through them. She loved looking through each, comparing them to their own ornaments back home. She had never decorated anyone else’s tree before, and it felt strange but familiar. She reached for a huge, crocheted poinsettia and held it up in front of her face.

“Grandma,” he said, smiling and reaching down into another box.

It was quiet except for the radio as they pawed through the boxes, but as Elle opened another, the last, smaller box toward the bottom, her stomach clenched and a different kind of static silence filled her head. She reached down, her fingers just grazing

the ornament inside, pulled away, and then reached down again, now picking it up and holding it in one hand. The ornament was small, delicate: two doves kissing, a banner reading “First Christmas Together” spun below them.

Tyler looked at her, still bending down, picking up another ornament, and then stood back up.

“Don’t have to put that one up, obviously,” he said as he reached into the tree.

Elle moved the ornament around in her palm. She bent a finger and touched the sloped backs of the doves.

Tyler picked up another bulb. “Really,” he said.

Elle nodded, lowered her hand, but then looked up at him—the quiet in her head growing louder, numbing, ringing in her ears.

“When exactly did you get divorced?” she asked, still looking at the doves.

Tyler rustled through some tissue paper. “Last November,” he said, his face pointed down into the box, the decorations. He stood up and went back to the tree.

Elle stretched out her legs, holding the doves in both hands now and resting them against her knee. “What happened?” she asked, glancing up at him.

Tyler didn’t say anything for a moment. He looked at her as he moved away from the tree, then shook some pine needles out of his shirt and shrugged.

“It just didn’t work out.”

“I know,” Elle said, “but what happened?” she asked, her voice steady and flat.

Tyler looked straight at each other for a moment.. The radio moved to a commercial and a stranger’s voice filled the room.

“She left me,” he said, shrugging again. “But it was fine. Wasn’t right anyways. Married too young. Didn’t know ourselves. That whole thing.” He touched a tree branch and snapped off a dead limb, rolling it between his fingers, still standing above her.

Elle put the ornament back in the box and folded her hands in her lap. He sat back down in his spot, shuffling through the bigger storage box and avoiding her eyes. He pulled out a nutcracker and held it up to her.

“How?” Elle asked. She wasn’t sure what was ahold of her now, but she felt like she was running fast, her legs moving without her, sprinting too hard to stop.

“What?” he said, exhaling and setting the nutcracker heavily back down.

“Did she leave you.”

Tyler leaned back against the couch and looked at the tree before shifting his eyes back to her.

“Alright, you want the full story?” He laughed once and sat up straighter, moving away from the couch. His voice was still his voice, but with just a pang of something else.

Elle didn’t say anything.

“When I got back from Iraq, the second tour, things were fine, and then they weren’t. Look, we were thinking about having a kid, you know, and she wanted to, I thought, that was the plan, but then it just didn’t work out. Not even like, that, you know, she just realized she didn’t want to. That we weren’t meant to be. So that was the end of it. And I’m better for it. It all worked out better, in the end. Really. I mean, I can’t

imagine. We weren't right for each other. That's it, really. Not even that dramatic. Sorry."

Elle folded her legs under her. She tucked her hair behind her ear.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking up at him and then back to the box, the words clumsy in her throat. She reached for the doves and touched them again. "It's still pretty," she said.

He laughed again, falsely. "You're still pretty," he said, his voice lighter now as he stood up, stepping past her and the tree, touching her head as he moved by, his fingers gentle, pulling up her hair just slightly.

"Want some tea? Or wine?" he called from the kitchen. "It is Friday, after all."

Elle called sure, not specifying, and stared up at the tree. It was beautiful. There was no denying that. It looked both exactly like every other one she'd ever seen and completely different at the same time. She looked at it a minute longer, then stood up to go into the kitchen, brushing her hands, the dust from the ornaments, off on her legs. Then, without thinking, she leaned back down, fast, and picked up the doves, staring down at them, and then pushing them through the branches into the back, near the center, the trunk of the tree—not visible, but there, just dangling, a flash of porcelain white through the pine.

The presentation was finished. They had worked right up until the last minute—Elle pausing briefly to study for the other test she had Monday, which was fine, just statistics—and then rejoining the group, putting the final touches on the slideshow early Wednesday morning. It would be held in the department’s smaller auditorium where the class, a few teachers, and the representatives from each client would gather. They had only met with the lottery staff once early in the semester, and Elle hoped it would be the same two older men who had sweet eyes and had just repeated, “Looks good, looks good,” as they went over their plans.

Still, regardless of who was there, Elle felt ready. Prepared She had the same flutter of nerves and adrenaline she had come to expect, but she had it in control. She had her slides. Her talking points. She knew she’d be fine.

The group with the insurance went first. Then the dry cleaners and bakery. And then they were up, climbing up onto the small stage, the dark chairs and faces ahead of them, and her body, her other self, took over. She stood still as Leila opened and introduced them all, her face frozen in a smile and hands clasped politely together. But it moved smoothly, each slide fading in and out like a well-timed dance, and everyone was doing well, and then Elle was up and her heart lurched for a moment, but she continued, flawlessly, only glancing up at the slide a few times, directing everyone’s attention:

The Emerging Market

- Focused on living in the moment and getting the most out of life but working hard for the future
- Facing debt and unemployment but optimistic
- Searching for companies that support good causes but not actively donating time/money
- Tech-savvy and focused on constant communication, instant gratification and sharing but feeling social pressure
- More diverse than any other generation but united by free thinking

When she finished, she looked back out over the crowd, watching the silent faces, the heads nodding.

Elle spent her last night at Tyler's. Her flight was out of the airport closer to downtown, so it made sense, too, to sleep there, catch an early cab to the airport. He had to work late that night, but he had left her a key under a brick behind the staircase, so when she got there Thursday afternoon, she let herself in, dragging her suitcase up the landing with two hands.

He had said he would be home anytime after seven, so at 6:45, Elle set herself up on the couch with a book. She was anxious to see him—had missed him during the week, mostly, she figured, because they'd just spent a whole week together, become used to each other, the mirrored curve of a body sleeping nearby, and it was strange to rip it away. But she'd adjusted back into her routines, her work. Still, now, with the semester over, with her leaving tomorrow, she couldn't help but focus on him completely.

An hour passed and Elle had only read one page. She kept imagining him walking through the door, how she would look posed there on his leather sofa, the dim light above her, golden on her hair, and she tried not to move from what she thought was the most nonchalant, flattering pose. She wanted to leave him with the best impression. She wanted him to miss her too.

She would, she knew: miss him. Even if it was more of an emotional truth, a physical voice somewhere inside her, that, when rising into her brain, she pushed down firmly, replacing it with hard thoughts about everything still being casual, fun, easy.

But the words were there, really there, later, after he had come home at eight and they ate a quick dinner of leftover chili, lay on the couch watching the news and then half of something else, there, right in the moment before they got up, hovering along the line of sleep.

“I’ll miss you,” she said as he turned to push himself up off the couch. He’d stopped, looked down at her, then settled back next to her, smiling and leaning to kiss her below her ear before saying it back.

And she had even said it again the next morning, when, before the sun had even risen, he’d gotten up for work. He sat on the side of the bed as he had before on other early mornings, his bulky uniform hard against her hands as she reached to hug him, and then he’d whispered it back to her again, too. He said something else, lingering there, but in her haze of sleep, Elle wasn’t sure what, and by the time he stood up to leave, the front door shutting quietly behind him, it was too late to ask.

But later, when she got up, after checking her alarm and flight time, she went into the kitchen and there, sitting on her suitcase, were more of his words—a Christmas card, a red envelope propped up against her suitcase. She picked it up, the paper smooth in her hands, and stared at it, her name written on the back in his handwriting, which she realized she had never really seen before. She traced each of the letters with her finger and started to open it, tearing slightly at the corner, but then stopped, holding it away

from her and looking up into the bright, milky light of the morning, and then instead, quickly, she slid it into the top zippered pocket of her suitcase. Later, she thought. She would save it for later.

She couldn't feel it until she was sitting at the gate. Not when getting out of the cab or shuffling through the lines of security, not when buying a bottle of water or double checking her flight information, but there, sitting at the gate, glancing up at the monitor, the on time departure and flight number blinking their harsh red—not until, like usual, it was the very, very next thing: going home. And then it did hit her, hard, making her close her eyes and breathe slowly, steadying herself as everyone moved, buzzing around her.

It was going to be strange, she knew. Part of her had convinced herself that nothing would be that different—that she'd just spend time with her family, with KC and Laura and Ash and avoid the movie theatre on Vicksburg, the bar on the south side of the lake, the grocery store his mom said had the best produce—but really, she knew it wouldn't be that simple. Everything was close. Everyone was overlapping. Thinking about it, Elle felt a shudder of distain she'd never felt before. She wished she could get back in the cab, looping the same, almost-familiar route back to Tyler's.

She would have to call Sam, too, she knew. It would be the right thing to do. She owed him that much, at least. They hadn't spoken since the final phone call, when, after calling back and forth for a week, she had said yes, she really did want to end it. That she was sorry. Really. She was sorry.

Because she was. She hadn't planned to break up with him, which she knew he—and his mom—didn't believe. She couldn't explain it, not well, but once she was gone, once she was settled into her new apartment and he called asking when he could come visit, when would be the best time, something had sunk inside her. She didn't want him there. Her new life. She knew, in ways, it really did make her an asshole, even if KC said otherwise. If you loved him, KC had also said, you wouldn't break up with him. But would I? Elle had thought. IT was strange, but loving him, the question of it, hadn't been on her mind, not in her pro/con list or the heaviest, loudest thoughts. She loved him, of course, but she had a different idea of her life. One without him. She'd told KC it was beside the point.

But Sam had said it too. On that last phone call. The one where they had agreed not to talk, not to text, because it would make things harder, which, selfishly, Elle was grateful for. She couldn't imagine him having to go through the same routines, just without her, knew it was unfair she had her own fresh start. But still, it wasn't easy. She didn't eat for days, a fist of guilt clenching inside her, snapping with her own sadness when she thought of certain routines: Sunday pasta night, walks home from the store, The Wheel of Fortune, and then the dog. The dog. The dog. That was the worst part.

But love. That's the last thing Sam had said to her: I thought you really loved me. Elle had held the phone hard to her ear, opened her mouth to say something but closed it again as he continued. When I had my appendix out. That night, he'd said. When you came in after, and I was all pale and stuff, and couldn't stand up, you cried. I saw you. I

saw you cry. I'd be an idiot if I hadn't thought you'd thought about all this before, but then, that night, I thought you really loved me. That it'd be fine. I did.

Elle had bit her lip hard, remembering the night, remembering being surprised at herself, too. She pressed her head in her hands and let the confusion roll all the way through her. She didn't know what else to say. I'm sorry, she repeated, because it was the only thing that felt true enough. I'm sorry. I'm sorry—she said again and again, unable to ignore the way the phrase, the syllables and cadence, matched up with a different phrase—the one he wanted to hear and she had repeated times before, and wished, in some ways, she could say now—I love you, I love you, I love you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

She saw her dad's car right away, and for a moment, everything else disappeared. She smiled, hugely, the Minnesota cold stinging her face, numbing her teeth, and held onto him hard as he got out of the car, leaving the door open and hugging her. He smelled the same as always: a hint of gasoline, sugar and cotton sweaters, and Elle pressed her face into him.

“Well look who it is,” he said as he pulled away, his hand still on her shoulder, the other reaching for her bag, his loose jacket catching a gust of wind.

She didn't say anything else, just stared up at him, her face locked in a smile, hair blowing around her, and followed him into the car, sinking down into the familiar seats, the familiar, different smell, and exhaled, thinking for a minute that everything, that all of this, that everything, may be okay—even though really, deep down, she knew it wouldn't.

The house looked the same. Even the magnets and photos on the fridge seemed to have stayed in their exact position, nothing gone, nothing more. Her room looked identical to how she'd left it too, although her mom had put a vase of fresh flowers on her bedside table—gerbera daisies, the kind her dad always got her on her birthday. They were just on sale, she had said, shrugging it off, when Elle thanked her.

But her mom had also made chicken pot pie, Elle's favorite, and so when Tommy came home from practice, they all sat in their normal seats at the little white table in the kitchen like no time had passed. The windows were filled with the cool, blue snow of dusk, the kitchen's old cream tiles and wooden panels warm and dented in all the same spots, and Elle relaxed as she ate, telling them about everything she had done: the lottery, the city, the restaurants, museums—although she never mentioned Tyler's name, just referred to friends from class, a girl named Leila.

It felt good to be home, though, Elle decided as she shut her door that night, tugging on the basketball sweatpants and T-shirt from freshmen year she hadn't bothered to take with her. At least for now. It felt like an escape, somehow, like she was hiding out somewhere for the time being, like some famous actress who went into her dressing room in between takes, collapsing on her fold-out chair and smearing off her make-up.

Her mom came in just as she was getting ready to get into bed, asking if she wanted the space heater she sometimes used when the temperatures dipped below zero.

“They say it’ll be minus five in the morning,” she said, leaning on one hand against Elle’s desk.

“I’m good,” Elle said. She bent over her suitcase, searching through her clothes for the book she’d brought.

“Okay,” her mother said.

Elle found the book and looked up at her. Her hair was longer now, just skimming her shoulders and dark red sweater, and Elle thought maybe people would think now, they looked even more alike. Elle could never see it, but everyone else did, friends mistaking old pictures of her for Elle, strangers commenting that they could be twins in the grocery store. Elle thought maybe someday, when she was older, closer to her mom’s age now, she would.

“I’m glad you’ve been having a good time,” she said, touching the elbow of the arm she was leaning on with her other hand.

Elle got into bed and put her book next to the vase of flowers. She looked at her and cracked her knuckles.

“You seem lighter,” her mom said after a moment, holding still.

Elle looked at her. “What?” she said. She cracked another knuckle.

“Just, lighter. Just, maybe the breakup really was a good thing. You know, I did see Sam the other week. He’s still been working part time.”

Elle swallowed and looked out the window on the opposite wall, then back to her mom.

“Can we please not do this now? I’m going to bed.”

Her mom put her hands up and stepped away from the desk.

“Fine, fine,” she said, her voice higher, “I just wanted to say.”

Elle picked up her book but didn’t open it.

“I’m glad you are making so many friends, too,” she said. “We were a little worried you’d be lonely.”

“I’m okay.”

“Any friends better than others?” She said, dipping her head.

“What?”

Elle’s mom smiled and shook her head, her hair skimming over her collarbones.

“Nevermind, nevermind,” she said. She stepped toward the door. “You want this on?” she asked, pointing toward the light switch.

Elle turned on the small lamp next to her, then told her to go ahead.

“Good night,” her mom said, flipping the switch. “Love you,” she said, her words travelling back to Elle in the dark.

“Reindeers or the diabolical Elves?” KC asked the next afternoon as they dug through the wrapping paper in Elle’s basement. She had come over early that morning and they’d spent the day talking, riding around in KC’s car just to go somewhere and because Elle kept saying how weird it was to be back, how strange to drive through the same old roads again, that she felt like she needed a whole tour of the town. It had all made KC put on a tour guide voice, as she called it, complete with a British accent, and driven her around every bend and turn, pointing out the Five and Dime, the 7-11, the playground where once, KC had fallen and chipped her tooth, which of course, Elle already knew.

They had texted Sam, too, that morning. It took an hour to think about, perfect, but KC had said to keep it simple, nice, and so Elle did, just saying hi and that she wanted to let him know that she was home, that if he wanted, they could meet. That’s the mature thing to do, I think, Elle had said, even though thinking about it, the idea of sitting and talking to him, seeing Kippa in his backseat maybe remembering her and barking loudly, jumping at her, or maybe not, made her stomach hurt. She hated saying Kippa’s name out loud. She hadn’t in months. It made the back of her throat hurt, too.

But he hadn’t texted back, and now they were shuffling through Elle’s basement gathering wrapping supplies. Her mother had asked her to wrap a few presents for Tommy, for her dad, and Elle had a few gifts she needed to wrap too: the Nationals jersey

she'd gotten for Tommy, the ornament of the White House for her mom, the T-shirt for her dad.

So they sat in the basement living room, folding, wrapping, creasing, and talking about people from school Elle hadn't thought about it in a long time. It was always weird, she thought, to realize later that you'd gone whole days, whole weeks, never once thinking about someone who used to drop into your thoughts daily. She wondered if there would ever be a time she wouldn't think of Sam's name, of Tyler's, of KC's or her families. She didn't think so.

A half hour later Elle's phone buzzed, and KC and her both stared at it on the table, not speaking as Elle reached for it, the tension evaporating as Elle looked at the screen and smiled, reading Tyler's name.

"It's just Tyler," Elle said.

"Lover boy," KC said.

They'd spent all morning talking about him, too, until Elle could tell KC was getting tired of it. She had this way of breathing and repeating the same phrases when she was getting bored with a conversation. So Elle had switched the subject, asking her about Brett, who KC had been on again, off again, for months now. And they were on right now, because, as KC said, who doesn't like having someone at Christmas. All those damn movies.

Elle responded now, not telling KC how her insides still flipped when she saw his name, how they texted often, but not that often, and it still felt like some secret between

them, somehow. Sometimes, at night, she'd go to bed touching herself as they talked, thinking about him, although she'd never admit that to anyone, anyways.

But then as they finished wrapping, as Elle and Tyler talked about her first day back, how he had gone Christmas shopping today, figuring out presents too, Sam responded.

She had expected it to be Tyler, had just made a joke about slipping on the sidewalks, and her heart sunk at his name. She hadn't seen it in so long, his name there on the screen, where it had been for years, and she turned the phone to KC.

Sure. Next Tuesday? he said.

KC didn't say anything. She shrugged and cut the last strip free from a roll of paper.

"Think you have to," she finally said, looking up at her.

Elle said yes. Of course. She knew. Of course.

They agreed to meet at The Loop, which was a place they had only been to once. Elle had suggested it and figured it was better than going to Redline or Clyde's, where they had gone regularly, which held too many memories—would be too easy to compare with how they used to be. He'd agreed, and she was sure he was thinking the same thing.

In the days leading up to it, Elle tried not to think about it, although it seemed now matter what she did, it was hovering over her head. Again, she couldn't really feel it—not the whole weight of it, but the fear of feeling it was there, so she kept herself busy. She went to the elementary school with her mom, helping her picking up some final projects; the stores with her dad, knowing he wouldn't bring her anywhere Sam was; went to play ice hockey with Tommy, carefully stepping onto the thawing lake, uneasy even as she watched the heavy, red trucks cruise by in the distance. She spent time at KC's as always, too, although she avoided some of the nights where she knew everyone would be together. She hoped Sam wasn't doing the same thing. She didn't want to go anyways. Somehow, drinking schnapps and going sledding at the golf course, sitting around Andrew's basement watching the boys play video games, ordering too much food at Grotto's just to fight over the bill—everything just felt too trivial now.

Then it was Tuesday, and Elle stood in her room with the door closed, staring into the mirror hanging behind her closet, going through her suitcase, her drawers. What did

you wear to see the guy whose heart you broke five months ago? She didn't know. It felt strange to dress up, put on makeup, which he knew she didn't do normally, but did more often now. And she felt like he knew all her outfits, could decipher each of them, their meanings. So after trying on three tops, she just grabbed the black long sleeve shirt she always wore and the same jeans she'd had forever. She put on mascara.

"I'm going to meet Sam," she said as she walked into the living room, grabbing the car keys from the kitchen counter. She took her down coat from the wall and shrugged it on, biting the top of its collar as she zipped it up. Her parents sat on the couch watching TV, but she could feel their eyes on her back now. She turned.

They all looked at each other, then her mother spoke.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"The Loop," Elle said, searching for her gloves in the basket on the floor.

"Good calamari," her dad said.

Elle and her mother looked at him.

"When have you ever had their calamari?" her mom said.

"I haven't. Just what Joe says," Her dad leaned back in to the couch cushions and winked at Elle.

Elle smiled slightly and shrugged her shoulders, stepping toward the door to the garage. They all looked at each other again, and Elle tried to act normal, ignore the way she was sweating everywhere, her hair hot against the back of her neck.

"I won't be home late," she said, reaching for the door before they could say anything else. "Bye," she called as she left.

As Elle opened the garage door and got into the car, started the ignition, her breath icy as it warmed, she felt it. It was something like stepping onto the frozen lake again, but worse. She tried to shake it from her mind as she backed out of the garage, realizing it had just started to snow, the tires slick against the fresh inches, but couldn't.

She kept her hands steady as she drove. She hadn't driven in a while, and it felt strange to her now. She'd never really loved driving—had been thrilled to get her license, finally have the freedom to go anywhere, but the power of it still scared her, how, if she just flinched at the wrong time, jutted the wheel as someone sped by or she curved around the lake, that'd be it. She didn't know why she thought about this now as she made her way to The Loop, finally pulling into the parking lot just as the snow picked up.

It was dark out, they'd agreed to meet at seven, and the windows of the restaurant looked warm and even comforting as she made her way inside. She hoped he wouldn't be there first—she wanted to get settled, had even come early—and was happy to see that he wasn't. She went to a high top in the back of the bar area and took off her coat, draping it over the stool as she smoothed her hair. She sat down and waited.

At ten past seven, he was there, and Elle saw him before he saw her, pulling off his hat as he stepped inside, scuffing his shoes on the floor, looking around. He'd always been thin, but he looked thinner, now, Elle thought, his round face more narrow, and she could tell he just had a hair cut, the light blonde trimmed neatly. She breathed, readied herself, and waved, saying his name too soft for him to hear.

He stared at her and smiled as he walked over, hugging her before sitting down.

“I didn’t know it was gonna snow,” he said, putting his own jacket over the stool next to them, shaking off the melting flakes. She could tell he was doing it too—some version of his Meet and Greet persona, which he used less often than she did, but still had, somewhere inside him, like everyone.

“Me neither,” Elle said, staring at him, noticing he was wearing his light green shirt.

They both shuffled on their stools and looked at each other again, the waitress coming just as Elle started to ask him how he was. He looked at her, down at the menu, and then asked if they wanted a pitcher. Elle didn’t say anything for a moment, had hoped they would just get one drink and head home, but she nodded, even smiled as he looked from her to the waitress back to her.

“Sure,” she finally said.

“So,” he said, as they watch the waitress walk away. “When’d you get in?”

“Friday,” Elle said.

They nodded and looked to the door, where a couple was leaving and back to each other. He laughed for no reason, then Elle laughed, and they both breathed hard and kept talking.

It slipped back to normal as Elle realized there really was lots to talk about, catch up on, and also when realizing that Kippa was definitely not in the car, that it was too cold, that she wouldn’t see her today. It wasn’t even forced, somehow, their old selves taking back over, and they talked about friends for the first part, how Brett was trying to start his own house flipping business, how he and KC really were ridiculous, how Ashley

and Lauren had talked about moving in together—and then about their families, her parents, Tommy, his mom, dad, sister. Elle mentioned the calamari comment because she knew he'd understand, and he laughed down into his drink and ordered it the next time the waitress came by.

“I haven't been working as much,” he said. “Miss your dad.”

Elle held onto the bottom of her beer and turned the glass slightly.

“I've been working over at Hamilton's, too, though. He's got that huge ice fishing thing going on. It's actually been going really well. Like, I may actually get my own place now.”

“What?” Elle said, laughing, “leave Ross and Tim? I can't imagine it.”

He shrugged and took a sip of his beer, smiling. He'd lived with them for years, since they graduated high school, and she couldn't see it, him living alone.

“That's great, though,” Elle said, nodding. She glanced out at the restaurant, relieved that it was almost empty and that no one they recognized was there. “That is,” she said again, more seriously.

“Thanks,” he said. He poured them both more beer.

The pitcher was almost gone, and as they both took a long sip, it seemed the easy conversation was dwindling too. They were getting closer to something, some bottom neither wanted to talk about but they knew they'd reach, and Elle felt like she had at times when they were dating when he'd talk about their future, making some comment about her moving in for good, or, like when once, his mom had asked if she wanted to try

on her old rings. It was like she was watching someone else react to their comments, inside, some other, truer part of her, shrinking. Elle took smaller sips.

Still, as they finished their drinks, as they finished talking about her new school and she played with the idea that maybe, really, they wouldn't have to talk about anything for real, that this really could just be a light, catch-up conversation, Elle knew it couldn't. So as the check came, as the last people filed outside into the snow, Elle leaned in closer, blinking hard for a moment, and then said it before she could change her mind.

"I'm sorry," she said, the words spilling over the table.

He didn't say anything for a minute, just finished signing the check, which he had refused to let her pay for, his hand slowing, then looked up.

"Don't be," he said, his words so firm she could see them spelled out in her mind. "That's just life." He shrugged, but she watched the muscles in his jaw tense, and suddenly, like a flip had switched, she felt like she was going to cry. She bit her cheeks hard until the soft, steely taste of blood touched her tongue.

"I am," she said. She tilted her head back and looked away so he wouldn't see the wetness in her eyes. She wanted to get out of there. She hated herself for this, in some ways, for all of it.

"Hey," he said, his voice off a little now too before he shook it away. "It's fine. Really."

Elle breathed in through her mouth, still looking away, her breath shuddering. "How's Kippa?" she asked as she turned back to him.

He smiled with his mouth closed. "She's good. Really good. A little fat, but, hey."

Elle laughed, loudly, breathing in hard again as she caught her breath. “Good,” she said. “Miss her.”

“She misses you, too,” he said. He looked out to the window. It was quiet for a minute and they both looked outside, watched the snow falling in big chunks, like ripped pieces of paper.

“I should probably get back to her, though,” he said, sitting up straighter. “I’ve been gone most of the day. She’s gonna be crazy. Really didn’t think it called for snow, though, either, right? This is weird.”

Elle agreed and leaned back in her stool. They had dipped out of the moment now, were back in the other type of conversation, and she moved her tongue against the sour cut on her cheek.

When they stepped outside, the wind pulled against their coats, and they both dug their hands into their pockets. There were at least three more inches now, everything falling fast, and they walked together as they both recognized each other’s cars parked next to one another. His was closer, and Sam reached across his windshield, wiping the snow away, as Elle stood still waiting to say goodbye.

“Do you want me to do yours?” he asked, his voice louder even though it was quiet, the snow was falling silently, the wind dying down.

“I’m fine,” Elle said. “I got it.”

He nodded, then turned back to her. A car passed on the street behind them, and they turned and squinted at its headlights.

“Should be careful driving home,” he said. “Your dad get new tires yet?”

“Yeah,” Elle said, even though she didn’t know. “I think.”

Sam looked away again then back to her, rocking on his heels, his hands in his pockets, his elbows jutted out in wide triangles.

“You know, if you want to see Kippa, you could come by sometime.”

Elle stood still and wiped a snowflake from her forehead. Her heart beat faster, her body hot.

“Thanks,” she said. “I don’t know, this week, Christmas, I don’t know.”

“Alright,” he said, forcing a smile. “Just wanted to say.”

“Thanks,” she said, the word sharp in her mouth.

He hugged her then, saying he would see her later, and they stood there for a minute, fitting together like they used to, both breathing, their chests rising against each other.

Elle didn’t look back up at him as she pulled away and walked around to her own car, but then she heard him call her name and she turned back, her hair in her face.

“It wasn’t me, right?” he said, standing close to his car door now, one hand on the handle, his voice rising.

“What?” Elle said.

“Everything. It wasn’t me. There wasn’t anything I could have done, right?” he said, unmoving.

Elle didn’t say anything.

“I mean, you just needed to do your stuff right, your thing? Alone. By yourself. I get it, I really do, I knew that, I do, I did. I just wanted. I don’t know.” He shrugged.

Elle paused but looked straight at him. “Yeah,” she finally said. “No. Not you. Never.”

He nodded, pausing, then opened his car door and lifted his hand in a wave. He got inside without glancing back up.

Elle turned and walked fast to her car, getting inside without bothering to wipe away the snow from the windshield or windows, then sat completely still, waiting for the sound of his car leaving, pulling out of the lot.

It was darker inside the car than outside. The snow was pressed firmly down like a heavy, gray blanket, so she couldn't see out, no one could see in, and she breathed hard, her breath spiraling into the cold air, and leaned back against the driver's seat. She didn't know how to describe what she felt, her brain not rationalizing it, but she put her hand to the lower part of her ribcage where something was tightening, something sharp, and she just focused on that, the way it seemed to be cutting into her, relieved, almost, to have a specific hurt to focus on, to blame.

The next day was Christmas Eve and no one asked about her meeting with Sam. She could tell her mom wanted to the next morning, when, at eleven o'clock, Elle finally came out of her room, but they were all in the kitchen by then cooking a late breakfast, and her mom had just said she was glad she got home safe, that she had been worried about the roads.

Elle had woken up to a text from Tyler, too, saying Merry Christmas Eve, but she hadn't responded, just wandered out into the kitchen in her pajamas, watching her dad and Tommy cook eggs, her mom turn on all the Christmas tree lights and decorations even though it was too bright to really seem any of them, the sun in the windows bouncing off the fresh snow. She picked at an omelet but didn't eat it, saying she was saving herself for dinner, which Tommy said was stupid.

KC hadn't answered when she called late last night but finally called her back around two as Elle lay on the couch with Tommy, watching the same movies they did every year. Neither of them really wanted to, but their mom had given them a look when they said were skipping it this year, so they'd obliged, sitting on the couch together, faces flat. Elle usually liked all the traditions, but now, at that moment, she just didn't care.

She stood up fast when she heard her phone ring, answering it and going into her room, closing the door tight behind her.

“There you are,” Elle said.

“Sorry, I was at my grandma’s,” KC said. “How was it?”

Elle’s insides loosened at KC’s voice, finally letting out the thoughts in her head. She told her about the night, how it was fine, and then wasn’t, what he had said.

“That’s not that bad. It wasn’t him, not really,” KC said. “It was your own crazy.”

Elle walked back and forth in front of her bed, then sat down.

“I know, but now, Tyler, and it’s different, I don’t know. I’m such an asshole. I just feel bad. If he knew. He would think it was him.”

KC sighed into the phone. Elle heard Christmas music playing in the background.

“So maybe it was him, I don’t know,” KC said. “I don’t think it’s that complicated. You didn’t really love Sam, now you like this new guy, and you’re with him. That’s it.”

“But I don’t want that to be it. That’s not what it was about at all. What it is all about. It’s about me. My life. Not being the type of person to marry their stupid high school sweetheart. That’s not me. But I’m not trying just to jump to a new boyfriend either. That’s just as pathetic.”

“Cause that would be the worst thing in the world.”

“What?”

“Marrying your high school sweetheart.”

“I think so, almost, yes,” Elle said.

KC didn’t say anything. Elle stood up again.

“I just think, if I’m being honest,” KC said, “you’re kind of being ridiculous. I can’t say I actually feel sorry for you.” She tried to laugh, turning it into the kind of joke and insult they always slung at each other, but this had different weight, and Elle felt her face warm.

“Just because I’m trying to do the right thing?” Elle said, hard.

“For yourself,” KC said.

“Is that so bad?” Elle said.

“No,” KC said, then she called to someone in the background, coming back to the phone and telling Elle to hold on.

Elle didn’t move.

“Look, I just think, nothing going on is that bad. You broke up with Sam. You got a new boyfriend. A new life. Be happy. This is what you wanted.”

“It’s not, though,” Elle said, her voice low. “This isn’t who I wanted to be.”

“I don’t know what to say, here, Elle bell. Then break up with Tyler.”

“We’re not dating,” Elle said, but KC interrupted, saying she had to go, that her uncle had just arrived.

“Merry Christmas,” KC said. “We’ll talk later, okay? Love you.”

“Merry Christmas,” Elle said, dropping the phone and staring nowhere, then pressing the heels of her hands hard into her eyes.

“Okay, what’s wrong?” her mom said later as they stood in the kitchen, cleaning up the dishes from dinner. Elle stood at the sink, scrubbing the pan from the scalloped potatoes.

“What?” she said, still staring down at her hands.

“You’ve been brooding all day,” she said as she dried a pot against her hip.

“No I haven’t” Elle said. She turned off the faucet and paced the pan in the rack, reaching for another.

Neither said anything for a moment and they listened to her dad say something downstairs where he and Tommy were finally wrapping the gifts they had bought.

Her mom opened a cabinet and put the pot away. “Is it Sam?”

Elle scrubbed the new pan harder, the sponge ripping under her fingers.

“I figured you’d ask about that,” she said, glancing up.

Her mom shrugged.

“But no, it’s fine, really. He was fine.”

“We miss seeing him around,” she said.

Elle shook her head. She turned the faucet on harder.

“I’m not allowed to say that?” her mom said, looking at her, folding her arms slightly.

“You can say anything you want,” Elle said.

Her mom went back to the kitchen table and grabbed the water glasses, setting them down on the counter with a clink.

“Okay, then, are you dating someone else?”

Elle turned and looked at her fully.

“I mean, it just seems like it, it’s not a bad thing, Elle, but everything you’re doing out there, seems pretty, date-y, if you ask me,” she shrugged her shoulders and dumped the leftover water into the sink, her shoulder touching Elle’s.

Elle took a step away, leaving the half-washed pan in the sink. “I’m not,” she said. “And even if I were, who cares?” She dried her hands on a towel behind her.

Her mom nodded. “Right.”

Elle swallowed hard and went toward the table, but then turned around fast.

“Why does everybody care so much?”

“What?”

“What I’m doing?”

“I don’t think they do. Well, we do, we’re your parents.”

Elle shook her head again, feeling her insides twist, tighten.

“I’m living my life, that’s it.”

“Well, good.” Her mom laughed. “Is it what you wanted?”

“What?”

“Your new life?”

“Yes. Better than this.” Elle’s insides stung at the words. She wasn’t even sure if she meant it, but she wanted to, she was trying to. She looked away as her mom smiled and turned on the faucet, shaking her head a little. She washed her hands.

“Well, good,” her mom said. “We’re all glad.”

Elle didn’t respond. She picked up the placemats from the table and put them in a drawer under the sink. Her mom watched her, then reopened the drawer, took them out, and put them in another one.

“Well, Merry Christmas,” she said. She touched Elle on the shoulder as she walked by, heading toward her own room, the other side of the house, the Christmas lights and tree now bright, aglow behind her.

Elle opened his card that night. She still hadn't texted him back and she didn't fully understand why. Just as she didn't fully understand why Sam had shaken her up so much. Why she'd snapped with KC and her mom. None of it made sense, on paper, not really, but her whole body felt like it was fighting itself.

She lay in bed and tore carefully at the envelope as if it might explode, moving deeper under her covers, the lights off except for her bedside lamp. She pulled the card out and stared at the front of it: a blurred portrait of two people carrying a tree in a snowstorm. She smiled smally and opened it, reading his still unfamiliar handwriting:

Dear Elle,

Merry Christmas. The holiday season—and life—has been so much better with you. I hope you have a wonderful time at home and I look forward to seeing you when you get back. Here's to getting the most out life...

-Tyler

Elle read it again. She was thankful for the dash, no heart, no love, but in reading it, her whole body softened. And she read it over until finally, she picked up the envelope to put it back inside, to put it back in her suitcase, but then she felt the weight of something else in it. She opened the envelope wider, dumping its contents onto her chest, her covers, and picked up the slip of papers.

Lottery tickets. A whole handful of them. Scratch cards, power ball slips, some confusing looking game with bright colors. She closed her eyes, still holding onto them, and laughed in her chest, smiling, then opened her eyes again. She picked up a scratch card and put her hand in a thin fist, angling her thumb towards it, and scraped at the little flecks of fake silver. She scratched four in a row as it instructed, but even as she stared at the numbers and pictures, saw a few matched up, she didn't know if she had won.

Christmas passed as normal. The morning and holiday reset the air between her mother and her, as mornings and holidays do, and they opened presents, made pancakes, and prepped for her relatives coming over for dinner that evening.

Elle had gotten books and money and some new boots, and she thanked her parents, not sure if they really liked her gifts, but glad they at least said so. She thought Tommy really did like the jersey though, and she promised sometime when he came to visit, they'd go to a game.

KC came over later that night, too. Christmas Eve was the big celebration in her family, Christmas was just boring, she said, so she sat on Elle's bed as she packed up all her new gifts, the clothes that were sprawled across her room and in her drawers. She was leaving the next day, which somehow, had been the cheapest flight, and she couldn't tell if she was happy or sad about it.

"You'll be back at Easter, though, right?" KC had said as Elle leaned on her suitcase, pushing it down. It was late, just after ten, but a few of her aunts and uncles were still there, finishing the last sips in their wine and pretending to help her mother with the dishes.

"I think so," Elle said.

“Well, I’ll try to come visit too. Before then. I have enough money, just need to get the weekend off.”

“Would love that,” Elle said, tucking her hair behind her ear before reaching for a sweater.

“Maybe meet Tyler?”

Elle nodded, trying to smile, her mouth more of a thin line. She hadn’t brought him up since their conversation. “Yeah,” she said. “Maybe.”

They said goodbye that night, KC leaving just before midnight, and Elle felt the rush of sadness she always felt at goodbyes, which never hit her until the moment they were hugging, pulling away. She tried to keep her voice from cracking as she turned. She said she’d see her soon.

It wasn’t the same with her mom or Tommy, partially because it was morning again, she thought, and partially because they were just different to her, she missed them in a different kind of way. It did with her dad though, as he drove her to the airport again, commenting that it felt like they were just there.

“I know,” Elle said, as he stopped the car along the curb of the terminal.

He put his hand on the back of her seat as she reached down to pick up her backpack.

“You know,” he said. “We are happy for you. Your mom, she just misses you.”

“I know,” Elle said.

“Proud of you. Everyone is. Going after what you want out there.” Her dad touched his beard, then the steering wheel, then put his hands in his lap. “Alright,” he said a minute later. “Shall we?”

They got out of the car and pulled out her suitcases, then they stood at the curb, the exhaust car hitting their legs, and they hugged until the feeling was swelling up inside her again, brimming, and she pulled away fast, calling I love you over her shoulder and breaking through the double doors.

Tyler picked her up from the airport. They had agreed he would even before she'd left since he was going to his uncle's again for Christmas, would be in the area and had the day off. And even though she had planned to tell him to forget it, that she needed to head straight home instead, as she finally talked to him on Christmas, thanking him for the card, she couldn't bring herself to. She wanted him to pick her up. To see him.

The airport was crowded and she leaned against a wall outside, searching for his car. It was later than she expected—she was always confused by the time change, how one hour of your life could just disappear—and she could feel the tiredness in her eyes, told herself to wake up.

Twenty minutes later he was there. She hadn't seen his car pull up, but then he was standing there, calling her name. She went to him, and he smiled and kissed her quick, but hard, before reaching for her suitcases and putting them in the trunk.

“You're back,” he said across the car as he went around to the driver's side.

“I am,” she said. Elle stood still on the curb, watching him, then finally reached for the car door and got in.

The air was different again, back like their first date, Elle thought. It was strange, how when you're apart from someone, they still live so fully in your mind, you feel close to them, but then when you're back with them, no matter how close you thought, felt you

were, it's still strange for a moment, your abstract ideas of them settling back into their flesh. They're there now. Physical. Next to you.

They talked lightly about the holidays as they drove back. Tyler held most of the conversation, though, his words excited, breathless, and he kept leaning over to touch her knee. Elle commented in all the right places, made all the right reactions, but still felt sunken, slightly, in a way she didn't understand as she stared out the window at all the melting snow and low sprawling buildings she didn't know the names of.

But when they got to his place, he kissed her in the kitchen, and then they were reaching for each other, Elle laying her hand along his neck, and they fell back into a different routine, a more comfortable one, the way it was so easy to be together. Elle kept her eyes closed the whole time, trying to just be there, to memorize it, not to miss anything.

Elle took the metro home the next morning. He had said he could drive her, didn't want her to have to maneuver all her suitcases, but she had insisted it was fine. So instead, he just drove her to the metro station nearby.

He leaned to kiss her as she left, but Elle turned her cheek, his lips landing near her ear instead. He pulled away, half-smiling, and moved his eyebrows. Elle looked at him from the passenger seat, the streets around them full of people walking, cars moving, everyone shuffling around them, and then she breathed, hard, and was about to say something, but didn't. And before he could say anything else, she got out of the car, pulling her bags from the backseat and disappearing underground.

On the metro, Elle took a seat in the back near the window. She let her bags fill the seat next to her and didn't care if anyone complained. Didn't worry about anyone stealing anything even as the car filled, people standing around her. Instead, she just leaned her head against the window, letting her forehead press into the cool glass, shaking with the train's movements.

That was it, she thought. It was about to be a new year. Another fresh start. She would try it again. Being single. Independent. On her own. She had repeated the words to herself on the plane ride there, her mind spiraling, and she tried to keep them on the surface of her thoughts now as she moved away from the city.

But as the train broke out of the city tunnels, now bathed in sunlight as it climbed toward her station, Elle adjusted in her seat, glanced around the car, and felt like she was choking, her chest shuddering as she made a sound she wasn't even sure was from her. She saw two men in front of her turn to look at her, but she didn't care. She turned back to the window, pressing her head into it even harder now, and let herself cry. It felt strangely powerful, crying in public, and she didn't hold back—her eyes shut hard, head moving with her breathes, body small against the seat.

A new year. A new year. A new year. She repeated it to herself again. It was all fine. She would be twenty-three soon, too, her birthday just at the end of January. Another year older. 365 days. She always loved the idea of a year. Of sectioning off time. How in her mind, she pictured everything restarting again, the calendar flipping, running back around a track, but really, in real time, everything was just moving forward. Still, it made it easier to think about life. The world. Herself. The year she was twelve. Fourteen. The year she lost her virginity. The year she moved. Started grad school. She wasn't sure how, in her mind, she really would remember this last year. Would it be the year of grad school? Or the lottery? Or breaking up with Sam. Or just: Tyler. She thought about this as the train slowed to a stop and she realized it was her station. She brushed the hair away from her face, sticky with her tears, and sat up straighter, reaching for her bags. No, she thought, none of them.

And she was right. Because she knew, even in that moment, that this time, this year, would not come back to her in labels or timelines or a neat, measured section. It would hit her in memories, in little breaths of feeling that will be familiar in some way,

but still unknown and distance, pulling her back into a different time, a different self—the same life.

BIOGRAPHY

Lina Patton graduated from Orono High School, Orono, Minnesota, in 2008. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Elon University in 2012. She worked in brand strategy for a brief period of time and received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2016.