

SPACE TO SETTLE

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the

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of

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in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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Spring Semester 2016  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Space to Settle

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

by

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Master of Education  
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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to Robert E. Simon, a man with a dream.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my husband, who has always encouraged me to pursue my interests and reach my full potential. Susan Shreve, Steve Goodwin, and Courtney Brkic—I couldn't have done it without your insightful guidance and support. You have understood what I have set out to do from the beginning. Lina Patton, you've helped make the past three years an unforgettable experience. You are a true comrade in the writing world. And finally, the late Alan Cheuse, who made me revise one of my stories about a billion times and made me tear my hair out. Guess what Alan? That was the first story I ever had published.

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## **ABSTRACT**

SPACE TO SETTLE

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George Mason University, 2016

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This thesis is a collection of stories that examine the expectation set against the reality of a planned suburb. The stories occur in backwards chronological order, and each story pulls back a further layer of Reston, Virginia, until we finish with its first resident. In each story, there is some type of ideal life that the characters are striving to live, but ultimately, they must settle for less. This includes settling for a less than ideal significant other, settling into a job that isn't a good fit, settling into a routine of unhealthy obsession, or settling into the idea of not being good enough, and therefore settling into a lesser version of oneself. Through shifting perspectives and certain details that can only be gleaned through modern technology, Reston reveals itself to be a plan gone awry, a promise as false as the American Dream.

## **THANK YOU FOR GIVING US A WONDERFUL PLACE TO LIVE**

Cora watched the light turn green for a second time, but she knew she wouldn't get to turn on this rotation. She'd been on Sunrise Valley Drive too many times during rush hour before. The traffic was so slow-going from the hours of four til almost seven, that if she happened to be on the road at this time, she'd give herself small, measurable traffic goals. She'd race herself to see how quickly she could make it to streetlight. A fire hydrant. A street sign. Out of towners may have found it cute, that Sunrise Valley was to the south of the Toll Road, and that Sunset Hills was to the north. But to Cora, it just reminded her of everything she hated about the area. That the sun would rise and set with your commute.

Traffic was especially bad today, as if everyone had something they were really trying to get home in time for, but Cora knew that all anyone wanted to get home to do was sit alone in their bedrooms with the door closed.

The light turned to a fleeting yellow, and red again.

"This just figures," Cora said. A whole life of complaining about Reston, and now that she was taking actual concrete steps to leave, it seemed to hold her in place.

She needed to catch a flight to Boston. The flight was hours from now, but now that she had no one in her life whose duties included driving her to the airport, she'd have to take the metro. The funny thing about this metro, unlike other metros in greater cities



throughout the world, was that almost no one could walk to it. At least no one in the suburbs. Once she dropped her car off in the lot, she knew it'd be eleven sprawling stops on the Silver Line, a train change, and five stops on the Blue Line to get her to Reagan, where flights had been the cheapest. It was part of why she hated living here. Nothing felt close.

"I'm going to live right in the middle of Boston," she said aloud. "I don't care what it costs. I'll put up a tent on Boston Common if I have to." She looked herself in the eye in the rearview mirror. "If I get the job," she added quickly. She had a terrible way of jinxing things sometimes.

The job opportunity was at a beauty school, where she'd be an instructor for other love-sick, lost 18-year-olds who didn't think they were smart enough to go to college. Cora thought she'd be good at it. She liked helping people, especially hopeless people. People like her.

When Cora graduated from high school, she was dating someone. Slightly older, in the Marines. She hadn't wanted to tie herself down for four years to a college where she'd probably do even worse than she had in high school and be left in debt with no marketable skills. And she hadn't wanted to risk falling for some pseudo-intellectual in college and wrecking her relationship. Instead, she decided to study the one thing that she felt she could really succeed at: cosmetology. The program was only eight months long, and she figured that when she was done, she could follow her boyfriend wherever he was stationed. But by the time she finished the program, he'd already left her. She didn't

resent him for it. She was sure that she'd have made the decision to become a hairstylist regardless. It was for the best.

She always told herself that things were for the best. You could make yourself crazy second-guessing decisions and thinking of what could have been. For that reason, she was sure---absolutely sure--that ending things with Derrick was for the best. It had propelled her in a useful direction, reminded her that she needed to move forward.

Reminded her not to get stuck.

She saw a sign stapled to a telephone pole: Celebrate the life of Robert Simon, Reston founder. Friday night at Lake Anne.

She laughed out loud.

"Thanks a lot, Robert Simon," she said, watching the light turn green again.

"Thanks for nothing."

After the way everything had shaken out, after she'd done what she felt was the right thing, she was ready to get far from these suburbs. She felt like a man she'd read about who ran into a burning building, saved a baby, and then fled the scene. She didn't want to stand around and collect the credit.

She needed Derrick to be happy, but she didn't need to see him be happy. She had heard that it was wrong to call suicide selfish, because people who commit suicide think others are truly better without them. She imagined what it must be like for people to commit suicide and then walk around as a ghost observing everyone they used to know. How it would be to see them all so much happier without the dead person. How their friends and family couldn't say it, but the dead person had saved their life by dying.

“Fuck,” she said, “how depressing.”

She had called her phone company and disabled the internet for the time being. She didn’t want use it again until she was gone. There were too many opportunities to check up on people without them knowing. It made her feel like a ghost watching Derrick. That was why she needed to get this job in Boston. She needed to be a ghost somewhere else. And then, eventually, a person again.

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“How much further?” asked Linda. “I’m not sure how much more my old hip can take it.”

“Oh, here mom,” said Megan. Linda tried not to wince at that word, mom. “Here, let me take here. Come here, gorgeous. Come with mama.”

“Oh, nonsense, Megan, I got her.”

Megan bit her lip. “Okay.”

Brian squeezed her hand and smiled at her. He ran his hand protectively over her swollen belly. “No heavy lifting,” he said.

Linda hoisted Amelia on her hip. The little girl clawed at her hair, then she moved on to her necklace, her collar. Every adornment of of her step-grandmother seemed to be hers to play with.

When Linda had pictured the kind of girl that would be right for her Brian, she’d never pictured the ex-wife of an incarcerated man. In fact, when Brian had told her that this was his choice of a woman to spend time with, she kicked him out of the house. It

was the first time he'd lived somewhere other than her house since Boy Scout camp in fifth grade--which had been cut short after day four due to his homesickness.

Last fall, Brian had quit taking his online MCAT classes. He claimed he'd never wanted to be a doctor, anyway--that this was Linda's delusion. He started taking education classes--which was what he'd wanted to do all along, despite his mother's protests. During his student teaching, he met Megan, the photography teacher who was back after a leave she'd taken to look after her daughter. A swarm of gossip followed Megan around, and there were certain teachers who wouldn't even attend meetings they were legally required to attend if Megan was going to be there. Brian ignored what he heard. In Megan's charcoal, stoic eyes, he saw something that was rare: a person who no longer cared one way or another what other people thought of her.

To Linda's horror, Brian moved right out of his childhood home into Megan's house. Linda pictured Brian filling in the creases in Megan's bed where her ex-husband used to lay. Using the same drawer for his shaving paraphernalia. Wearing his old clothes that were still leftover from his quick exit.

Linda was invited to the wedding. She met them for dinner a few weeks beforehand to ease the awkwardness, and she saw her son smiling in a way she hadn't seen him smile since his father passed away. Megan was not what she had expected, but she was a nice girl. Nice, but not terribly bright. Experienced, but still mostly innocent. The things that had happened to her were not her fault. Linda resolved to try with Megan; to put forth actual effort. It was the first thing she had tried at in twenty years.

The group grew silent as the pathway spilled into Lake Anne Village Center. A soft glow from hundreds of candles reflected off the water. A bronze statue of Robert E. Simon, Reston's founder, on a bench in front of the water was now surrounded by bouquets of flowers and an elegant homemade sign reading: Thank you for giving us a wonderful place to live.

Linda held back tears. Robert had been good friends with her father. She didn't remember him very well, but when her father was alive, he always told her that Robert had picked out Linda as someone who would be something special one day. He had said that kids like Linda were the future that he'd built Reston for. She just hoped that she'd lived up to that responsibility.

Megan took a photo of Amelia sitting on the statue's lap. "For our family photo album," she said to Brian, smiling. Megan used to put photos of her daughter on Facebook, but since she'd deleted the app from her phone a few years ago, she didn't do that anymore. Even the wedding photos, which were so lovely, lived as non-interactive, private, glossy printed photos, in an album under their bed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Lauren Panakopolis did not like funerals. But vigils were different. Vigils were only held for people who the general public believed mattered.

She'd felt especially saddened when she read the news online about Robert Simon. She talked to him a few times when his daily walks coincided with her daily walks. These walks, a prematurely geriatric hobby, were a result of feeling cooped up in the townhouse she shared with people she barely knew.

She knew the only reason she was sad that he'd died was that she knew him personally. But she also know how unfair that was. That everyone deserved a little sadness at their time of departure, regardless of the circumstances.

She'd heard a couple of her coworkers at school comment on his death. "Well, he was really old," they said, as if that were some kind of excuse not to feel bad that he was gone. That just because he was 101, he deserved death more than younger people. That was the really sad thing: that people liked to make excuses to protect them from legitimate feelings of heartbreak.

Lauren saw Brian from afar and met his gaze before she could avoid him. She smiled and waved as she approached his family. She timidly hugged Megan--she was so horrible with hugs. She silently prayed that Brian had not told her about their one terrible date, but taking one look at Brian--his overeager, overly honest demeanor showing through his eyebrows that he'd admitted to tweezing--she was sure he had. Since their date, he'd gone from substitute teaching to becoming a bona fide history teacher. He seemed to take it all a little more seriously than everyone else, carrying a briefcase to work and wearing a tie every day. Lauren nodded to Linda, who gave a subdued little nod.

Lauren awkwardly gestured at Megan's huge belly. "Congratulations," she said. "I heard from..." she began, but did not finish, as she feared she might mention a teacher that Megan was not on speaking terms with. The list was long. Although they all worked at the same school, Lauren rarely saw Megan and Brian. The school was so big that her

coworkers sometimes felt like strangers living in adjacent townhomes. Like little speedboats passing too quickly to say hi.

“Thank you,” said Megan graciously. She looked at her husband. “We are both so thrilled.”

“You deserve it,” Lauren said, but then instantly regretted saying.

Megan took Lauren’s hands in hers. “Thank you, Lauren,” she said. “Really, thank you.”

Lauren tried to hide her alarm as she saw Megan looking at her in that way that she’d suddenly felt like more and more people were looking at her. That look that said: you are a good person. Thank you for existing.

Ever since Lauren had begun therapy, she had started putting her past with Burt behind her. She realized that being alone for a little while did her a great deal of good. Being alone was not so bad when you started to realize you can actually like yourself.

“Well,” she said, yanking her braid over her shoulder. “Enjoy the vigil. There are some candles over there under that little white tent. You know, if you want one.” She gave a timid little wave to Megan’s daughter and walked away.

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The route from Devraj’s house to Lake Anne Village Center was a long one, but using The Blue Trail, they wouldn’t have to walk on the road once. The fact that the trails were not heavily monitored by the police was an added bonus.

At the Wiehle underpass, Devraj asked Rachel to take the forties out of her purse. Kevin smiled. “Your girlfriend is so cool, man,” he said.

“We’re like Bonnie and Clyde, right Rachel?”

Rachel laughed and took a giant sip of her 40. “You guys are such dorks.”

Devraj poured out a tiny bit of his drink.

“What are you doing?” cried Kevin.

“Have some respect, Kevin! I gotta pour out a little for Robert E. Simon, my fallen homie.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Oh my god.”

“I’m not fucking around, Rachel. Without him, we wouldn’t have this trail. Wouldn’t have this underpass. Wouldn’t have Tall Oaks to steal forties from.”

“Don’t forget about the fake lakes,” said Kevin.

“He’s right. We wouldn’t have the fake lakes.” Devraj drew Kevin under his arm. “And we wouldn’t have interracial friendships like me and my best bro over here.”

“Oh boy,” said Rachel.

“No, really! That an Indian kid and white kid could be best friends was all part of his Reston manifesto thing.”

Rachel smiled. “Are we actually going to this vigil thing?”

“Of course we are, Rachel. We’re going to pay respect the legend. One day our kids are gonna ask us, who started this place? Who built this majestic empire? And we are going to tell them we were alive when he was alive. That we lit candles and sang in his honor. And our kids are going to be these really cute light brown half-Indian kids, and they are going to be as smart as you and me combined, and they are all going to go to TJ...”



Rachel laughed hysterically.

“Watch out, Rachel,” said Kevin, “This guy is poking holes in the condoms.”

The three of them drank through an awkward silence. Although Rachel had a reputation that suggested otherwise, she was actually a virgin. As was Devraj, of course.

Kevin was the first to finish his 40. He threw it to the dirt ground, where it clanked, but didn’t break.

Devraj picked it up. “Hey, you gotta recycle this man! What would Robert E. Simon’s ghost do if he saw you littering like this? Build a better tomorrow, man.”

“Be the change you want to see in the world,” said Rachel.

Devraj grinned. “I made her watch the Gandhi documentary with me.”

Kevin sighed. “You guys are too much.”

The three continued walking, Kevin on the left, and Devraj and Rachel on the right. Every now and then, Devraj would put his arm around Rachel and pinch her shoulder, as if to remind himself that his life, that this beautiful suburban moment full of tall trees and squirrels that seemed half-drunk, was really happening.

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Maddie pulled her jacket close. She was always cold these days, even on a warm September evening. She touched her face and it barely felt like her own. She hardly used to wear makeup--just a touch of mascara. Makeup never felt real. But with her skin growing yellower each day, her normal appearance barely felt real anymore, either. Now she covered her face in makeup to try to cover the shame she felt. As an apology for existing.

“How much further?” she asked.

“Only a little,” Derrick said. “Here, let me carry your bag.”

“You don’t have to,” she tried to say, but he was already doing it. He was always that way, even years before she got sick. Wholeheartedly generous. When she first met him, when she was in high school, she remembered the countless elaborate dates he’d taken her on. For Valentine’s Day that year, he’d bought her a bouquet of sunflowers, a locket, and taken her on a dinner cruise, where most of the other patrons appeared to be cheating middle-aged husbands looking to do something to keep their wives from leaving them.

His love was overwhelming. It was part of the reason she’d found it so unfathomable to break up with him when she was in college. Unfathomable, but something she had to do regardless. She could not have imagined becoming her sister-in-law, who married her brother a few years after high school and seemed to have so small of a life.

When she’d broken it off all those years ago, she remembered feeling the need to pay him some kind of reparations. To cut him a check for all of the dates he’d taken her on. To give him two years of his life back. But Derrick was as gracious then as he ever was. He was nonchalant. It almost scared her.

She’d never understood why the people around her were so upset by this breakup. She almost felt like her friends and family put more stock in their relationship than they did. As if the onlookers took her teenage tableau to be true love.

Maddie knew deep down that this rekindling was nothing to be proud of. If anything, it was an incredibly selfish choice. But Derrick had informed her of his desire to spend this time with her in the same way he'd always stated everything he intended to do for her. Unable to take no for an answer.

It had frightened her. The knowledge of the fact that no matter what she did, no matter how horribly she treated him, he would never leave. During her short-lived marriage to Andrew, this kind of unconditional love had never been the case. And she was much happier with it that way. It kept her in check. The idea that love could really be unconditional, that it could overlook flaws and terrible actions was just irrational and unfair. It didn't hold people accountable and led to abuse. Loving each other needed to be a choice. A choice that each party made every day. Maddie remembered a quote along these lines from somewhere, perhaps from a book she'd read, or maybe just a romantic movie. She didn't care if the quote was cheesy. It was true.

"I love you, Maddie," Derrick said just then, picking a flower and threading it through her knit cap. He picked her up and carried her. "Just until we can see the lake, okay?"

She relaxed in his arms and tried to think of nothing.

"Okay," she said.

\*\*\*\*\*

At the vigil, Devraj got candles for Rachel and Kevin. He kept shushing them and telling them to be more reverent, but this couldn't undo the 40 ounces of malt liquor they'd just consumed.

“Hey,” Devraj said suddenly, unable to stop himself, pointing indiscreetly. “Is that...you know?”

Close to the edge of the lake was a hulking young man with broad shoulders and blonde, close-cropped hair. He reached out his giant hands and lit a candle for a tiny little girl. He pushed her hair behind her ear to keep it from the flame.

“Kyle Matthews,” laughed Kevin. “What a loser.”

“Is it true?” asked Devraj, suddenly aware with the high concentration of kids at the vigil. “That thing about his you know what?”

Kevin laughed. “Why don’t you ask your girl?”

Rachel kicked him in the shin playfully. “Shut up, Kevin! You know I don’t know about his you know what!” She began to redden. “And even if I did, which I don’t! That was before that whole rumor thing.”

Kevin looked at Devraj. “What do you think, you okay with your lady knowing mouthbreather over there in the Biblical sense?”

Devraj reached around Kevin’s shoulder, trying to put him in a headlock. The alcohol made him feel like he had superhuman strength. Regardless, he laughed while he did it.

“Hope I’m not interrupting,” someone said with an awkward laugh.

It took Devraj a second to place the face. At first he thought it was someone his own age, but as he processed the side braid and slightly professional manner of dressing, he realized it was his English teacher from last year.

“Holy shit,” he said loudly. “Miss Panakopolis!” He gave her a sloppy hug.

“Sorry I said ‘shit.’”

She laughed. “It’s okay. We’re outside of school. No big deal.” She looked at Rachel.

“This is my boyfriend,” she said. “This is Devraj. I mean, you already know him. But you probably didn’t know he was my boyfriend.”

“Oh!” said the teacher. “What an interesting surprise.”

“We’re going steady,” Rachel said, looking meaningfully at her teacher. “He holds my books for me.”

The two shared a long laugh while the boys looked on, puzzled.

“I guess chivalry isn’t dead,” said the teacher.

Devraj interlaced his fingers with Rachel and gave her palm a squeeze.

“No,” said Rachel. “Chivalry is very much alive. It’s just hard to find.”

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Lauren was standing outside one of the little cafes that lined Lake Anne. These cafes didn’t make the money that the owners probably hoped, and even now, people were going into them mostly to just use the restroom, not even buying a coffee or a soda for the sake of posterity.

She saw a couple in line for the restroom, a man with dark, shaggy hair and soft eyes and a woman wearing a knit cap who appeared ill. She felt like she knew the man from somewhere, but she couldn’t quite place it. She opened her mouth to say hi in case he noticed her first, but hoped he wouldn’t. It was strange enough, trying to recall how

you know someone and putting all of the pieces of their life in place. It added an extra eerie element, trying to place how you knew their sick girlfriend, and then carry on a conversation without staring or acknowledging her illness.

The man looked right at her but didn't meet her gaze. He continued talking to the girlfriend and touching her back. Lauren figured she was safe.

It happened more and more, though, the feeling that she might know about ten people wherever she went in Reston. She had started noticing the same vanity license plates again and again if she looked out for them. LUVBUG. TUBAGUY. 66 U SCK. She would see people in line for the grocery store and wonder if they were the same person she'd sat next to at a restaurant or on the metro. How many people in a given day was she nearly missing? How many of these people could be a friend if she'd only opened her mouth? How many could be something more?

She looked down at her candle. The crowd around her began singing "This Little Light of Mine." Lauren did what she'd done every Sunday in church growing up. She moved her mouth to the words she knew, but she didn't let any sound escape. On some of those dreadfully boring Sundays, she'd have fantasies where everyone else's voice would cut out in order for her to have a solo. But the joke would be on them. They'd wait, expectantly, and she'd give them a proud look that would seem to say, "What? You think I'd actually sing right now?"

She'd read his obituary several times. She felt the familiar pang whenever someone she vaguely knew died. She asked the article all of the usual questions. Was he alone? It said he died in his home on Lake Anne. He was probably alone. Was he alone in

the world, though? Maybe not. He had a wife--his fourth--who he'd apparently met on one of his daily walks around the world he'd planned. Did people care? She looked around at the people around her singing. Was it possible that they were all mouthing just the words? No, that wasn't possible. If that were true, there would be no song at all, and there was clearly a song. But was it possible that they'd all come to this place because like Lauren, they were bored and lonely and couldn't find another way to spend their Friday night?

Perhaps.

But ultimately, did he leave a legacy? Were people happy that he had lived? Had his dream been fulfilled? Lauren contemplated this for a while.

Lauren had stopped wishing for a crowd of chairs of familiar faces around her at her time of death. Some things could not be guaranteed, no matter how many provisions you took. Instead, all she hoped for herself, all that she hoped for Robert Simon and everyone else, was some kind of legacy.

That at least one of her students would say later on, I remember Miss Panakopolis. She believed in me and thought there was more to me. I'm not sure if there really was more to me or not at the time, but she convinced me that there was, and I believed it. And for that reason, I am where I am.

Or even if none of them could say that, that at least a few of them would always remember her when recalling the difference between "there" and "their" when writing a cover letter to a potential employer.

She listened to the chorus of voices, people trying to do something nice, people trying to show some semblance of community. She looked around at people that she might have known if she'd taken the time. She felt the overwhelming sense that they were all the same. That like Robert Simon and his lofty goals, they had all done the best thing a person could do. They had tried.



## NO PASSCODE

As the second hour after her contract time approached, Lauren thought to herself that there were teachers who stayed after, and teachers who did not stay after, and no matter what, the two groups would get paid the same.

She had gotten more desperate for human interaction lately. Now that both of her roommates had significant others, they were virtually never home. Her own passive attempts at obtaining a significant other, on the other hand, had failed miserably. She was feeling more and more disconnected from humanity, and she thought that staying after to help students, no matter how selfish her own reasons were, could only be a good thing. Although she wasn't even sure half the time if she was helping them at all.

"Maybe I should get a dog or something," she wondered aloud.

Rachel, the junior staying after to write an essay, looked up from her computer. "Dogs are cute," she said. "But you have to take care of them." She pushed a piece of shoulder-length hair behind her ear. It was dyed that maroon color that young women dye their hair when they are unhappy and they want others to know it.

"That's true," Lauren said slowly. She often felt shocked by the fact that even when she said stupid things, students tended to take her seriously. It was almost as if she could do no wrong, because she was only eight years older and had endured four years of minimally rigorous courses to get to where she was. Whenever it snowed and there was a

chance the students would be off of school the next day, they looked to her to provide an expert prediction on whether or not school would be closed.

“Can I use a thesaurus?” asked Rachel. “I keep getting the same words stuck in my head.”

Lauren felt in a funny place, making the rules. “Yeah, you can. Just don’t use it too much. You might end up sounding like a robot.” She looked up at Rachel. She looked like a smart person who got things. “There was actually a study done recently from a university. They said that people who use a lot of big words for no reason actually sound dumber than someone who speaks simply.”

“That’s funny. What a weird thing for them to do a study on. People are dying of diseases every day and this study is just trying to find out if using big words makes you sound smart.”

Lauren shrugged. “Not everything can be life or death. I guess.”

Rachel fiddled with her hands inside the desk. “Oh,” she said as her hand smacked on to something. “Someone left their phone in here.”

Lauren sighed. She always turned the desks around so they couldn’t put anything in them. But the students would turn them back around whenever she wasn’t looking. If she had one moment of weakness, one tiny moment where she ran out into the hall to get water or ran across the hall to the printer, that’s when it would happen. “Whose phone is it?”

“Um...” said Rachel. “Do you want me to look?”

“Well,” said Lauren, “That wouldn’t be like, too big of an invasion of privacy? Right?”

“I mean, whoever it was just left it here.”

“Then look.”

Rachel made a few deft swipes across the screen. No passcode. Lauren mentally chided the student, whoever they were, for being so blasé about privacy restrictions.

“Oh,” said Rachel, trying to maintain a neutral expression.

“Can you figure it out?”

“Yeah, I figured it out. It’s Kyle Matthews’ phone.”

Lauren scrolled through her mental rolodex of 140 students. Kyle Matthews. A hulking, grunting, nonintellectual. He was the kind of student who spent about 90 percent of his life with his mouth open. “Oh. Kyle.”

Rachel looked down. “Yeah,” she said quietly.

“What is it?” Lauren pressed.

“Nothing.”

But Lauren could tell that it was something. Teenagers were usually so apathetic, shuffling like zombies from one unwanted activity to another, getting signatures for volunteer hours when necessary, complaining here and there along the way. But this look that Rachel had contained a real feeling. More than just a usual complaint along the lines of unfair popularity.

Lauren thought of the dumb mental health training she attended earlier in the year. She remembered the after school special type of lines she was supposed to use in

situations such as these. She hated the way they sounded when she imagined them coming out of her mouth.

“Rachel,” she said slowly, “you can tell me.”

Rachel laughed a little. “Oh yeah. I’m sure I can.”

Lauren looked at the door. She thought about closing it, but then she remembered that in one training, they said that they should never, ever close the door. Who knew what kinds of things kids might make up about you. And especially after the whole Lisa Kim thing, which came out years after the fact, teachers would never close the door again.

“It was just this thing. This thing that I sort of had with Kyle. If you could call it that.”

“Was he like, your boyfriend or something?”

Rachel laughed almost spitefully. “You think that’s how it was? Adults are so naive. All they ever think is back to their little goodie-two shoes days a million years ago. ‘Oh, he was my boyfriend. He held my books. We went steady. He took me to the big dance.’” She shook her head. “It’s not like that anymore.”

“Oh, I mean, I don’t know. I didn’t necessarily think that’s how it was. I’m not even really that old, even.” She hated the way her voice cracked sometimes, like a prepubescent boy, when she was trying to appear casual. “People didn’t ‘go steady’ or whatever when I was growing up. Weird stuff still happened.”

Rachel crossed her arms. “What kind of weird stuff?”

Lauren looked away. “I don’t know. Just weird.” She looked at the open door. It was 5 PM. Nearly everyone on the English hall had already left. Rachel, with her

downward glances and sullen demeanor, appeared to her as someone ashamed of the things she'd done. As if she was the worst one out there. Lauren knew this feeling well. "I sorta dated someone when I was young. But like you said. You couldn't really call it that. He was a lot older. And I was like, in middle school when I first met him. It was messed up." She felt herself turning red and she immediately regretted her words, just as she did whenever she mentioned something about her life to her students. One time she had made a reference to drinking in one of her honors classes, and the students seemed to liven up and listen more closely to her for the rest of the class. But then she spent the entire evening worried that there was one square in the bunch that would go home and joyfully report her transgression to their parents.

"So it was like, statutory rape?" asked Rachel, her eyes wide.

"Sh," said Lauren, almost under her breath, looking at the open door. "I wouldn't call it that. I don't think of it like that."

"But that's what it was. That's the definition of it."

"Oh, I just, I don't know." With the door open so wide, she hoped she would catch some kind of cross breeze to cool her down. She didn't have windows in her classroom. She was in line behind seven other teachers to get a room with a window.

"Hey," she said suddenly. "This isn't about me. It's about you. And, uh, Kyle." She made sure to say his name quietly. "What's the deal?"

"You're going to judge me."

“No I’m not. I’ve done weird stuff, too. Everyone does weird stuff. If they try to convince you otherwise, they’re lying. Like even your parents. I know you don’t believe me now, but I bet your parents even did weird stuff.”

She sighed. “I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation.” She looked around the room as if someone might have been hiding there just to listen to her. “I mean, everyone knows anyway. My English teacher might as well know, too. Just don’t like, talk to a counselor about me or something? Or my mom. Jesus Christ, don’t even think about talking to my mom about it. Okay?”

Lauren thought about that training again, about how she wasn’t supposed to promise not to tell about anything. “Okay,” she said.

“So Kyle Matthews had me over to his house this one day. And his parents weren’t home. And we like, got drunk. And went out on his stupid boat because I guess he has money. I mean, a little bit of money. It’s just a pontoon boat. I was so drunk. He told me to like, take off my clothes on camera. And then Kevin and Devraj showed up.”

“Devraj Singh?” Lauren had never liked the kid, but she didn’t have a particular reason why. Like a few other students, she just didn’t like the look he usually had on his face. “Did Devraj tell everyone?”

“No. God, no. Devraj is actually a pretty nice guy. For a nerd. He and Kevin were like, trying to help me, or something. But it was too late. Kyle had already sent it to the whole lacrosse team.”

In the training they said to offer concrete options to the student in crisis. “Should we go to the police?”

“Oh no. God, no. I never should have told you. I’m such an idiot.”

“No, no. Sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned the police. We don’t have to tell anyone.” Lauren looked at Rachel and saw desperation. Not just desperation, but a stranger feeling she knew well. A mostly indescribable feeling, the same one you get when something you were planning on returning gets damaged in a way that you’re positive will be noticed by the store clerk, and nothing, absolutely nothing, can be done to fix it.

She looked down at his phone. “We do have his phone, though,” she said slowly.

Rachel studied her carefully. “And?”

“I don’t know. You’re part of the technology generation. What do you do when you find someone’s phone?”

Rachel smiled. “Well, you used to go into their Facebook and make it say they’re interested in men. But that’s too insensitive these days. Too many actually gay people are cool.”

Lauren picked up the phone and tapped the Facebook app.

“Wow,” she said. “Someone has a lot of Russian female friends.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “He’s such an idiot,” she said. “All of those accounts are fake.”

Lauren began typing a status. Rachel laughed. Lauren deleted it and began typing something else.

“I wish,” Rachel said at this one. “That would be poetic justice.”

Lauren thought of a game she used to play in college where she would dial 911 on her friends' phones but not hit "call." She always liked that feeling of teetering on the edge of a terrible mistake.

Just then, footsteps fell in the hallway. Lauren hid the phone in the pocket of her slacks and straightened herself out. "So, the tone in this piece," she found herself saying.

It was just the custodian, a small El Salvadoran woman who cleaned meticulously. "Hi," she said shyly to Lauren.

"Hi," said Lauren, as the woman began sweeping under the desks and bent down to pick up an empty bag of chips. "Thanks." Lauren always felt that this was one of the most awkward parts of the day. She always felt compelled to get up and help the woman, but knew she wasn't supposed to.

Rachel pretended to be working on her essay again. Lauren went back to her desk and flipped through ungraded papers. She felt the phone vibrate a few times, but it wasn't loud enough for anyone to notice but her.

Once the custodian was safely in another classroom, Lauren pulled out the phone and placed it on her desk. She gasped.

"We posted it. Somehow we posted it."

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Rachel was pacing around the room, hands scrunched inside her blue hoodie. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know what she would do."

"Can we take it down?"

"It's already been shared seven times!"



“It’s fine,” said Lauren. “People have to think it’s a dumb joke.”

“I don’t know,” said Rachel. “What if they think it’s real?”

“Maybe,” said Lauren. “Maybe it would be good for him. Humble him a little bit. Maybe this is exactly what Kyle needs.”

“What if they trace it back and figure out it was you? Couldn’t you get fired?”

Lauren shrugged. “I mean, it’s going to trace back to his phone. It’s going to look like he posted it. I’m not so worried about it.”

“But this is your job! This is your life!”

“Yeah. Teaching public high school. It’s all I ever dreamed of since I was a little girl.”

“Really?”

“No! Of course not!”

“Then why are you doing it?”

“I mean...I don’t really know what else I would do. I don’t really have any other marketable skills.”

Rachel crossed her arms. “Well that’s really great to hear, Ms. Panakopolis. It’s so inspiring to know that none of you teachers even want to be here, either.”

“Hey, I thought it was all about honesty today. You were being honest. I was being honest.” Lauren thought back to the PowerPoint from the training that said HONESTY in big letters. Or was it TRUST? There was a big difference between the two, wasn’t there?

Just then, the phone made a little “ding.” Lauren looked down.

“Oh my god,” she said. “They think it’s real.”

The first comment that came through was from Danny Wang: *“So sorry to hear that, man.”*

Rachel laughed. “Danny’s dumb as rocks. Of course he would buy it.”

“But,” said Lauren. “It’s sort of a bad sign, isn’t it?”

From Devraj Singh: *“Is this real?”*

“Is Devraj even friends with Kyle?” Lauren asked.

“No. But that’s not how Facebook works. You’re just friends with everyone. Even if you aren’t really friends.”

Again from Devraj: *“Because if so, you got what was coming to you, man.”*

“Oh shit!” said Rachel, grinning.

“Can you try not to curse so loudly with the door open?” whispered Lauren.

“I don’t know, can’t you close the door or something?”

Lauren felt herself turning red. “No,” she said. “I can’t.”

From Elvira Lopez: *“I’m sorry to hear that. My uncle went through the same thing.”*

Lauren and Rachel exchanged glances.

“So this is a real thing that happens?” asked Rachel.

“I guess.”

The condolences stacked up. Each sympathizer seemed to borrow the etiquette standards of the previous comments. A few users scolded Devraj for not being more understanding of a classmate during such a difficult time.

Sheila Matthews: *"I am so sorry to hear this, Kyle, but I am so happy that your testicles were spared. There are procedures they can do so you can still have children one day. You will find a woman who understands."*

"Nice detail about the balls," said Rachel.

"Thanks. Who is that, anyway? She looks old."

"I think it's like his aunt or something."

"Why wouldn't she just call his house? You know, instead of do this cheesy Facebook post?"

"I don't know. Calling someone takes more than five seconds of your time."

Just then, an unknown call came through.

Lauren and Rachel stared at the phone.

"Should we answer it?" asked Lauren.

"God, no! No, we don't answer it! Are you kidding?"

"I just. I don't know. What are we going to do now?"

"God, anything but answer it!" yelled Rachel.

5:45. The door was still wide open. No one was around.

"Do you think there's any way that he'll know it was us?" asked Lauren.

"I mean, the chances are high. If the posts were made this late after school, they had to be made by someone in this room. I think he might figure it out. Unless we like, move the phone elsewhere."

"Elsewhere."

"Yeah. Maybe we can plant it in someone's locker?"

“Who’s locker? And besides...hasn’t it got our like, prints on it?”

Rachel laughed. “Our prints? This was a Facebook prank. I don’t think anyone’s going to be dusting for prints exactly.”

Lauren got up and began walking between the empty desks. She nervously began turning the few rogue desks back around so their inside was facing out. “I’m starting to feel weird about this,” she said.

“And you didn’t feel weird about it a couple minutes ago?”

“I don’t know,” said Lauren. “I don’t know.” She thought about the latest thing the juniors turned in. A little essay about whether or not competition was important in society. The things they shared in that essay. One girl discussed her eating disorder in excruciating detail. Another discussed his father who had just found himself out of a job. They felt, at the times she could stand them, like little flashlights shining in a bright room for no one.

“Ms. Panakoloplis? What’s wrong?”

Her hand had found her way to her chest. She was pushing down, trying to steady her heartbeat. The harder she pushed, the harder her heart pushed back. Lauren put both of her hands on the desk in front of her. They looked small. “I think we need to get rid of it,” she said.

“The phone?”

She nodded sharply.

“I know a place.”

“Okay.”

“We have to drive there.”

As they walked to the parking lot, Rachel related the story to Lauren of her license getting taken away, and at first, Lauren thought that this was bad parenting, but then, she thought about what could have happened if her own parents had taken her license away, and then she wasn't sure. She was starting to think more and more that the safest choice would be not to have children, so you wouldn't run the risk of ruining anyone other than you.

Lauren stopped in front of her car and looked behind her. “I don't think I'm supposed to drive my students around,” she said.

“I don't think you're supposed to cut their dicks off on Facebook, either.”

“Well. Don't tell anyone about this.” She looked at Rachel. “And don't die.”

“Okay. I'll try not to die.”

“Good.”

They parked the car in a small parking lot next to a walking trail. Lauren felt her forehead straining, but she tried to tell herself that nothing serious was wrong and that she should try to look natural.

A familiar bearded old man with a cane waved at Lauren.

“Hi!” she said.

“Hello, gorgeous,” he said. “Is this your sister?” He motioned his cane at Rachel.

“No,” she said. “This is my...friend.”

“Aw, Miss P,” said Rachel. Lauren elbowed her. Rachel extended her hand. “Nice to meet you,” she said.

“I’m just going on my daily walk,” he said. “Seen two blue herons already!”

“That sounds wonderful,” said Lauren.

“That’s why I love it here.”

“Well,” said Lauren, “we’ve got to get going. See you soon!”

As the old man hobbled away, Rachel turned to Lauren. “Holy crap,” she said.

“You know him?”

“He’s just this old man I run into when I go on walks. He’s nice.”

“Dude, he’s Robert Fucking Simon.”

“Who?”

“You know, like Reston? Robert E. Simon town?”

Lauren remembered reading the cheesy blurb about the planned community in a blog about “America’s Coolest Suburbs.” When she graduated college, she swore she’d never end up in a town as boring as Alexandria, the DC suburb where she was born and raised. But at the same time, starting over completely seemed unfathomable. So she picked a different DC suburb, one that was touted as cool by this blog. To this day, she felt that the blog had lied to her.

“That’s the Reston guy?” she said finally.

“Yeah. It was his 100th birthday last April. There was a big celebration at Lake Anne and everything. Where were you?”

Where was she? Crying in her bedroom? In her car with her head on the steering wheel? Trying to figure out how to get out of a parking lot during rush hour?

“I guess I was being oblivious,” she said.

The two young women walked down to the lake, where it was secluded from the trail by a row of oak trees.

“Shall I do the honors?” said Rachel.

“It’s all you.”

Rachel heaved the phone as far as she could. It sailed over the drainage pipe and made a magnificent splash. Lauren thought of the fish in the lake, how they were descendants of the original fish first put in back in the sixties. She thought of how startling the phone would be at first, something new in their environment that had been so safe and quiet for so many years, but how like with all things, they would eventually grow bored of it.

## SQUIRREL APARTMENTS

Cora was already awake when Derrick's phone lit ablaze with a text message. She looked over at him. Sound asleep.

"Honey," she said. "You got a message."

He didn't stir. She was jealous of him, really. She hadn't asked for insomnia. But along with a laundry list of various minor ailments, it was something she'd inherited from her father.

"Derrick?" She sighed. She flung her arm over his torso, hoping to wake him. He didn't budge. She grabbed his phone, still plugged in and charging for the night. Without her glasses on, she had to pull it close to her face.

*Maddie: Hi Derrick, I know we haven't spoken in years, and I don't want to bother you or mess up your life in any way, but I'd like to see you. I have something to tell you.*

"What the fuck?" Cora said loudly. But Derrick stayed asleep. She looked to the ceiling, still leaning over him. Maddie. Goddamn.

She'd first heard Maddie's name about two years ago, when they started dating and went through the mandatory listing off of exes and their stories and the baggage that they brought. Maddie was the only one he mentioned without disgust, perhaps with a touch of nostalgia. Maddie was the one that Cora called "the one that got away" in her



head, but never out loud for fear it would ring too true and cause Derrick to leave her immediately. Maddie the smartypants. Maddie who went to college and left Derrick behind and then married some other smartypants. Maybe they had a smartypants child that they would show Baby Einstein videos to in order to get its synapses moving in the right direction. If that wouldn't give some closure, she wasn't sure what would.

She was vaguely aware of the fact that Maddie lived in a nearby suburb, but she had never assigned too much meaning to this. Everyone seemed to end up in this monolithic strip mall paradise. Where the shopping centers had interactive fountains where the kids could play. Maddie was just another sucker in a sea of suckers. It was hard to avoid living near everyone you ever knew.

It was part of why Cora wanted to leave. She wanted to start over and become nobody. She hated the conversations with the people from her past, the what are you doing these days, the oh isn't that so *interesting*. She also hated that the salon was ten miles away, yet it took her almost an hour to get there. She felt like a weed growing in the parking lot of a grocery store. It was a wonder she was still here, with her roots having to bend this way any that to keep her in this uncomfortable position.

Cora ran her finger over the surface of the phone. Without thinking too much about it further, she deleted the message and set it back down.

She rolled over and stared at the ceiling. Pangs of guilt began to nag at her from deep down in her throat. She thought she might be sick. Sick with herself. She often did these things, impulsive things that she thought for a second about doing and then for years regretting.

She looked at Derrick, his smooth, unknowing back. She reached out and touched it and it felt like a stone worn down by a stream. She told herself that if this Maddie had something important to say, she'd reach out again. It would not matter that she had deleted the message. And besides, what could be important enough that a married woman would have to reach out to an ex to say? Nothing except trouble. The more she thought about it, Cora felt proud for deleting the message. She was diffusing a problem before it happened. Dismantling a bomb.

But for the rest of the night she lay awake. She watched the clock change numbers until her alarm went off.

The next day was a boring day at the hair salon.

White-haired ladies came in to get their hair dyed a darker shade of white.

Mothers brought their children in to get bowl cuts. Whether they were boys or girls didn't seem to matter.

Nothing remotely glamorous occurred. Cora put a blue streak in her hair out of boredom.

The next night, she did what she usually did after an entirely sleepless night. She lectured herself about how she *must* sleep, how staying up two nights in a row was unreasonable and cause for concern. Of how two nights would logically turn into three and then a week and then pretty soon she'd either end up dead or like Sylvia Plath, who was basically dead inside before the whole oven thing anyway.

Sleep, she told herself. Sleep.

She pictured sheep in a pasture. One sheep bit another right in the belly. The sheep that was bleeding out raised a leg, giving her the finger. Sheep didn't even have fingers. She felt stupid.

Derrick, next to her, asleep of course. Derrick who would laugh at her if he knew she pictured a sheep with fingers.

Derrick's phone went off.

Maddie again.

*Maddie: Hey, sorry that I texted you out of the blue. I know you're with Cora now. I'm not texting you looking for a cheap hook-up. It's something else. I want to see you again so I can tell you something.*

Cora shot out of bed. She let the message lie there, right next to her sleeping boyfriend. She grabbed her computer and went out to the living room.

She opened up Facebook. She didn't even know the girl's last name, but she knew it would be easy enough to find. In the search bar, she typed "Maddie." There were a few Maddie's from Cora's high school, so she scrolled past them. Maddie Wilkerson. Seven mutual friends--Derrick and his closest buddies from the store. It had to be her.

Cora had seen many of her friends put their boyfriend's exes on a pedestal. It was an easy thing to do, especially if you had low self-esteem. Women seemed to have some sort of correctional goggles when looking at someone their significant other used to love. Fake blonde hair turned natural, eyes too close together were spread apart, severe cleft chins smoothed out and became attractive, noses that were all wrong looked distinguished. Cora knew this was a phenomenon. Yet, when she looked at Maddie, thick,

curly blonde hair cascading down her back, wearing a long black dress and a sunflower in her hair, laughing in the setting sun--everything about her just glimmered.

Who even took the photo? Her husband? Was it from an engagement shoot years ago? Although, it would be strange to have a solo engagement shot, wouldn't it? Cora opened up the photo.

The caption read *Taken by Giselle at Skyline Drive. Thanks boo.*

Cora moved through a couple of profile pictures. Maddie in San Francisco. Maddie on a boat. Maddie with her arms around friends at a 5K. Maddie with a dog. Cora went back and back and back looking for the wedding photos.

She tried to remember the timing of events as Derrick had told her. They dated just as Maddie was entering college. When Derrick had been out of high school for a few years.

Maddie on the beach. Maddie with a mimosa. Maddie wearing her cap and gown for college graduation. Maddie at a bar. Maddie with a red cup. Maddie on the top of a pyramid of girls outside of a dorm.

Hold on, Cora thought. Where's the wedding?

Maddie dressed as a pirate with other college kids. Maddie in New York City.

Cora gasped even though she knew what was coming.

Maddie kissing Derrick. The date on the photo was almost ten years ago.

Cora had seen photos of Derrick from the olden days before he cleaned up and got his promotion, but it still surprised her.

Derrick's hair was long and shaggy. He wore big rings through his ears and was wearing a sleeveless shirt with the name of some band on it. The look in his eyes was different, too. It was far-off. Dreamy. He never looked dreamy when she kissed him. Although, she admittedly did not have photographic evidence of this.

She scrolled through and found photo after photo of the two of them together. The captions were similar.

*My love.*

*So happy I got to see Derrick this weekend.*

*Aww we're pretty cute.*

*LOVE LOVE LOVE.*

*Soulmates.*

She kept clicking and clicking until two years had clicked by and she was a point before they'd met. Maddie, celebrating New Year's, wearing a party hat and throwing her head back and laughing. She was maybe 15 and she looked like she could have been drunk. That was the oldest one. No more photos.

Wait, she thought again. What about that wedding?

She inspected Maddie's info further. Relationship status: single.

"What the fuck?" she said aloud. Where the hell was this wedding?

She was sure that Derrick had shrugged when discussing Maddie, shrugged his shoulders hard and said something like, "Yeah, she moved on fast," and discussed her marriage and that was that.

Had Cora made that up? There was absolutely no evidence on Facebook of this marriage.

Had Derrick made it up? Was he worried that Cora would get jealous and weird if she knew he had a single ex? Cora felt uncomfortable and paced to the kitchen and back.

She took out the computer again. This was insanity. She closed the tab and erased the browsing history. Madness.

She went back to bed, grabbed his phone, and deleted the message again.

Only after it had been removed from cyberspace did she realize that this was probably what Derrick would have expected out of her, the girlfriend he invented fictional weddings for to keep her craziness at bay.

Hours later, she felt a nagging feeling that she'd missed something. She felt awful--that was a given. But for her to have gotten the detail wrong about the ex being married--or for Derrick to have lied about it--just seemed out of character for both of them.

She got back up and went back to the living room. If she was being honest with herself, she knew she wouldn't sleep anyway.

She clicked through the pictures again. Still no wedding.

Think, she told herself. Think. You're not going to sleep, so think.

In another tab, she opened Google. She typed in *madison wilkerson wedding registry*.

There it was. Not so hard to find at all.

*Madison Wilkerson and Andrew Starling's Registry.*

It was a subpage of another page, their old wedding website dated four years ago. Forgotten but not removed from the internet.

She breathed a sigh of relief. She was not insane! Maddie was married! Or, she had been. She clicked through their site.

*How we met: In a bookstore. Andrew was picking up a copy of Atlas Shrugged that was on display. I don't know why, but I felt like I had to say something to him. It was totally out of character for me, but I went up to him and told him that the book would change his life. And the rest was history.*

“Ew,” Cora said out loud. She kept clicking on all of the links. Pictures, pictures, pictures. Pictures of the rings. The dress on the back of the stupid door. Him in his Army Reserve uniform. Her posing with the flower girl. Fake smile.

*Our first date: We went out to see Toy Story 3 together.*

Cora put her forehead in her hands. The childlike wonder. The naivete. What was it with adults her age, she wondered, that had them grasping for nostalgic things? For movies and songs and video games that reminded them of the time before they knew how much evil there was in the world? And look where it got the two of them. Divorced or erased from the internet. Which was as good as divorced, anyway.

She exhaled and cleared the browsing history. Closed the laptop. Got back in bed.

When the alarm clock rang a few hours later, she thought to herself, Night Number Two.

Derrick came home early from work the next day and Cora asked him if he wanted to go on a walk. Her eyes felt tired, but she felt invigorated by the picturesque idea of the two of them romping around in nature. It seemed like a request Maddie might have made.

“Why do you want to go on a walk?” he asked.

“Why not? You always go on walks.”

“Yeah, but I usually go alone.”

Cora pouted. “Yeah, well I want to go with you. What’s so wrong with that?”

Derrick laughed. “Nothing. It surprised me, is all.”

Cora ran ahead of him. “I’m full of surprises.”

Next to the sign for the neighborhood were a bunch of irises. Cora picked one.

“Hey,” said Derrick. “Don’t let anyone see you do that.”

Cora shrugged. “What are they gonna do? Arrest me?” She put the flower behind her ear. “Besides. Doesn’t it make me look beautiful?”

“You’re acting weird.”

“How am I acting weird?”

“Have you been sleeping?”

She shrugged. “A little bit.”

They walked until they got to the path that went to the lake.

“How come there are no pictures of us kissing?” Cora asked.

“Excuse me?”



“How come we don’t have pictures of us kissing? Like in front of this lake? Can we set up the camera and take a picture of us kissing?”

“That seems so high school. What made you think of that?”

“I don’t know. I saw a bunch of my friends do it and I never had a boyfriend back in high school so I felt left out.”

He laughed. “Okay. Are you going to cut it out in the shape of a heart and stick it to your mirror?”

“I can’t do that. The guy I live with won’t let me.”

He laughed and kissed her. “I’ll let you do whatever you want.”

They set Cora’s phone up in a tree where its branches separated into a V. She put a ten second delay on it, closed her eyes, and kissed Derrick. The phone made an artificial clicking noise.

“Happy?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, distracted. She grabbed the phone to look at it. Zeroed in on his eyes. He looked very, very down to earth. Cemented in the moment at hand. Not lost in it.

Back on the path, squirrels were congregating in the trees. One squirrel made a bold leap from one side of the path to another, just dangling by a branch no wider than a tiny stick. His friends seemed to cheer him on. Pat him on his little back.

“How do you think squirrels figure out where they’re going to live?” she asked him.

“What?”

“It’s just that...of course we humans know where to live. We get a job and then find the closest place with a low rent where our commute won’t be too awful and we can still do some of the things that we want to do. And that balances out. So even if no one wants to live, you know, in Northern Virginia...there are enough people who have to.”

He exhaled. “I told you. Yeah, I know this place isn’t ideal, but I’m not going to find another job where the people support me as much as they do here. And I don’t want another job. I love my job.”

"I was talking about squirrels. Not you."

He sighed. "So what about squirrels?"

"I just think they all look so happy here. Why can't they all live here? Why do some squirrels choose to live somewhere that's freezing or too hot or too polluted? If you were a squirrel, you could live anywhere. Why wouldn't they all just pick someplace like this?"

Derrick shrugged. "Maybe you haven't considered all of the factors at play. Maybe you're wrong about squirrels."

"How so?"

"Maybe this trail is just full of squirrel apartments where the squirrel landlords charge really high squirrel rents. And the squirrels have to commute to neighboring trees every morning to make sure they come back with the right amount of acorns. But they can't all get hired at the most convenient trees, so some of them have to commute really really far, and it's all dangerous when they run across the road. But they do it for their

family. They don't want to get squirrel evicted." He stared at a big tree that two squirrels were scurrying around. He smiled with his eyes. He got that far-off look.

"Maybe," Cora said. Or maybe, she thought, the squirrels that settle for less than ideal places are the ones that would do anything to be close to a squirrel girlfriend that broke their heart ten years ago.

Derrick insisted that she try to nap while he made dinner. She was able to doze off, but it was that kind of dreamless sleep that someone has when sitting in a reclining lawn chair. Every time she felt herself drifting off, she jerked awake, startled by the sensation that she was falling.

That night, Cora was awake again. She blamed the nap.

But this time, no rude messages coming through on Derrick's phone. It was strange. She hated that this woman had the audacity to text a man who was in a relationship in the middle of the night. But now that she wasn't doing it, Cora sort of missed it.

She grabbed Derrick's phone and went to the living room.

*I've been really busy, she typed. I want to know what it is you have to tell me but I can't meet with you in person. It would feel too much like cheating. I'm really happy with Cora.*

Silence. Cora worried she'd said too much. That she'd typed too on the nose of how she'd want him to respond. She felt herself start to sweat in strange places. Her nose. Her forearm. The back of her ankle.

Then, typing from Maddie. Stop. Editing, erasing, maybe. More typing. More typing.

*I've been diagnosed with cancer. The doctors say I don't have long. Six months tops.*

Cora froze. She started typing *What kind of cancer* and then erased it and wrote *That sucks* and then erased it and then just didn't type anything for a long time. Finally, after what felt like too long, she typed *I am very sorry to hear that, Maddie*. She looked at it for awhile and imagined a pretty girl reading it aloud. Then she hit "send."

*I'd like to see you one more time. I'm too old for the whole Make A Wish thing. But you'd be my wish.*

Silence.

Then, *Just kidding*.

*Okay* typed Cora. *Maybe we can get together sometime soon.*

Her brain reeled from sleeplessness. It was only after she typed it that she realized that it would be Derrick that would have to see Maddie, not her. That she and Derrick were not the same person. These were the kinds of mistakes she'd make on Night Three. Night Four, which she'd only seen a couple of times back in high school, was much worse. It included having difficulty remembering the order of letters in her last name. Forgetting the turns that led to her house.

Her first instinct when she heard someone was going through something terrible was to doubt it. Her second instinct was to blame the person. Stupidity led to misfortune most of the time. These things made the randomness of disaster easiest to digest.

She found herself hoping the cancer was a lie. That Maddie was crazy and that Derrick had dodged a bullet by not being with her. Then she hoped it was lung cancer. Too many cigarettes spent on staying trim. Or skin cancer. Too many UV Rays to get that illustrious glow. Cora pulled up Maddie's Facebook photos once again. She really did seem to glow.

In another tab, she typed *Maddie Wilkerson cancer*. She was ready to laugh at her sleep-deprived self, wondering why she'd actually think this would produce a result. But as soon as she pressed enter, the top result was a GoFundMe page. It was created by Giselle Andreas.

*Maddie Wilkerson has been my best friend since third grade. I came to school wearing the same pair of light-up shoes as her one day. I was getting ready to tell her that she needed to take them off and get out of my sight when she came up to me and said "You have amazing taste in shoes." We've been best friends ever since. I consider Maddie to be my conscience. My better half. When I heard that she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, my whole world was flipped upside down. I figured the least I could do was make this page so she could stress a little less about financial things as she enters the end of her life.*

"Jesus," Cora said aloud. The end of her life?

In another tab, Cora searched *pancreatic cancer survival rate*.

There was a page from the American Cancer Society stating that 20% of patients survive the year and 6% survived five years.

She went back to the GoFundMe page. A total of two hundred and twenty-six donors had raised \$30,000. How was that even possible?

She read some of the comments.

*\$200: Molly and Dave Anderson*

*Ms. Wilkerson taught our daughter three years ago. I've never met a more compassionate teacher, and I wouldn't hesitate to help her out during this difficult time.*

*\$50: Jenna Michaels*

*Maddie was on my crew team in college. She always had such high spirits even in the face of adversity. We love you, Maddie. God bless.*

*\$100: Anonymous*

*\$75: Diane McIntire*

*Maddie, I don't know you personally, but I admire your bravery and your story speaks volumes.*

Cora thought of how much she hated the storyline of the well-loved person dying. Every time there was a book or movie about young people in love, and every time the book or movie came from a certain author, she knew that one of the pretty young people, like Maddie laughing in the twilight with a sunflower in her hair, was going to die. And that it wasn't supposed to make the audience sad because their love was supposed to transcend death somehow. But Cora always felt cheated by this falsehood. Death was death. The end. Cora hated to see a perfect relationship wasted on someone who was dying. The other person left to hold the dead person up as an unreachable measuring stick for everyone else to come.

She set the laptop on the coffee table. She walked outside and saw a little squirrel running around the parking lot.

What are you doing here, little squirrel, she wondered. Why don't you just go someplace that makes you happy?

She knew that what Maddie and Derrick had wasn't perfect. That it was childish, even. But she also knew that it was the kind of unselfaware love that made people die happy.

"He's your wish," she said to the squirrel. "He will make you feel like when you were seventeen and not so alone."

The sun was coming up. The squirrel met up with another squirrel.

Cora sat down and watched them run off. She tried to remember a movie that she watched about squirrels in elementary school. That they banded together to stop a forest from being cut down, or something. She felt it was an unfair plotline. People would cut down forests if they pleased. No squirrels, regardless of how remarkable they were, were ever going to stop them.

Across the street, the squirrels leapt from branch to branch. One of them nearly fell but didn't slow his pace.

How unburdened, she thought. They could go wherever they wanted. They could do anything. If things ever got hard, they could just leave. They would never get sad and they would never miss anyone because they didn't know how. All they knew how to do, in any given moment, was just to be.

"How wonderful," Cora said, "unknowing."

## THE PIRATES OF LAKE AUDUBON

Zoning out, Kevin kept his eyes on the water just beyond his sliding glass door. The lake looked calm today. In fact, the lake looked calm just about every day. That was how man-made lakes no larger than a couple of football fields side by side tended to look. Beyond the water were some crappy townhouses. That was one of the downfalls of living in a cluster of the nicest real estate on the lake. The view was shit. The people in the crappy townhouses, however, got to look at Kevin's decked out mansion. This irony probably pissed off his parents. Kevin smiled.

"I just feel like her tits might be on the internet," he was hearing Devraj say.

He kept his eyes out on the water. "Whose tits?"

"Dude, did you not just listen to me? I was talking about Ms. Panakopolis."

Kevin felt a laugh deep down in his belly, but not up in his face. "What is your obsession with her, man? She's not that tight."

"Exactly. Which means her self-esteem wouldn't be very high. Which would be exactly where I'd come in."

"You're high."

"And that's when I have my deepest thoughts." He took another hit. "Give me your laptop dude. I'm gonna find her "

"They aren't on there!"



“Okay, so maybe they aren’t. But if they are, I will find them. Especially with a name like that! If we were looking for Mrs. Smith’s tits, then we’d be out of luck.”

Kevin cringed. Mrs. Smith was their middle-aged calculus teacher. “Why would we be looking for Mrs. Smith’s tits...”

“We wouldn’t. I was just saying.”

Marching band practice had been cancelled that day. This was an unpredictable and unforeseen event. Ever since they made it to states two years ago, Mr. Sherwood had been on their nuts to a sadistic degree with long after-school practices. An improbable cancellation seemed to Kevin like a gift from the gods of 2.5 unsupervised hours with his friend before his parents got home.

As Devraj typed away, Kevin thought of the scene in Lion King where Mufasa said to Simba, “Son, all of this will be yours someday,” gesturing out to the kingdom. Kevin imagined his son, a tiny, wide-eyed, cuter version of himself staring up at him. He imagined gesturing out to underwhelming Lake Audubon and telling his son the same thing, even though it would never be true. And then he pictured his son’s mind nearly exploding.

*“Even the T Dock?” he pictured his son saying.*

*He grinned. Andy, who everyone knew to be a liar, told people that he had fucked a girl on the T Dock. “Yes, son, even the T Dock. Squalid as it may be.”*

*“Even Pizza Pizza?”*

*“No son. This will all be yours, but you will still have to pay five dollars for two slices and a drink at Pizza Pizza.”*

“Fuckshit!” yelled Devraj, throwing Kevin’s laptop against the couch.

“Jesus! Don’t fuck up my laptop!” Kevin yelled him. He cringed. He felt like he was always yelling at him. “You find her tits?”

“No, dude. Better than tits.”

It was clearly an old picture--their teacher couldn’t have been much older than 20. She was wearing a low-cut sparkly top and had her arm around a short, overzealous-looking brown-skinned guy who was kissing her on the cheek.

“Look. His name is Adam Patel.”

“So?”

“Aka the American Dream is not a lie after all. Suck it, Gatsby.”

“Oh my god.”

“I’m going to marry a white girl and have a bunch of little mulatto babies. Just like Adam Patel did.” He grabbed a throw pillow off of Kevin’s couch and pantomimed doing the dirty.

“I’m pretty sure they aren’t married. In fact, I’m pretty sure Ms. Panakopolis hasn’t gotten laid in like, years. That’s why she’s such an uptight bitch.”

“Again, I could change that.” Suddenly Devraj hopped up. “So, we gonna do something with this day, or what?”

Kevin sighed. He knew exactly what Devraj would want to do: take Kevin’s family’s pontoon boat out for a little joy ride. Kevin was always obliging this request, lest he sound like one of those lake kids who complain (quite precisely) that their friends only

like them for their money. So his family had money. So they had a boat and the right cars and the right clothes. No big deal. Kevin still went to public school with everyone else.

“Yeah, alright. Let me put on my shoes.”

Devraj, always one step ahead of him, was heading for Kevin’s dad’s liquor cabinet.

“For the road?” he asked, gesturing at the Patron.

Kevin’s chest felt heavy. He hated always having to fill whatever they took back up with water. He really expected his dad to be the type to notice when his shit was watered down--but after two years of doing this with alternating bottles, he hadn’t said a word yet. Kevin nodded once and Devraj began the careful process of extracting a tiny stream of it into his Deer Park water bottle.

The first time Devraj had been to Kevin’s house was in 8th grade. They had played video games and walked to 7-11. Devraj had seemed star-struck by the fact that Kevin lived in the same neighborhood as the actual popular kids. He had also seemed a little disappointed, as if simply by living near them, he’d automatically have some sort of political sway with them. This was simply not the case. Kevin was mostly nonexistent to the popular kids. He had once watched a dorky kid going on and on about Pokemon in front of the popular kids, and then they pretended to like it, too, just to make fun of the dorky kid. The dorky kid didn’t get it. What’s worse, the dorky kid looked legitimately excited when he went on and on about how his Charmander could evolve into Charizard while the popular kids stifled their laughter. Kevin hated that shit.

Kevin slid open the glass door that led out to his back yard. Next door, Cocoa the chocolate lab was barking. Kevin's dad would get drunk like clockwork every night at 7, and then by 8, most nights, he would go out to the dock and come back inside and make a comment about how one of these days he was gonna take out his shotgun and kill that goddamn dog. When Kevin was in middle school, this would worry him, but not now. His father was a man of words, not of actions.

The house next door was a tacky shade of purple, and while Kevin couldn't care less about it, he heard his anxious mother bring it up nearly every time she saw it. She was a member of the HOA, and she told him that that house rang up a charge of 50 dollars a month for every month that they waited to repaint it to a color off of the approved list.

Kevin expertly took the seat covers off and stowed them under the seats. Devraj stood on the boat, hands by his sides. Kevin untied the boat and pushed off the dock with his foot. He sat in the captain's chair and turned the engine on, backing up.

Devraj took a long sip from the water bottle. "You know," he said, "one of these days, I'm gonna quit marching band."

Kevin sighed. "You say that all the time."

Devraj took another long sip, making the little "ah" sound to punctuate the sip like they do in beer commercials. "This time, I mean it, dude. Mr. Sherwood is such a dick. And there's nothing in it for me."

"I mean, there's college applications."

Devraj laughed unnaturally hard. “You sound like my parents. But without the accent.”

Kevin shrugged helplessly. He was acutely aware of how much like a parent he sounded, especially the way he’d scold himself in his head sometimes. Well, he sounded like someone else’s parent. A responsible parent. Not his drunk dad or nervous wreck of a mother.

“You know what I heard? I heard of this kid who graduated two years ago that just straight up lied on his college applications. Said he was class president, captain of the wrestling team, head of some charity thing. Just blatant lies.”

Kevin squinted. “No.”

“Yeah, he really did. Got into UVA, too.”

“You’re full of shit. They have to like, background check the students.”

Devraj laughed. “Oh man. You’re so brainwashed. That’s what they want you to think. You know who’s on those college admittance boards?”

Kevin turned the wheel sharply to the left. “People who went to that college?”

“Yeah. People who just graduated who don’t want to move on in life and want to keep partying with younger kids. Like my gay disowned cousin. He works for college admissions at Tech. You really think he checks up on people’s shit?”

“How is your gay disowned cousin doing these days?”

Devraj shrugged. “Well, I’m forbidden from speaking to him.”

“Lest he turn you into his gay incestuous lover.”

“Right. But from what I see on Facebook, he’s always with a lot of good-looking dudes. Traveling cool places. So I guess he’s probably doing pretty good, if that’s what he’s into.” Devraj measured the empty space in the water bottle with his fingers. “You want some of this, man?”

Kevin looked down at the wheel of the boat. He didn’t usually like drinking and driving, and drinking while driving was one step worse, a brazen flip-off to authority.

“Yeah dude. Gimme that.”

Devraj tossed it, and the bottle teetered dangerously close to falling into the water, but Kevin secured it, opened it up, and finished the bottle in one go.

“Damn, son!”

Kevin knew that Devraj wouldn’t compare his drinking binges to his father’s, because last time he did, Kevin sucker-punched Devraj so hard that he doubled over and admitted he deserved it.

Kevin aptly dodged the big drain in the middle of the man-made lake and thought of how funny it was to live on a lake with a drain. In elementary school, his fourth grade teacher had made all of the kids do something called a Reston Appreciation Project. Looking back on it now, Kevin thought the assignment seemed kind of fascist. He had checked out a book with pictures from the 80’s of the “hustle and bustle” of Lake Anne Village Center. He wanted to smooth out their frizzy hairstyles and laugh in their faces, shouting: You think Reston is a real place?

He pictured the founder of Reston, Robert E. Simon, whose name he had typed at the top of his paper alongside “A Man with a Dream.” He went around to all of the kids

in his class that day, asking: “Do you get it? Res-ton? Robert E. Simon-ton?” No one laughed except for his teacher. Then he told them all that one day he would make his own town, and he would name it after his own initials. Kocton. Now the cool kids were falling off of their chairs laughing, and the teacher was looking horrified and threatening to take away their recess, and this was the first in a series of events of Kevin *just not getting it*.

Kevin liked to imagine Robert E. Simon actually being a cruel tyrant, deciding that the people of his town--Kevin’s mother and father, for example--did not live up to his expectations and therefore no longer deserved the fake lake. Like that, Mr. Robert E. Simon could reach his giant hand down on the drain, and like releasing the water of a bath, make it disappear forever. Kevin wondered what his mother’s HOA would have to say about that.

Now Devraj was lying on his back, looking up at the clouds. He never handled his liquor very well. His parents didn’t drink as it was against their religion. Kevin wondered who was more fucked for the future in the drinking department, Devraj for having none of it in his blood, or Kevin for having all too much of it.

“I’m still so mad about the TJ test,” Devraj was saying.

Kevin sighed. Three years ago, in 8th grade, they had both taken the entrance exam for Thomas Jefferson, the top science and technology magnet school in the country. Devraj had missed getting in by one math question. Kevin, on the other hand, was nowhere near the mark. He just took the test because his mother thought he was smarter than he really was.

“Dude, you gotta get over TJ. That was years ago.”

He pounded his fist on the deck. “The cool kids are all Indians and Asians at TJ. It’s so unfair.”

Kevin laughed. “Do you really think you would automatically be cool if you went to TJ? Don’t you think that for every cool Indian kid, there are like twenty total social pariah Indian kids with unibrows?”

“Damn, yo. That’s racist.”

“Don’t you realize that there are even some cool Asians at our own school? Like Josh?”

“He’s adopted.”

“Mei?”

“She’s only cool because she’s a slut.”

Kevin’s arms floated up into an exaggerated shrug. They felt like balloons. “I guess you can’t win, man.”

They were quiet for a second, just looking up at the clouds.

“Sh!” said Devraj, even though Kevin wasn’t talking. He snapped up to a seated position.

“What?”

“You hear that?”

“No. I hear nothing.”

“Sh! I said *listen*.” He started humming along with music in the distance. “I’m a smoker, I’m a joker,” he sang spitefully. Steve Miller Band was getting louder and louder. “I’ve never liked this song,” he spat. “It’s such a bro anthem.”



Kevin laughed. “Well, it’s a good thing you didn’t go to TJ then, because according to you, you’d be a total bro there.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’d be a discerning bro. Just because I’m popular doesn’t mean I have no taste.”

Kevin remembered the way the book on Reston had called it a New Town--capitalized it and everything. Even in fourth grade it had freaked him out. It kind of made them sound like a moon colony or a social experiment or something. All Kevin ever wanted was to be real.

Kevin was pretty sure Devraj didn’t care about being real, he just wanted to be somebody, even if it meant being a fake somebody. On the off chance that the cool kids talked to him, he took to the activity like a 6th grader might try writing only in cursive for an entire day. Something novel to break you out of the mundane and make you feel temporarily special. Devraj was Kevin’s man, but boy, did Kevin hate that shit.

“Is that fucking Kyle Matthews’ boat?” Devraj asked, pointing at the source of the music, another pontoon about fifty yards out.

Kevin knew that despite all of his sucking up to the cool kids, there was no one Devraj hated more than Kyle Matthews. Kyle Matthews had literally stolen his lunch money throughout most of middle school. Literally. He was that trite. And at least those little scuffles made sense. Kyle Matthews was so ruthless a moron that sometimes he did mean things for no personal gain whatsoever. There was this autistic girl in Kevin’s class, and when they were turning in papers one day, he took her paper and ripped it into a

million pieces, laughing in her face. She tried stammering something about it, but the teacher never listened to her.

Kyle Matthews was one of those guys with a really horrible face, the kind where you really knew his parents were bullshitting themselves about how cute he was when he was a little kid. He would sit open-mouthed in class and Kevin would just wish some obscure poisonous beetle would fly in and demonstrate natural selection. Somehow, this braindead human specimen said all the funny things at all the right times and had all the cool girls tricked into thinking he was a catch.

“Yep. That’s his fucking boat.”

“What’s with the towels?” Rows of beach towels with Hawaiian flowers on them hung from the top perimeter of the boat’s roof to create a makeshift cabin. The lake was so small that bigger boats with real cabins weren’t allowed, so privacy wasn’t really a thing on the water.

“I don’t know. Probably for something sketchy.”

“God, I fucking hate that kid,” said Devraj, “Can we go over there?”

“What for, if you hate him so much?”

“Dude, you *know* I hate him. Don’t doubt that. I just want to see what stupid shit he’s doing over there.”

“He’s probably just smoking weed. Afraid of getting caught.”

“What a pussy,” Devraj sneered.

Kevin didn’t remind Devraj that he, too, was too chicken to openly smoke weed on the lake. Instead, he just gave the boat a little gas.

“Alright, this is good,” said Devraj. “Don’t go any closer. I don’t want to risk that fucker seeing us.”

Kevin gave the boat a little more gas.

“Jesus, Kevin,” Devraj whispered. “Can we go now?”

“No!” he said out loud, not quite whispering, but not quite shouting either. “I’m tired of being scared of him. I’m tired of being scared of everything!”

Devraj brought his pointer finger to his mouth. “Shut the fuck up, man,” he whispered. “This is starting to get dangerous!”

“I don’t see anything dangerous about that tool.”

“You like that?” a female voice was saying from behind the towels.

“Let’s go,” said Devraj. “Now.”

“Come on baby,” Kyle Matthews’ big dumb voice was muffled. “Closer to the camera. Ohh, yeah.”

Kevin thought he could feel the alcohol racing through his veins. In his mind, he was turning into the Hulk. He gripped the wheel as hard as he could. “I fucking hate that kid so much, I want to do something about it,” he said.

“Whoa. Where is this coming from?”

“I’m just so done with them!” He was yelling now, not caring who heard. “I am so tired of having to be nice to them just so they can shit on us!”

Kevin gave the boat another pump of gas, bumping right into the hull of Kyle Matthews’ boat.

The towels, hung precariously, fell with the force. And then Devraj saw in real life what he'd only before seen on the internet.

Rachel, a quiet girl also from band, was obviously tanked. Her clothes off. And she had this smile on like even though she was naked, she was still a big secret. That kind of smile drove Kevin insane.

Kevin hurdled over the side railing, right onto Kyle Matthews' deck. He motioned for Devraj to join him, but Devraj stayed where he was. The edges of the world, spinning before, were now starting to straighten out.

Kyle Matthews had a camera phone in his hand. He pressed the pause button and then got in Kevin's face.

"What the fuck are you doing on my yacht?" he yelled.

Kevin laughed. Devraj looked over from the other boat nervously.

"This isn't a yacht," Kevin stated, feeling all of the chemicals start to melt away. The scene before him started to appear like a bright sunny day after hours spent in a movie theatre. "It's not," he said. "Not even remotely close to being a yacht."

Rachel was cowering like a little lost lamb. Her secret smile had vanished. She reached around the floor until her hands grasped the towel that Kyle had thrown to the ground. She seized it and wrapped herself up in it, attempting to fix herself beneath it. She regarded Kevin and Devraj with downcast eyes, like they were people who weren't supposed to see her naked. Like they were her awkward cousins she barely knew or something. Everything sexual evaporated into shame.

"So," said Kevin. "You guys making a little movie?"

Kyle laughed quietly the way they do on TV right before they kick your ass. “Yeah. What’s the beef. She your girlfriend or something,” he asked motioning back to Rachel, who was now crying, doubled over shitty vinyl seats and looking ready to vomit.

Devraj said something from the other boat, but Kevin wasn’t listening. Instead, his eyes were focused on that camera phone, and he was thinking how easily, with how swift of a motion, he could upset the phone from Kyle Matthews’ grasp and send it right into Lake Audubon.

He looked at Rachel. Her top was around her waist. Her denim skirt was unbuttoned and hanging to the side. Her dark hair, which was highlighted with maroon streaks, was sweaty and plastered to her face. Nothing before him was sexy. All he could feel was sorry for her.

“I said get the fuck off my yacht before I beat your ass!” Kyle Matthews was screaming.

Kevin looked at Rachel’s glazed eyes. He looked at the phone.

This will ruin you, he thought he may have said out loud, but he realized the words were not there. It was a dream where the bad guys were about to get him and he couldn’t scream, couldn’t move. Devraj was climbing up to the steering wheel of Kevin’s dad’s boat.

Kyle Matthews’ enormous hands were around Kevin’s waist, hoisting all 130 pounds of him without a second thought.

The September air made the water chilly in a way that wasn't too arresting, kind of like a giant swimming pool. Kevin stayed there a moment, wishing the drain would swallow all of the water and Kyle Matthews and his stupid phone.

At least then, the view out his back window would be a giant hole in the dirt. At least then it would be real.

## **THE CUTEST LIFE EVER**

Megan tried a cooling filter on the photo of Corey and Amelia playing with the teddy bear, thinking it would make it more dramatic. It certainly did--the bear cast its shadow on her oriental rug in a way that could only be described as elegant. She bit her lip, turning her head to the side slightly. She wasn't sure it looked right. She didn't want people to think she was some kind of phony. She took the filter off.

A crash sent her away from her favorite place, her computer chair, and into the kitchen.

"Alright," she said at the scattered cans from the recycling. "Who was it this time?"

Her dog and her daughter looked up at her simultaneously. She didn't like a lot of things about the time she spent without her husband, but if she had to pick a favorite, it was things looking up at her. At 5'1, most of the students in the high school photography class she used to teach had been inches above her. And her husband, the band director at the same high school, was 6'2. But Corey, her Pembroke Welsh Corgi, had a squat build and only stood 11.5 inches high. And Amelia, her one-year-old, was 30 inches the last time Megan had measured her. That was above average. Megan had hope that her daughter wouldn't ever have to be the shortest one in her grade.

"Come here," she said at neither of them in particular. "Do something cute."

Her digital SLR camera was all the way up in the bedroom. It would require all kinds of tests shots with different shutter speeds, aperture, ISO...she didn't have that kind of time. She needed something now. She reached for her phone on the table.

"Do something cute," she repeated and sighed. "You guys are so lucky. All you have to do is exist."

Corey looked at her philosophically.

"Stay there!" she yelled, bringing her phone up slowly. As soon as she'd focused the screen, her dog moved to scratch an itch.

"God damnit, Corey."

Her daughter seemed like she was pouting.

"I'm so sorry, baby girl. I'm so sorry Mommy has such an awful mouth. It's not her fault. Mommy is under a lot of stress, you know."

She felt the familiar shakes that always happened while Dan was away. That trembling breathing that preceded the predictable weeping sessions she sent herself into. She thought of crying the same way young men thought of masturbating. That stuff inside had to get out. Keeping it in just wouldn't be good for her.

She let the tears spill down to the floor. She loved the way her dog licked at her, willing her to feel better. Her daughter looked on indifferently.

"Do you guys miss Daddy like Mommy misses Daddy?" she sniffled down at them. "You know that's why Mommy's crying, right? She just misses Daddy. But he'll be home in a few hours and then Mommy will be smiling again. I promise."



“Daddy and Mommy just love each other too much,” she said, her voice catching. “But you can’t be selfish, my dears. Mommy could say that Daddy can’t do the band practice anymore. That he has to get a job at a middle school or something where he isn’t away all the time.”

She took a breath. “Mommy knows that Daddy loves being band director at the high school and she has to respect that. When you love someone someday you have to respect that.”

She picked up Amelia and balanced her on her hip. “You know it was Daddy who wanted Mommy to stop working to be home with you all the time? And Mommy loves you both very much, but she doesn’t love being home all the time.” She noticed how dark it was in the living room. She opened the blinds but it didn’t help. Of all of the houses her and Dan had looked at, this one was the best deal, the most “room to grow” for the money as the realtor had put it, but it let in the least amount of natural light. Dan said they would get used to it, but he was hardly home during daylight anyhow.

She looked over at Dan’s La-Z-Boy recliner. It was kind of a ridiculous purchase, honestly. It was a chair for an 80-year-old man, yet her husband, her youthful husband, not yet even 30, had his heart set on it.

“Whatever Daddy wants, Daddy gets,” she said to her daughter with a grin on her face. “Isn’t that right?”

Corey pawed at the bottom of the chair. He’d never figured out how to get up there. With his tiny, chubby frame, Megan wasn’t sure it was possible. Megan had wanted a bigger dog--a lab, or maybe a Pitbull. She had always been a big dog person. It

had been Dan that changed her mind, played the good dad card. He said a smaller dog would be less likely to endanger the baby.

“You want a boost, little one?” she asked. She placed her hands under his chubby belly and scooped him up, depositing him in the fold of the chair. He looked up at her with big dumb eyes. Almost like a cat.

Her daughter groped at the back of her leg. She put her arms under her armpits and placed her right next to Corey.

She longed for the SLR, but she had to remind herself it would take too long. Neither of them would sit still for that long.

“Hold it right there!” she yelled. Like a hunter not wanting to lose his target, she slowly backed closer to the coffee table, keeping her eyes on the two of them. Without turning around, she bent her legs and fished around for her phone. Still turned towards them, she made her way to the switch on the wall for the overhead light. She hated lights on in the daytime, but she wanted to be sure everything would show up alright.

Corey turned his head away, into the fold of the couch.

“Come on, Corey! Come on!”

He would not look back at her.

“Mommy needs this, Corey.”

He nuzzled further into the fold. Amelia stuck three of her fingers into her mouth.

“Corey. Walk!”

At this Corey stood at attention and leapt off the chair, making his way to the front door.

“Fuck!” she yelled. “Corey, get back here!”

He ran in little circles, occasionally yelping and pawing at the door. Megan was worried he would scratch off the paint.

“Corey, I’m sorry Mommy lied. We aren’t doing that right now. Back to the chair.”

The dog stayed at the door. Megan went to the kitchen and opened the cookie jar where she kept dog treats on hand. He quickly forgot about the promise of a walk.

She did a little jog over to the recliner and placed both Corey and his treat down on it next to Amelia. Corey gobbled at it and looked expectantly for another.

“Stay, Corey! Stay right there!”

She took ten rapid-fire photos. To an untrained eye, they looked nearly the same. But there was one that stood out, one where Corey’s ears and eyes were at their perkier, one where Amelia’s big baby smile was wide enough to be cute without being so wide that it was monster-like.

“Perfect!” she yelled at them. “This is the one we’ll put up!”

There were those two beings gazing up at her again. As if she had all the answers.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” she said with an extravagant curtsy. “Thank you for making this photo update possible.” Her daughter’s fingers went into her mouth again. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

She captioned the photo, “We miss our Daddy! Hanging out in his chair until he comes home.” Then she published it to her Facebook feed.

Corey was already out of the chair. Amelia was looking a little stir crazy as well, but she had no way to get down.

Megan held her breath after posting it. She always felt that tension in the time between putting up a photo and receiving accolades for it. She always worried that she might have put up something wrong. Something people wouldn't want to see. Like her one Facebook friend who was always referencing her miscarriage, mentioning the dead baby by name. But Megan felt that she knew better than to do that. She knew what the people wanted to see.

Suddenly, a little ding. Lauren Panakopolis from school liked it.

Megan smiled a sideways smile. Of course Lauren Panakopolis liked it. She could tell from the way she looked at Amelia when she brought her to football games she was baby-crazy. Too bad. Lauren had just gotten out of a long relationship with some unemployed loser who wouldn't even come to the faculty happy hours. As if he had better things to do! Megan did not see babies any time in Lauren's future, at least not for the next ten years or so. Until then, Lauren could just look at Megan's Facebook page to get her fix. That's what it was there for.

She received another like from her aunt. Another one from Jim Hadley, a teacher who should probably retire soon but didn't have enough money to. She felt her cheeks spread into a grin. Thank god the people liked her photos. At least she had that.

Going on Facebook was a dangerous game when her husband was gone. She loved the boost it gave her self-esteem. But there was always the trap of the messages tab

up there, right next to her notifications tab. There was always that trouble that she could get into.

She looked at her daughter soundlessly clapping her hands in the La-Z-Boy. She wrung her hands.

“Mommy shouldn’t look at the message again, should she sweetheart?”

Amelia let out a little shriek.

“So Mommy should? Mommy should look at it?”

Corey paced around the room, gave a little look of determination, and for the first time ever, cleared the jump from the floor to the recliner. He circled into a little coil next to Amelia.

“Corey! My goodness!” She pulled at a little piece of skin beside her thumbnail. She brought it down too quickly and it began to bleed. She just let it drip there, staining the skin around her nail. She used to get a manicure every two weeks.

“Okay. Mommy will read it again, then. I think Mommy needs to read it again.”

For a moment, she thought of reading it on her phone. She had done this before a few times. But that always felt kind of cheap, not ceremonious enough. She would have to scroll and scroll. Instead, she decided she would pull it up on the computer. It would be like watching an action movie on a big-screen TV.

She was not sure when her husband would get home. This only added to her desire to do it on the computer. It was less discreet. Like watching pornography in the living room.

She cleared her throat and looked at her audience in the recliner.

“Dear Mrs. Sherwood,” she began. “You probably don’t remember me, because I wasn’t in your class. But some of my friends had you for photography and said you were a really nice person. That is why I felt like I could come to you about this matter.”

Her daughter’s eyes were starting to flutter. She leaned on the dog, tangling her wet fingers in his fur.

“That was nice of them to say about Mommy, right? And I actually did know who she was. I mean, how could I have not known?” At this, her daughter’s eyes closed.

“Anyway. I’ll pick up there.” She bit her lip. “I feel that you deserve to know about this. I was your husband’s drum major two years ago, the year that you were pregnant. As you may recall, your husband was very concerned with us making it to states that year. He required us to have extra practices, he made marching band two class periods, he was willing to do whatever it took. And as you may also recall, all of that hard work paid off.”

Megan looked up to see if her audience was following. Corey’s tail wagged slightly.

“But what I do not believe you knew was the secret relationship that we had that year.”

She let that line hang in the air for a bit before continuing on.

“We had sex in the practice room. We had sex in your car. He told me that once I graduated, he would leave you for me. He told me he did not really want to be a father. I think that sometimes, pregnancy causes couples to drift apart and I’m sorry that happened to you.”

Her daughter's eyes were open again. "I don't really think that happened," she said quietly to her. "I never thought you caused Mommy and Daddy to drift apart. All Daddy ever talked about was how much he couldn't wait to hold you."

"Anyway," she went on. "We tried to be careful, but near the end of senior year, we found out I was pregnant. I wasn't naive. I already knew how he felt about his actual wife having his child. I knew he wasn't going to feel differently about me."

Megan sighed.

"He took me for the abortion for that teacher workday after the last day of school. He lied and told you there was an inservice for band teachers in the county."

Megan felt a tear slide down her cheek. He had told her a funny story about another band director that they both disliked. She remembered that he said that he had walked around for the whole inservice with his fly down that day. It had seemed plausible, even poetic. But it clearly hadn't happened.

"I'm not still upset about this. No offense to you, but I don't think he'd make the greatest dad. I'm starting my second year of college now, and I'm doing really well. I wouldn't be here right now if I had the kid. I wouldn't have a future at all. I was able to put the past behind me, but I have always felt very guilty that you didn't know."

Megan shifted in her chair.

"I know that it will be difficult to forgive your husband, but I believe that honesty is the first step to moving forward. Maybe you won't be able to forgive him, but I think that knowing is better than not knowing, no matter the outcome. I truly have no bad intentions in telling you this and I wish you and your family the best. Fondly, Lisa Kim."

Megan looked to the door, hoping it would swing open any minute. But life never worked out that easily. “Do you really think she meant that, little ones?” she asked softly, so as not to wake them. “Do you really think she wishes your Mommy the best?” She looked at the way her daughter clutched at the dog like some kind of guiding life force, even in her sleep. It melted her heart a little.

She deleted the message and turned off the computer. She got up and squeezed between Corey and Amelia. She knew that Amelia would be hitting a growth spurt soon enough and in time they wouldn’t all fit in the chair. She felt the warmth of the two of them, these living, breathing, tiny creatures, and let herself drift off into a blissful, unknowing sleep.



## TRIGGER

Lauren's thought, on repeat, was that she should not be doing this. She fidgeted her leg up and down at the coffee shop like the unmedicated kid in her class with ADD. His parents knew he was failing everything, but they had tearfully admitted that they feared ADD medication caused sterility, and they so badly wanted grandchildren. Through all of this, the boy had kept his eyes downcast, on the screen of his phone. It was awkward. Lauren felt awkward now, too. She tried to play with her own phone, but just the sight of it depressed her. No one was going to call her.

She had almost told one of her roommates, a tall, thin boy who didn't speak much, where she was going. In case this guy tried to killed her. But then she thought that it'd be hard to put into words, why she'd want to help a stranger rekindle a romance with someone she never knew. And she also thought she might have just been flattering herself, thinking that he'd care.

She found it to be a good barometer of self-worth--how many days it would take for anyone to figure out you were missing. She thought of old lonely people, rotting alone in their depressing luxury apartments. She thought of herself, disposed of in the Goodwill clothing donation dumpster out in the parking lot of Lake Anne Village Center. God knows how often anyone looked in any of that thing. People would probably write her smell off as a dead raccoon sooner than they'd freak out and look inside.

She scrolled through the apps on her phone, pretending to look busy. She looked at the Craigslist post again-- *Help me get the love of my life back*. This seemed like a noble thing to do when you were so apathetic that you wanted to die. The guy was going about it a shady, dishonest way, yes. But if Lauren's sad boredom could help just one person--*If I can stop one heart from breaking*, said Emily Dickinson, it would all be worth it.

"Lauren?" a timid voice said. She looked up. It came from a husky guy with curly brown hair. He was wearing a brown and red plaid shirt buttoned up to the neckline. He had stretched holes in his ears like little pink tablets which looked to be leftovers from punkrock days. A certain sadness emanated from his dark brown eyes. Lauren told herself that this was not the kind of person who would kill her and dispose of her body in a Goodwill dumpster.

"Derrick?" she asked.

He laughed as if he knew himself to be a joke. "Yep. It's me."

"I'm surprised," she said.

"What did you think, I'd be some kind of creep?"

She laughed. "Yeah. I did. I think based on the request you made, I thought you were a little obsessed."

Derrick sighed and looked at his feet. "I know. It's bad. She's got a real hold on me, man."

He excused himself, went to the counter and ordered a double espresso. He turned to Lauren to ask if she wanted anything. She didn't hear him. He got her an orange juice.

“Thanks,” Lauren said, looking confused. She stuck a straw in the lid and took a giant gulp. “Well, Derrick,” she said. “You know, I barely know you, but if I’m being honest, you’ve gotta let this girl go. And you know it’s not really in my best interest to say that.”

Derrick laughed. “Speaking of,” he said.

“Oh, right,” she said, pulling her laptop out of her bag. “Okay, I’ve got it right here.” She felt suddenly aware of everyone around her. A thin Asian girl was reading *Lolita* at the table in front of her. At the coffee bar, a young Hispanic guy was holding hands with a blonde girl. The barista mouthed the lyrics to an obscure 80’s song that was playing on the record player.

“Read it to me,” he said.

She looked back at the couple at the bar. The Hispanic guy removed a blonde wisp of his girlfriend’s hair from her face and kissed her nose. “Read it out loud? Here?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, maybe you haven’t guessed, but I’m not exactly a literary guy.”

“Oh,” Lauren said. “So you can’t...can you...?”

“Oh my god. No, I’m not illiterate. I just...I have dyslexia. I’m going to look like a moron trying to figure out what all of this says in this charming little coffee shop.”

“Oh. Okay,” said Lauren, feeling herself redden. She hated it when people, like her students, pointed out their disabilities to her. She once asked a girl to read aloud and the girl did nothing. After class, she told her that due to a rare kind of albinism, she could only read if she put the page exactly up to her face. It made Lauren feel like a privileged

asshole. “Well I read all your notes,” she said. “And I did what I could. But some feelings, you know, are hard to articulate.”

“It’s okay.”

“Well...what if you don’t like it?”

“No big deal. I’m sure I’ll love it. I’m sure anything you can come up with is better than what I could.”

“How could you possibly know that? I mean, you just met me.”

He smiled slowly. “I can just tell. I can tell by the brand of computer you have. You aren’t fucking around.”

She reddened further. “So this computer makes me smart? Couldn’t I just be a rich dumbass with a nice computer?”

He grinned. His teeth were straight, but not cookie-cutter braces straight. “I can just tell, Lauren.”

Oh god, she thought. *Lauren*. I hope this man doesn’t fall in love with me. I hope this man doesn’t have to hire some other girl to write me love notes. But then she thought: so what if he does? What’s the worst thing that could happen? She jerked herself out of this line of thinking quickly. Love out of boredom, she concluded, is the weakest kind of love.

“Anyway,” she said as harshly and unattractively as she could, “Anyway I guess I’ll just read it and get it over with.” She tried to channel one of her students, an Indian boy named Devraj, who was so self-assured and uncool that he was embarrassing to listen to. “It’s like tearing off a band-aid, I guess. So here it goes. Dear Maddie, I know

it's been a long time since we last spoke. I know that sometimes things seem broken forever and all you can do is move on. But since I've spent so much time alone, I've been doing some thinking, and I feel that any amount of time I spend away from you is a waste. I love you. I believe I was a better person when we were together, and I know that you were too. I heard what happened with your marriage, and I know that you probably think you were partly to blame, but I know you, Maddie. I know you're a good person to the core. Nothing you do will ever change that. You may think you are flawed, but I love your flaws. Please, Maddie. I've been alone for years now and I'm terrified that I might die this way. And the only thing that scares me more than dying alone is giving myself over to someone else. Give me another chance and I promise that things will be perfect. Love Derrick." Lauren exhaled. "How was that?"

"Wow. That was real. That might even be too real. That part about dying alone? Damn."

"I just thought you really needed to make a statement," Lauren said quickly. She regretted that word, just. It always snuck into her conversations, apologizing for her existence. She read an article that posited that women used the word more than men. That it was a permission word, and that women like her were always asking for permission.

"No, no. I got that it's a statement. It's good." He drummed his fingers on the table. "I don't know if you should say she might think she's partly to blame for the marriage ending, though," he said.

Lauren thought of Devraj and tried to set her shoulders akin to his, a gesture meant for taking up more space than God originally intended you to. “Why not? Why wouldn’t she think that?”

Derrick shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You think it hasn’t crossed her mind?”

“She’s not really the type to take a lot of blame. She’s just sort of...aloof, I don’t know. Immature. Not in a bad way. Just more--you know--like innocent. But who knows. Maybe she’s changed.”

Lauren reminded herself that Derrick didn’t know her, and that after this interaction, he never would have reason to again. “She sounds like a real treat.”

Derrick’s eyes went wide.

“Sorry. I’m just being honest.” She cleared her throat and winced. “I’m being honest.”

“Yeah, she was tough. Maddie was tough. But I liked it that way.” Hi picked up her straw wrapper and started tearing it to pieces. “Nothing that’s easy is worth having, you know? You ever date someone and it’s just all too easy?”

“Sort of.” Lauren thought of Burt, as she always did when the subject of comparing exes came up. But nothing was ever easy with Burt, which went to prove Derrick’s point. She also knew that she couldn’t really say anything about Burt aloud, so she switched her mental focus to Adam. Adam, who she never thought about, because he never mattered to her, but who she was thankful for at times like these. A socially acceptable ex to tell stories about. “I guess. I dated a guy once and we both didn’t really

put in a lot of effort. And it was really easy. Because we didn't really like each other that much. And neither of us were really relationship type people."

"See? Now that's what I don't want." He raised his eyebrows.

"You seem more like a relationship-type person," she said.

The Hispanic guy looked back and grinned. He whispered to his girlfriend.

Lauren realized that out of context, their conversation seemed strange.

"I bet people think we're on a date," she said.

He laughed. "This would be a good place for a first date. It's pretty charming."

She shuddered. "I don't know. I don't know if I'd like to go on a first date here."

"Why not?"

"Too much talking. I'd rather go to a concert or a movie or something. Something where we can do more than just interview each other." Lauren was beginning to feel, that in this ten minute encounter with a stranger she'd met on the internet, that she was being more honest than she'd been in years.

"Heaven forbid you get to know each other, you know, on a first date."

She sighed. "I don't know. It's just how I am. It's probably why I have no friends. I hate getting to know people."

"Wow, Debbie Downer. Are you fishing for a compliment or something?"

She put a strand of hair behind her ear. "Some of my students like me. But that's about it."

"Aw, you're a teacher?"

Lauren winced. “Why aw? What do you think I do, help six year olds draw puppies all day? Is that what everyone thinks?”

“No, I just...never mind.”

“Well anyway,” she said, “It doesn’t matter what you think of me. I wrote the stupid letter. Here’s the flash drive, do you have the money?”

“Oh, back to business, huh? I was enjoying your company, ironically enough. My life has been pretty boring lately. I feel like this is the real conversation I’ve had in months.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out a twenty. He handed it to her, taking her flash drive.

“That’s this area for you. Land of the zombie strip malls.”

“We all hate it but we never leave. It’s like an abusive relationship.”

Lauren shifted in her seat, her legs sticking to the vinyl. “So how long ago did you date this girl, anyway? How long has this been going on?”

Derrick grimaced. “About ten years.”

“Ten years?! So you are still obsessed with this girl that you met in high school or something? And you feel like if you could get back together with her, everything would be as simple as it was then? That’s not how it works.” Lauren winced at her frank words. She was aware that she trivialized everyone’s sadness...everyone’s but her own. She blamed her inability to connect with others on this fact.

“I wasn’t in high school. She was in high school. I was working at a hardware store.” He sighed, looking out at the manmade lake. “I was 23 and I thought I knew



exactly how my life was going to be. I thought I'd never be anything special. At best, I'd just get by. But then Maddie came along and put all of that into question."

Lauren hadn't expected any of this. This was a nasty surprise. This was like enjoying a drive on a beautiful day with the sunroof down only to be hit in the head by the fecal matter of a crow. It wasn't a plausibility she'd considered until it was happening to her. "Oh," she said, playing with the hem of her shirt.

"What? What's that face for?"

Lauren saw in her head a girl in high school, laughing with her friends, opening a locker. Basically a child. And a younger version of Derrick, but still a creepy, washed up, older man. An older man addicted to the way a young girl made him feel, that just because all of the possibilities in the world lay in front of her, they lay in front of him, too. She said nothing.

"I suppose you think it was messed up, predatory or whatever. But I swear it wasn't like that at all. Hell, when I was 23, I had the social maturity of about a 15 year old. I wasn't thinking, oh, let me take advantage of this younger girl. I just fell for her hard. I had to be with her."

Lauren looked down at the floor, observing how the geometric pattern was interrupted by broken tiles.

"Besides, she's not in high school now. So you don't have to think what you're doing is wrong or whatever. She's 27 now. And I'm 33. If you met a couple where the girl was 27 and the guy was 33, you wouldn't flinch."

How many times had she done similar math? If someone met a couple where the girl was 26 and the man was 49, would they flinch? Maybe just a little. Good thing it could never be.

“That’s why her marriage failed, probably,” said Lauren. “She isn’t the special chosen one anymore. Now everyone she tries to love seems flawed because they aren’t you.”

The Hispanic guy and the blonde girl looked over at them.

“That’s a bit diagnostic, don’t you think?”

“You felt better then because you felt older, smarter. You felt like you knew things. Like you could protect someone. You felt a fake kind of maturity.”

“Lauren, I loved her.”

“You don’t even know what love is.” She began to cry quietly. He put her arm around her. She shrugged him away. “Get off,” she said levelly.

The blonde girl laughed to her boyfriend. “Now that’s a bad first date,” she said. Her boyfriend put his arm around her and gave her shoulder a squeeze.

Lauren reached in her pocket and pulled out the twenty. She crumpled it up and threw it at him.

“Give me my flash drive back.”

His eyes widened.

“Now,” she said.

He fumbled around his pocket. The flash drive fell to the floor and he reached down to grab it.

“She deserves better than you,” Lauren said down to the ground. “She deserves better than some schmuck who needs help writing love letters.” She sighed. “Too bad she doesn’t know what she deserves,” she said to no one in particular, grabbing the flash drive.

“You leave first,” she said to him.

She watched him pull out of the parking lot, very very far from the Goodwill donation dumpster. She walked over to it and threw her flash drive inside. It made a hollow clink when it reached the bottom.

## **DEATHBEDS**

Lauren drove home from work at three that day. She'd even forced herself to stay an extra hour at school, and as the time withered away, she felt her boredom melting into anxious anticipation. Ahead were those awful hours when she was home alone, praying for the sun to go down to make it an acceptable time to take ten melatonin pills and turn in early.

Her roommates would be home eventually, maybe at 7:30 or 8. They had places to be; they felt important. Sometimes they were working, other times they were nurturing precious relationships with people from previous stages of their lives. She would save something clever to say for the few moments they would interact. She would pretend that this was as important a part of their day as it was hers.

Every now and then, one of them would come home early because they'd had an appointment or a hangover. This excited her, relieved her in a way that she had to be careful never to let on about. She felt like a ten year old being left alone for the first time, trying to prove to her parents that she was mature enough while simultaneously being terrified of everything imaginable that might occur to her as a result of being alone.

Willow trees and overzealous landscaping welcomed her little car into the neighborhood. She had seen her neighbors, most of whom were retired, working tirelessly to plant flowers and disperse red mulch. Lauren had never seen the point of all

of the time they spent. Sure, they looked nice. But they served no function. And in a few weeks, they would require weeding, watering, fertilizer. Lauren hoped she'd die before she'd commit her days to such a futile endeavor.

There had been a moment years ago where she had talked to Adam about moving in together, which seemed, in these lonely hours, preferable to living alone in a huge house with strangers. But of course that had never panned out. She could never get a feel for how serious Adam was about the idea. And now Adam was living with people who used to be friends of hers by extension, people he had won in the breakup. Good for him, she thought as she slammed the door to her car.

She climbed the stairs to her room, and since no one else was home, she took a seat on the stairs that went up to the fourth floor. How bizarre it had been, to sign a lease on this house. How almost like vultures they had seemed, she and these three strangers from the internet, but in this suburban world where people kept inflatable passengers in their car so they could ride in HOV lanes, the only way to survive was to be a vulture.

The ad had seemed desperate, the price had seemed desperate, and when she arrived to meet with the landlord, labeled boxes were piled up nearly to the ceiling.

Forgive me, he had said. We had an estate sale to clear all of this out, but there were a lot of things that no one wanted.

She had been able to piece together the situation from certain choice words he had used--unfortunate, timely, late, stability--that his ailing wife had passed away recently and his family did not want him living alone in the house she'd died in. Money had

clearly been an issue, and as such, he was willing to trust young strangers to fill the house in which he'd lost the one he'd loved the most. Anyone who would pay the rent.

But Lauren wasn't sure how sentimental rational people really got about these things. What was this house, at this late date. Sure, there were memories attached to it. But what use were those when someone was gone forever? What good was a memory when there was no one left to turn to and ask, do you remember that time? Do you remember that time we made love on the kitchen floor, halfway through putting the groceries away? Do you remember when we made coffee and sat on the back porch and looked at the stars until the sun came up? Do you remember when we had that kind of energy?

She tried to imagine asking an aging Adam these questions, but the face immediately in her head wasn't his.

Lauren had agreed with the landlord that the upstairs room was off-limits. She hadn't asked questions. She hadn't mentioned this to her mother when she moved in, either. She knew that her mother would assume there were drugs, dead bodies. She'd even added an extra hundred on the monthly price she'd reported over the phone to make it sound more believable. Her mother didn't believe in good deals.

But how many times had Lauren wondered about that upstairs room.

She silently chided herself. She knew that many of the things she wanted were not socially acceptable. Were inexcusable. Inexcusable. At the presence of that word in her mind, Lauren shook her head hard, knowing what was coming. What always came at

times like these. She did what she could to prevent it. There were times where she'd taken medication, but it had never helped. Never made her forget Burt.

Burt was the reason she wanted to do everything and wanted to do nothing. He was the fire inside her that made her quest for everything off-limits. He was the smoke that suffocated her on her way home from work and made her want to lie motionless early in the evening, relieved that a day was over but anxious that there was a new one coming shortly.

But she knew better than to be self-loathing about this. How easily she could play the role of the victim! This was what Adam would have had her do.

You're only as broken as you choose to be, she reminded herself. This was her mantra when she thought destructively.

She wanted, more than anything, to enter that upstairs room. But a competing desire was not to want those sorts of things. She knew that none of her roommates would know if she did it. But she also knew that if things happened and people didn't know, they still mattered.

And how she knew.

She rifled through her purse. There it was--the very symbol of her adulthood and independence. The credit card she had received in the mail just a few weeks ago.

The irony. She had to laugh.

She had seen it before, in some kind of spy show. Funny that she should compare her safe life to a spy show.

She slid it along the crease in the door and the knob loosened with ease.

In a spy show, it would have never been that easy. It would have been a deadbolt and she would have had to scale the outside of the building, maybe remove the glass from a window. But the reality of the break-in, perhaps of all break-ins that weren't on TV, was anticlimactic.

The first thing that hit her was the smell. It was musty, yes, but she could have sworn she felt actual dust particles enter her nose. She sneezed and felt annoyed with her body for its predictability.

The bed had a stiff, orange-hued floral bedspread stacked with brightly colored throw pillows. Behind the bed was a cherry headboard with two shelves running across it. The shelves were packed with framed photos, ceramic cat figurines, and books, including multiple editions of the Bible and Agatha Christie paperbacks. Nothing on or around the bed was anything that Lauren could imagine being purchased new from a store. She tried to imagine Pier 1, with its trendy geometric designs, attempting to sell this old-fashioned floral bedspread. Lauren pictured them putting it on clearance.

Around the bed were chairs with varying levels of comfort. Right next to the head, facing the expensive throw pillows, was a plush recliner. Further back were cushioned wooden chairs. At the foot of the bed were those horrible aluminum folding chairs that hurt to sit in at length. All told, there were nine chairs. Nine chairs to be filled with loved ones with nowhere more important to be.

Nine felt a little optimistic to Lauren, although she knew that even if she did die now, it would probably be quick and sudden, no time for a circle around her grasping for last words. She cringed at this thought. She hated thinking things like this.



She wondered, and then felt guilty for wondering, how often all nine chairs were filled. If they ever were. If someone had said they'd come by but never showed up. If all these chairs had been put in here in case the woman had had more loved ones than she'd accounted for. She hated picturing her frail landlord carrying these chairs upstairs from other rooms, one by one. Throwing his back out while he pushed the recliner up the stairs, knowing he'd get in trouble with his son and daughter later. For a moment she let herself wonder why he hadn't tried to sell these things in the estate sale, but as soon as she wondered, she knew.

She sat in the recliner and imagined, for a moment, Burt upright in the bed. Burt telling her one last important thing. Her telling him that none of it mattered, that she forgave him, that she was wrong about what she had said that time that she had visited the farm over her first winter break in college.

College wasn't the enemy, exactly, but going there did open her mind to some things that she'd rather leave safely sealed away in some airtight container, under a bed in a guest room where she'd never have to look unless she wanted to. That one phrase, people kept saying it in her literature classes, in the clubs she joined, about people she knew. *Fucked up*. That thing that happened in that story was so fucked up. That thing she did to him was so fucked up. Last night he bought me so many shots and I got so fucked up.

They say that in some languages, you can't have a thought if you don't have a word to say it. Now she did.

How could she have known that the visit over winter break would be the last time she would see him? She couldn't have known. But also, she knew that that didn't matter.

Her second year in school, she had started to feel alive in her skin. She started making A's in her classes, doing extra work for professors, but always maintaining an air of distance that she had neglected to establish in the past. She had people who lit up when they saw her face. She met Adam. She felt attractive and normal.

Of course it came out one night, with Adam. The thought of this made her blush, even now. Why did he need to know? Her first boyfriend--well, second really, if you counted--and here she was pouring out the innards of her soul, her blackest secrets that literally no one else who wasn't involved in them knew? For what reason? Because in movies and books had taught her that that was what a relationship was for? Some stupid excuse for a confidante?

The saga had produced within Adam a seething rage that she hadn't even known he was capable of. In fact, if she'd known he was able to care so deeply, to speak so hatefully of someone she had once loved, she'd never have told him. The only reason she'd thought she could trust him was the laissez-faire attitude with which he'd approached nearly everything else.

From Adam, even more new words to add to her vocabulary: coercion, statutory, assault, rape.

She felt cheated. Her childhood, her memories--those belonged to her. They weren't Adam's to remember. They weren't his to label. But he told her that if he ever saw that pedophilic rapist, he'd bash his face in.

She wanted to laugh at this turn of phrase. Bash his face in, really? She'd wanted to say. Since when are you a neighborhood bully on a stolen dirtbike?

She buried this story, tried for the weeks afterward to talk about something else, anything else from her childhood. But she'd spent so many hours at the barn, so many happy hours, that she often found herself accidentally mentioning it in conversation and Adam growing quietly agitated.

Soon she didn't care if it did make him agitated. It had been part of her life and it was something he'd have to get over. If he couldn't, well...

It was her mother, that second year in school, who made the telephone call. Her mother, who knew nothing. She had gravely reported, not tearfully, but very seriously, that Burt had passed away in a car accident. She kept her voice in that proud, important tone of voice that adults always took when reporting bad news. She had something important to say, so Lauren had better listen to her for once. Someone they both knew, someone from their town, if you could call it that, had died. Died. The permanence of it. But with an edge of victory. Someone had died, she seemed to say, but she was still kicking, still would be kicking, to bear the bad news of others forever, for as long as she was self-aware.

That arrogant edge to her voice, that matter-of-fact delivery, when she never really knew. Lauren would never forget it.

Then again, she wasn't sure what she expected from her mom. She was older; she'd had many years on her classmates' mother's growing up. Lauren had been the miracle child she'd always wanted, the beloved one and only. Her baby forever. Her baby

that she had refused to speak to about becoming a woman because in her mind, she'd never be one. Her daughter was placed on a shelf that nothing sinister could reach, not even on its tiptoes.

For her father, there wasn't much to say. He wasn't a man of many words.

There had been times back then that she almost wanted one of them to catch on. Although she'd gone through her days as a young teenager with a secret smile, a sense of satisfaction that she had a private life that no one would ever know about, sometimes the guilt that went along with this made her feel like she was crumbling. She sometimes hoped that her mother or father would say something that would catch her off guard, something that would set her over the edge into a long confession of the entire saga.

Now the only people left who knew were Lauren, and, because of a selfish slip-up she'd made, Adam. She hated this because she couldn't say she took it to the grave with her. That was a phrase she'd always loved. The very idea of her grave put a smile on her face now.

What she had feared when she had told Adam about Burt's death--and in a way, what she had hoped--was that he would say something terrible. That he wouldn't be able to resist saying something like, "It's for the best." As if anyone could really tell what was for the best in any situation. Just thinking about this made Lauren feel lost.

No, for once Adam held his tongue while he held her close, forehead buried in his shoulder, a pose that probably suited him because it didn't require him to look at her.

It wasn't until three years later that Burt's name came up between them again, when she was crying in the middle of the night. That was the beginning of the end with

Adam, which at the time had seemed inconsequential in comparison to the end with someone else, the real end, forever.

She laid down carefully on the bed--this woman's deathbed. How wonderful, she thought, to know that you could just succumb the thing you'd been fearing ever since you were old enough to know it existed. How freeing.

She sighed audibly and imagined it to be her last breath. She felt instantly guilty that Burt hadn't had the luxury of knowing. He had only been fifty. Lauren knew that Burt had had some brushes with death--it was only natural when you rode horses the way he did every day--but she also knew he had the same kind of invincible spirit she used to have. He probably never considered death the way Lauren was considering it now.

On the dresser in front of the bed, two little stuffed cats sat proudly. Between the two of them was a little pink banner made with sweet intensity; careful attention had been given to coloring inside the lines but little spikes ended up making their way outside of them anyhow. It said, in as straight of a font as it could, "We love you Grandma! Get better soon."

It broke her heart at the same time that it gave her confidence in the world. She pictured the heartbreak on their sweet little faces when they received the news.

A woman's designer scarf was draped over one of the chairs, the one next to the recliner. It lay unclaimed and forgotten. Lauren leaned forward and grabbed it, folding it in half and looping it around her neck. It smelled of sunflower perfume.

She looked back at the recliner and tried to imagine who would be in it. Not a husband, she decided. She may marry. Marrying would certainly be a logical choice,

financially. But she knew herself. She knew the way she was now. She knew it wasn't likely that she would die married.

It would be her daughter. It would be the beautiful mistake that she would make with a helpless fool, someone she would have to hide her true ways from.

It warmed her heart to think of her daughter's eyes, brown like hers, but puffy from tears and dark underneath from lack of sleep. Missing her job. Missing important appointments. Missing everything to ensure that she'd be there so that Lauren wouldn't have to die alone. There might be more chairs, but their emptiness wouldn't matter.

Her daughter would sit there waiting with a far-off gaze. It would be her first experience of that uniquely awful type of waiting: the type where you'd actually prefer the event you're waiting for to never happen.

When Lauren finally realized there was that little time left, she would grab her daughter's hand and tell her about the only man she'd ever loved.

## MAMA'S BOY

When Brian was in high school, his mother, Linda, was always trying to get him to bring girls over for dinner.

“If she’s not nice enough to come over and stay for dinner, then she’s not nice enough for you.” What she’d wanted to say was, if she’s not nice enough to come over for dinner, then she’s a skank. But she’d never have used this kind of language around Brian when he was so young and impressionable. You had to be so careful.

Now he was a young man, 25 years old, finishing up some pre-med credits at the community college and substitute teaching at the local high school. And she was proud of him, she really was. But she was not so eager for him to bring girls to dinner any more. Now every girl seemed like a lip-glossed, legging-ed threat. He was so sensitive and he’d been through so much. Linda had heard all about modern girls and she wasn’t so crazy about them.

The latest one called herself Lauren. She was an English teacher at the high school where Brian was temporarily teaching. Linda hadn’t met her yet, but she already thought he could do better. She thought education was important and everything, she thought teachers helped change the world for the better--well, a few of them did, anyway--but did they really need to date her son?

“It’s not a date,” he reminded her as she replaced the vase she kept on the table for special occasions with fresh flowers she’d picked up with the groceries at Trader Joe’s.

Linda smoothed down the corner of his collar. “I love that shirt,” she said. “You look so good in blue.”

Brian shrugged off a smile. His perpetually pink cheeks under his orange hair were starting to redden like they always did. He started to pace around the kitchen.

“What are you making?”

“Linguine and clams--your favorite!”

He stopped. “Clams? What if she’s a vegetarian?”

Linda laughed. “Clams aren’t meat!”

“Mom. Vegetarians don’t eat fish.”

“Yes they do!”

He covered his red face in his hands. “Oh my god,” he said through his hands, “please don’t let her be a vegetarian.”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“I’m not taking it in vain. I’m truly appealing to him.”

She poured white cooking wine into the mixture on the stove, which was starting to smell unmistakably fishy. “First of all, vegetarians aren’t worth your time. Second of all, vegetarians that don’t even eat fish are just ridiculous. How do they get their protein? Is she anorexic?”



“Mom! She’s not anorexic! And I don’t even know if she’s a vegetarian or what. That was my point. I don’t know.”

“Son, it will be fine. And if it’s not fine, then it isn’t meant to be. Can you zest that lemon for me?”

She stirred the mixture around and watched her son’s earnest face as he dragged the cheese grater across the lemon. He broke her heart. He really did.

Linda didn’t bring up Victoria, although she was on her mind. Brian had made her promise she never would again, and her son barely ever made her promise anything, so she respected it.

Victoria had graced them with her presence three years ago when Brian was on a break from college. Those two years he’d spent on campus had been a complete disaster. All he met were degenerates there.

She came for three days, right after Christmas. Linda had been skeptical from the start. What kind of family would let their girl leave right after Christmas? Not a nice family.

Linda had insisted that they stay in separate rooms. She trusted her son to stay true to the values he’d been raised with, but as far as she knew, this girl had been raised with none. She’d read in one of those awful magazines they had at the dentist’s office that the average US woman had four sexual partners in her lifetime. Four? What happened to one? It also said that the average US man lost his virginity at age 16. She felt a twinge of pride when she read it. Thank goodness her son was helping to bring up the average.

The second day Victoria was there, she and Brian went out on a hike. Linda went in to make the bed in the guest room--because apparently Victoria had been raised in a house that didn't stress cleanliness--and saw her diary sitting conspicuously on the dresser.

At first Linda didn't want to open it. She was afraid of what she might read about her son. But then, when she really thought about it, she knew her son. She knew she had raised him to be pure. This girl, on the other hand--she had her doubts about her. She felt she needed to read it to be safe.

She opened her diary to the latest entry, and there it was. She'd left the diary out, and the information was there in the latest entry. It was almost as if she had left it out open to that page. That's what she had told her son afterward, anyway.

*We've been dating for three months now. Three months and no sex. He says he's a Christian and he isn't sure if he believes in premarital sex. That may be, but what about my needs? Of course I'll never say this to him. I tell him it's heaven to just lie naked next to him. What a bullshitter I am.*

Linda slammed the diary shut, horrified picturing this big-breasted girl lying naked next to her son. How much longer was this going to go on? How much longer until her carnal ways got the best of her and she rolled over and made him do something he didn't believe in!

If she'd wanted to keep her thoughts private, would she have really left it out? No. She wanted someone to find it. And that someone was her son. She wanted her son to find it and somehow be swayed by her evil ideas.

She called him right then and there. Didn't care that he was out on a hike. Didn't care that he wasn't alone. She called him and told him everything and said that she was packing Victoria's car for her and she was to leave immediately.

Now, this Lauren girl was someone her son had brought up a few weeks ago. He said that she and her boyfriend of four years had broken up and he thought she could use some cheering up. Linda had held her tongue, but she couldn't help but widen her eyes when he'd said, "four years." Who would date someone for four years and then change their mind? And in that amount of time, Linda knew that it'd be nearly impossible for her to have remained a virgin. This was not the kind of girl her Brian needed. He needed a younger girl, an innocent girl. He needed to be somebody's first boyfriend.

Linda reached for a tablecloth from the kitchen cabinet. The townhouse had belonged to her mother and father, and Linda felt it was disrespectful to keep her tablecloths anywhere other than that kitchen cabinet. Her parents, gone now, had left a long, hard legacy as the first residents in Reston, in the neighborhood that she loved, and she was not willing to tamper with anything they'd been doing right.

There was a knock on the front door and it was Lauren. Linda saw how she just stood there, sunken-eyed--a lanky ghost of a girl with a thick brown braid slung in front of her shoulder. No, this was not a good girl for her son.

"Come in, dear!" she said. "I don't want you to catch cold!"

Lauren pulled her thin fleece pea coat tighter around stepped in the door frame. "You must be Mrs. Kelly." Her voice was husky, like she'd been smoking since she was 12. She smiled one of those tight, unnatural smiles of a girl who didn't smile often. Linda

watched the corners of her mouth fold strangely. A smile was clearly a strain on her whole face.

“Hello Lauren,” she said, not caring that the girl hadn’t yet introduced herself. She folded her arms around her until her elbows met. She felt that if she had hoisted her elbows upward, this tiny girl would float toward the sky, maybe stay up there, weightless, forever. She was almost tempted to do it.

“I brought wine!” she said loudly, her voice resembling one of the more awkward sounds of an orchestra--not a feminine flute or clarinet, but more that of an oboe.

Linda smiled. “Oh, how thoughtful of you dear. That is so so sweet.” Linda drank wine among polite company. Had it about once a month or two for years. But she hated this young girl’s assumption that she’d render that kind of sacrifice out of Linda.

Lauren shrugged. “No big deal,” she exhaled. “I think Brian said Cabernet is his favorite.”

“Well I tell you what Lauren, he gets it from his mother,” Linda said, not because it was at all true, but because it was something to say. “Sit down, dear. Dinner’s almost on. Putting on the finishing touches.” She turned towards the stairs going down to the basement, where she knew Brian was hiding. “Brian dear!” she yelled. “You have company!”

Brian slunk up from downstairs sheepishly. “Hey Lauren,” he said.

“Don’t just stand there, Brian!” Linda cried. “Entertain your guest! Fix her a glass of wine!”

“Since when do we have wine in this house?”

“Since your friend was nice enough to bring us some.”

Lauren’s eyes grew wide. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t--”

“No, don’t apologize!” said Brian. “I’m just saying, since when do we have wine? Like, since when are we that kind of fancy family, all drinking wine together?”

“Oh,” said Lauren starkly. “Since me!” she said too loudly. An off-key oboe solo.

“She’s good,” Linda said, eyes on the pasta. “You keep that one around, you hear?”

“Mom. Do we have a wine key?”

“What’s a wine key?”

“You know, like a wine opener?”

“Oh, a wine opener?”

Lauren cut them off. “I think you don’t need one. I think it’s just...you know. A twist-off.”

“A twist-off!” cried Linda. “She’s resourceful, too, Brian! You keep her around.”

Brian smiled slightly and twisted the cap hard. “There you go,” he said. He grabbed three water glasses and began pouring tiny sips of wine into each. He revisited each cup three times to be sure they were equal.

“There,” Linda said to the simmering dish before her, “there, we’re almost there. Lauren, how chewy do you like your clams?”

Lauren shrugged. “Uh...chewy I guess?”

“Then they’re just about done.” She turned to her son. “See? I told you so.”

He laughed. “Maybe this time, but you never know, was all I was saying.”

Lauren laughed her low nervous laugh again. Linda was beginning to tire of it. “Um, dare I ask?” Lauren ventured. This was a girl full of uhs and ums. That wasn’t what her Brian needed. He needed a girl who knew what she wanted and knew how to say it. Not any of this awkward modern conversation crap.

“We were just debating whether or not you ate fish.”

“Oh, I eat so much fish that I’m practically gonna die of mercury poisoning!” she laughed. “You know. Because they say that tuna has, you know. High mercury content.”

“See,” said Linda to her son. “I told you so.”

“You did not tell me anything. I was barely even worried. I was just saying.”

“Barely even worried? Why, you were worried sick!”

“Could we drop it, mom? Please?”

“Alright, alright. Well, have a seat Lauren, the table’s already set.” She took a seat and began doling the clams onto individual plates. “Now who’s going to say grace?”

“Not me,” said Brian. “I said grace last night.”

Linda looked slowly to Lauren. “Perhaps our guest would like to say grace.” She said it even though she did not care to hear what type of meager prayer she’d come up with.

“Oh sure!” she said all too quickly, like she’d agree to anything. This girl was eager to please, Linda could see that much. But to what end? What was she after? The same thing as that awful Victoria? Had the world come to that point that that one illicit thing was all that any of these modern girls wanted anymore? “Dear God,” she said, “we thank you for this food. And we also thank you that we are able to share it among such

great company. For these things and all things, we thank you. Amen.” She punctuated it with a little head nod.

“Thank you Lauren. That was beautiful. What church do you go to?”

Brian’s eyes widened.

Lauren cleared her throat as she punctured a clam with one of the tines on her fork. “Oh, well. I guess you wouldn’t really say that I’m religious. Instead, I guess I would say that I’m spiritual?”

Linda had heard that one before. In fact, if she’d had a quarter for every time she’d heard that from a pro-choicer, she’d probably have enough money to end abortion once and for all.

“That’s lovely. I’ve met many great people who don’t necessarily belong to a certain religions, but are spiritual.”

“Thanks.”

“So, I know that you teach at the school with Brian, but what is it that you teach, exactly?”

“Um, eleventh grade English.”

“Wow. I don’t know how you do what you do.”

She shrugged. “I thought the kids were going to be way more difficult than they are. They’re okay. Brian is even better with them than I am sometimes, though.”

“Brian’s going to become a doctor,” she said proudly, all of a sudden. “My little boy is going to save the world.”

“Nice,” said Lauren, looking at Brian. “Have you taken the MCAT yet?”

“Not yet,” he said, dipping his bread into the linguine. “I’m taking a practice course right now.”

“Good call. The one through the county?”

“No. It’s online.”

“Oh. I did the county one. It was pretty good, I guess. I didn’t really score well enough to get into a good school though. But maybe you’ll have better luck than me.”

His eyes widened. “I didn’t know you wanted to be a doctor!”

She shrugged, those sunken, inky eyes darting from side to side. “Isn’t that what every kid around here wants?” She put her fork down. “Well, it’s what I used to want, anyway. Now I don’t really know. I don’t really know what I want to be. I guess I like talking to people. Maybe I’ll try to become a counselor or something.”

Linda looked up from her plate. “Lauren, I think that’s a wonderful idea. You would make an excellent counselor.”

“I guess I’m pretty interested in...helping people,” she said dully to her already cold linguine.

“I tell you what, Lauren. The world needs more people like you. It’s a crazy world we live in. In this day and age, almost everyone could use some help of some kind.”

“Yeah, I definitely think so. I think that maybe if more people got help, everyone would be a little more okay with each other. I don’t get why there’s this stigma against getting help.”

“I think Brian’s dad could have used some help.”

Brian looked down at his plate. “Mom,” he said quietly.



“He wasn’t right. He needed someone to talk to. Someone professional. It turned out that Brian and I were not enough.”

“Oh,” said Lauren. “I’m sorry.”

“No apologies necessary. That was long ago. Brian was just a kid. It’s all over now.”

“Mom,” said Brian, “Can we please...”

“This was a lovely dinner,” said Lauren. “I really really liked the clams.”

Linda began picking up the plates and stacking them in the sink. “You’re very welcome, Lauren. You’re welcome over here any time.”

As she washed the dishes, she saw her son out of the corner of her eye, taking this girl upstairs, showing her his room. The rules were the same as they had ever been. The door had to remain open.

Linda almost felt sorry for this girl, thinking that she was worth Brian’s time. She knew that her son would find a girl eventually, and that it would be exceedingly difficult for her, but the time was not now.

She had watched a TV show once where a woman had interviewed a support group for mothers whose sons had become priests. Linda had hated the pushy woman with her rude questions, asking again and again, “But aren’t you sad you won’t have grandchildren?” One woman had answered that her son wasn’t hers in the first place, he was hers to borrow for 18 years, he belonged to God. She was not sad in the least. Linda did not feel so bad for these women. Although she thought her son was capable of more,

she would feel a sense of peace if her son decided to become a priest. If anyone deserved her son's company more than her, it would be God.

She picked up her sweater from the couch. She would use it as an excuse to go upstairs, to walk past Brian's room to go put it in her own. As she paced the hallway, she noticed the door was closed. She stopped.

She heard her son's voice and felt relieved. They were just talking.

"She's gotten way worse lately," he was saying. "I don't have a ton of money saved up, but I don't know how much longer I can take it."

"She seemed nice."

"Oh sure, she's nice to you, but you're not the one she bosses around all day. And then she blames my father's death on mental illness. As if anyone who hadn't met her for fifteen minutes wouldn't know why he'd kill himself."

She felt her face begin to burn as she paced to her room, throwing her sweater on the floor of the closet. She took a minute to gather herself and then marched over to his door, wrapping sharply three times.

"It's a school night," she said, because it was. "Lauren's got to go home and get her rest. And so do you."

There was a pause from the other side of the door. Some whispering. Linda could not hear.

Brian opened the door and showed Lauren to her coat. Lauren called up the stairs to Linda. "It was great to meet you, Mrs. Kelly," she said in the doorway. "Thank you so much for having me over."

## BLIND CARBON COPY

J. Crew Bridal is running a St. Patrick's Day sale. *Get Lucky Before Your Big Day*, says the subject line. Haha, get it? I guess the wedding industry is finally realizing that no one but religious weirdos wait for marriage at this point.

Madison emailed her mom to say that she's pissed because she got her dress three weeks ago, during their *Save Big During Your Post-Valentine's Blues* event. She got 15% off when, if she'd have waited, she could have gotten 20% off.

Well boo-dee-fucking-hoo.

Other than that minor setback, wedding planning is going off without a goddamn hitch! The bridesmaids have all been notified, and every last one of them (there are nine) are just so *honored* to be there on her big day.

Give me a break. What's so honorary about dropping 300 dollars or whatever on a dress you'll never wear again, drinking \$11 cocktails at a bar where you don't want to be until you puke, and getting some goddamn high-price massage you don't need, all in the spirit of some kind of bullshit sisterhood? But anyway. If any of those nine girls had any kind of objections, financial or otherwise, they didn't say so, so now I guess they must forever hold their peace.

The cake tasting is tomorrow and Madison is going with her mom and her grandma. They've decided for sure on chocolate and vanilla, but they just can't for the

life of them settle on a third flavor. Grandma wants lemon, mom wants red velvet, Madison wants pumpkin. Talk about Sophie's Choice! I just don't know what they're going to do, but something tells me...oh yeah, that's right: no one fucking cares.

All these emails opened and replied to between the hours of 8 and 3...guess I know who's not winning Teacher of the Year this time around.

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Well, Madison had a total fucking freakout today. I don't know what was said exactly (it was over the phone) but according to Madison's mom's email, she and her dad are almost ready to back out of paying for the wedding!

Somebody call 911. I think I'm going into cardiac arrest or something.

So what's the problem? Do you want to know what the fucking problem to end all problems is?

Madison wants *barbecue* at her wedding and her mother thinks it's *tacky*.

Madison went on and on in the apology email, apologizing but not really apologizing, like she does. She kept saying she was sorry, but if her mom had been reading the wedding magazines she'd been sending her, she'd know that barbecue, when done right, can actually be a hip new thing to eat at weddings. Barbecue is becoming "increasingly prevalent in New American cuisine."

Madison just kills me sometimes.

Anyway, I don't know why Madison cares so goddamn much, I mean, her mom and dad are footing the whole bill after all, so she shouldn't really care if they serve liver

with raw chicken at her wedding, so long as she doesn't have to pay for it? It's not like she's going to have time to eat on that day anyway--that's what her married friend, Giselle, had to say in her ever-present infinite email wisdom.

Giselle wasn't the only one Madison emailed. She emailed her whole fucking bridesmaid crew the same little tirade. I mean, after a certain point, I feel like engaged girls should just have their own little bridal tirade newsletter that their friends can either subscribe to or opt out of. Thank god I'm not a girl. Whenever one of my friends gets married, I just buy him a scotch and leave it at that.

This is all starting to get horribly predictable with Madison, but of course I can't look away. I never could.

Today was an okay day at work. I helped an old lady fix her favorite lamp. And also these dumb teenagers came in looking for a funnel, plastic tubing, clamps, and a valve. All the younger guys were watching, so I told them that they could go to Lowe's if they wanted to make a fucking beer bong, because the people at American Hardware didn't support underage drinking. You should've seen the looks on their faces. All the guys were high-fiving me, and they know it's especially ironic because I'm usually the one who brings the beer bong to our work parties.

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Madison wants to know if it would be too much to have American flag tablecloths at the wedding. Andrew's in the Army Reserves, and after all, she wants the wedding to be "representative of their individual personalities."

I nearly died when I read that part of the email.

She wants American flag tablecloths and he's just in the Army fucking *Reserves*? Give me a goddamn break! What is that, like one weekend a year? And it's part of his identity all of a sudden? Hold onto your seats, ladies. This guy's got a personality that's liable to knock your socks off!

I remember when my dad said I should go into the Army. And the real Army, too, not this Army Reserves bullshit. He said it'd give me structure. I said, who needs structure? I make my own structure. Besides, I don't want my face blown off.

And then he punched me in the side of the head.

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Well, Madison finally made a decision I can respect today: an open bar at her wedding.

Her dad worried it would be too costly; he thought beer and wine would suffice. And I see where he's coming from, seeing as the cost differential is in the neighborhood of \$5,000 according to the price quotes from the bartender emails, and he's the one paying for it. But isn't there something about weddings that just makes you want to be able to drink yourself sick?

I was still thinking about all of this when I was playing my game after work. I'm actually in this online guild for World of Warcraft. I don't talk about it much, but it's something that I do a lot in my free time. I don't know if I'd say it's "representative" of

my “individual personality.” I don’t know if I’d get the logo for World of Warcraft on the goddamn tablecloths at my wedding or whatever.

Anyway, Erica from my guild thinks what I’m doing is perfectly normal. She said that people grieve losses and get over things in different ways, and she’s not one to judge me for my coping skills. She’s nice like that.

She’s the only person I can talk to about stuff like this because no real person would understand. People you meet online are fake people, in a way. She can’t tell me to do things I don’t want to do. Well she can, but she can’t try very hard to make me do them or I’ll just go away.

She’s probably just a guy. She is probably a fat 45-year-old white guy who is bored with his 45-year-old fat white wife and their several kids who are also fat and white, ranging in age.

I told her this and she just laughed. I told her that was it. She wasn’t denying it, so it had to be true. She said no, if she were denying it, *then* I’d know it were true. I laughed. She’s really funny. I can talk to her easily, unlike most girls. That’s probably because she’s actually a 45-year old fat white guy.

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Andrew sent Madison a bunch of emails today. They all had addresses of random family members he suddenly remembered. He was hoping that she could send them invitations ASAP since she’d been “delegated” that “task” from their “wedding to-do agenda.” Seriously, who is this guy? I wonder if he’s even into girls at all?

Madison opened the emails but she didn't respond. He'd even marked them urgent. You can always count on good old Madison to leave a guy hanging, can't you? Well. It looks like some things never change.

All the clothing stores must be on to her at this point. Victoria's Secret sent her this sickening display of "Bride-to-Be Lingerie." I'm not going to lie, I stared at it for a good ten minutes before I re-marked it as unread, and it wasn't only because their models are hot as shit. I was just kind of reveling at their devilish grins, and how the looks on their faces kind of clashed with these angelic, white costumes. I say costumes because that's what they are. A girl's wedding night is when she gets to dress up and play virgin. There's a whole industry built around it and it kind of makes me sick.

I remember when Madison was actually a virgin.

No, I didn't expect her to stay that way. And of course I'd be the most dishonest guy in the universe if I told you that I wanted her to. It's just something I can't explain. She was different back then. She was less complicated.

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When Madison said it was really important that they get sunflowers for the table settings, "despite their being out of season," part of me took it as a sign.

Okay, yes, it was the dumb part of me, the part of me that gets a little swimmy when I see movie posters for goddamn romance movies, but it was part of me all the same.

Maddie wouldn't forget. I don't know how she ever could.



When she was a senior in high school, she was chatting to me online about this biology test she needed to study for. She was royally freaking out, which I just don't get, because how could someone really care about school when they just kind of pass you along and let you graduate no matter what these days? But Maddie did care about school. A lot. Way too much. She kind of let it define her.

I was in love with her. I met her at the hardware store, the same one I where I still work. She was my coworker's sister. She would come in and hang out sometimes when things were slow and she always talked to me. She gave me her screen name and we kept chatting even though I had started my real life and my job while she was still stuck on prom and college applications. I've always thought college just delays real life for most people.

So anyway, she was having a major freakout, and this was long long before I got tired of listening to that kind of thing. I gave her some line about how worthwhile of a girl she was and how some dumb grade on a test would never change that one way or another. Then I asked her if she wanted to hang out right then.

Are you crazy, she typed, it's fucking one A.M. on a Wednesday.

I typed something like I think you need a little bit of crazy in your life, Maddie. I really had her going with that one.

She snuck out her basement window. I picked her up and took her to a spot that I'd been saving in my mind. It was near the water by where everyone goes with their kids and everything on a nice day, but it was easy to miss because you had to walk through the woods a little bit to get there.

Are you going to kill me, she whispered. I smiled.

On the other side of the woods was this random field full of sunflowers. The moonlight off of the water made them seem to glow.

Holy shit, she said. They're even taller than me.

We laughed for a while. Maddie's very tall.

I picked the biggest one I could find and kind of fanned her with it. It was a pretty hot night for September. I called her your majesty, and I think I meant it at the time.

The next day during my lunch break, I put a sunflower on her windshield in the high school parking lot. I put a note telling her she was my beautiful sunflower and asking her to get dinner with me.

That was how this whole thing started.

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Sometimes I wonder why I don't just stop. Stop looking at things I don't want to see. But part of me does want to see them. I want to know how it turns out for her, you know?

Not that she cares how it turns out for me. Not that she'd even come to my funeral if I killed myself.

Andrew keeps sending her these links to houses for sale. I don't know what he's smoking if he thinks his little dinky government job plus the stupid army reserves is gonna add up to the money it would take to buy one of these bad boys. But, who knows. Maybe his parents are rich, the little fucker.

There was this day that I got off from the hardware store early when Maddie and I had been dating for a couple of months. We never got off early, but Billy, this kid who's pretty nice but also a little retarded, accidentally came in at three on Sunday thinking he was supposed to work. He was really scheduled for the next day. No one ever comes in on Sundays at three, in fact we close at five so that would just be a two hour shift, but like I said, Billy's a little retarded, and he really hates when things don't go his way. So he came in and the asshole in charge told him to go home, and he started throwing this huge fit and I just nipped it in the bud saying I'd go home instead. I didn't mind if he wanted to take my hours. I had things I'd rather be doing.

I picked Maddie up from her house. She gave me this look like when you run into your friend that you thought was supposed to be on vacation.

Billy thought he was supposed to work, I explained. That's all I had to say. Maddie knew I was a little protective of Billy.

Let's go on a drive, I said, although I can't imagine myself saying it now. Maybe because gas costs so much these days. I don't know if I'd waste it just driving a girl around anymore. But like you probably already guessed, Madison wasn't just some girl.

We were about an hour away when we stopped at a stoplight in a little downtown area, and I was thinking to myself how funny it is that a little downtown area an hour away seems sweet and charming but the little downtown area down the street from you makes you want to put a bullet in your brain.

Look at that house, she said. A porch swing! I'd like a porch swing.

I looked at the porch swing. It was nice, all right. In front of it was a sign with red, white, and blue balloons attached.

It's open today, I said. Wanna go?

Open for what?

Like to show people. To get them to buy it.

Are we buying a house today, Derrick? she asked. She said it like she was joking, but she could be serious about it if I wanted her to be.

Not today, I said. Maybe someday. But the realtor lady doesn't have to know that.

I parked the car and held her hand when she got out.

The plump, pleasant realtor welcomed us and the place smelled like cookies. I looked around for them but saw it was just one of those expensive candles that is made to smell exactly like cookies.

Honey, I said to Maddie, even though I didn't usually call her honey. She was only 17. Come look at this bay window. Didn't you say you always wanted a bay window?

Bay windows were one of those things I always heard about at the hardware store. She smiled at me and shook her head.

The realtor picked up my bait. The bay window is just one of the many luxury features that this home affords, she said.

I pointed out the window at the fenced in yard. For our dog! I said. I knew better than to say something about kids. I think Maddie liked dogs better.

I grabbed Maddie by the crook of the arm and escorted her upstairs. I don't know what came over me, but I started kissing her in the master bathroom and closed the door.

When we came out, we made our way to the door and politely nodded to the realtor, who looked less pleasant now. We got in the car and I put my arm around her from the driver's seat.

I'm going to buy you a house like that, I said into her shoulder. One day.

She smiled quietly. She rolled down the window and put her arm out into the sun.

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I was shaking when I read her email to Giselle. I just finished looking at it. I reread it seven times.

Madison changed her mind today.

Not about the color she wanted on her nails. Not about the height of her heels.

About the whole goddamn wedding.

That's typical Madison for you. She's the baby of her family, so I guess boys are like expensive toys that she throws around her room until they break. Then she just goes crying to her dad for another one, and he chuckles, rolls his eyes, and relents.

Excuse my cliché metaphor. I was never very poetic in school.

Of course, Andrew doesn't know yet. Of course Andrew is going to be last to know. I'm almost starting to feel sorry for the bastard.

I looked through all of the emails he sent her. He didn't email her very much, but when he did, it was always about some kind of event he was going to take her to. Fancy

dinners. Concerts. Parties. He even signed them up for a goddamn tango class together. He was always making plans, that Andrew. I don't know. Maybe that was the difference.

Well, he's probably still making plans, right down to the name of their first child and what kind of boat they're going to get when they retire. God. What a poor, sorry, dumb fuck. He should have known better. Maddie isn't the kind of girl you can plan on at all.

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Well, it's all over now.

If I were a halfway decent guy, this would be the point where I'd look away. But I never claimed to be halfway decent, did I?

Well, first of all, her parents are disappointed. How do I know? I hit Control+F on their multi-paragraph email and found the word "disappointed" 17 times. Boy. My dad was always an ass, but if I ever did something like that, I think he'd already know how embarrassed I'd be without emailing me a manifesto on his disappointment. Well, come to think of it, my old man doesn't even have an email account, so he'd just have to man up and say that shit to my face. I wonder if Madison's parents would do that.

Then Giselle had to get on her high horse. Of course, Giselle thought that Madison was too immature to get married all along, but she picked right *now* to tell her.

Madison really did a number on me, but if I ever dated a girl like Giselle, I'd probably just blow my brains out.

Then Andrew's sister, who was supposed to be one of the nine bridesmaids, went on this total rampage ripping apart Madison's flaws one by one. "Self-centered" made an appearance. So did "a total fucking baby."

It's sucked to be me lots of times, but probably never as much as it sucks to be Madison right now.

I chatted with Erica today, and she said now's your chance. I said, shut up, what do you know, you're just a fat 45-year-old lame white guy. She sent me a crying face, but I don't think she was really crying, because who sends a crying face when they're actually crying?

Anyway. She logged off for fifteen minutes and then logged back on. I said sorry. She didn't say it was okay.

Instead she just said, here's how I know it's your chance: she still hasn't changed her email password.

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Well, Andrew still isn't talking. Not in emails, at least. Maybe in real life. Maybe Andrew's that kind of guy, the kind that isn't afraid to show up on a girl's doorstep unannounced like in the goddamn movies. That little John Cusack motherfucker. Maybe he's not a coward. He is in the Army Reserves, after all.

Madison's mom is making her pay back everything they spent on the wedding deposits. That's kind of funny, in a way. She's treating the situation like Madison is a

little kid who broke a window with a baseball, not like she's a 25-year-old that broke an engagement with her heart of ice.

Sweet little Giselle thinks that this is "totally acceptable" and that Madison "needs to start acting like an adult" and she's "glad someone's finally holding her accountable for her actions." The funny thing is, I tried to find that email a couple of hours later, and I realized Madison had deleted it.

Erica hasn't been online in a while. I guess I pissed her off. I'm not surprised. I pissed a lot of people off back when I was dating Madison because all I could see was her. Maybe just looking at all of her emails is having that same effect again.

Work was a piece of shit today. Some idiot came in swearing that we carried this stupid brand of mulch, and I told him we haven't had it in five years. He asked to speak to my manager and I said I was the manager. He laughed right in my face. This type of thing seems to happen almost every day.

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Well. Before she could return the dress, before they could cancel the catering order, before they could try and return the vases for the table settings, before they could call the photographer--the wedding's back on.

"I hope Andrew has some thick wool socks," her mom wrote, "because now he knows he's marrying a girl with cold feet!" Too bad they don't make wool socks for hearts.

"We knew you'd come around, sweetie," her father wrote.



“I hope you’re making the right decision for you,” Giselle wrote.

“I am so sorry, I don’t even know what came over me,” his sister wrote.

I stared at the screen for a long time and I tried to be surprised. I stared until my eyes hurt and itched and felt dry. Then I cried.

I wrote an email from Madison’s account to Giselle. I copied some random penis enlargement ad and pasted it into the email. That way Madison will know she’s been hacked and she’ll have to change her password.

Then our anniversary will no longer have to come out of her fingers every time she logs onto her email.

And then the last part of me in Madison’s life will finally be gone. Set free.

Erica chatted and said she wanted to hang out in real life. I don’t know. Real life is hard. I’ll have to see how I feel. Real life takes so much out of you until there’s nothing left.

## **I FALL TO PIECES**

Lauren fingered the familiar brass pineapple door knocker, trying to place in her head what pineapples represented. Family? Welcoming? She knew Adam didn't pick it out, but still. She pulled it towards her and then let it descend with a dull thud.

She glanced behind her down the brick stairs leading up to the townhouse. They were steep, but she could run in her tall brown boots. She'd tried it before.

The door opened a crack, as always. As always, but now everything was different.

"You're really here," Adam stated as Lauren pushed the door open and began hanging up her jacket.

"What do you mean, really? After trivia, you said..."

Adam winced. "After trivia, I said a lot of things. That's what happens when there are five dollar pitchers."

She brought her hand back to her jacket. "So you don't still want to go."

"I didn't say that." He looked around the entryway and decided to take the three steps up to the living room. She followed. "So, did you like, have to get a sub?" he said.

"Yeah."

"That's kind of surprising."

"Really? Why?"

He began meandering to the kitchen, not making eye contact. “I don’t know. I’m just surprised that you would let someone else...you know. Who’d you get?”

She cleared her throat. “Just Brian.”

“Oh. Good ol’ Brian.”

“Stop it!” She fake-punched his arm. “Now that we’re broken up, you aren’t allowed to hate him anymore.”

“Hey! I never said I hated the guy. In fact, I stand by what I’ve always said. He’d make a great replacement for me.”

“Stop.”

“I’d approve of him.”

“Are you done?”

He picked up a cup of coffee off of the counter and inhaled. “Yes.”

In the sink, dishes were stacked almost to the faucet. Adam’s roommates were always in a hurry, depositing a mug here and a cereal bowl there. Whenever one of them was in the kitchen, it seemed that they pointedly ignored that sink, kept their eyes fastened to something else, as if a mere glance at it would commit them to a domestic session of elaborate dish-washing.

“So are we going?” Lauren asked. “I want to get a jump on the day.”

“Can I finish my coffee?”

“Yes. But I want to tell you about everything I want to do as you finish.”

He took a long sip. “How much could there possibly be to tell? It’s just Winchester.”

“Yes, but you aren’t the one who was begging to go there for the past three years.” She cleared her throat for dramatic effect. “First of all, did you know that it’s the birthplace of Patsy Cline?”

“I did not know.” He took another sip. “Who’s that again?”

“You know.” She grinned and clutched her chest. “*Crazy...crazy for feelin’ so lonely.*”

“I thought that was by Leanne Rimes.”

Lauren punched him in the arm again.

“Ow...I was kidding! Since when are you a classic music fan?”

Lauren shrugged and imagined a photo of herself with the caption *enigmatic*. “I guess there are some things you just don’t know about me, Adam.” She liked when people who knew each other well said each other’s names in conversation. She felt like it happened more in the movies than in real life.

“Okay,” he said. “Whatever.”

“There’s also a kind of old-timey place where you can get little tiny burgers and eat outside. And they’re apparently really dog-friendly there, so we can do some serious dog-watching.”

“That’s always good.”

“We should eat lunch there. Oh and the world’s largest apple is also in Winchester. It’s four stories high.”

“Fascinating.”

“In fact, there are like 20 other big apples made by artists all around town. We should see how many we can count.”

He looked incredulous. “Okay.”

“And every spring they have this big apple festival and everyone comes from out of town and it’s a really big deal.”

“Maybe you should have broken up with me in the spring, then. We really could have enjoyed that.”

Lauren looked Adam in the eye. “Are your roommates home?” she asked unsteadily.

“No. They’re all at work.”

She cleared her throat. “Look, I was trying to have a nice time today. I miss you and we never went to Winchester after three whole years and I thought that we could go together and it’d be nice.”

He finished his coffee and put it next to the sink. “Okay,” he said flatly. “You’re right. I want to have a nice time too. This will be good.”

“I thought it would be.”

“It will be.”

“Okay.” She smiled slowly. “This will be good. In fact, this will be awesome. Lauren and Adam take on Winchester, Virginia! The *real* Big Apple.”

He looked away and laughed.

“Are you done with your coffee yet?”

In the car, Lauren insisted that they listen to the songs she'd put together for the occasion. It was mostly a mix of Patsy Cline classics and alt-country songs that vaguely sounded like driving through fields to her. She put her feet up on the dash as Adam started his way through the suburbs where they'd both always lived.

He relied on her for directions, as always. As a result, she took him through the winding path of route 50. Once they were outside Chantilly, farms became prevalent, as did general stores and quaint houses that Lauren thought, if things had been different, they could have lived in together one day.

She knew that if it were up to Adam, he wouldn't have hit "avoid highways" on his GPS, and they would be on ugly route 66, with billboards advertising rock music festivals and colleges that weren't really colleges.

"Did I ever tell you about my friend Megan that I teach with?" she asked once the road became open and the intermittent traffic lights were far behind them.

"No, I don't think so."

"Oh. She has the cutest life ever."

"How so," Adam stated, glancing in his rearview mirror even though there was nothing behind him.

"She's the photography teacher. And her husband is the band director? Are you sure I never told you about them?"

"I don't think so."

“Wow. Megan was the first person I met at Lincoln. I think they got married right after college, when she was like twenty-two? Anyway, she had a kid last year. Cute little girl. She looks just like her. The whole family is so adorable I want to claw my eyes out.”

“Hmm,” said Adam, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Who knows. Maybe they’re unhappy just like everyone else.”

“Probably.”

“Maybe she’s dead inside. Married her high school sweetheart and now she can’t escape. Oh, and they have one of those dogs like you like. You know, the little squat kind with the pointy ears?”

“She has a corgi?”

“Yeah. She has one of those.” Lauren paused, letting a long twangy guitar solo punctuate this thought. About a minute later, she figured she’d waited long enough.

“Remember Tiger?”

Tiger was a puppy in a litter named after wild animals that they’d seen in a pet store two years ago. They had both taken turns holding him and taking pictures with him.

“Yeah.”

“We should have gotten him.”

“Maybe.”

Lauren unraveled the end of her braid and began to rebraid it tighter. “I guess it’s for the best that we didn’t.”

“I guess. It could have worked out.”

“Maybe. Maybe we would have stayed together for Tiger’s sake.” She rolled down the window and dipped her hand up and down with the wind. She’d seen people do this dozens of times, but she’d never personally understood the thrill.

Without all the talk, the Patsy Cline song on Adam’s stereo seemed louder, in focus. Lauren let it wash over her.

*“I fall to pieces/Each time I see you again/I fall to pieces/How can I be just your friend?”*

Lauren’s eyes grew wide. She suddenly realized that a light misting of sweat had taken up residency where her forehead met her hairline. She swatted it away, pretending to smooth her hair back into her braid. Adam didn’t usually listen to the lyrics of songs, but suppose he chose this moment to start?

She turned down the music, deciding to talk over the song. “How’s the job search going?” she blurted.

He scrunched up his face into a mean grin. “You know, now that we’re broken up, you aren’t allowed to be on my nuts about getting a job anymore.”

“Sorry. Just trying to make conversation.”

“I’ll get a job when the right opportunity comes around.”

“Sorry.” She turned the music back up, letting the awkwardness sit stalely in the warm car. It was unseasonably warm for mid-October.

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Forty-five minutes later, the miniature skyline of Winchester reinvigorated Lauren. All of the pointed silence of the ride came pouring out in the form of reciting



from online travel brochures. Last night after trivia she was so high on Bud Light and the prospect of one last date with Adam that she barely slept. Instead she spent hours on the internet trying to prove to herself that Winchester was an interesting, quaint place that could save their relationship.

“So where to? We could do the Patsy Cline museum, we could walk on the little downtown stretch, we could hunt for artsy apples...” she craned her head as she exited the car. “Look! I already see one! Across the street there! Should we take a picture so we have proof?”

He responded with a mute, ever-so-slight closed-mouth grin.

“Okay, Adam. What do you want to do?”

“I’m actually pretty hungry. I haven’t eaten at all today.”

“Do you want to go to that mini-burger place? The one with the dogs?”

“Actually, I was thinking Indian food. Can you look up where one is?”

She squinted. “Do you really think they have Indian food here?”

“If they don’t, then I guess I don’t like Winchester very much.”

Lauren fished through her purse, attacking her phone with her fingers. A few minutes later, she said, “Okay. There is an Indian place. Not too far. But we have to drive.”

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When the food arrived, Lauren waited to see what Adam would do. They used to ordered dishes that they both liked so they could share them.

Without thinking, Adam scooped out some of his palak paneer and some of her baingan bharta onto his plate, finished with an ice-cream-like scoop of white rice. After a second, he looked up at her.

“Oh,” he said quietly.

“It’s okay.”

“Did you want to share?”

Lauren did her best impression of cute Megan, who was always so damn agreeable and peppy. “Sure!”

After a few minutes, Lauren said, “This is really good!” even though it tasted just like every other Indian dish she’d ever had.

Adam, who claimed to know a thing or two about Indian food, nodded full-mouthed in agreement. “This is very good. This might be the best-cooked eggplant I’ve ever had.”

This made Lauren want to laugh. She imagined a series of eggplant steaks, well-done, medium-rare, rare. Eggplant tartar. She definitely wouldn’t like eggplant tartar. She felt a small smile start on her face but she repressed it.

“I want to ask the chef how he made this,” Adam was still raving. “I’m going to try to make this for our friends one night. Maybe one night before trivia.”

Our friends. Lauren was now one of those. “Oh yeah? You should!” She was happy for any excuse to interact with anyone else, if even for a moment.

The waiter returned to ask how things were going. Adam asked if he could speak with the chef about how the food was made. He was fascinated in cooking he said, and he might even go to culinary school one day.

As the waiter went back to business, Lauren tried to remember conversation topics. It had been so late at night when she'd read those things on the internet, she was now struggling to recall them.

"Oh! So, how much do you know about Patsy Cline?"

He took another huge bite of eggplant. "Not much."

"Well, did you know that she died when she was only 30?"

Another mouthful. "That sucks. She kill herself or something?"

Lauren took a big sip of water. "No. She died in a plane crash. But it was so weird, I was reading about it online. She had a major car accident when she was famous, too, and that almost killed her. I'm talking really gruesome. Like, she had this big jagged scar on her forehead and had to grow her bangs long to hide it."

"Like Harry Potter?"

She took a deep breath, feeling derailed. She shook her head. "Anyway. She also had some other kind of near-death-experience when she was younger. And you know what she said right before she died? She said she thought she was going to die soon. She said some weirdly predictive thing like, 'Honey, I've had two bad ones before. The third one'll either be a charm or it'll kill me.'"

"Hmm."

“Yeah, isn’t that so weird? Do you think people really know when they’re about to die?”

“I don’t know. I mean I guess you can make everything look like it was predictable in hindsight. You can say I told you so about just about anything if you talk enough.”

Just then, an Indian man covered in discolored splotches emerged from the back. He was wearing a white, clean uniform. He looked like someone who’d been splashed in the face with chemicals, screamed at that he’d never become anything, and had therefore resolved to become something to prove them wrong.

“Sir, your waiter said that you’d like to speak with the chef.”

As Adam and the chef discussed baking techniques and spices she’d never heard of, Lauren could not take her eyes off of the scars on the chef’s face. Were they scars, or had he been born like that? She hoped that he’d been born like that. Although, did that really make it any better? Maybe she would ask Adam about it. But as her eyes drifted to Adam, she saw that he was rapt. He clearly had respect for this man he barely knew. She decided not to bring up the white patches at all.

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Driving back downtown, Adam was still talking about how good the food was and how amazingly talented the chef was. Still nothing about his face, though. Lauren turned all the way around in her seat. “There’s another one! An apple!”

Adam kept his eyes on the road. “The four-story one?”

“No. Just another big one.”

They parked the car even closer to the downtown stretch this time. Lauren saw another apple, but she said nothing about it. Instead, she said, “I’m so glad we’re doing this.”

“Me too.”

They began walking down the little stretch of brick road where no cars were allowed to go that any self-respecting small city had. Adam saw a creamery and told Lauren it would probably be good after Indian food. They went in and he ordered and paid for both of them. Rum raisin for him, pistachio for her. He didn’t even have to ask.

As she bit into her cone, she scanned both sides of the little street for quaintness, but was surprised by how seemingly suburban everything was, even 75 miles outside of that collared-shirted beast of a city. Vinegar Tap Room was to her left, Posh Pets to her right. She saw a big sign for Thai Winchester, and this gave her hope. She and Adam had gone to a local Thai restaurant on their first date.

“Look!” she said. “They have a Thai place! That seems pretty ethnic for Winchester.”

Adam shrugged hard. “Thai food might as well be Italian food at this point.”

She focused on the ground, concentrating on the patches of brick that were grayer than the rest. It made her think of that chef again, although she did not want to think of things like that. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a storefront for a videographer called An Affair to Remember. She wanted to ask Adam if he too thought it sounded like they made pornos, but decided it was best to leave it alone.

“You look beautiful today,” he said as she finished chewing the last bits of her cone. This was not something he said often; in fact, Lauren could only recall one time when they had first dated, before they had ever slept together, that he had used this word to describe her.

“Really?” she asked, suddenly aware of how old her braid made her feel. Eight or eighty. She wanted to touch it but she didn’t want to bring attention to it.

“Really. There’s something I’d like to do,” he said, wiping his hands clean with a napkin.

Her eyebrows felt unsteady. “What.”

“This,” he said, grabbing her cheeks in both his hands, which was something he’d never done in the time they were dating. He pulled her face into his and gave her a long open-mouthed kiss.

“What was that for,” she said when it was finally finished.

“Winchester,” he said.

She felt herself turning red out of embarrassment for him. “Can we go to the Patsy Cline house now?” she asked.

“We can do anything you want,” he said.

Life had suddenly been breathed back into the tour guide within Lauren. “Okay. Well actually, Patsy Cline grew up on the wrong side of town. But it’s not that far. We can walk.”

“Okay.”

“It’s really crazy,” Lauren said. “The people in Winchester didn’t even hail her as a hero at the time. They weren’t even proud of her at all. She got all famous and the newspaper ran like two sentences in the entertainment section. That was it.”

“Why.”

“I guess she was white trash and some rich people are really snobby in Winchester. They just didn’t mix.”

“Sounds like *The Outsiders*.”

“Yeah. Kind of like *The Outsiders*.”

Walking down the remainder of the brick road, Adam’s hand found itself in Lauren’s. Lauren let it make a temporary home there, shielded for the time being from the humid Winchester air.

The brick road ended abruptly in peg-like barricades and suddenly they were out on a major thoroughfare. They crossed the street and took a side road deeper into the neighborhood.

The sidewalk became uneven and littered with weeds. Houses became the unpredictable assortment of duplexes, ramblers, and multicolored townhomes. Yard decorations were haphazard and random: a lone rose grew up next to a miniature American flag. Porches seemed to be a higher priority than shutters and roofing, both of which always seemed to be falling off. On one porch sat a recycling bin containing only three empty bottles of wine and an empty can of Spaghettios. There was very little space between the sidewalk and people’s front doors, and Lauren felt invasive. She tried to avoid eye contact with the people inside.

Two men biked by with plastic grocery bags secured to the front of their bicycles. Lauren had a feeling that people around here didn't bike to be cute; they biked because they couldn't afford a car or had their license revoked.

As Lauren looked down at her phone to avoid eye contact with the men on bikes, a horrible wailing sound began across the street.

"What's that?" she asked, head jerking up.

Adam shielded the eyes from the sunlight. "I think it's some kind of animal."

The two of them ran across the street.

"Oh my god," breathed Lauren.

Beside the curb, a black lab was struggling to stand on three of his legs. His fourth leg was bent in a way that looked wrong, and it was bleeding profusely. Every few seconds, it threw its head back and let out a high-pitched whine.

"Oh my god," Lauren said again. "What do we do?"

Adam removed his outer shirt and tied it around the dog's leg. "Do you think this is tight enough?"

A large lump was forming in the back of Lauren's throat. Her left hand was pressed up against her temple and she was struggling to breathe in a normal sequence. "Yes."

A large woman in a denim shirt came running out of the house. "Cooper!" she yelled. She looked at Adam. "They take off?"

He nodded gravely.



“Son of a...I keep telling my boyfriend to fix this fence.” She looked to Adam pressing his shirt on the dog’s leg. “Thanks.”

“Do you have a vet where you can take him?” Adam asked.

“Yeah. I do. Emergency vet. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do.”

“Need help getting him into the car?”

“No, no. I’ll get my boyfriend to help. Thank you though.” She led the hobbling dog up the path to her house.

Adam began walking in their original direction. Lauren stood frozen. Her heart was pounding and she felt lactic acid building up in her chest.

“Lauren? Let’s go.”

She took in a sharp breath and suddenly realized she was crying.

“What’s wrong?”

“The dog,” she blurted quickly, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice.

“What about the dog? He’ll be okay. It was nothing life-threatening.”

“No he won’t,” she said, no longer hiding her tears.

“He’s okay. He’s gonna come back with a nice new cast to show off to all his dog friends in the neighborhood.” He put his arm around her, stroking her back.

She shook her head. “You always do this.”

His hand went still. He looked at her. “What do I always do?”

“This.”

“What’s this?”

“You always take these big terrible problems. And then you make them cute. That’s not how life works. Things aren’t just little trivial bumps in the road because you say they are.”

“Lauren, he just hurt his leg. He’s going to be fine.”

“He’s not going to be fine!” she yelled. “The operation is going to be too expensive and they’re going to put him down!”

Adam looked shocked. “Lauren. I know you’re upset, but you need to quiet down.”

“I’m not going to quiet down,” she stammered as she shook. She turned around and began walking back to the car.

Almost to himself, as if he’d just figured out a difficult math problem, he said, “I forgot you were like this.”

She glared at him. “You’re not exactly my dream date, either.”

“No,” he said quietly. “No one is. It’s not your fault, what happened to you. But it does make you a pretty hard person to be with.”

She exhaled deeply and thought about refusing to get into the car with him, but all other options for getting home seemed too complicated or too expensive: the statement not worth the trouble. She did not play her mix of Winchester songs on the ride home. She did not even provide Adam with directions. She stared silently out the window as the ugly scenery of route 66 zoomed past. She had nothing left to say.

## **HORSE CRAZY**

Apple Hill Barn, on a tiny remaining sliver of farmland in Alexandria, was the eye of the massive hurricane of northern Virginia. Or, more accurately, it was the tiny little hurricane itself and the rest of the suburbs were the eye. Burt knew that wasn't how hurricanes worked, but he could think of no better way to describe the beautiful, disorderly second home of his that sat safely tucked into a world of strip malls and chain restaurants. It was like he sat through eleven lights of suburban bullshit, Pet Sweaters and The Baby Gym and nonsense that couldn't exist anywhere else, and then he hung a quick left into a neighborhood and he was in the country.

Sometimes he caught his reflection in the rearview mirror and it scared him. He knew better than to hope for a younger face looking back at him. But, for all the living he'd done, he wished he could at least look a little more smug. He wished that guy in the mirror could look like he had it all figured out, but to tell you the truth: he didn't.

The self-confidence he lacked, however, he made up for with confidence in the barn. He wasn't the religious type, but that barn felt like holy ground to him. As long as it stood there at the end of that suburban road, he could still stand to live where he lived.

Standing it was one thing, but affording it was another. He found the most barebones place he could in the area and it was still close to two-thirds of his paycheck. But he didn't really mind. He wasn't really a money guy.

He was more of a time guy. He didn't sit down and think about how much money he'd made at the farm because it didn't really matter to him. He thought more about the twenty-two good years it had given him. He never could stand guys that thought of their lives in terms of a number on a bank statement. He thought of his life as a series of big old movie reels. Sometimes they slowed down, sometimes they sped up. Sometimes you had to take a little break to change the reel.

In those twenty-two years, Burt had seen a great number of girls go through that barn. He wasn't a womanizer, or anything like that, but he did feel there was something special about horse girls. They were always dreamy girls, into big ideas. They weren't necessarily grounded in the same reality as the other ones from their suburban high school--thank god. They seemed a little less like girls and a little more like little intellectual spirits, savoring their little ounce of freedom from the same things that Burt hated about the area.

These girls, with the way they took over the stables by storm after school, walking in unannounced, getting right to work brushing a filly's coat, making jokes with the staff like it was their full time job--sometimes it was easy to forget that they weren't even born yet back when Burt had graduated from high school.

This was especially true three years ago, the day Lauren had walked through the door. Now here was a girl who knew what she wanted.

I want to work here for lessons, she'd said the moment she'd walked into his office. No chitchat, no bullshitting about the weather--just stating her demands.

Okay ma'am, Burt had said, full of elegant formality. He looked down at this pint-sized girl in a collared shirt and khakis before him. She looked plain, bordering on masculine. A single thick brown braid hung to the side of her shoulder. She had precisely kind of drab face that viewed in the right light could be something beautiful--it reminded him of Seattle. She was as tall standing up as he was sitting down. And how old might you be, he asked.

She bit her lip and thought for a second, then said: how old do you have to be to work here?

Fourteen.

She set her jaw and said: fourteen it is then.

He chuckled. The others at the barn would have paused further and worried about what kind of trouble hiring someone underage was liable to get them into. Burt thought life was too short to worry about those types of things. Alright, he said, I ain't gonna ask for ID.

Her eyes widened; she nodded. Even then, she struck Burt as the type of girl who would load up on a bunch of college-level courses in high school. A real go-getter.

From then on, Burt had enjoyed seeing Lauren every day. It was like each day she was a little more grown up, a little closer to being a miniature human being. It reminded Burt of those photos that artsy folks took of a sunset, time lapse slowing it down to individual moments. Every day Lauren was a little closer to her moment of brilliance.

He never asked her her real age; in the end he didn't really want to know. Judging by her height and initial overzealousness, he guessed she was at least a year or two

younger than the other ones. Because of this discrepancy, she was fiercely independent. She didn't slow herself down to fit in with the other girls.

She didn't slow herself down with the rules of the barn, either. She often went the route of pleading forgiveness rather than asking permission, and her smile was so charming that Burt and the other members of the staff could never stay mad at her long.

It was her rule-breaking spirit, in fact, that ended up saving Burt's life.

One day, well after when reasonable folks ate dinner, Burt took an old mare out to the trails behind the barn. These weren't owned by the barn--in fact, financial straights being what they were, the barn was hardly owned by the barn--but they mostly gave a secluded feeling if you know where you were going.

The trails used to cover much more land, but they were slowly being carved away to make parking lots, new properties, and god knows what else. It was hard for Burt not to think of the Native Americans and their trail of tears. Pretty soon there would be nothing natural left within one hundred miles.

She was an old mare, the one he was riding that day--Emmy Lou. Burt never named the horses. Outwardly, he thought it was tacky. Inwardly, he thought it was bad luck. But his coworkers--mostly women--tended to disagree.

Emmy Lou had grown increasingly sensitive to sounds in her old age. Burt didn't like to think of it, but he knew it wouldn't be long before he'd have to be the one to take her out behind the barn with a shotgun. Not too long ago, one of the ditzy new girls had had her car alarm go off, and Emmy Lou had reared around in her stall destructively.

Now every time he rode her, he couldn't help thinking it might be her last ride. In some ways, this comforted him. He always thought it was a shame about those horses that stumbled and broke a leg during the Derby. Poor jockeys didn't even know it was their last ride together.

On the path, small branches whipped Burt in the face. Roots littered the ground and seemed more prevalent than he remembered. He began thinking to himself that this trail with Emmy Lou may not have been the best idea.

That's when the bikes came.

Those idiot kids, no helmets on, no handlebars when they could help it, screaming and hollering and bouncing over the roots. One of them saw Burt and rung his bell and shouted, "It's a fucking horse!" to his friend.

Burt was pretty sure it was the tone of that little brat's voice that did it.

She reared and whinnied, and he grabbed tightly to her reins, remembering what he told all the new girls: stay calm. But she rose again, higher this time. His body slipped further down her back. Soon she was rearing out of control.

The boys were long gone as Burt's ribcage collided with the unforgiving dirt path. He felt a sharp, stabbing pain. He opened his mouth to scream but found that inhaling made the stabbing sensation worse. He was unable to make a sound save for a low whimper.

What do you think of when you are left for dead on a path that is essentially some rich family's backyard?

Burt thought of all the time he'd wasted. He felt his time on earth slipping away into nothingness. He thought of the picture he'd seen in Spanish class, prior to giving up on school: melting clocks. That was how he felt when he was in school and that was how he felt now. All the time, all the things he could have done, turning into a pile of incoherent nothingness.

He had made peace with this, tried to visualize distorted numbers on their sagging dials to focus on anything but the pain. And that's when he saw, like some kind of teenage guardian angel, like his very own Joan of Arc: Lauren, breaking a fundamental rule of Apple Hill Barn and trotting off the property, on an unruly young stallion, Reginald, towards him.

Burt, she cried, stopping her horse and dismounting. She ran over to him with a face so serious for someone her age.

Listen to me, Burt. Stay where you are. I'm going to get help.

He tried to thank her, but he could not find the strength to say those words.

At the hospital, he was told he had fractured his rib which punctured his lung and he was given bills he could not pay. The next day, he called a cab to take him home, and when the cabbie asked him where home was, he just gave him the address of the barn.

It was hard to think of much on that cab ride back, given the pain, but these two things were clear in his mind and could not be muddled: Lauren had saved his life. And he had to stop wasting his time.

Lauren came into his office every day that next week to check on him. Although she was usually such an articulate girl, now she would greet him and then just stand in his



office, staring doe-eyed. Burt resorted to telling her stories of when he was her age to make her feel at ease, to give her something else to focus on.

He told her about the time when he was growing up in Kentucky and went with a group of boys from his stable to sneak into the barn at night. It was the first time they had done something like that, not that he condoned this behavior, he winked to Lauren. But all in all, they had picked the right night for their mischief, because much to their surprise, one of the stall doors was wide open. It didn't take them long to find the culprit--a negro boy who hadn't ridden a horse in his life was kicking at the old mare, trying to get her to take off.

Lauren winced at this, and Burt had to remind himself that he wasn't in Kentucky anymore, and apparently a bunch of sissies made it normal to insist on political correctness.

African American, he backed up to say, just for her sake. She looked relieved enough.

Anyway, he went on, this kid really picked the wrong horse to try to steal. Old Ida was as stubborn as a mule, and she had a mind of her own. If she didn't like you, she wasn't gonna take you nowhere.

He shook his head. Don't even know what use he had for a horse anyway. Unless, he said, looking straight at Lauren, unless he was planning something really sick.

Lauren's eyes widened with mature knowledge of the twisted way the world worked. Burt nodded slowly.

Gross, she said.

But anyway, he went on to say, we sure took care of him.

Lauren leaned in over his desk. Burt was done talking, but she asked him what he meant.

Just what I said. We took care of him, he repeated sternly.

Lauren didn't blink. Did you kill him?

Burt gave a big belly laugh. Did I kill him, he repeated. I'm from Kentucky, kid. Not the mafia. No, no, we gave him a good beating--and he sure as hell didn't have the kind of spirit to try and pull something like that again.

Lauren grinned. She said, I wouldn't have known what to do if you were a murderer. It would have made me sad.

Life's too short to be sad, my girl, he said smiling.

Now, Burt knew horse farms often doubled as gossip farms, and Apple Hill was no exception to this rule. Some words began to fly around the Burt and Lauren situation, especially from some of the plainer girls with few redeeming qualities. She was called a "suck-up," and "Burt's pet," and told that she had a "hopeless crush." When she tearfully reported this to him, he told her that this was the kind of thing that only sprung from jealousy.

He hadn't forgotten those melting clocks, and the minutes, sometimes hours that she spent in his office made him start to feel like they were standing still. Like they were preserved. Like he wasn't forty-five and his life wasn't presumably half over.

He had been pondering this one day, when he suddenly realized that he was not doing enough. He knew the direction he wanted to take, he knew where he wanted to be, but knowing simply wasn't enough. He had to start doing, he had to get the ball rolling. He winced at these criticisms as they were the same ones his father made of him long ago.

He watched Lauren mounting a horse one day, so graceful, so lithe, so...young-- that he had the sudden unusual urge to speed time up ferociously and then slow it down to the most sluggish of speeds. He knew he couldn't really do this, but he would forever dream of it.

He started by doing for Lauren what someone had done for him when he was her age--well, maybe a little bit older. When he was sixteen, the old man at the barn had given him a horse.

His mother shook her head when she heard this. "A horse!" she'd said. "You gotta be out of your mind, boy. If someone gives you a horse, that's a gift to them, not the other way around. I hope you don't ever forget that."

He didn't. In retrospect, that horse was the reason he stayed in Kentucky so long after he dropped out, the reason he had to get up at dawn even after all-night benders, the reason that even on Christmas and New Years and Thanksgiving, he had to work. He knew what giving someone a horse really meant for that other person. And that's why he knew giving Lauren a horse was the first step he could take.

I've seen the way you work with Reginald, he said. You're the only one who can handle him.

Her mouth still remained agape. You're giving me a horse? She repeated again. She rose to hug him but he motioned for her to sit back down.

It's not going to be all fun and games, Lauren, he said. There are going to be early mornings. Late nights. You're going to have to be here twice as much, at least. This isn't the same as owning a kitten.

She rubbed her eyes like a restless child. I will do whatever it takes, Burt. I think you know you can count on me.

He looked at her steadily. I think I know, too.

He stood up from his chair and held her close to him. Her small body smelled of cucumber and melon, that overzealous, overpowering scent that young girls often chose the first time they went to the mall to pick out their own perfume.

He did not feel evil, although he did, for once, feel smart. Other men did their research and played the stock market, earning millions from their selective investments. What he was doing felt no different. He was like an impatient child that presses the bud of a flower between their thumb and forefinger, willing it to bloom.

He watched her approach Reginald and told her to ride him just the same as always, even though everything was different now. He felt a sense of paternal pride as she checked Reginald, sliding two fingers between his girth and his side. She brought the stirrups up nearly a foot, then stepped on the mounting block. In one fluid movement, she gracefully stepped into the stirrup and swung her other leg around his back. A perfect mount. She gave him a familiar tap on his side and brought him to a working trot. She glanced back at Burt, shielding her eyes as he was standing in the sun.

You're a natural, he yelled at her, and then worried that this was something he'd said to too many of the horse crazy girls in the past. She brought him to a canter and hugged the treeline as effortlessly as someone would steer a jet ski. God damnit, he said, feeling his pulse in his ears. The autumn sun broke through a hole in the clouds and shined down on Apple Hill Farms. He opened the gate that led to the off-limits trails. You're golden, he yelled as she passed through.

## A NEW TOWN

Milton Kelly unpacked his last box--a box that belonged to his wife. Leather gloves, wool socks, a mink muffler. He'd never seen her wear the muffler, or any muffler for that matter, but he took great care to handle it gently anyway. All of the items fit snugly in the top shelf of the front closet like soft baby rabbits. They took up residency there. And with that, he, his wife, and his two kids were fully moved into the only available home in Waterview Cluster. In what felt like the only home in the world.

In his head, he named the closet "The Cloak Closet." Just as he'd named the room downstairs with the sliding door that went out to the water "The Rec Room." It was a lot of pressure being the first family in a new house. No one else's memories competed with yours. You weren't calling anything by the incorrect name.

He'd told his fellow agents at Langley that he was moving to a New Town, but for such bright men, they did not seem to wrap their minds around the premise of his move. They assumed he was moving into one of those customizable nightmares, one of those cul-de-sacs of manufactured pop-up wealth, always with one of those falsely pretentious names like The Reserve or Nine Oaks. He tried to explain that no, he was moving into a New Town, literally a place that did not exist before now: 7,300 acres of farmland that were being turned into what his friend Robert had described as a utopia, the anti-suburb. But this confused them further. They pictured his new home as a mansion,

something with a pool and a stable, like one of those sickening numbers that could be purchased fairly inexpensively out in Loudoun County, where dollars and cattle stretched with every square foot, and distance from the White House meant breathing room. Milton didn't have it in him to explain that it was actually a townhouse he'd purchased, a townhouse on a manmade lake named after his old buddy Robert's second wife. Some things just couldn't be explained nicely.

Little David and Linda were exploring down by the water, throwing a football around. Joan was looking out the bay window that overlooked the water, gasping and flinching every time one of the ran too close to the shore. Milton said in a low voice to her not to worry. He was always telling her not to worry.

He looked out the window to the opposing shore. He could make out the concrete shell of Lake Anne Village Center, a little marketplace that Robert had promised would be bustling with coffee shops and little ethnic restaurants by Christmas next year. "A farmer's market every Saturday," he'd said with a wink. He knew how much Joan loved a good farmer's market. She'd grown up in Vermont, and she missed that kind of weekly home-grown community.

Robert had been Milton's friend since Harvard days, and when he and Anne had come over for dinner two years ago to the Kelly's home in sprawling Annandale, the a new suburbia had sounded like a good idea to Joan.

"These cowardly whites can take their idea of suburbia and shove it," Robert had said. "I'm taking it back."

Joan put her napkin and looked him in the eye. "Is that so?"

“I think we can all live together. If we really want to. If life is lived the way it’s meant to be lived.”

Joan uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. “How is it meant to be lived?” she asked.

“It’s meant to be lived with purpose. With connection to a place. Not wandering from job to job, uprooting your family for each upgrade. A family should be able to set its roots firmly in a place, say in a condo, and then eventually grow to a townhouse. Maybe someday a single family home.”

Milton kept his eyes on Joan, who’d insisted that a condo was beneath them when they first got married.

“It’s meant to be lived with a sense of real community. No more of those ‘bedroom communities’ where everyone hides inside their houses and draws the blinds. I want to create a place where people go out and do things. I want to create village centers for every neighborhood with local shops and restaurants. I want people to meet by accident while grabbing a coffee, walking their dog.”

Milton wasn’t sure the idea would take off, especially since the trend at the time was for money to translate into square footage. People wanted the biggest bang for their buck, a place where their friends would visit them for the first time and wonder if they’d written the address wrong.

“It’s too bad it’s so hard to communicate what pleasure one gets from living with one’s fellow human being,” said Robert, staring out the dining room window of Milton’s old house at the house across the street, lights on upstairs but otherwise no sign of life.



Joan, probably picturing her neighbors in Vermont helping shovel each other out in the winter, nodded along.

Milton walked out his new Lemon Meringue front door, which was painted according to Waterview Cluster's approved list of colors. Milton and Joan had been given a booklet with the approved palette to pick from for the brick, the roof, and the door. Lemon Meringue ended up being a disappointingly mild shade of yellow.

As he walked down the row of compact houses, he saw that the doors of his future neighbors were painted lesser colors with lesser names. Deep Blue. Brick Red. Drum Hill Gray. The neighbors had second and third priority in their multiple choice world. He imagined walking out to his car in the parking lot at the same moment that one of them was walking their dog in his field of vision. His chest tightened. His breath quickened.

He ventured out of his own cul-de-sac, reminding himself he wouldn't run into anyone, that it was impossible at this point. His shoulders loosened a bit and he felt the way he felt when he went on lone hikes as a boy. Not a soul in sight. Nothing but him and the trees.

Construction was beginning on a new crop of homes, but Milton was a skeptic when it came to these kinds of things. There had been a sign in his old neighborhood promising a new shopping center for years. When construction finally began, Milton couldn't help but think that all they ever did was push the dirt around. Make a little pile here. Push it over there. Push it back over here. Change the opening date by a season or two. When driving past it, Milton imagined a pizza place where families could hold affordable birthday parties for their children. This vision of a happy family with pizza

and birthday cake always loomed like a ghost in the air on top of the newest mound of dirt. By the time his family moved out here, the shopping center still hadn't opened.

He turned back on a little trail, one that called itself The Green Trail. Robert had penciled in an ambitious rainbow of different trails in his initial concept of Reston. So many that he had to use colors like pink eventually. Turquoise, even. Milton wasn't sure how a place with so much natural space was supposed to be part of suburbia. Anti-suburbia or not, he wasn't so sure they wouldn't eventually pave over the trails to create something that would make money.

As he walked, he tried to recall where he'd put the Christmas decorations. He wasn't sure if they were in the attic or the linen closet. Either way, with his newly downsized house, they wouldn't be hard to find. He'd ask Linda and David to help put them up tonight. Milton knew that no one else would see their decorations this year, that the decorations were for his family only. This made him smile.

The trail winded back to the water, back to his lake. Joan had worried about the kids drowning in the lake. They were 7 and 9, and had taken swimming lessons when they were young. Linda was even on the swim team at their summer club back over in Annandale. Something about the fact that it was an artificial lake bothered her--she was so worried that one of the young ones would get their foot caught on the drain and never come back up.

She hadn't been herself since the miscarriage. She seemed to think that God had his quick finger on a string attached to everything important to her in this world, ready to

pull at any second. Milton was willing to do anything necessary to make things easier for her. Anything save for leave the area.

He knew she wanted to go back to Vermont. Sometimes she insisted she needed it. She hated the faceless unincorporated area they had called home since the beginning of their marriage. Milton hated it, too. He never had felt right here after growing up in Buffalo. Buffalo might not have been pretty, but it did not feel like this strange area around the nation's capital--a mess of limbs without a heart or brain.

But Milton was not so naive that he thought that what he wanted should in any way influence what he got. He was the one that made the money. His family needed that money; his wife wasn't able to work. Milton needed to be a part of the CIA. He needed to feel important. His identity as a person and as an agent had become so inextricably intertwined. The removal of his job would feel like the removal of a vital organ. Every other part of him would die soon after.

He couldn't even imagine what paltry, emasculating job they'd offer him in Vermont. There was nothing more embarrassing in this world than not being able to offer your children the best brand of everything.

Walking up the shore, he easily spotted his house. It was the only source of light save for the setting sun. He waved to David, who threw him a long pass. Milton caught it and thought about how a year from now, he'd remember to tell him to sign up for the Reston football club. He thought about how ten years from now, he'd tell him not to let his job define him. He'd tell him how all of those things a man is supposed to want can end up ruining him.

Maybe someday they could retire up north. Nothing would matter then, after Milton's career was over. But for now, farmland converted into a New Town called Reston was the best he could do.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Marissa D’Orazio grew up in northern Virginia. She received her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Education from the University of Virginia. She has been teaching middle and high school English for the past seven years and received her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2016. She still lives with her husband in northern Virginia, but she hopes to escape soon.