Badges Earned and Bridges Burned: Essays

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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Badges Earned and Bridges Burned: Essays

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The heart of this thesis is six personal essays reflecting on experiences spanning from the author’s late teens to early thirties. Although they recall the author’s personal experiences learning about her relationship to others, as well as her relationship to herself, the essays also deal with universal commonplace subjects, such as work, love, attraction, and friendship. The author attempts to offer authentic human experiences where all readers can find something that resonates with them and inspires them to reflect on their own lives.
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Here’s a situation: a senior girl in high school wants to take a freshman boy to the prom. She plans, she asks, she’s accepted, but his mother won’t let him go. How could I take this strange, humorous dilemma that I experienced and make it more than just an anecdote? Why did I want to revisit it, write about it, and share it?

In her book, The Situation and the Story, Vivian Gornick discusses the same issue when writing about a woman who recalls being an apprentice to a doctor at the doctor’s funeral:

What about the experience? What exactly was it? And where was it? She realizes suddenly that what she’s been calling experience is only raw material. Now she starts thinking. Who exactly was the doctor to her? Or she to the doctor? And what does it mean, having known her? What does she want this remembrance to exemplify? Or invoke? What is it that she is really wanting to say? (8)

The more I thought about my prom experience, I realized the story or essay was not really about his mother forbidding him to go to the dance. This was just the situation or the problem. I was more concerned with how finally having a date made me feel. I felt “normal,” like I was doing something feminine even though I had complicated feelings about traditional femininity and went out of my way to not be feminine. I was surprised to find that I liked the idea of getting dressed up and putting on makeup. I also thought my going to a dance with a date would please my mother. I felt like I owed her because she was more feminine and probably wished she had a daughter who was like her. The essay was born out of these complex feelings. Gornick describes something similar in her discussion of the apprentice at the funeral:
The place to which our eulogist finally puzzles her way: her own mixed feelings. First she sees that she has them. Then she acknowledges them to herself. Then she considers them as a way into the experience. Then she realizes they are the experience. She begins to write (9).

Along with acknowledging my own “mixed feelings,” my essay, “A Date for the Prom” was also about the discovery that my mother had never wanted me to be anything but myself – an experience that is nearly universal for any reader because most of us want to be accepted by our parents. Making my writing identifiable is a key aspect of the essay. As Michel de Montaigne, the first essayist, stated, “Every man has within himself the entire human condition…And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump” (Lopate xxiii).

“A Date for the Prom” describes an experience that rendered wisdom, as all experiences worth retelling do. “Every work of literature has both a situation and a story,” Gornick writes. “The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say” (13). So the situation, the raw material I had to work with, was that my prom date’s mother wouldn’t let him go because of his age. The story was what I came to learn about myself and my relationship with my mother.

My essays do not focus exclusively on one subject or follow a specific formula. I don’t consider myself a sex or dating writer, although I do write about those subjects. I’m not a chronicler of work or job-search experiences, but have written about these, too. I don’t focus solely on family and friends or personal problems, but they are a part of my writing. I don’t recall only my awkward and poignant experiences in high school, although some of those are included. I don’t consider myself a humorist even though I
try to incorporate some humor in all of my essays. As enjoyable and challenging as humor writing is, the tone simply does not fit every subject I want to explore. Sometimes I find value in reflecting on the more heartbreaking aspects of life. The fact that I don’t fit into a particular category is what I believe I can contribute to the literary art of essay writing. Unlike when readers sit down with a collection of David Sedaris’s humor essays and expect to be, well, humored, readers aren’t going to necessarily know what to expect when they read my essays. But I like offering my readers a variety of authentic experiences, some funny, some weird, and some troubling.

After all, why should an essayist box herself into one category and write about only one subject when there are so many wondrous things in life to ponder? Patrick Madden states in his book of essays, *Quotidiana*:

> The essay-writer has no lack of subject-matter. He has the day that is passing over his head; and, if unsatisfied with that, he has the world’s six thousand years to depasture his gay or serious humour upon. I idle away my time here, and I am finding new subjects every hour. Everything I see or hear is an essay in bud. The world is everywhere whispering essays, and one need only be the world’s amanuensis (2).

My experiences I write about are not extraordinary. People have friendships that fade. Some people don’t get to go with the date of their choice to a high school dance. Hunting for a job is not something unfamiliar to many people. I’m not reporting or reflecting on natural disasters or war-torn areas. I write about every day, commonplace contemporary issues and experiences, but essays do not require extraordinary subject matter to be considered valid or interesting. Madden has written essays on as simple subjects as garlic, diaper changing, and the fact that he will never be able to see the top of his head. In *Quotidiana*, he focuses solely on commonplace subjects and in his essay
“The Infinite Suggestiveness of Common Things” he writes that he “was struck (dumbstruck, moonstruck) by those authors who wrote from seemingly insignificant, overlooked, transient things, experiences, and ideas, who were able to find within their everyday, unexceptional lives inspiration for essaying” (2). Even the title of his essay comes from a quote by poet and essayist Alexander Smith’s essay “On the Writing of Essays”: “A quick ear and eye, an ability to discern the infinite suggestiveness of common things, a brooding meditative spirit, are all that the essayist requires” (1).

And yet, alongside my interest in the quotidian, I’m also fascinated by how nonfiction engages with overtly controversial and even taboo subjects, such as alcoholism, sexuality, and depression. I value writing about my personal struggles that others may share. Certainly, I have been embarrassed about some of the truths I’ve admitted in prose but I think these are important parts of nonfiction to discuss and reckon with. We all have done things at some point that we are ashamed of or had experiences that are painful to recall, but I believe it’s important to reflect on these hard times and not repress them. Writing about these experiences is not only an opportunity for the writer to come to a better understanding of past actions and experiences (and avoid doing them again), but it also offers the reader the chance to learn from the author’s experiences and apply these lessons to their own lives.

But how does an essayist write about such subjects without sounding like an exhibitionist? How does an essayist gain sympathy and maintain interest from readers when making uncomfortable admissions and acknowledging faults? On this matter, Gornick states:
Think of how many years on the couch it takes to speak about oneself, but without all the whining and complaining, the self-hatred and the self-justification that make the analysand a bore to all the world but the analyst. The unsurrogated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader (7).

Phillip Lopate has much to say about this as well in *The Art of the Personal Essay*:

The spectacle of baring the naked soul is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist’s self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor. Some vulnerability is essential to the personal essay… Part of our trust in good personal essayists issues, paradoxically, from their exposure of their own betrayals, uncertainties, and self-mistrust. Their sincerity issues from an awareness of insincerity and it gives them a doubled authority. The sins that make these essayists cringe in retrospect usually turn out to be an insensitivity that wounded another, a lack of empathy, or the callowness of youth (xxvi).

The essayist’s struggle with wrongs she’s done against others or against herself is what makes the essay. The essay should not be about the mistake or problem itself, but should deal with the essayist wrestling with her feelings about it and why she did it. There needs to be some humility and vulnerability, along with a certain amount of distance from the experience to produce a work of art from it. Lopate identifies self-righteousness as the personal essay’s enemy, “not just because it is tiresome and ugly itself, but because it slows down the dialectic of self-questioning” (xxx). The essayist cannot just recall every time she’s gotten black-out drunk and expect that to be enough. It leaves too many questions for the reader. Why did the essayist do it? Why is she sharing it now? How does she feel about it? Is she proud, writing for shock value, or does she regret it? The personal essayist writes to explore things she’s ashamed of, not just to confess, but to offer wisdom that can only be arrived at after time to reflect, and perhaps through reflection itself. Lopate eloquently describes this process:
The personal essayist is a Houdini who, having confessed his sins and peccadilloes and submitted voluntarily to the reader’s censuring handcuffs, suddenly slips them off with malicious ease by claiming, I am more than the perpetrator of that shameful act; I am the knowser and the commentator as well (xxviii).

To be the knowser and commentator is to be more than just confessor. It also gives the personal essayist the license to reflect. My essay “Somewhere in the Middle” attempts to be more than just a confessional piece about mistakes the narrator has made. The narrator is attending an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting because she is concerned about her behavior with alcohol and wants to learn more about the organization. In the first draft, the piece was simply a recounting of what happened at the meeting. The reader knew the narrator drank too much in the past because her internal monologue admitted this fact, but the insidiousness of her alcohol dependence did not become apparent until almost the end of the essay. When colleagues read this piece the majority commented that they needed more of the narrator’s history with alcohol. Her ethos would be strengthened if she did not wait to admit how serious her dependence was until the end of the essay. I revised the draft to open with a description of the first time the narrator got drunk at fifteen and how the alcohol made her feel. Revealing that the vodka silenced her anxieties and worries at a young age established why she drank and that she had a long history with alcohol. The new version goes back and forth between describing the meeting as it happened and flashbacks that continue to show the narrator’s history with alcohol. The narrator leaves the meeting with a better understanding of how she uses alcohol to hide and why it makes her do things she regrets. The essay closes with a final flashback scene describing when the narrator would pre-drink before going
on dates with her boyfriend. This leaves the reader with the impression that the narrator’s struggle is not over, but she is more self-aware and trying to be a more responsible and healthy person in the world. So the narrator in “Somewhere in the Middle” admits flaws about herself, but shows these flaws come from a place of deep insecurity and anxiety. She wants to improve. This ideally leaves the reader feeling the humility, vulnerability, and credibility that is necessary from the narrator to avoid making the piece purely narcissistic. As Lopate states, readers of personal essays want “that shiver of self-recognition – equivalent to the frisson in horror films when the monster looks at himself in the mirror” (xxvi).

I am a personal essayist but I don’t write with the soul intention of writing about myself. I want the experience to resonate with my readers and have them work out for themselves the wisdom that has been gained. Sometimes I do this through exposition and other times through scene and dialogue. I only explicitly state what I’ve learned or what I will do going forward if I think it is important to the essay. For instance, my essay “Eat My Heart Out,” is about my friendship of seventeen years with a woman who ultimately was not as invested in the relationship as I. The reader never sees the narrator tell her friend how she feels when the friend lets her down. She doesn’t stand up for herself. I want the reader to know that the narrator has found agency at the end of the piece and is in control. In the essay’s final stage the narrator has received a wedding invitation from the friend along with some old letters written to her by the narrator. The essay could end with the found texts of the letters and leave readers to reflect on what has happened between the two friends and work out for themselves what the narrator will do, but in this
case I do think it is important to solidify that the narrator is moving on from this toxic friendship. She will not allow the friend to hurt her anymore. It is for this reason I end the essay with: “But I won’t attend the wedding. Fiscally and emotionally, I can’t afford it.”

Gornick states, “The writing we call personal narrative is written by people who, in essence, are imagining only themselves: in relation to the subject in hand” (6). When I write personal narrative I am always aware that my part in the essay is to share my experience in relation to the subject. I think of the essay as a piece of music and consider myself the instrument to play it – to play the theme bigger than myself. My function is to tell the story I experienced, not to be the story. To this end, I rely on narrative strategies of storytelling. In Lopate’s words, “The essayist must be a good storyteller. All good essayists make use at times of storytelling devices: descriptions of character and place, incident, dialogue, conflict” (xxxviii). Essays do not have to be straightforward retellings or purely analytical with only one narrative voice present. I think dialogue is an effective tool for authors to show readers what an author is trying to say rather than telling through excessive exposition. In an interview with the online journal, The Fiddleback, essayist Jo Ann Beard states:

Dialogue, like any other part of writing, has to be fresh and unique, surprising. It shouldn’t be carrying narrative water and it shouldn’t be telling us anything we already know. It shouldn’t be there just because someone said it. It should further the story and it should illuminate something that couldn’t be illuminated in any other way. People don’t explain things to each other in real-world conversation – they just talk and expect each other to understand context. For better or worse, that’s what conversation in writing has to be like too (Nelson).
In my essay, “Eat My Heart Out,” I use dialogue to show the underlying neglect present in the narrator’s relationship with her best friend, Marysia:

“You two could come see my neighborhood then. You could finally see my place and I’d love to take you for a tour of Jamaica Plain. It’s kind of a hipster/blue collar area. It has some great restaurants where we could eat.”

"That would be awesome!” Marysia said. "I've wanted to see your place since you moved here. How long have you been here again?"

"Almost three years," I said.

When the narrator reminds Marysia that she’s lived in her neighborhood for three years without a visit from her, this line says a lot about the state of the relationship for the reader, even though the narrator in the scene is still not fully aware of it herself. It’s a very telling section of dialogue, without the narrator simply telling the reader.

Although I prefer to write dialogue, I am aware that this can be a sensitive and controversial element of creative nonfiction. There are readers and writers of nonfiction who are adamant about dialogue being verbatim so as not to misquote or put words in people’s mouths. This is understandable to a degree, and I do my best not to quote anything incorrectly. However, I believe that writers of personal essays and memoir cannot be expected to remember everything that was said in past conversations. My recollections in the following essays are primarily based on memory. They are my personal experiences the way I remember them. I believe that memory brings a truth that is worth staging for itself, even if it doesn’t have documentary accuracy.

Beard writes in a style similar to mine. She is a narrative personal essayist, writing her essays in a fiction-like manner through the use of scenes. Her essay “Cousins” is an exploration of the relationship between two sisters (Beard’s mother and
aunt) over the course of their daughter’s lives. It opens with a scene of the two sisters fishing while pregnant with the daughters (Beard and her cousin) and goes back and forth between scenes depicting the sister relationship and the cousin relationship until the final scene in a hospital room where the aunt is knitting and Beard’s mother is dying from cancer. Beard never states that her mother is sick, but she clues the reader in through key details like a morphine injection given to her mother and describing the room as “the sterile landscape of cancer country” (44). It is not necessary for her to explain what is happening throughout the essay, the scenes speak for themselves. The narrator simply narrates events and builds the relationships between the four women through scenes and imagery of fish and batons. The essay ends with a depiction of Beard’s mother’s dream:

My mother sleeps silently while my aunt thinks. As the invisible hands tend to her, she dives and comes up, breaks free of the water. A few feet over a fish leaps again, high in the air. Her arms move lazily back and forth, holding her up, and as she watches, the fish is transformed. High above the water, it rises like a silver baton, presses itself against the blue August sky, and refuses to drop back down (45).

I also employ imagery in “Eat My Heart Out” to symbolize the friendship the essay explores, similar to the way Beard uses fish and batons to emphasize key moments in the lives of the cousins and sisters. Food is involved in nearly every scene between the narrator and Marysia, except the final scene where they part ways. They have a mutual joy of food, but Marysia seems to put it above everything else – parallel to the way she neglects the friendship. In the opening scene, Marysia states that her mother chastises her to lose weight and won’t pay for college unless Marysia goes pre-med. In the later flashback during junior year of college, it is revealed via a phone conversation that Marysia is pre-med and eating carrot sticks because she’s on a diet. The essay relies on
scenes to illustrate the relationship between two friends that gradually disintegrates over time.

The following six essays are a reckoning with my past to better understand the present. As Meghan Daum states in the forward to her essay collection, *My Misspent Youth*, her book is “about not knowing what things are about to sort matters out by using one’s personal experiences and observations as a tool” (9). My essays make the same attempt. The narrator is coming to terms with her relationship to herself as well as those around her, including parents, family, friends, lovers, colleagues, and strangers. The learning experiences illustrate how I became more aware of who I was and the kind of person I wanted to be. I don’t always like the person I am on the page, but then again I don’t always like the person I am off the page. Like everyone, I am flawed, but I do not try to hide this from my readers. Flaws are part of being human, but it is the struggle to understand these flaws and to grow that make the human experience extraordinary.

These essays are personal but deal with universal subjects. The goal is for all readers, women and men, to find something in these essays that resonates with them. Whether I’m writing about something seemingly mundane, like figuring out what I see in a guy I’m attracted to, or something obviously life-changing, such as coming to terms with my alcohol abuse and anxiety disorder, I hope to leave readers feeling more connected to the world and inspire them, through my example, to reflect on their own lives. I want to connect with people through my writing. The moments when readers have told me they were moved or were still thinking about one of my pieces days after reading it give me the kind of pride I imagine parents feel about their children.
REFERENCES


A DATE FOR THE PROM

I needed to ask him.

I was riding home from school play rehearsal in the carpool organized by a few of my cast mates. Sitting in the backseat watching Michigan farmland and new housing developments blur together in the early May evening, I tried to think of a way to ask Jim, the guy sitting next to me, to my senior prom. He was sitting in the middle seat between a girl named Lindsay and me. I liked sitting close to him because our upper arms had no choice but to brush against each other’s. The outline of his semi-muscular chest was visible through his blue T-shirt. He smelled good, like fresh laundry, and his curly red hair was cropped short, giving it a slight wave at the top. I wondered what it would be like to run my fingers through it.

Then I felt guilty for wanting to do this since Jim was fourteen and I was eighteen. Sometimes I just forgot his age, though. He didn’t look fourteen and, more importantly, he didn’t act like it. Unlike many of the senior guys, Jim was thoughtful and kind. He showed interest when I talked to him on breaks during play rehearsal. He didn’t always need to be the center of attention. He was the first guy I felt comfortable with. None of the boys in my grade did this for me, and a lot of them were asking freshman girls to the prom so I figured I could ask a freshman, too. Now I just had to do the actual asking, preferably before our carpool reached his house. My heart pounded as we passed the golf course and took a left into his neighborhood. I tried not to think of how humiliating it might be if I was the senior rejected by a freshman. Before I could
change my mind, I took a deep breath, leaned over to him, and whispered in his ear what I had never asked anybody before.

“Hey Jim, you want to go to prom with me?”

“Sure, Kyle,” he whispered back. It was that simple.

As he got out of the car we made plans to discuss details at school. I announced my good news to the remaining passengers as we drove away. They were happy for me. So was my mom when I got home and told her. “Wonderful!” she said. She seemed almost happier about the situation than I, which made me wonder if it bothered her that I hadn’t dated anybody before. She never nagged me about it like some mothers might, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t disappointed. Like I wasn’t the kind of daughter she’d sent away for in the mail. I knew she wasn’t impressed with my wardrobe. I rarely wore anything dressier than baggy thrift store-bought pants and brown and gray cardigans that looked like they’d been designed for grandfathers.

As a little girl, I loved the kinds of things girls may be expected to like, such as frilly dresses, the colors pink and purple, and wearing princess costumes on Halloween. I stopped being as concerned about looking feminine, though, around the time I began high school. I thought makeup was a waste of time. It took too long to put on in the morning. And why did I have to enhance my facial features with a bunch of fake color? Why couldn’t I just be satisfied with my plain face? Why couldn’t everyone else be, too? I had a natural chip on my shoulder that made it hard for me not to respond to things I didn’t like. And I didn’t like being expected to do things or act in a certain way because I was a girl. I considered my choice of dress and refusal to wear makeup as a small act of
rebellion. The clothes I wore were comfortable, and there was never any danger of me smearing chemical compounds on my face when I rubbed my eyes or ate lunch.

My mother couldn’t leave the appearance issue alone, though. “Is that what you’re going to wear?” I heard on many mornings before school. The days I didn’t wear a bra really killed her. “Honey, you’re bouncing all over the place!” she’d say. In high school my mother had been on dates and attended every dance. She even worked on the Homecoming parade floats. I never saw her leave our house without her face made up and every blonde hair in place.

“Don’t think of putting on makeup as a task,” she said one day. “Think of it as a privilege.”

“Are you serious?” I asked. I could hardly contain my laughter. I was a little horrified, too. My mother was a child of the fifties, but I thought she sounded like a housewife from the decade instead.

“Yes, I really think it is a privilege,” she said. “If you recognize putting on makeup for what it really is – something we get to do in order to look our best that men don’t get to do – then it doesn’t seem like an annoying extra step to take when getting ready in the morning. You never know who you’re going to see or who may see you when you leave the house. It’s just a suggestion.”

“So you want me to look good in case I meet a man,” I surmised.

“No,” she said, sharply. “You should want to look good for you.”

“Then why did you add the part about never knowing who I might run into? I’m fine with the way I look.” My mother’s insistence that it was important I look good for
myself got jumbled inside my head like a bad phone connection. All I heard was her saying that I wasn’t pretty and I needed the makeup to attract the boys so I could be the daughter she wanted. This made Jim’s acceptance without me changing my appearance very gratifying to me.

I had more in common with my father. We were both laid back yet worried and over-analyzed almost every situation. We didn’t care for convention or traditions, at least some traditions like high school dances. He had skipped his prom. “I thought I didn’t need it,” he said. My mom loved to chastise him for making some poor girl from his class miss her prom because he was too cool to ask somebody. He admitted regret for this decision, though. He said at the very least it would have probably been a nice memory to have with friends. Part of being laid back meant my dad and I didn’t let ourselves get too excited about things, either. This meant less disappointment if they didn’t work out. When I told him I was going to prom, he looked up from his paper, smiled, and said: “That’s great, honey. Go and tell me what I missed thirty-one years ago.”

As the prom drew closer I could feel the excitement building in me as I threw my usual caution to the wind. What could go wrong considering Jim had said yes? Each pre-prom activity, from planning the party after the dance to shopping with girlfriends for dresses, confirmed that I really wanted to go to prom and I wanted to go with Jim. I just couldn’t believe that I was getting to go with a guy I actually liked. This kind of thing just didn’t happen to me. I even found a dress I loved. A white, spaghetti-strap, floor-length gown with little silver swirls all over that reminded me of a glass of champagne.
When I tried it on in the dressing room, I liked the image staring back at me in the full-length mirror. She looked nice, pretty, even. Her breasts no longer looked like lumps of fat hanging awkwardly from her chest. They weren’t a nuisance in that dress, but an enhancement. The dress celebrated my body, making me feel connected instead of alienated in my own skin. I wanted to wear the dress. I wanted to wear it while standing next to Jim as my mother took cheesy pictures.

Jim was renting a tux and seemed just as into this whole dance thing as I. I wanted to thank him for being my prom partner, which I wrote in a little card that I gave to him on closing night of the school play, Neil Simon’s *Fools*. My character, Snetsky, was originally written as an absent-minded male shepherd, but the director thought I fit the role well and changed it to a female part. The costume designer had still been unsure of Snetsky’s sex halfway through rehearsals and finally said one afternoon, “What is Kyle supposed to be – a man or a woman?” I sat on the stage embarrassed as the rest of the cast and crew chuckled and joked and a few said, “Awww.” Jim rushed over and put his arm around me. “It’s okay, Kyle,” he said. He knew I was the woman he was taking to the prom. Ironically, Jim had been cast in the play as the village villain. As evil as he tried to act, though, it was impossible for me to see him as a bad guy, even on closing night of the play.

The Monday after the play closed, Jim walked up to me at my locker.

“Hey, Kyle,” he said. He was looking down at his shoes; at the folder in his hand; anywhere but in my eyes.

“Hey,” I said, hesitantly.
“Um, I’m sorry, but I can’t go to prom with you.”

I waited hoping he’d say he was kidding. He didn’t. I knew I shouldn’t have gotten too excited.

“Why not?” I asked. A number of reasons ran through my mind. He didn’t want to go. He didn’t want to go with me. He liked somebody else.

“My mom won’t let me go,” he said. His eyes were shut tightly as if it pained him to say these words.

“What?” I asked.

“You think I’m lying?” he said. “Don’t you think I’d make up a less embarrassing excuse if I were trying to get out of this?” I liked his defensiveness.

“I didn’t think you were lying,” I said. “I’m just…confused. Why won’t she let you go?”

“She says I’m too young and that prom is for juniors and seniors.”

“That’s it?” I said, raising my voice. “That’s her reason? You’re in high school! That makes it okay for you to go if a junior or senior asks you. It’s a compliment to how your mother raised you that a senior would ask you to prom as a freshman. She should be proud.”

“Thanks,” he said, blushing. “I know she’s being ridiculous.”

“Does she know how many guys in my grade are taking girls in yours? It’s not like I’m the only senior asking a freshman. And what does she think I’m going to do to you at the prom?” I said, thinking that we hadn’t even kissed yet. “I’m, like, the most unthreatening older prom date ever.”
This was achingly true. The last piece of action I’d gotten was in kindergarten when I made out with Kyle Remsburg during story hour. He was cute but I mostly liked him because we shared the same first name. I thought this was a sign we were meant for each other. Kindergarten making out consisted of several closed mouth pecks on the lips. The way we kissed reminded me of the simple way I might kiss a relative, except Kyle’s kisses inspired a very different feeling in me. I felt giddy and special. I may have only been six but I remember how I felt. When Mrs. Crittenden noticed what we were doing she immediately told Kyle to go sit on the Time Out chair in the corner. She looked at me with what I didn’t know at the time was sympathy. One might think that my early kissing start would have been a red flag for future youthful indiscretions, but I hadn’t so much as hugged another boy since kindergarten that wasn’t related to me by blood. I felt like Jim’s mother was punishing me for being some kind of harlot, which was really infuriating because not only was it untrue, but I’d never even gotten to enjoy these naughty experiences she was imagining I’d had. And I may have been attracted to Jim but he was fourteen and I wasn’t stupid. I was a good, responsible senior and maybe his mother would see that if I called on her like a suitor in a Jane Austen novel.

“What if I introduce myself to your mom and promise to have you home at a certain time?” I said. “Whatever time she wants!”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I already asked her that. I’m sorry. I really wanted to go.”

He was such a good son, which probably meant he’d make a good boyfriend and husband someday. My mother always told me that men who respected their mothers
made good marriage material. Like my dad and the way he treated both my mom and 
grandma as if they were queens. I almost told Jim, “If you really wanted to go you’d find 
a way,” but what was the poor kid going to do? He lived under his parents’ roof and 
couldn’t drive. He worked at a stable on the weekends so unless he was willing to steal a 
pony for us to ride on, there were no options. He wasn’t one to go against his parents and 
why should he? He’d have future proms to go to but this was my last chance. Maybe his 
mother thought I could easily find somebody else to go with, but I thought the fact that I 
was asking a freshman at all should have been some indication that my pickings were 
slim. It’s amazing how people we never even meet can impact a time in our lives so 
much.

I kicked my locker closed and cursed. Jim smiled, finding this reaction amusing 
and maybe a little sweet, too. I was showing my deep disappointment that this was not 
going to work out, which in turn showed how much I wanted to go with him. I hope that 
was clear to him. The bell rang for the final class of the day.

“Well, I’ve got to go,” he said. “I’m really sorry, again.”

“Yeah,” I said. He walked away. “Me, too.” Students quickly closed their 
lockers and hurried past me to their classes. It was just another day for them. The idea 
that things should go on as if nothing had happened was unbearable. When I got home 
from school I broke the news to my mother.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. She was putting away groceries. I suddenly 
panicked that she might actually try to call his mother to put in a good word for me. My 
humiliation would be complete then. But she just shook her head. She looked annoyed.
I was sorry she wouldn’t get to see her daughter do one “normal,” traditional thing before high school was over. I tried to make it happen, though. I played by the rules as best I could, but this was not my fault.

“Do you ever wish I was a different kind of daughter?” I asked.

She looked up from the grocery bags. “What do you mean?”

“Like do you ever wish I was a different person? Do you ever wish I were more popular or more outgoing or had more boyfriends? Do you ever wish I was more like you so we’d have more in common?”

“No, honey, I’ve never thought that,” she said. She sat down at the kitchen table and motioned for me to join her. I took the seat across from her. “I’ve never wished you weren’t my daughter. Why would you think that?”

“Because you’re always suggesting ways to make me look better, like telling me to wear makeup or criticizing my clothes. It’s like you can’t accept me for me. I bet you feel left out when your friends talk about all the dates their daughters go on or the shopping trips they take together.”

“Wait a minute,” she said. “I admit I don’t understand the way you dress. And I admit I think you should wear makeup more. But, as I’ve told you before, I want you to wear it for you.” I listened as she went on to say that she believed part of being a good mother was helping me be my best – and that included looking my best. Just because she helped me didn’t mean she was ashamed that I was her daughter, though. She admitted gloating to her friends about the plays I was in and how funny she thought I was. I could date as many or as few boys as I wanted. But since I was always telling her how
unimpressed I was with the boys at my school, she wasn’t surprised I didn’t date much. That’s why she had been happy I’d found somebody I’d wanted to take to the prom. All she wanted was for me to have a good time.

The conversation was like something out of a movie on the Lifetime channel, but it was necessary and perfect. She had disproved my fears of inadequacy. I decided I was going to the damn dance with or without a date. Nothing was going to stop me from experiencing this, not Jim’s mom or my own fear. I had a new dress and I really wanted to wear it. It would look good with some makeup, too.

I wanted to look my best for me.
EAT MY HEART OUT

“Kylie, is there anything you think you couldn’t tell me?” Marysia asked one night during ninth grade. We were having our usual Friday night sleepover. I considered her question as we lay in our sleeping bags in the warm furnished basement. A package of Oreos was placed between us on the floor. A single lamp on a table in the corner lit the room in a comforting glow.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“Really?”

“Kind of,” I said. I unscrewed another Oreo and licked the white icing between the two chocolate cookies. “Why?”

“Because there is something I’ve done that I don’t think I could tell anybody. I’m afraid you’d think I was, like, sick.”

“I would not!” I said, quickly sitting up. “Oh, you have to tell me now. You can’t say something like that and then just leave it.”

“I’ve never told anybody,” Marysia said. “But I will if you will.”

“Okay,” I said. “Because I want you to feel like you can tell me anything. You’re my best friend and I think we should be able to be, like, totally honest with each other.”

“Oh…” Marysia said. She sat up in her sleeping bag. Black Oreo crumbs dotted the corners of her mouth and chin. She inspected her fingernails. Or maybe she pretended to so she could avoid eye contact with me. “I used to….masturbate a ton.”

I broke out into hysterical laughter.
“Why are you laughing?” she asked. There was anger in her voice.

“Because you sound so ashamed and you shouldn’t be,” I said, catching my breath. “I mean, it's totally natural.”

“I know,” Marysia said. “But I still feel…gross or something. I mean, I used to do it a lot. Even when I was really little and didn’t even know what sex was.”

“So what?” I said. “It feels…good. I think you have too much catholic guilt going on in your head.”

“Yeah, that definitely doesn’t help,” she said. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “God, I’m so glad you don’t think I’m some kind of, like, sex freak. That’s my most embarrassing secret.”

“It’s totally no big deal.”

Marysia took an Oreo from the package and bit into it. “So, what’s your secret?”

It was my turn to take a deep breath. I focused on the half-eaten Oreo in my hand. I couldn’t look at her. I worried that what I had to reveal would confirm there was something wrong with me. That there was something about me that made some people think it was okay to treat me like I didn’t matter. Maybe it would make Marysia change her mind about being friends with me. “In seventh grade choir I got picked on really badly. Amber Noftsinger and Alisha Whaby were sitting in back of me. They kicked my seat and put trash in my hair and sprayed this gross hairspray in it. A lot of people saw it, but I’ve never told anybody about it out loud except my mom. I was just too embarrassed.”
“Awe, I’m sorry,” Marysia said, reaching for my hand. I let her take it, but I still couldn’t look at her. “You shouldn’t feel embarrassed or like there’s something wrong with you, though. People just suck. And Amber and Alisha are such trash! I heard Amber gave her boyfriend a blowjob on the back of the bus.”

"Ew, she would," I said. I didn’t yet know that having sex didn’t mean you were bad. “I’m really glad we shared this stuff,” I said. The relief that Marysia gave me was probably the same way I made her feel when I assured her she wasn’t a sex freak. I liked knowing we could actually make each other feel better. That we weren’t just friends to get something out of each other. I was certain we were the only girls at school who had this kind of supportive friendship.

Marysia lay down and propped herself up on her elbow. “You know what Matt Vickery asked me the other day?” She looked the way she did when she was about to tell me a joke. Her right eyebrow was raised. She grinned.

"What did he ask?"

"If you and I were lesbians."

"What?! Why would he think that?"

"Oh,” she said, brushing crumbs from her chin. “He said he saw us walking with, like, our arms around each other's shoulders through the hall one day and he wondered why girls would do that unless they were lesbians."

"That's clever," I said, rolling my eyes. "Girls couldn't want to, like, be affectionate because they're best friends and have stayed that way for more than like a week without betraying each other.”
"Yeah," she said. "Matt's an idiot."

I heard shouting coming from above in Marysia’s parents’ bedroom. A man’s angry voice was yelling. Then a woman screamed back.

“Ugh,” Marysia groaned. “Let’s go outside. I hate it when my parents fight.”

“It’s getting worse?”

“Yes, my dad’s been drinking,” Marysia said. She walked over to the closet and took out two jackets. She handed one to me. “And my mom’s being a real bitch. Telling me I'm not pretty and I need to lose weight if I'm ever going to get a boyfriend. And they told me they'll only pay for college if I go pre-med. I swear they are, like, the saddest people.”

We put on the jackets to protect ourselves against the fall chill. “Let’s bring the cookies,” Marysia said. I grabbed them. Then I put my arm around my friend’s shoulders and squeezed as we snuck out the front door into the night.

***

It was four days after Christmas 2010 when I took the subway steps two at a time up to the cold, slick Boston streets. I always hurried when I knew I’d soon see Marysia, my best friend of seventeen years. She had told me to meet her and her fiancée, Tom, at The Cactus Club on Boylston Street. Unlike previous years, Marysia had not come back to Michigan to spend Christmas with her family. She had wanted to spend it with Tom and his own family – people who were nice to her. Her parents had forbidden Marysia to see Tom when she began dating him six years earlier. Despite the fact that he was a handsome thirty-one year old doctor and Marysia was twenty-four when they met, her
parents had dismissed him as too old for her. And at 5’5’’ they insisted he was too short. Instead of dumping Tom, though, Marysia decided it was time to distance herself from her overbearing parents. “The two of them trying to decide who I date is just another way for them to control my life,” she said. Since moving to Pittsburgh with Tom for her medical residency the previous year, she only saw her parents at Christmas if she chose to go home. She and Tom had decided to come to Boston for New Year’s weekend because they had been invited by Marysia’s friend, Melanie, to stay at her farmhouse north of Boston for a night. Marysia had called and asked if I would also be in town.

“Well, my return flight isn’t until a couple days after,” I’d said, checking the modest amount of money in my online bank account. “But…it’d be worth the fee to see you. I’d have more fun back in Boston with you than in Michigan with my parents.” The travel modification ended up costing 250 dollars.

When I arrived at the Cactus Club I scanned the many tables in the large dining room. The restaurant was bright and warm with smells of salsa and black beans wafting invitingly through the air. I had come here before with friends and was looking forward to enjoying a meal with one of my oldest. My eyes finally rested on the back of a familiar head of shoulder-length dirty blonde hair. A short, good-looking guy with spiky grayish brown hair was sitting next to her in the booth. They looked down at their menus intently.

“Hi,” I said, approaching them. I couldn’t stop smiling.

“Hey!” Marysia said. She stood up and threw her arms around me. “It’s so good to see you!”
“You, too,” I said, squeezing back.

***

We met in seventh grade gym class when my family moved from one school system with no money to one with more than enough in Michigan. I wasn’t used to so many classmates wearing designer labels or having to buy uniforms for gym class. My friendship with Marysia was solidified when we agreed that the popular girls were a bunch of bitches who took volleyball way too seriously.

“I hate Sarah Marks and her little group of friends,” Marysia said. We were changing out of our gym uniforms in the locker room after class. “They’re such snobs. And so fake.”

“I know,” I said, glancing over at their group of tall skinny blondes and brunettes. They were laughing about something. Or somebody. Marysia and I were both short and curvy. We found it extremely inconvenient that no matter how many sit-ups we did our bellies seemed destined to stay soft and round. Her dirty blonde hair contrasted with my reddish auburn locks. But we both wore it long.

I was relieved to not be the only girl who thought it was okay not to like the cool kids. Everybody else seemed to kiss Sarah’s ass, even if they didn’t really like her. Marysia and I knew we wouldn’t be accepted by Sarah even if we did suck up to her. The adolescent hate we felt for these girls was a way for us to fight back against the reality of their rejection. We were united in hate, but it was nice to be united in something. After weeks of girl-bashing in gym class, I finally got up enough courage to ask Marysia if she’d like to come over to my house after school. On the bus ride home she told me she
was originally from Poland, which made her even more fascinating to me. She spoke Polish fluently and served as an interpreter for her parents when they needed her. As a naturally introverted girl, I had trouble communicating in one language, let alone two. That afternoon, in between mouthfuls of chocolate peanut butter ice cream, she told me of how she and her parents moved to the United States when she was four.

“When we got here my parents thought I’d fit in better if I went by ‘Mary’ instead of Marysia,” she said.

“Really?” I asked. I got up from the couch to help myself to seconds of the ice cream. “That’s such an old lady name, though. I’m glad you changed it back to ‘Marysia.’ You want some more ice cream?”

“Yeah,” she said. She licked chocolate from the corners of her mouth. “I shouldn’t since I’m on a diet but what my mom doesn’t know won’t kill her.”

“Your mom has you on a diet?” I asked. I looked her up and down and raised an eyebrow. She had a belly but she certainly wasn’t fat. It reminded me of my own round stomach. “You don’t need to be on a diet.”

“Tell that to my mom,” she said.

“My mom watches what I eat, too,” I said. I defiantly began scooping more ice cream into our bowls. “Actually, I can only sneak seconds of this because she’s still at work.”

As we ate more, Marysia revealed that her mother sometimes bluntly called her fat. I told her that my mom wouldn’t let me go to a skating party in fifth grade because I’d snuck too many cookies. This didn’t seem equal to what her mother did, but Marysia
didn’t make me feel like my experience was any less valid. With each truth we told each other, the other nodded as if saying, “I know you.”

***

“So how’s work going?” Marysia asked as The Cactus Club server brought our margaritas. We’d already ordered dinner.

“Ugh, same as usual,” I said, sipping my drink. “Sucky.”

“Still?”

“It’s another administrative gofer job. It just sounds better this time because it’s at an Ivy League school. Actually, I’ve been thinking of going back to school—”

“Oh my God,” Marysia said. She was eyeing something from across the room.

“Look at how good that salad looks! I kind of want to change my order now...”

“Go ahead if that’s what you want, honey,” Tom said. He rubbed her back.

“I feel bad,” Marysia said. She bit her lip. “But I really want that salad.”

Tom and Marysia caught our server’s attention and asked to switch the order. The kitchen had already started preparing her burrito, but the patient server said she would tell them to change it. I was reminded of the previous year when Tom and Marysia had also been in town for New Year’s. The three of us had been invited for dinner at the apartment of Marysia’s friend, Alison. She had requested that Marysia, Tom, and I bring some wine or makings for a salad. She’d also asked that we arrive promptly at 7PM.

We went to the grocery store twenty minutes before we had to be at Alison’s place. It shouldn’t have taken longer than ten minutes to grab the necessary items, but Marysia and Tom spent half an hour going back and forth over what kind of salad they wanted to
make. Should they add Portobello mushrooms or pine nuts? Was red wine vinaigrette or balsamic the more fitting dressing? Alison did not hide her frustration when we finally got to her apartment. I didn’t blame her.

“I know it’s annoying when I do that,” Marysia said sheepishly after the server walked away.

“It’s okay, honey,” Tom said, smiling.

“So, how’s work going for you?” I asked, changing the subject. “I could never be an ER doctor. I get stressed when the damn copy machine at my office jams.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely stressful,” Marysia agreed. “But at least it’s not boring.”

“I bet,” I said. How ironic it was that her parents weren’t able to see the respectable doctor they’d always wanted her to be. “Well, I hope you’re able to just relax and have fun while you’re here. This New Year’s can’t be any worse than last year.”

Marysia and Tom looked at me puzzled.

“Remember Jeremy?” I asked.

They both said, “Oh, yeah.” Marysia muttered, “What a jerk.”

My ex-boyfriend, Jeremy, had chosen to go out with friends the previous New Year’s Eve instead of spending it with me. “He’d better not change his mind and text you for a last minute booty call around midnight,” Marysia had said. I assured her he wouldn’t. Twenty minutes before midnight, though, that was exactly what he did. I was so preoccupied with believing he was a certain kind of person that I paid no attention to who he really was.

“Thank God there won’t be any boys to mess up this New Year’s for me,” I said.
“Yes!” Marysia said, clinking my glass with hers. Tom chuckled.

“So, did you ask Melanie if it’s okay for me to tag along with you to the farmhouse tomorrow night?” I asked.

“Umm,” Marysia said, swallowing. “Actually, I asked her and she told me there isn’t enough room in the house for more than Tom and me.”

“What?” I said, genuinely surprised. I wasn’t close with Melanie, but we’d always gotten along.

“I think she’s being pretty ridiculous about the space issue,” Tom said. “Especially since she's the only one living there.”

“Yeah,” Marysia said. “But Melanie has always been a little…uptight about planning and stuff. I’m sorry, Kylie.”

“That’s really weird,” I said. Hearing Marysia call me by the nickname she’d given me in high school only deepened my disappointment.

“I know it’s weird but I don’t really think it’s my place to argue with her,” Marysia said. “I mean, it’s her house.”

“True,” I said. I was a little pissed that she was still going. I took a long drink from my margarita.

“Don’t worry,” Marysia said. She reached out and put her hand on my arm. "We’ll hang out all day on New Year’s Eve. Melanie will be at dinner with all of us that night, but Saturday during the day will be just us. Okay?”
“Okay,” I said. "You two could come see my neighborhood then. You could finally see my place and I'd love to take you for a tour of Jamaica Plain. It’s kind of a hipster/blue collar area. It has some great restaurants where we could eat.”

"That would be awesome!" Marysia said. "I've wanted to see your place since you moved here. How long have you been here again?"

"Almost three years," I said.

“Well," Tom said. "To show our appreciation for you coming out to dinner with us tonight, it’s on us."

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” I protested.

“No, we insist,” Marysia said.

***

I awoke on Saturday morning, New Year’s Eve day, and checked the alarm clock beside my bed on the floor. 11:50 AM. Marysia said she’d call in the morning. I began to feel paranoid, wondering if she might not. Then my cell phone vibrated from its place next to the alarm clock. There was a new text message from Marysia:

Hey! Just leaving now. Troy and I are meeting his old roommate for lunch. Talk later!

The message stared back at me indifferently. I thought of how I had changed my flight to spend time with her. How she had told me we would hang out all day today. Did she actually forget she’d said that? Or was it one of those things people said but didn’t really mean. What was going on? And why didn’t I feel like I could call her out on this if we were best friends who could tell each other anything?

***
“Hey, Marysia,” I said. It was junior year of college and I had just called Marysia on the phone for one of our epic chats. I was supposed to call her the night before but I had forgotten. It just never entered my mind even though I had told her in my last email that I would call last night. This bothered me and I wondered if it would bother Marysia.

“Hey, Kylie,” she said. She sounded fine. She also sounded like she was chewing on something.

“Sorry I didn’t call last night,” I said.

“That’s okay,” she said. “I passed out early. I had a huge biochem exam yesterday and I was exhausted.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, good.” I knew I would have been at least a little annoyed if she had been the one not to call me. But college was confirming that I was a little more sensitive about the strength of our friendship than Marysia. I had found myself annoyed when she had invited her new college friends to hang out with us the majority of the first time I had visited her freshman year. I thought she missed our one-on-one time as much as I did. I was really annoyed during a visit sophomore year when I ended up sleeping on the couch in the living room of this guy, Dave’s, apartment, while she hooked up with him in his bedroom.

I heard some more chomping sounds on the phone.

“Are you eating something?” I asked.

“Yeah, carrot sticks,” Marysia said. “I’m on a diet.”

***
I was drying my hair in my room when I received another text from Marysia around 4pm:

*Lunch ran late. Let’s push dinner reservation back to 7:30. We're stuffed!*

At this point I didn't care about sharing a meal at the bougie restaurant they’d picked near their hotel. It would take an hour to get there on the subway and I didn’t want to face the happy drunken New Year’s Eve crowds that would no doubt fill the train on the way back. I did not text her back – I called.

"Hey," Marysia answered. "We're looking at ice sculptures. They're so pretty."

"Cool," I said, sitting on my bed. "Um, would you be really disappointed if I didn't come to dinner tonight? I just don't want to deal with the trains and the crowds. Some friends are throwing some parties around here that I'd like to go to. You could all come out here later?"

"That's okay. I think we're just going to stay near our hotel. We're tired."

In my head I saw myself asking Marysia why she had even asked me to come back early to Boston. But I didn’t want to make a big deal. I didn’t want to ruin her New Year’s the way she had ruined mine. I just said, "Okay, well…have a good night."

"Happy New Year, Kylie!"

***

The next morning, New Year's Day, I lay awake in my bed thinking of how my ex-boyfriend had let me down at the same time the previous year. His insensitivity had hurt, but at least Marysia had been there to comfort me. She’d even called Jeremy out for the thoughtless person he really was. Now Marysia was the one being thoughtless,
although not for the first time. It seemed the older I got, people just kept disappointing each other. Friends and lovers. I rubbed my temples as shards of sunlight shined through the slits in my cheap, dusty blinds. Getting up for a drink of water, my phone vibrated. It was Marysia texting if I wanted to meet her and Tom for brunch before their flight. I considered telling her I wasn’t interested. But this would have been a lie. She had disappointed me, but that didn’t mean I didn’t still like being with her. And in all fairness, she had no idea how upset I was because I didn’t tell her. Maybe I could bring it up casually to her during brunch. After all, she was reaching out by inviting me to eat with them. I texted back and asked where we should meet.

***

"Sorry for the location change," Marysia said when I arrived at the restaurant on Newberry Street. I rarely hung out in this area of Boston. It was too pricey.

"We originally decided on sushi," Marysia continued. “But then Tom got a craving for tapas."

How diverse your palettes are, I thought. I took off my coat and sat down. Tom handed me a menu. I perused the appetizer list, wondering how to bring up yesterday’s issue.

“What did you do last night, Kylie?” Marysia asked. She scanned her menu.

“Went to some parties in my neighborhood,” I said. This seemed like a good opportunity to breach the subject. But Tom spoke first.

“Hey, I really like your neighborhood, Kyle," he said.

"You do?" I put down my menu.
"Yeah," he said. He sounded really excited. “You're in Jamaica Plain, right?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, we went there yesterday to meet my old roommate for lunch. He lives there."

I comprehended what he said, but couldn’t believe the words he had just spoken. "You came to my neighborhood to have lunch with your old roommate?” I could hear my heart pounding in my ears.

"Yeah," he said, smiling. "We ate at this really good Indian restaurant. Bukhara," I said, numbly.

"Bukhara," I said, numbly. "Yeah!" Tom said. "That's it. It was really good. Wasn't it, Marysia?"

"Yeah, it was great," she said. She just read her menu.

"And then we walked around the neighborhood a little bit," Tom said. “We walked around this lake down the street from Bukhara.”

"It's not a lake,” I corrected. “It's a pond, Jamaica Pond.”

"Yeah, it was really pretty," Tom said. "You have a really cool neighborhood."

"Yeah," Marysia said. Her eyes never left her menu. "It was nice."

"Glad you finally got to see it," I said, staring at Marysia. Were they both really this clueless? Thoughtless? A server came up and asked if we were ready.

"Oh," Marysia said, biting her lip. "These decisions are so hard."

***
I walked the couple back to their hotel where they would take a cab to the airport. I smiled and acted like nothing was wrong, but inside I was screaming at them. Maybe there wasn't really anything wrong, though. Was I being too dramatic? Had what Marysia done been so bad? They had only visited my neighborhood. I’ve always been a little too sensitive.

But Marysia had said we would all hang out yesterday. After that bitch Melanie had excluded me. I had told them I wanted to show them my neighborhood. Where was the Marysia I had wanted to be friends with seventeen years ago? Did she even exist anymore? Or had I been in denial about how one-sided this friendship had been for a while? Perhaps I’d misjudged who she was the same way I’d misjudged Jeremy. She wasn’t the person I used to know. Maybe I was naïve to think she would always be something like the girl I met in seventh grade. These are the things I thought about as I hugged my old friend goodbye. As she tried to end the hug but I wouldn't let go. As the tears began forming in my eyes. Was I crying because I was disappointed in Marysia or because I would miss her? I didn't know anymore.

"Why’s she crying?" Tom asked.

"Because we don't get to see each other very often," Marysia said. She sounded confident in the reason as she cradled my head.

***

I open an envelope with Marysia’s return address on it that came with a wedding announcement for her and Tom. Sliding a piece of paper from the envelope, I see that
it’s a letter written in my sloppy, child-like handwriting. Passages stand out as I read through:

First of all, I know I see you every day at school and we talk on the phone but I just wanted to write you a letter...Second of all, I’m sorry things have been kind of shitty at home. If your parents fight a lot maybe you should talk to them about it, and if you ever need a friend to talk to about anything you know my #. I’ll always be here for you Marysia, no matter what happens...Well, it’s getting late and I have to go to bed. See ya in school tomorrow!

My eyes skim another letter, this one type-written from sophomore year of college:

…it kinda scares me when I think about you two possibly getting married without...I don’t know...ever being in any other relationship. Maybe you guys should do what the old saying says, “If you love somebody set them free. If they return it was meant to be.”... You are a very strong, beautiful, and independent person. You have a lot of strength and I know you’ll do fine with or without Chris...

A small hand-written note is the last paper I remove from the envelope:

Hey Kylie!

I was going through a box of old letters/notes & found these gems. One of them you wrote in 1996. I had a good laugh, thought you’d enjoy them, too. Hope all is well.

Lots of love,

Marysia
I could accept her for who she is now and know that she too appreciates the bond we shared. Or I could remain bitter and ignore her. I decide to compromise. I will write her and give her my congratulations. I hope the food will be a delicious feast. I hope she and Tom will be very happy together.

But I won’t attend the wedding. Fiscally and emotionally, I can’t afford it.
I’d been living back at my parents’ place for a week when I finally got the phone call I’d been waiting for. Like many college students on summer break, I was trying to find a job. Not just any summer job. The summer job as far as I was concerned. A seasonal position with the city parks department would involve working outside and have nothing to do with retail, food preparation, office supplies, or unbecoming uniforms. Since my dad had a contact in the parks department who said he would put in a good word for me, I returned to my hometown thinking the job was as good as mine. As a week went by with no further news, though, it appeared I was being punished for playing the nepotism card. Then my dad made the aforementioned call to me from his office.

“Alright,” he began. “I got you a great job.” I was immediately suspicious since he sounded a lot like he did when making sales calls.

“It’s not in the parks department,” I said, glumly.

“Yes, it is,” he replied. “It just happens to be a different kind of park. It’s a cemetery called Woodlawn. You’ll love it.”

Being told you were going to spend the summer working in a cemetery might alarm some people, but I was intrigued. I had always liked cemeteries, but I didn’t exactly know why. It had something to do with the fact that they offered solace, but I also liked the idea of there being dead bodies underground. This made cemeteries weird places to me, but I liked weird places because of their weirdness. I liked the idea of life working with death. It leant an air of seriousness to a job that I had never known before. If nothing else, it sounded more interesting than spending sunny summer days in a
I was sitting in a cubicle under harsh fluorescent lighting filing papers. I wanted to do something different. I didn’t want to be bored.

“Would I be like a grave digger?” I asked. I kind of hoped the answer was yes.

“Of course not,” Dad said. “I mean, I don’t know exactly what you’ll be doing, but I doubt you’re qualified to dig graves. It’ll be pretty and quite, though. I think you’ll like it.”

Woodlawn Cemetery was huge, stretching for miles along both sides of a busy road near a baseball field where my dad used to take my brother and me to play catch. Benches and mausoleums made of stone and marble were spread throughout the hilly grounds. Headstones and markers lined up in neat rows along leafy maples and tall pines, which offered shade to the miles of grass. Before leaving for my first day of work, my mom reminded me that my great-grandparents were buried in Woodlawn. She suggested that I visit them on my break if I had time, as if they were living in a retirement community on the property instead of dead. Driving along the concrete roads in the cemetery, it became clear how easily one could get lost or have difficulty finding a particular grave in this sprawling place without a map. The family reunion with my great-grandparents’ graves would have to be postponed. I had been told to report to the maintenance office at the top of the hill at 7a.m. and to wear clothes I wouldn’t mind getting dirty. As part of the seasonal crew, I would be working with a team that took care of the lawns. This wasn’t exactly grave digging, but I welcomed the opportunity for some physical work outside after an intensive academic school year. I didn’t want to have to think too much.
I parked my car in front of the maintenance building and walked through its front door where I was greeted by the curious faces of four seated men. They all eyed me. I stood awkwardly near the door, too shy to speak.

“Are you, Kyle?” one of them asked. He was a short, stocky man with a cigar held between his big yellow teeth. A blue baseball cap covered his short reddish hair and he wore a tan T-shirt and dark green shorts. His arms were crossed, resting over his round belly. I acknowledged that I was, indeed, Kyle. He removed the cigar from his mouth.

“Welcome to the job,” he said, casually. “I’m Grant. I manage the crew.” I was surprised Grant didn’t get up to introduce himself or shake my hand. In my limited work experience, all my other bosses had. All my other bosses had interviewed me, too. “This is the crew,” he said, nodding at the others. I hadn’t considered the prospect of there not being other women working at this job. I had never worked with all men before.

One of them, seated in a corner, was a tall redhead who looked to be in his early-mid twenties. A black baseball cap was turned backwards on his head. He wore thick black glasses and had large black studs in each ear. A black hooded sweatshirt covered his black T-shirt and, not surprisingly, he was wearing black jeans and black boots. He was actually kind of cute except all the black made his fair skin look pasty and pale. He looked up from his video game magazine and grunted that his name was Jeff.

Sitting next to him was another man in black with slightly less pale skin. He even had rosiness to his cheeks. He too wore a black baseball cap over his short brown hair, except his cap wasn’t backwards. His large blue eyes were pretty, looking like two small
pools of ocean water. He was kind of chubby and appeared to be somewhere in his twenties. He was dressed almost identically to Jeff, but he also wore a black spiked dog collar around his neck. When he said his name was Jason, he sounded like he had just sucked on a helium balloon.

Across from them was a black man who looked around forty. He wore a bright orange jumpsuit, making him stand out compared to the “prince of darkness” clothing worn by Jeff and Jason. A blue bandana covered the man’s head and he stroked his goatee while smoking a cigarette. He was tall and lean, and waved a hello at me. He opened his mouth to say his name was Daniel, revealing a missing front left tooth. He started humming a tune that sounded like Lola by The Kinks.

I grabbed a chair near the door. They all seemed to be waiting for something, probably for work to begin. I just looked at the floor, wishing I’d brought a book or something. What did they think about working with a woman or had a woman ever worked with them before? I was a little intimidated by the idea of working with all men - especially the one called Daniel. His orange jumpsuit reminded me of the prison uniforms I’d seen convicts wear on the news. Men had always made me feel uncomfortable for some reason. Not that I didn’t like men, I just didn’t feel like I could relax around them. This was a weird situation for me. It was far weirder than the idea of working in a cemetery had ever been. The thought of getting up and leaving was tempting, but I knew I had to give this a chance. At least for the first day.

“Okay,” Grant said, standing up. He stubbed out his cigar in a nearby ashtray. “Time to get to work.”
I followed them all through a door that led out to a large garage with John Deere riding mowers and other complicated-looking equipment. Grant said the weeds needed cutting in sections seven, eight, and nine. He told us to grab the gas-fueled cutters lined up against the wall. I watched the rest of them pick up the equipment like it was business as usual. When I picked up the contraption it was so heavy I almost dropped it. The thing was metal and almost as tall as me. For some guidance on exactly what I was supposed to be doing, I looked over at how the others were holding theirs and preparing them. Grant walked over to me.

“You ever cut weeds before?” he asked.

“Uh, no,” I said, shaking my head.

Grant nodded as if he wasn’t very surprised. He demonstrated with his own cutter how to hold it correctly and how to tie the orange plastic wire around the bottom so it would be an effective blade when turning on the engine. I nodded and smiled as if this was all making sense to me, but when he left my side I inevitably couldn’t get the little orange wire to tie correctly. So much for not wanting to think too much on this job. I knew I was not going to master the wire tying technique on my own. To avoid bothering Grant, I asked Jeff, who seemed the closest to me in age and the least intimidating, if he could show me slowly how to set up the orange wire. He chuckled at the poor job I’d done so far, but at least he tied the wire for me. Hopefully I wouldn’t need to know how to do it myself again anytime soon.

When we finished filling up our cutters’ gas tanks, Grant instructed us to walk over to section seven and begin there since it wasn’t that far. Everybody picked up their
cutters and began carrying them. Except me. When I picked it up I had to bend back
down to keep from dropping it. This thing had already been heavy, but with a tank of gas
added it felt like a ton. I didn’t know how I was going to be able to carry it around for
hours at a time. They all looked back at me.

“You alright?” Grant asked.

“Yep,” I said, pretending to tie my shoe. “I’ll be right there.” I wasn’t going to
allow the weed wacker to make me look like a fool. I took several deep breaths and
heaved it up. The cutter’s shoulder strap helped me carry the weight. When I joined the
others at section seven I observed what went into cutting weeds. They just held the
spinning orange wire blade over the undesirable plants and the force of the blade made
the weeds jump up and away from their inconvenient locations between the headstones.
When I tried it the weeds jumped up, but not away in the opposite direction. They
jumped up and hit me hard in the shins. It stung so much I thought I might cry - like a
girl. I tried to cut in a way that would keep the weeds from hurting me, but every time
they catapulted at my shins as if I had donned bulls-eye targets on each of them. I didn’t
see anything different in the way I was cutting compared to the guys. After several
attempts to avoid it, though, I concluded that I couldn’t cut weeds without the little shits
hurting me. It wasn’t meant to be. I walked over to Grant and tapped his shoulder.

“Uh, I don’t know how to do this,” I yelled amidst the noise of the other cutters. I
set the cutter down on the grass.

“What?” he asked, turning off his cutter.
“I’m sorry,” I told Grant, crossing my arms and trying to hide my intimidation. “But that cutter is too heavy for me to carry and…the weeds won’t stop hitting my shins.”

He looked down at me for what seemed like years. This was so humiliating. Would I be fired because I couldn’t wack weeds properly? The rest of the crew stopped cutting and looked over at us. They whispered to each other and laughed, nodding their heads in my direction. It felt like my first day of kindergarten when I saw Alison Smith and Jessica McGillis pointing at me and whispering in each other’s ears. I had hid my face in my tiny hands when that happened. I kind of felt like doing it again now.

“Alright,” Grant told me. “You can plant flowers.”

“What?” I said.

“Whenever we cut weeds you can plant flowers,” he said, looking back at the crew. “None of us want to do that. So if this is a job you don’t want to do, you can take one we don’t want. You can go down to the main office and pick some up. They’ll tell you where they want them planted.”

Grant returned to the crew and they resumed their cutting. I decided to leave my weed cutter with them as I made the trek to the front office. They probably didn’t want to plant flowers because they considered it too “girly.” I would have liked to tell Grant that despite my female status, I’d never planted flowers and didn’t know the first thing about doing it. But then I might look completely useless, and my shins and I were honestly grateful to not be doing the previous task. Hopefully the main office people would offer some planting advice. I wondered if the parks department had ever
considered giving some sort of mechanical aptitude test for people interested in doing seasonal work. Or was I their first special case? I was assuming that I was maybe the most academically educated person on that crew, but being able to analyze *The Canterbury Tales* didn’t mean much when you couldn’t master the art of weed wacking. I was out of my league.

After the morning’s humiliation and an awkward lunch break where I spent the hour eating in my car, Grant informed us that we were going to cut the grass for the rest of the day. He assigned Daniel in the faux prison suit to work with me.

“Daniel’s been here a long time,” Grant said. “He can answer any questions you have and help you get the hang of mowing. Have you ever mowed a lawn before?”

“No,” I said, averting my eyes.

“Uh-huh,” Grant said, nodding to himself.

The mowers were at least the riding kind so I would have no problems with carrying anything or getting tired. I was actually in decent shape and could walk for long distances – just not when carrying heavy machinery. Mowing itself didn’t sound too difficult seeing as it was just a matter of cutting in straight, even lines. But then when headstones on hills were thrown into the mix it sounded more precarious. I had an unsettling image of losing my balance while riding the mower along a hillside and seeing not only myself falling, but the mower falling on me and chopping me into bits.

“Don’t worry,” Daniel said. We were waiting in line to fill our mowers’ gas tanks. “Nobody’s been killed on the job…that I’ve heard of.” He flashed a wide grin
showing his missing front tooth and gave a chuckle that soon became a hacking smoker’s cough. He spat the bile on the ground.

Thankfully, Grant assigned us a flat section to mow. Daniel did his best to teach me precision in cutting the grass in straight lines. “Park behind me on the edge of the grass and watch me cut for a few rounds,” he said. I watched as he drove the mower in crisp, parallel lines, leaving neat rows of fresh cut grass behind him. This in-depth mowing tutorial seemed a little superfluous to me. I may not have cut grass before, but I didn’t think I needed a ten minute demonstration. Maybe Daniel didn’t have many chances to show off his skills, though. Not surprisingly, I turned out to be as good a lawn mower as I was a weed cutter.

“No, no, no,” Daniel said, stopping me several times mid-cut.

“What?” I asked.

“Look at how crooked your lines are behind you,” he said, pointing at the paths of green chaos I’d created. Was there anything I would do right? I felt like that brainy high school character in The Breakfast Club who takes shop class because he thinks it will be easy, but flunks because he can’t make a lamp. “You want your lines to be straight,” Daniel repeated. He made slicing motions through the air with his hands, as if I didn’t understand the concept of straightness.

Trying to mow in between the graves made it even more complicated. Some were laid out horizontally into the ground like large bricks, while the vertical headstones jutted out from the ground creating unequal amounts of space to cut between each grave. The riding mower was like a mini-car that I was constantly trying to parallel park and turn
around. Unfortunately, the lawn mowing lesson ended with some graves having a few more marks on them courtesy of me accidentally bumping or cutting them.

After a couple hours of frustrated mowing, Daniel drove over to me and made a sign with his hands as if he were breaking an imaginary stick. I took this to mean it was time for a break, but instead of driving back to the main office he switched off his engine. I did the same.

“It’s only a fifteen minute break,” he said, getting out a pack of cigarettes from his orange pocket. “Might as well just hang here since we got more to cut anyway.” I nodded in agreement, although I felt uncomfortable about spending fifteen minutes sitting in a solitary, wooded area of a cemetery with a man I hardly knew.

“Man,” he said, taking a long pull on his cigarette. “My woman be driving me crazy.” I was not expecting to hear something so personal from him, like we were friends.

“Really,” I said. I tried to make myself more comfortable in my mower’s seat. “How come?”

“She spends my money and her kid’s kid is always running around through my house making a mess.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Have you ever told her how you feel?” I had gone from a challenged seasonal cemetery worker to a therapist.

“I’ve tried,” he said. “But she don’t listen.”

“Why don’ you just break up with her then?” I asked. “From the little you’ve told me, she sounds like a pain.”
“Nah,” he said. “I can’t do that.”

Having never dated anybody seriously I didn’t understand why people would put up with anything less than stellar in a relationship if they weren’t happy. I hadn’t yet gotten to a stage of loving somebody despite their faults.

“Why do you wear the orange jumpsuit?” I asked, changing the subject.

“I don’t want to get my clothes dirty,” he said. “Why wash them every day when I can just wash this?”

“Ah,” I said. “How long have you worked for the cemetery?”

“This is my seventh summer,” he said. Holy shit. He must have some stories to tell.

“Do you ever have anything to do with the actual burials?” I asked.

“I’ve helped with a couple,” he said. “Mostly just digging the graves.”

“So you’ve never worked with or…seen the bodies they bring.”

“No, the coffins are always closed by the time we get them.”

“Do you have a lot of funerals here or do they take place before?”

“Some families have them here, some at church. Depends what the families want.”

I thought about asking if he’d ever found it creepy to work in a cemetery, but this question didn’t seem necessary. After seven summers, I figured this was just a job for him. It was only my first day and the weirdness I’d been excited for that morning about working in a cemetery seemed far away from the practical matters of mowing in straight lines and cutting weeds.
Despite the inauspicious start to my first day, I gradually improved on the tasks assigned and, more importantly, the crew and I actually warmed up to each other. Or maybe we just got used to each other. Either way, I was just glad to stop feeling like an outsider around the third week. I even told Grant as much one day during break.

“I’m sorry if you felt awkward, but I’d never managed a woman seasonal worker here before,” he said, the usual cigar between his lips. “We didn’t know what to make of you because we didn’t get why you wanted to work here. Especially if you’d never worked with any of the equipment. I definitely had doubts about whether you’d last one week. Mostly cause I figured you’d get sick of it and quit. Thought you’d find a job with people your own age. Ya know, we’d also been visited by Human Resources before you started. They wanted to remind us that we needed to be more sensitive about what we said with a woman present. As if we sit here talking about porn and boobs all day. And they said we shouldn’t curse in front of you. You don’t mind cursing though, right?”

“I don’t give a shit,” I said. “Cursing has been a part of my daily vocabulary for a while now.”

“Yeah,” Grant said, puffing on his cigar. “It became clear to me pretty quickly you weren’t the kind of college kid who’d work at the mall.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Why do you say that, though? You think retail people don’t swear?”
“Probably not as much as we get to since we don’t work with as many customers as them,” he said. “But you just don’t seem like the type of girl you see at the mall. You’re not very…bubbly.”

The guys and I laughed at this astute assessment.

“You get so frustrated sometimes,” Jason added, playing with the dog collar around his neck. “I can’t imagine you dealing with difficult customers or showing them blouses in their size.”

“Well, you’re right,” I said. “I’ve worked in retail and it wasn’t for me. Unfortunately, a lot of people don’t have a choice in where they work. They just need a job, right?” I wondered how many of these guys chose this job or were there because it was what was available.

“A lot of kids may not dream of working in a cemetery,” Jason said, as if I had asked my question aloud. “But I’m an assistant manager here at twenty-seven years old and it suits me fine. I’ve got a steady paycheck, I own my own home, and I don’t have to put up with people’s shit. How many guys my age can say that?” I couldn’t see Jason placating mall customers, either.

I developed a bit of a crush on Jeff, the tall redhead dressed in black. We rarely worked together, but on the occasions we did or hung out during breaks, we always had stuff to talk about. Like me, his friends had dubbed him a “Movie Encyclopedia” and we spent many lunch breaks quoting films and discussing our favorites. He always offered to mow the more difficult sections for me and his laid back nature made him easy to be around.
One day close to the end of the shift, I was picking up trash alone on the other side of the cemetery from the maintenance office. Jeff drove up in the dump cart we used for picking up trash and dumping dirt into graves after burials. He said he’d been told to pick me up on his way back to the office, but when I sat next to him in the cart he said he felt like taking the long way back and asked if I felt like going for a ride. When I agreed he told me to hang on and gunned it into the woods. He found a trail to drive on and we sped up and down the dirt road past tall trees and brush. My stomach rose and dropped with each hill we drove over and I couldn’t believe I was actually getting paid on this crazy rollercoaster of a ride with a guy I actually found attractive. There was a point where it looked like we were stuck in mud and I thought of how this would be the point we would make out if we were in a movie, but Jeff was able to drive the wagon out of the muck and back to the office. I thought this little joyride was perhaps his way of trying to tell me something, but when his tattooed, lip-pierced girlfriend showed up for lunch break the next day it appeared that any “signs” from Jeff had been in my head. Her name was Liz and she was apparently a “Movie Encyclopedia,” too. When the lunch conversation turned toward Cate Blanchett, I piped up that I loved her in a movie that I thought few other people had seen called *Charlotte Gray*.

“We love that movie,” Liz said, smiling at Jeff. It was probably better not to get involved with somebody from the “office” anyway.

Daniel never stopped complaining about how annoying his woman was, which made him equally annoying to listen to sometimes. I couldn’t stand it when my friends complained about the same problems they had with their significant others over and over,
and Daniel’s dilemma did nothing but deepen this abhorrence. It was like he couldn’t imagine not living with her, though. After a particularly long diatribe he gave during break, I finally told him to just get rid of her.

“All she does is make you miserable,” I said. “You only ever say negative things about her. I don’t know if you’re making it worse than it really is, because I can’t imagine somebody being this bad all the time. If what you say is true, though, I think it’s time to ask her to move out.”

“What about her kids?” he asked, shaking his head.

“Well, they’re not yours,” I said. “I’m not saying you should cease all contact with them, but they’re not your responsibility. And if it is as bad as you say and you’re fighting all the time, then it doesn’t sound like a healthy environment for them. You should ask her to move out before it gets worse.” When I first met Daniel, I never thought I would be giving him relationship advice. But he had helped me a lot while I learned how to cut between those damn graves. I thought this was the least I could do. I just hoped he took my advice so things really didn’t get worse and I didn’t have to hear about his woman anymore.

One late summer afternoon, I drove my mower back to the maintenance office for the second afternoon break. The guys were already there sitting in the grass and smoking in front of the office. I sat down near them with my notebook.

“You gonna miss us when you go back to school?” Grant asked.

“Yeah,” Jason added. “You gonna tell people what it was like working on the Woodlawn Cemetery crew?”
“Nah,” Daniel said, smiling. “Soon as she gets back to school she’ll forget about us.”

“How could I forget you guys?” I said.

“Holy shit!” Jeff yelled. The rest of us looked over at him sitting under a nearby tree. “That’s the biggest worm I’ve ever seen!” He fetched a long stick, using it to pick up the worm and brought it over to us. This was the fattest, longest, and slimiest worm I’d ever seen. I wasn’t even sure it was a worm. Are there green worms? Because this one was pea green. It looked like a long, gooey piece of snot. Then Jeff found something else amazing. “Holy shit,” he said. “Look at that ant hill! What do you think would happen if I dropped the worm on the ants? Who do you think would win?” I wasn’t familiar with bugs so I couldn’t say for sure. Jeff decided to find out. We all gathered around the ant hill as Jeff slowly placed the booger worm on it. Within seconds, those ants went ape-shit on that poor worm. Its green color was quickly covered by massive amounts of tiny black legs crawling all over it. Guilt overtook me when I noticed the graves out of the corner of my eye. It was like they were the eyes of the cemetery giving us accusatory stares, saying we should know better than to kill an innocent creature here of all places, especially for entertainment. But I got caught up in the excitement, telling myself I was part of the crew. One of the guys. I cheered along with them, chanting, “Go! Go! Go!”

On my last day of work I arrived to find Daniel not in his usual seat.

“Is he coming in today?” I asked Jeff.
“Uh, he was in earlier,” Jeff said. “But the police came to arrest him for roughing up his girlfriend.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Grant said, stubbing out his cigar. “He screwed up. You’re moving on from here.”
JUST KEEP WALKING

“I am going to kill you if you don’t get in that locker!”

I stared down at the backpack I’d been wrestling with for ten minutes. I was trying to get it into a locker at the place serving as my home at the time: a hostel on 103rd and Amsterdam Avenue in Manhattan. The plan had been to stay for a month in the hostel while attempting to get an entry-level job in book publishing. Because I didn’t have family or close friends there, not to mention much money, I figured my only practical accommodation choice was the hostel at twenty dollars a day. My experience with hostels had been exciting up to that point. I’d stayed in them for a couple of nights at a time while studying abroad in Ireland. After two weeks in the Manhattan hostel, though, it was becoming very clear why people only stayed in hostels for a couple nights. It lessened the possibility of going crazy from the lack of privacy that came with sharing a stuffy, hot room with twelve other strangers who may decide to swipe your stuff.

Hostels were fun in college because they all represented potential for new adventures. My friends and I would drop our stuff on our bunks and head out to explore the new town or go for a hike. We were carefree but not reckless. We were young, healthy, and able-bodied. The Manhattan hostel stay felt like the end of my youth, a dramatic thought for a twenty-four year old. I felt old and lonely among the many young travelers there who were having the same untroubled experiences I’d had in Ireland. My future was so uncertain, though. I didn’t just wake up each morning - I was jerked awake by panic. What was I thinking selling my car for money to live on out there? If I didn’t find a job, I couldn’t go back to Michigan and get around without a car. How could I find a
publishing job in a month? Sometimes it took a month for companies to get back to applicants.

I didn’t want to go home, but I didn’t know if I could live in New York. It was so dirty and crowded and outrageously expensive. The whole terrorist threat wasn’t a major selling point, either. It didn’t help that I had my father’s hateful Midwest commentary on New York running through my head.

“Why do you want to go to New York?” he asked before I left. “I mean, it would be a very brave thing for you to do, but that city’s overpriced and full of assholes.”

“I don’t necessarily want to go, but…”

“It’s fun to visit for a couple of days,” he said. “But you couldn’t pay me to live there.”

I understood what he meant when I looked up at how high the buildings were and compared them to how small I was. I felt like a mouse in a science lab maze. Who could ever relax here? One day I saw a man slap a woman across the face on the street in broad daylight. “What are you lookin’ at bitch?!” the man said when he noticed me staring at him. I just kept walking. I didn’t try to help the woman. New York was already turning me into another hardened city person after only two weeks. It was a concrete jungle out there.

I had just returned from another hostel on the morning of my futile attempts to get my backpack in the locker. The hostel on 103rd had been full the night before. I knew this prior to getting to New York and had booked a night at another hostel accordingly on West 86th Street. I figured it wouldn’t be too difficult to move for one night, and at night
it wasn’t. The morning, however, was another story. When I walked outside of the 86th street hostel the humidity hit me like a million warm, damp sponges. I practically gagged on the thick, smoggy air. Carrying my suitcase and backpack up seventeen blocks and across a few more, I felt like any wrongs I had ever done in my life were being washed away with the sweat pouring down my body. I was there alone trying to get a job. I wasn’t using any connections I hadn’t made myself and I wasn’t blowing my money on a hotel. I thought this must count for something even though I was in a city filled with people probably doing the same thing in their own way.

When I got to the hostel on 103rd my room wasn’t ready yet, but I had to meet somebody soon and needed to keep my stuff somewhere secure. My clothes were soaked and I smelled like an old sock, but I didn’t have time to shower. My cousin, Doug, was in town visiting a friend for the weekend and he was taking me to brunch. Doug and I didn’t see each other often since he lived in Boston. I wasn’t as close with him as some of my other cousins, but I had never wanted to see a familiar face so badly. The damn locker was making me late, though. I tried easing the backpack in next to the suitcase and then I tried shoving them both in. My lack of sleep and water were making me a little delirious. I thought this bag was being disobedient like a petulant child and deserved to be yelled at. Finally, I just unzipped the bag and threw its contents into the locker. I was then able to squeeze both suitcase and backpack in and lock my nemesis away for a few hours.

I waited for Doug on the corner outside the hostel, trying to make myself look less disgusting. Thankfully, I was wearing a black V-neck shirt so the sweat wasn’t as
visible. The sweat on my head proved to be quite useful as I used it to smooth my hair back into a tight bun. I aired out my shirt and smoothed my skirt, hoping this outfit would be enough to make me presentable. I wished I had some deodorant, but it was locked away. I didn’t know where my cousin was going to take me for brunch, but I was pretty sure it would be somewhere I could never afford to eat.

At thirty-five, Doug was a successful anesthesiologist; the darling of our family. The rest of us had potential but Doug was brilliant. He taught at Harvard and worked at one of the most prestigious hospitals in Boston. I didn’t even really understand what he did in his field that made him so sought after, but he was always being asked to speak at conferences. Along with his brains, though, Doug was a huge goofball. Once when I was ten and he was twenty-one, he tried to freak me out by blowing air onto the back of my head and telling me he had just hocked a loogie into it.

“Ew,” I said. “You better not have really done that.”

“Touch your head and find out,” he said.

He used to challenge my younger brother, Nick, to arm wrestling and wouldn’t let him win. He turned into a big kid around kids. He was eager to have his own someday if he ever found a woman to whom he was willing to commit. I never saw him lose his cool, couldn’t imagine it happening. He was the embodiment of what I thought the term “Golden Boy” meant. He was the kind of guy who didn’t go to brunch with sweaty young women.

When the cab pulled up and Doug stepped out, I couldn’t believe he was just there in front of me. I walked over to him as he paid the driver. He was dressed in a white v-
neck shirt and tan trousers. At 5’10” he was the tallest guy in our family of short Italian men. His dark sunglasses hid his big brown eyes and his brown hair was cut short and spiky. As usual, he looked like an advertisement for *GQ*.

“How are you doing?” he asked putting his arm around me. He pointed to my wet hair. “Did you shower?”

“That’s sweat.”

“Oh,” he said, removing his arm. “Seriously, that’s all from sweat?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, looking down.

“What have you been doing?” he asked. He looked at me like he couldn’t believe it was possible for the body to produce that much perspiration.

“I’ll tell you later,” I said.

“Wow,” he said, taking out his phone. “I can’t believe that’s all sweat.”

“Are you going to take a picture of it with your phone?” I asked. I was only half joking.

“Maybe later,” he said, grinning. “Have you ever been to the Mandarin Hotel?”

“I don’t think so,” I said, knowing that I hadn’t. I thought it funny that he would think I’d been to a luxury hotel when he was picking me up at a hostel.

“Well,” he said, fiddling with the phone. “That’s where we’re going for brunch.”

Awesome, I thought.

He hailed us a cab and we took it downtown. It was nice not to ride the subway. I wondered if Doug had ever gone down into the depths of that particular hell. The hotel was made up of two tall dark towers overlooking Central Park. It looked both formal and
foreboding. Self-consciousness for my appearance returned as we entered the building and I saw people who had clearly showered and probably had other people to carry their luggage. Maybe they shopped on Park Avenue, too. As we rode the elevator up to the restaurant I couldn’t stop thinking about water. I hadn’t been that thirsty since soccer practice in high school.

The restaurant was decorated all in white with huge windows along the walls that looked out over the park. The hostess looked up our reservation and sat us near a window. New York’s maze of streets and intimidating buildings looked better from above. Ten minutes passed after Doug and I sat down, though, and there was no sign of any server coming to bring us water or ask what we wanted to drink. Most of the moisture from my body was drying on my clothes.

“Uh, Doug,” I said. My foot tapped nervously on the floor under the white linen tablecloth. “Uh, when are they bringing the water?”

“They’ll bring it soon,” he said, checking his phone again. “This is different from other places. You just have to relax and wait. It’s like Europe.”

I stared at him, confused. “You pay a lot of money to eat here and they decide when they’re bringing you stuff?” I asked. Normally I was a patient restaurant patron. Having worked in a restaurant during college, I hated when people were rude to servers. I just couldn’t believe they hadn’t at least come over with water, though. How can you relax without water? And I didn’t know what Doug’s “Europe” comparison meant. When our families went on a trip to Italy eight years before, the restaurants of Rome had had an abundance of water they readily brought us.
Then I saw him. A server dressed in a white dress shirt and vest and black pants approached us bearing glasses and a pitcher of ice water. I tried to act calm while he carefully set the glasses down and poured the water, but before he could remove his hand from my glass I had already pounced on it. He snapped his hand away as if I were an animal that might bite. Holding the glass with both hands, I brought it to my lips and gulped the ice-cold liquid. It tasted like a miracle. After I finished that one I picked up the pitcher to pour another, spilling some on the table cloth. I greedily guzzled more. Some dribbled down the corner of my mouth but I didn’t care. It tasted too good to stop. I clunked the glass down on the table and breathed. I felt dizzy and my hands were shaking. I looked up at Doug. He stared at me like I’d been raised in the wild.

“Sorry,” I said, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Take it easy,” Doug said. I could tell by the grin on his face that he was amused. But he still looked around to see if anybody had seen my water-drinking spectacle.

Later when we were eating, Doug started asking me practical questions that I didn’t want to answer.

“So, why do you want to work in book publishing?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, honestly. I’d already made a fool of myself with the sweat and the water in front of my perfect cousin. It was too late for impressive, thoughtful answers. “I’ve got an English degree and don’t want to teach. I thought about grad school, but I can’t see myself doing that – at least not right now. I like to write and I studied it in college, but the thought of actually having a career in that seems crazy. I know people do it, I guess I just don’t have confidence yet. I don’t know what I want. I
know that I’m supposed to and it seems like everybody else knows what they want. Maybe I’ll find something that I really want to do while working in publishing. I think I’ll have a better chance of doing that here in a big city than back in Michigan.”

“That makes sense,” he said, nodding. “But I wouldn’t say all of that in an interview.”

“I didn’t plan on it.”

He asked how I planned to go about landing a job. This felt like an interview that I hadn’t prepared for.

“I’ve got some informational interviews with some publishers that I was able to set up through contacts at the workshop I attended in Denver this summer,” I said. “Sometimes those can lead to jobs. Other than that I’m just going to apply for everything that I see while I’m here.”

“It might take longer than a month for companies to get back to you,” he said. “I know;” I said, nodding. He thought I was a fool. Doug wouldn’t have done this. He would have planned. I started to feel panicky again. My stomach dropped like an elevator inside me. I wasn’t hungry anymore. I put my fork down and breathed deeply through my nose.

“It’s really brave the way you’re doing this,” Doug said.

I stopped breathing and looked up at him, surprised. “What?” I asked.

“I couldn’t do what you’re doing,” he said, shaking his head. He took a sip from his mimosa. “Especially when you don’t know for sure what you want. I mean, you’re
taking a big risk coming out here without a job set up. When I planned to move to Boston after college, I had medical school lined up there.”

“But you went to medical school at Michigan State,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “But I got into a ton of other schools all over the country and planned to go to Boston College. The day before I left, though, I kind of freaked out because I wasn’t ready to leave home yet.”

“I had no idea,” I said.

“Yeah, well,” he said, shifting in his seat. He actually looked a little embarrassed. “The way it worked out was best for me. But when I say I couldn’t do what you’re doing I mean it.”

“Thanks,” I said. I sat up in my chair. “But I couldn’t do medical school anywhere so we’re both even.”

“It was hard,” he said. He began chuckling and shaking his head again. “I don’t know if I would have done it if I’d known how hard it would be. Seriously.”

“Yeah,” I said. He seemed unfamiliar to me, but in a good way. “Nobody would do anything if they knew.”

After brunch we went for a walk in Central Park. I was still thirsty so Doug bought me lemonade. We meandered in the park past different sights. The Belvedere Castle; the Jackie O. Reservoir; the outdoor theatre. I thought the city might somehow seem smaller, more manageable now that I knew what it was like to look down on it. I was still scared, though.
“Well, I’m sorry to cut this day short,” Doug said. “But I actually have a blind date tonight.”

“Really?” I asked, raising my eyebrow.

“Yeah, she’s some woman who my friend I’m staying with here set me up with,” he said, shrugging. “We’ll see.”

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t want him to leave me. I still didn’t want to be alone in this city of millions of people who didn’t know me. If New York had taught me anything so far it was that you could be lonely even when surrounded by people. Doug reached out and hugged me. My sweat didn’t deter him this time. “It’s good seeing you,” he said. “Good luck with everything.” I hugged him a little longer than I usually would. “Here,” he said. He put forty dollars in my hand. “It’ll make me feel better knowing that you have this.”

“Wow, Doug,” I said, looking down at the money. “You don’t have to do this.”

“It’s yours,” he said.

I squeezed Doug’s money in my hand. I didn’t know if I would find what I was looking for in New York. I was still scared, but I no longer felt like a fool for going there.
I was sixteen the first time I got really drunk.

Late one night some friends and I quietly snuck vodka from my parents’ unlocked liquor cabinet and took it down to the furnished basement. I’d tasted alcohol on a family trip to Aruba the previous year, but I had never taken straight shots of liquor. We each took a swig from the bottle and quickly chased it with water. The vodka smelled like the rubbing alcohol nurses used to swab my arm with when I got my weekly allergy shot. The taste was terrible, but the relaxing sensation washing over me was worth any initial discomfort. A feeling of tiredness came over me, but I didn’t feel like going to sleep. I simply felt relieved of my anxieties and fears. Some were more typical, like fear of death, and worrying about what others thought of me. But there were more sinister fears, too. What made them sinister was their irrationality: If I didn’t set an object down on a table the “right” way then something bad would happen. Unwanted visions of me physically hurting people, people I loved, flashed before my eyes like some sick movie reel. A psychiatrist had prescribed an anti-anxiety medication, but it never made me feel this euphoria. All the concerns that had silently plagued my mind only a few hours earlier now felt silly and irrelevant. They were pushed down, down, down beneath layers of pleasure and liberty. One of my friends began giggling uncontrollably. Another began to cry, saying over and over, “I don’t want to lose control!” I skipped around in a circle, celebrating the loss of my own control.

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“It’s nice to feel human again, ya know?” Vanessa says. “And be a functioning, productive member of society.”

“Yeah, I hear that,” Byron responds.

“Yeah, instead of being messed up all the time…I can’t believe that was me. I mean, that’s no life.”

It’s a Friday evening and I’m at a meeting in the small college town where I attend graduate school. While people of all ages down the street at one of the many local bars may end the night clutching toilets as their bodies eject the abundance of toxic liquid they’ve ingested, this group of people live in a different world. Or, rather, they lived in the toilet-clutching world for too long and now want something different. Maybe some of them still do live in the former world but are here to listen and learn more. I fall somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. Before arriving I had a picture in my mind of the meeting room being large and dimly lit with members seated in rows facing a podium. That’s how I remember it being in all the dramatic films I’ve seen like Days of Wine and Roses (awesome) and When a Man Loves a Woman (great). But this, obviously, is not a movie. There are about thirty people crammed into this small, fluorescent-lit side room of a small church. Couches and chairs are set up in a large circle so everybody faces each other, making inconspicuousness not optional. On a large square table in the middle of the circle are several copies of a thin, hardcopy book called Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. No one author is specified.

Byron, the thirty-something guy sitting next to me who I overheard talking to the young woman named Vanessa, permeates a pungent scent of nicotine and cologne that
makes me wish I’d sat somewhere else. But it’s too late to move now; there’s not a chair left and a woman sitting two seats away makes a motion as if she’s about to talk.

“Okay,” she says. “I think we’ll get started. Welcome, everyone. My name is Patty and I’m an alcoholic.” She has short curly gray hair, and wears a plaid purple shirt and jeans. Her ears are double-pierced and one of the earrings is like a long and silver chord that bobs each time she nods her head. She seems kind.

“Hi, Patty,” chants the group.

“I’ve been sober for ten years,” she continues. “And I’ve volunteered to lead tonight’s Alcoholics Anonymous Open Step meeting, which means we welcome any visitors who want to learn more or offer support.” She looks down at her thin, tattered notebook. “As usual, I’d like to start with a few moments of silent meditation and then I’ve asked a friend to read the ‘Preamble’.” I close my eyes when the meditation begins, but self-consciously wonder if anybody else has their eyes closed. I don’t meditate or pray in public much. Or in private for that matter, though friends have suggested I try meditation to help me relax so I won’t worry so much about little things; like whether or not I’m the only one who closes my eyes during the meditation part of an A.A. meeting. Looking around at the other people, though, it’s clear you can do whatever you want with your eyes. A young man wearing a football jersey, who looks to be no more than twenty-four, stares at the floor with elbows resting on his legs.

“Bill,” says Patty, a minute later. “Will you read the ‘Preamble,’ please?”

“Hi. My name’s Bill and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Bill!”
“Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women’,” he reads. “Who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking….” Unfortunately, I can’t hear Bill very well. He’s not speaking very loudly, and I’m sitting directly in front of a humming drinking fountain that sounds like a large chorus of monks chanting at my back. I suspect this “Preamble” is something the others know by heart; they are nodding after each statement Bill makes and I’d be surprised if they could hear him any better than I. With his gray hair and long white beard, Bill reminds me of an off-duty Santa Clause. I wish I could hear him better, but I’m definitely not going to ask that people speak up.

“Thank you, Bill,” Patty says, when he’s done. “Now I ask that we all say the Serenity Prayer, please.”

“God,” the group begins. “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” I am struck by how reasonable and applicable this prayer seems. How many times have I wished to go back and change the past, but shirked even the most basic life changes? Like adding more fiber to my diet; not making assumptions about people; not drinking so much.

“I’ve asked Carla to read “How it Works,” Patty says.

“Hi,” a redhead on a couch says, quietly. She looks to be around forty. “I’m Carla, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Carla!”
“Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path,’ ” Carla reads. “Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves…” She reads on, but like Bill, Carla is a quiet speaker. I assume what she says is more along the lines of “we can’t help those who don’t help themselves.”

“I’ve asked another friend to read the Twelve Traditions,” Patty says. A man named Leo from across the room begins reading, “Number one. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.”

Byron’s heavy nicotine and cologne smell is irritating the hell out of my throat, and his constant fidgeting makes me nervous. This man cannot sit still. He is the embodiment of frenetic energy with his constant leg crossing, neck popping from side to side, and leg shaking, resembling some kind of mini leg convulsion. When his wallet drops beneath the seat a frustrated “Fuck” escapes his lips while he bends over to retrieve it. I wonder if Byron is this restless in every situation and if he uses alcohol to relax when drinking. Like I do. The older woman sitting to my right, Stephanie, adds to the nicotine scent. As I relish the thought of breathing in the cool night air when outside again, it finally occurs to me to pick up one of the thin books on the coffee table so I can read along with the speakers.

“Are these extravagant promises’?” the next speaker, Kate, asks, reading the last few lines of something called “The Promises,” which, unfortunately, does not end up being in my book. Thankfully, Kate has a loud, clear voice. “We think not. They are
being fulfilled among us, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.’ ”

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I am sixteen. My family is on vacation in Aruba. Our hotel is in a beautiful spot right on the white beach facing the ocean. It is extremely hot so all we want to do is swim in the hotel pool, lie in the sun, and eat and drink. The bar by the pool never cards anybody so my parents send my thirteen year-old brother to order drinks for all of us and carry them back to our poolside seats. I like the way it feels to calmly approach the bartender and order a margarita like it’s no big deal. Like I’m a mature and sophisticated woman. Not the awkward, insecure girl I usually feel like. During the first few days, I order cocktails for my parents and soda or juice for me. When my dad asks me to get him a drink called Kahlua, I’m intrigued. The plastic cup filled with brown, creamy liquid and ice looks and smells like chocolate milk.

“Try some,” Dad says.

I’ve never tasted anything like it. It still reminds me of chocolate milk, but it’s like a more serious chocolate milk. One that doesn’t kid around. “That’s really good,” I say, handing it back to him.

“Go up and get one,” he said.

“Really?”

“Hell, you’re on vacation with us. We’re just relaxing.”

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“Thank you, Kate,” Patty says. “Okay, do we have any newcomers tonight?”
My hand slowly goes up and Patty asks me to say my name. After I do, the group greets me with an enthusiastic, “Hi, Kyle!” Vanessa has raised her hand, too. She is cute and petite with her blonde hair up in a bun and two large silver hoops hanging from each ear. I wonder if she and Patty would hang out during any other time outside of this group; where they might each know the other’s full name. “I’m in a treatment center about an hour from here,” Vanessa continues, a touch of a drawl in her voice. “But it’s nice to meet a new group. Through God’s grace I just reached twenty-eight months of sobriety.” There is a hearty round of applause and “Woo-hoo’s!” from the group after this. “Oh, and just to let you know,” she says, giggling. “I like to talk a lot. I just say whatever I’m thinking. So you’ll probably be hearing a lot from me tonight.”

“Thank you, Vanessa,” Patty says. “Is there anybody who needs a ride home from tonight’s meeting?” Vanessa raises her hand and says, “See, I told you I talk a lot. I would really appreciate it if a woman from the group could give me a ride to a friend’s house tonight. A woman.” As a woman who hasn’t always felt comfortable in the presence of men, I wonder what’s happened to make Vanessa uncomfortable or if she’s always felt that way. She seems comfortable with everybody. I would offer her a ride if I had a car. When a middle-aged woman across the room says “I can help you out, honey,” Vanessa thanks her gratefully.

“Is anybody sick or have loved ones who are ill that we should keep in our prayers?” Patty asks.

“My name’s Dalton,” a young man with a buzzed haircut says, raising his hand. “I’m an alcoholic.”
“Hi, Dalton.”

“Yeah, my mom’s in the hospital,” he says, looking down.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Patty says. “Would you like us to pass around a Get Well card to sign?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice. Thanks.”

As Patty signs the card, she asks, “Has anybody had a recent relapse in their sobriety or is anybody going through a difficult time right now who would like to address it?” Silence except for the quiet “shit” Stephanie says when she accidentally drops the Get Well card on the floor. “Anybody have some milestone sobriety anniversaries they’d like to share?” Patty asks. Hands shoot up.

“Hello!” says a man with a large potbelly and a dark brown beard. “I’m John and I’m an alcoholic!”

“Hi, John!”

“I have been sober,” he begins, smiling. “Since February 14, 2002.” You can see the pride in his face and it is met with great applause. Kristy has reached 120 days. Vanessa repeats her twenty eight months. Gary has three years.

“This is great news,” Patty says. “I am now going to pass around the donation baskets. One for spare change and another for bills. Alcoholics Anonymous is completely self-supported through our own member contributions.” Vanessa contributes to both baskets.

“So this is a Step and Discussion meeting tonight,” Patty says. “And we will be reading Step Six from the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. Each member can read a
paragraph or however much they want and then say “pass” to pass it on to the next
member. If you choose not to read just say “pass” when it’s your turn.”

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“Kyle! What the hell is going on?!”

A year ago these words woke me from a deep sleep. I looked around my dark
bedroom and wondered if I was dreaming. Then I smelled smoke. I jumped out of bed
and opened my bedroom door to find my roommate, Dustin, opening all the windows in
the living room.

“You left a pot of water boiling on the stove!” he said.

“What?” I asked. I didn’t remember doing that.

“I woke up to the smoke alarm going off and I found water boiling on the stove in
the dark! I didn’t do it so it must have been you. Did you just go to bed and forget you
left the stove on again?”

Then I remembered. The bar. The free shots. The drunken hunger. Filling the
pot with water and switching on the gas burner. Then blackness.

“I’m sorry, I guess I just passed out in bed,” I said, running into the kitchen to see
the damage.

“Well, you could have killed us!” Dustin said. “Stop making food again after
you’ve been drinking. I don’t want to deal with this shit again. And you owe me a new
pot.”
He went to his room and slammed the door. I didn’t blame him. Not only could I not believe I had done it again, I couldn’t believe the second time I just turned off the lights and went to bed forgetting I had started cooking something.

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I open my book along with everyone else to “Step Six – We’re entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” There are many references to God and turning your life over to a “Higher Power.” Before coming here, I knew that AA was spiritual and not affiliated with any religious sect, but it’s interesting to see all the God references. I wonder if the book might ever be updated since its original publication in the 1950s to possibly include members who believe in another higher power or who want to get better but don’t believe in God. Atheists can admit they’re powerless, but how do they complete “Step Three” if it requires them to turn over their lives and wills to a power whose existence they refute? I’m not an atheist and I’m not particularly religious. Like most things, I’m somewhere in the middle. Commitments make me nervous. Maybe non-believers just find another treatment program. Although, it’s hard to imagine this group of people excluding anybody who sincerely needed help and wanted to put forth the effort to recover.

I pass on reading aloud a passage from Step Six when it’s my turn, but I am reading along. Basically, Step Six says that after you’ve made the decision to stop drinking and turned your will over to God to give you the strength to quit, why can’t you do this to be free of other imperfections about yourself? By imperfections, Step Six means when you let your natural desires “far exceed their intended purpose.” When you
want more and more than is reasonable or deserved. This organization is not just about getting or staying sober as I previously thought. It’s also about trying to be a better person overall. For example, what’s the benefit if a woman who treated people like shit when she was drinking is still treating people like shit when she gets sober? Yes, she’s sober, but what is she doing with this sobriety? Step Six is when self-improvement comes in, which is sometimes even harder than quitting drinking. The meeting gets significantly more interesting when people start commenting on the reading, reminding me of what I love most about grad school: class discussion.

“Quitting alcohol, man, that’s the easy part,” Scott says. “You think trying to quit drinking is going to be the hard part but that’s just the crutch. Now you’ve got to work on dealing with yourself and actually living and trying to be a better person. It’s not like you’re just free of flaws when you stop drinking.”

“But,” Patty says, nodding, making her long earring dance. “I like where Step Six states that perfection is an ideal goal; not one that is expected to be ultimately met, because we must acknowledge that nobody is perfect. I like that that pressure to reach perfection is taken off of us. As long as we keep trying to improve these defects then we’re on the right track. It’s the trying that matters.”

“My problem is that…I like some of my defects,” John says, sheepishly. There is a burst of laughter from the group. John laughs, too. “I’m not ready to give all those up.”

“Right!” Vanessa says, excitedly. “I think what the book calls defects are the strongest parts of my character. I am extremely ambitious and hard working. I thrive on
being productive. Even when I was doing jobs that were illegal my “co-workers” were impressed with my work ethic. I didn’t get a lot done because I was drunk and high most of the time, but I had drive. And now that I thankfully have legal employment and am sober, I find myself devoting time to my job but neglecting to spend time with my daughter. She’s only four years-old. She needs attention, too.”

“I keep thinking I can solve my problems on my own,” Linda says, a plump woman with short hair. “But I have to remember it’s not for me to solve on my own. I need to turn to my higher power in crisis. Also, I know I need to stop punishing myself for wanting to put myself first sometimes. I’ve always feared that if I didn’t take care of others I would be rejected, but if I don’t take care of myself first then I won’t be good for anybody, let alone myself.”

“For me,” Heather says, two seats away from Linda. She has shoulder-length brown hair and square-shaped hipster glasses. “My life got a lot better after I stopped drinking when I just stopped being so selfish. All I ever thought about was myself, even after I got sober. So, if you just get up off your ass and go help somebody you might feel better. I always do.” I don’t know if this is an independent statement or a criticism of what Linda said. Linda seems convinced it’s the latter; she’s shaking her head and looking annoyed. A baby cries on the lap of a young woman who came in late.

“Self-righteousness,” Byron says, anxiously stroking the pages of his book. “I find self-righteousness very enjoyable. That is my huge defect. I have this buddy and when we hang out we just sit and talk about all the people who we think we’re better than. And it’s not because we think we’re so awesome. We think those people we’re
talking about are just wrong and we’re right; whether they’re ass kissers or they do what they do because it’s popular. We think we’re acting the way people should act so that’s why we talk about them. But we’re definitely not perfect.” Byron and I have something in common.

“I’m a master manipulator,” Carmen, the young man in the football jersey, says. “I deceived so many people when I was drinking and drugging. Especially myself. I may be clean now but sometimes I still find myself lying to people or working them to get what I want. So, Step Six is an important one for me to remember.”

“Hi, I’m Nicole and I’m an alcoholic,” a young woman with deep brown eyes and a small smile says.

“Hi, Nicole!”

“I just want to say,” she says, her voice getting shaky and eyes welling up with tears. “I can relate to something everyone said tonight. I’m getting emotional right now because I’ve been feeling out of control for a long time…but coming here has made me feel like there’s hope.”

Control. While I’m not sure if I identify as an alcoholic, I definitely know what it’s like to not feel in control and to use alcohol excessively for relief and to try and get back some control. Whether it’s in social settings, dealing with my anxiety disorder, or my intimacy issues with men, I’ve gotten black-out drunk to deal with them all. I had sex for the first time in my late twenties because that just happened to be the time I met a man with whom I finally wanted to do it. Unfortunately, I can’t remember it or most of the four-month relationship because I was drunk a significant part of it. Like Meg Ryan’s
character in *When a Man Loves a Woman*, I guess I was afraid if he saw who I really was without any fun, inhibition-reducing glaze, then he would get bored and leave. But these choices I made to keep him from leaving were the very reasons why he ultimately did.

“This is my first visit to AA,” I say. I’m ready to talk. “I came here tonight to learn more and see what it was like.” Shit, I can feel my face heating up and turning red the way it always does when I speak in front of people; another minute and you could cook eggs on my forehead. “Tonight was, uh, really informative. I related to a lot of what I read in Step Six, particularly trying to improve your weaknesses. I use alcohol to improve my weaknesses, which only creates more problems.” Although I’m looking down at my hands, out of the corner of my eye I notice Byron and Vanessa nodding their heads. “Anyway, I look forward to learning more about you and, hopefully, myself.”

“Thank you, Kyle,” Patty says.

While inhaling the deep breaths of night air I’ve been looking forward to during my walk home, I want a drink. That was an intense hour and a half and I could use something to take the edge off, though I have no intention of going overboard. Actually, I never have that intention. It’s just ended up that way more times than I’d like to admit. Despite the meeting’s intensity, there was a definite calming feeling that came over me after a while; I believe this has to do with the lack of bullshit in the group. They were so welcoming and honest about their flaws, which is saying something coming from a cynic like me. A fellow cynic could say the group members were only acting nicely because they were supposed to, but after actually being there I think their acceptance of my presence and their devotion to reaching their goals were genuine. The pride John had in
his face when he announced his Valentine’s Day anniversary of ten years of sobriety was more heartwarming than most valentine cards I’ve received.

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He’ll be here in a few minutes but I don’t feel ready enough yet. I’ve been dressed for hours and my hair and makeup are all done. But I don’t feel ready inside. I crack open another beer. Not sure how many I’ve had so far. Might be number four or five. Looking in the mirror as I smooth my hair with one hand and chug the beer I’m holding in the other, I do not like what I see. I do not want to get drunk before every time I go out with my boyfriend. Friend with benefits. Fuck buddy. No, I don’t like what I see, but I like the way I feel. Weightless and yet centered. Relaxed. Comfortable. The way I wish I could naturally feel with a man without the use of alcohol. I now understand why some people helplessly do things to themselves over and over again that they know are harmful and stupid and illogical. I am one of them. They are me. Us. The doorbell rings and I feel ready inside and out. Upside down. It’s showtime, but all I want is something real.
Hi,
I'm sitting in front of my computer trying to get some work done but I can't concentrate because I'm thinking about our talk the other night. There's a sense of dissatisfaction I have about it and the more I think about it the more I realize how angry I am about certain things that were said. I also feel like you got your closure by stating what you were mad about but you didn't really want to listen to my responses or maybe why I was mad. I appreciate your willingness to talk face to face, but I also think I let you take over direction at certain times. And I admit I'm not good at confrontation. Sometimes I act like things are okay because I internalize my anger, usually when I'm embarrassed. Or sometimes I just don't know how to respond until I've thought more about it and I don't want to say anything I'll regret. I guess I could arrange to say all of this to you in person, but after the other night I don't think talking about these things to you makes communication much better. It was nice talking about the school stuff, it relieved the tension, but I need to respond honestly to four things that were said — and then I'm done.

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I first saw Joe in a picture from a party welcoming new fellow grad students to the English department. He was tall and lean with short dirty blonde hair and a closely-cropped beard. He reminded me of what I pictured a disheveled, Russian writer from a century long ago might look like if he were transported in time and given a T-shirt and jeans to wear. Seeing him was like a wake-up call for my sex drive. I'm rarely instantly attracted to people, but I wanted him. I didn't want to want somebody, though, particularly not a colleague. While some people might look at a new romantic interest as something exciting, all I could picture was how this would not work out. Being an

UNFORTUNATE ATTRACTION OR THE POLITICS OF HOOKING UP

“The search for freedom through sex is doomed to failure.”

– Camille Paglia
anxiety-ridden pessimist with a number of bad past relationships, I assumed he was probably too good to be true. But I was lonely. I didn’t want to want him, but I missed not wanting somebody. I missed the thrill of not knowing when I might bump into a crush or having somebody to look nice for (other than myself). It’s sad that my immediate response to this attraction was to prepare for disaster.

Later on the same day I saw his picture, I got a notification emailed to me from a free online dating site I had joined a couple of years prior. I used the site casually, knowing the majority of members weren’t going to be taking it seriously since it cost nothing. But this notification was letting me know that a guy had just rated me highly and it included his picture – the guy was Joe. I went to his profile and was instantly unimpressed with what I found. Some highlights: You should only message me if you’re not a bigger egoist than me…I spend a lot of time thinking about whether or not I’m an idiot…I’m looking for long-term relationships, short-term relationships, casual sex…As expected, too good to be true. I did not want to get involved with a guy who tried so hard to sound like an asshole on his dating profile, the place he should be trying to make himself sound semi-appealing. I deleted the notification.

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1. You said something like, "I wanted to be friends but you wanted sex, and sex and friendship usually don't work..." Well, it's not like I was having sex alone or that you were a totally unwilling participant. Yes, I wanted to have sex. But so did you. I would not have had sex with you that first time if you hadn't been making it clear to me through looks/attention, etc. that you were interested. I figured you meant what you said in your email about wanting us just to be friends and I was willing to stick to it. And we didn't have to keep having sex
either. I honestly had no expectations beyond the first time. Your statement made me feel invalidated.

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It’s hard to tell yourself you’re not attracted to somebody when you are. Especially when you have class with that person and see him on a regular basis in your office and in the halls at school. As if those reasons weren’t enough, it’s even more difficult when he ends up living two houses down from you. The coincidences were unreal to the point where it seemed as if fate were practically pushing us together.

“That’s like kismet,” my mother said on the phone when I told her about him. It’s damn near impossible to fight the feeling when he invites you in for a beer after class and you end up talking for three hours about everything from literature to relationships to how annoying high school was. He was much less of an asshole in person than online, although I didn’t understand why he wouldn’t want to promote this great guy sitting next to me. Maybe I just really wanted to believe he was better than I feared to justify my urge to reach over and kiss him. I hadn’t been this attracted to anybody in a long time.

“I have no interest in being in contact with a majority of my classmates from high school,” he said. He crossed his arms and smirked

“Me either,” I said, feeling less alone in my own angst about high school. The humid September weather made his kitchen feel hot and sticky, like sex. I kept trying to decipher what color his eyes were. They were a very subtle shade of blue or brown, maybe even gray.

“But it looks like one buddy I do keep in touch with has sent me a wedding invitation,” he said. He opened a pink postcard-size envelope and pulled out the
invitation. “Yep. And it’s asking if I’m going to bring a plus one. I don’t know, I don’t even know if I’m gonna go. His fiancée doesn’t like me very much.”

After walking home later that night, I texted my best friend, Karen, to tell her I’d spent three hours talking to Joe. She texted back: Sounds awesome! Think you two are gonna bang?

Her bluntness surprised me. She knew I wanted him, but he and I had just started talking. The way she asked the question made it sound like sex was as reasonable a prospect at this point as going to the movies. Maybe it was. What did I know? I was thirty-one and had only lost my virginity three years earlier. Although I’d had opportunities to have sex earlier, I just hadn’t been ready. Before I met Joe I’d only had sex with two other men. Courting was no longer necessary, though. There seemed to be no more rules for dating and sex except the ones we chose to make for ourselves.

I next saw him that weekend at a party. We didn’t talk much during it. Even though we’d had a great conversation a few nights before, I felt like I’d forgotten how to speak to him – a sure sign I knew I liked him. He wasn’t going out of his way to talk to me, though. I briefly entertained the idea that this meant he was as nervous as I, but I knew it was more likely that if he were really interested in conversing with me then he would. I had heard about the “He’s Just Not That Into” You philosophy from Sex and the City. I really thought guys were different from women. Where we could be shy and look for meaning where there wasn’t any, men didn’t think too much – they just did. Even my brother once admitted this to me when I was asking for advice about a guy. If a guy was interested in you, he usually did something about it. Just because he stood near you at a
party didn’t mean he did it to be close to you. Maybe you just happened to be near another person to whom he wanted to talk.

As the party winded down, Karen suggested our group of friends go back to my house afterwards since there was plenty of space. I took this opportunity to suggest to Joe that he give me a ride home since he lived so close. He and I arrived at my house before anybody else and fell into conversation as easily as we had at his apartment. Why was it easier to talk when nobody else was around and there were so many more chances for awkward pauses or stumbling over words? We drank wine and when the others arrived we all talked for another couple of hours. Finally he said he was tired and needed to go home. I walked him to the door where he unexpectedly held out his arms to me. I stepped towards him and he enveloped me in a hug. I tried not to make more of it than a friendly gesture. But that annoying, girly voice in my head pestered me with tired thoughts: What did that hug mean?... He didn’t have to hug me...Maybe he’s just a huggy guy...But my other guy friends don’t always hug me and Joe and I hardly know each other. I couldn’t sleep that night. I was caught between reveling in the feeling of his arms around me and wishing I didn’t like it so much.

By the next weekend, Joe had hung out with my group of friends and me a couple times, but nothing significant had happened between the two of us since the hug. Karen invited him to join us at her house for drinks and a movie around nine on Saturday. When she and I went to the store to buy liquor, she suggested I text Joe to ask if he wanted any. He texted back for me to pick something out for him because he was adventurous. I wondered if he would have responded to Karen in the same flirty way.
Back at her house around 8:30, I texted him that he could come over early if he wanted.

Twenty minutes passed.

“Have you heard from him yet?” Karen asked, sipping a beer.

I shook my head. She said she’d text him. I went to the bathroom feeling anxious about the lack of communication. When I rejoined Karen in the living room she was looking down at her phone.

“Oh okay,” she said. “You are to have nothing more to do with him.”

“Why?” I asked.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “He just texted me that he’s not coming because things are looking promising with two girls he’s talking to at the bar.”

I couldn’t believe he just ignored me but told Karen the truth. Did he think she wouldn’t tell me?

“Why was he so honest with you about that and not me?” I asked.

“Well,” Karen said. “He probably knows there’s something there with you two. He’s not going to tell you about women he’s hitting on.”

Her statement confirmed what I had suspected, which pleased me in a sick way because it meant he liked me at least a little.

“Let’s go out or…just not stay here,” I said, grabbing my purse. I was more upset than I expected to be considering I hardly knew him. We went over to our friends’ house where they all tried to make me feel better. They revealed to me that at the party the week before he had told them he was a bad person because he slept with women and didn’t call them back.
“Ugh, what?” I said. “What guy admits that to women he just met? How awkward.” My phone vibrated with a text. It was Joe stating that he was on his way over to Karen’s. “Oh my God,” I said, showing the phone to my friends. “He must have gotten shafted by the two girls at the bar. So now he finally gets back to me.” I felt transported back to a past New Year’s Eve when my ex-boyfriend, the first man I’d had sex with, had told me he wanted to spend the evening with friends instead of with me. Then twenty minutes before midnight he texted me that he was at a bar down the street in case I was home. I had been disgusted and felt like a consolation prize, as I did at the moment I received Joe’s text. I was sick of guys treating me like I wasn’t a real person.

“Just let him show up to my house,” Karen said. “Just ignore him and let the asshole show up to an empty house.”

I never told my ex-boyfriend that his actions hurt my feelings. I’d never stood up for myself. Maybe just ignoring made an impression bigger than yelling at somebody. I turned off my phone.

The next morning a text message from Joe waited for me: Sorry about last night. I was surprised he apologized at all. As hurtful as the night before had been, at least it saved me from putting any more time into him. That’s what I told myself at first. But the next week I found myself still curious about him and what he thought about me. Despite obvious reasons why I should stay away, I was still attracted to him. I couldn’t stop thinking about him and it was driving me crazy because I didn’t particularly like him as a person.
“What do you see in him?” my friends kept asking me. “Where is the attraction?” They thought he was gross. They considered him physically cute, but he rarely seemed to put effort into his appearance. He often looked like he’d just gotten out of bed and threw on whatever clothing was on his floor. He always looked tired and “out of it,” as if he were hung over or high. He rarely smiled or engaged with people, giving off this attitude that he was indifferent to everything. My friends thought these reasons coupled with his treatment of me should have weakened my attraction. I knew they were right and wished I knew why I couldn’t stop. I just knew that whenever I saw him or even thought about him something happened to me that made all reason and logic go away. It didn’t make the bad things he did forgivable, just easier to overlook. He was the last thing I thought about before finally falling asleep at night. I felt both comforted and anxious in his presence. He didn’t have to do anything to get a physical reaction out of me; he just had to be. I wondered if there was anything he could do that would make me stop wanting him.

His behavior showed that even if he was interested in me, it wasn’t seriously. But I decided I wanted him sexually more than I wanted to go to the movies or wait for promises he wouldn’t keep. Even if he didn’t want to date me, that didn’t mean he wouldn’t sleep with me. His online dating profile said he was interested in casual sex. I told myself that I was a free sexual being with needs and if he could meet some of them and I had few expectations, then maybe we could work out some kind of arrangement. If I didn’t care about him and knew he wasn’t dependable then that should release me from any emotional attachment. A casual relationship seemed the best solution to my
predicament. I wasn’t sure how to approach him about this, though. I’d never propositioned a man sexually before. I’d never seriously dated one, either. An email seemed the most painless form of communication. If he said no, at least we wouldn’t have to face each other. I’d deal with the consequence of actually seeing him at school when the time inevitably came. The email was the scariest communication I’d ever sent.

He responded two days later:

I certainly meant for the movie thing to be a friend thing. I guess I'm sort of mired in some drama already and not up for any more, so I'm glad you said something. I don't like making decisions that affect other people at a personal level so I'm sort of hesitant to do so, which is probably why things are the way they are.

Sorry it took me forever to reply - I've just been trying to think things through. So if we're cool, then I'm glad. I don't want there to be any friction in the office.

- Joe

It would be an understatement to say that I was not expecting this cold reply. His words left me feeling utterly humiliated. While women with more experience with sex and rejection might consider his response a mere disappointment, I took it much worse. Not surprising, considering I had only become sexually active three years earlier. I felt like a fool for misreading his feelings, like I should have known better, even though his actions over the past few weeks would have probably confused anybody. To me, being told by a man whom I was attracted to that he only meant for us to be friends was like being told that I was ugly. I had clearly been fooling myself that I was ready for a casual relationship if I couldn’t even handle him rejecting the suggestion of it. I didn’t even consider the logic in why it would probably not be the best idea to get involved with
somebody I worked with. All I could see was the word friend typed across my screen like an accusation. I decided to stay away from Joe as much as I could. It was too mortifying for me to be around him. I dramatically saw his refusal as a huge snub to me, like he had cheated me at cards. When I knew I would have to see him in class or at a school event, I would make sure that I looked really good. If he ever changed his mind it would be my turn to snub him. And I had the feeling that one night I would get my chance.

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2. I felt insulted, myself, when you said that Sean liked me and that you had "talked me up" to him. I'm not comfortable with you suggesting guys for me like we're girlfriends. It made me feel like a commodity that could be passed around the office. Sean is a nice guy and if I choose to pursue something with him, or anybody, then I will. But I don't need to be with somebody and I don't need some kind of replacement. I'm sure you meant well, but I felt like I was being pitied. Also, joking about why didn't I ever hook up with Adam? I wanted to scream when you said that. Adam is my good friend. That's it. I just can't believe you would suggest all these guys for me to get involved with after getting so bent out of shape because you think I treated you cheaply. As you said, I have feelings.

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My opportunity to snub Joe came later that weekend. I met up with friends at a bar where he ended up being, too. “I was out with my roommate and his friends,” I overheard him say. “But they ditched me, so I just walked over here.” He didn’t mind going to bars alone. Or admitting that his roommate ditched him. I wondered if being abandoned by people he went out with bothered him at all. He didn’t seem too hurt, but
maybe he was just good at avoiding unpleasant feelings. Getting drunk alone at a bar probably helped with that.

I was living up to my promise, though. I looked decent and talked to everybody but him. I was giving a great performance, but all I wanted was for him to look at me. I’d seen him staring at me at a school event the night before. Why was he being so resistant? Maybe he knew he was trouble for women, like he’d told my friends, and wanted to spare me. Why did I care so much about what he thought when he had made it clear he didn’t care about me – or wanting to be responsible for other people’s feelings? I suspected he had some feelings, though. Otherwise he would have simply ignored my email. I wanted to know why he seemed so resistant to feelings. I was getting reeled back in.

We all left the bar – including Joe – when the bouncer noticed somebody had snuck in outside beer. On the street, my friend, Sara, asked, “Well, should we move on to another bar or drink at our place?” I shrugged my shoulders and looked around at the others. When my eyes met Joe’s, I knew I was not going to be able to live up to my promise of rejecting him. He was finally looking at me – and it looked like he wanted to devour me the way I’d wanted to devour him the first time I saw his picture. His face that usually looked so disinterested seemed to have new vitality in it. I still couldn’t tell what color his eyes were, but they seemed truly open for the first time. He was smiling widely at me, a broad smile that showed his canine teeth. His eyes looked intently into mine. If looks could talk, then his was saying he wanted me. It was probably the standard look he gave women when he was trying to deliver such a message. Maybe he
even practiced it in the mirror. I knew this look didn’t mean he had changed, just that our interaction would be significantly different for at least a couple hours that night. If Joe was now playing the bad guy who slept with women and didn’t call them back, then, for better or worse, I wanted the bad guy. It seemed perfectly natural that I would sleep with him. All my plans for rejecting him and restoring my pride were eviscerated because of one look. Nothing else mattered except that I was finally going to get this longing out of my system. And it would disprove his assertion that he only saw me as a friend. I didn’t care if it was only for one night – I would take it. It’s frightening how attraction makes us do things we swore we’d never do. The thought of telling him no wasn’t an option now.

The sex was not how I had imagined it would be. I thought casual sex with a promiscuous, insensitive man would be rough, perfunctory, and maybe a little kinky. But we clasped each other and kissed like we couldn’t get enough, each devouring the other the way Joe’s look had prefaced. I didn’t expect us to converse and laugh so easily during it, but we did. I didn’t expect him to want to hold my hand and me, but he did. I didn’t expect him to spoon me all night, but he did. I didn’t even expect him to stay the whole night and lay with me talking in the morning, but he did. His actions didn’t make sense and I didn’t care. I was tired of trying to make sense of him. I just wanted to enjoy how well the night had turned out.

“My roommate’s an okay guy,” he said. I was lying against his chest and he had his arm around me. Sunlight shined through the corners of my blinds casting shadows
across our bodies. “He just does kind of dumb things sometimes.” He rested his hand on the back of my head.

“Yeah,” I said. “Roommates can be annoying.” I shifted my place on his chest slightly to get more comfortable. Part of me wanted to address the fact that we were doing exactly what he had said in his email that he didn’t want to do. But I knew it was better not to call attention to it. Honesty had the potential to make things uncomfortable. When he got dressed and gave me an awkward hug goodbye, I wasn’t surprised he made no plans to call me or to get together again. I knew what the night before had meant. When my friends asked me when I would see him again I just said, “I don’t know if I will. I don’t expect it and I don’t need it.” Our one night together had restored my confidence and quieted my attraction. It hadn’t extinguished the attraction totally, but at least it had been quieted. I wasn’t expecting my friends to be more excited than I. Even Karen was and she had been the most pessimistic about him.

“Oh my God, what if you two start dating?” she asked.

“That is so not happening,” I said. “We probably won’t even hook up again. He doesn’t call women back.”

“Oh,” Karen said, smiling. “It’s so gonna happen, again.”

When it did happen again after class the next week, I was surprised. If he didn’t call women back then why was he breaking his rule for me when he had been so resistant at first? Had he really broken any rules, though? We had no choice but to see each other in class and when the class goes out for drinks, it makes sense for neighbors to walk home together. I knew I wanted to sleep with him again if he were interested. He had a
calmer version of the look on his face as we walked home, but the look was still there. He accepted my invitation to come over for a little while. After we had sex twice, I lay against his chest, like our last morning together, and told him about the ex-boyfriend from New Year’s Eve who treated me like a consolation prize and had also refused my Facebook friend request.

“He said he ‘wasn’t ready to have everything in his life on the Internet,’” I said. “I mean, for Christ’s sake, I was only requesting to be his friend. It’s not like I was asking him to go steady with me.” The fact that Joe had done some rather shitty things to me, too, had not escaped me. They were just easier to ignore when I was lying against him.

“Awe,” he said, hugging me to him. “That guy sounds weird. But don’t worry, I’m not even on Facebook so I couldn’t refuse you.” We laughed and I jabbed him in the rib.

He didn’t spend the night. He said he needed to sleep in his own bed. I wasn’t disappointed – I slept better when I didn’t share the bed, too. I had been surprised, though, at how well I slept as he spooned me that first night. Regardless, I knew I had to be okay with him not spending the night so I was – mostly.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do this weekend,” I said, as he got dressed. “Karen’s going out of town for a wedding.”

“Well, I’ll be around,” he said.

“Okay,” I said.
I wanted to hang out with him on Friday, but I couldn’t let him think I wanted to hang out with just him – like a date. He might think I was clingy and coming on too strong. I couldn’t let myself show how much I wanted to be with him. I actually thought that this paralyzing way of thinking was a normal part of dating, of experiencing another person. I wasn’t fully experiencing anything, though, because I wouldn’t allow myself to just be in the moment. I was always planning, analyzing, organizing. I wouldn’t let my guard down. That was the only way I knew how to have an unemotional, casual relationship, though. I was playing a part, like I suspect a lot of women do today when they risk getting closer to somebody.

I invited Joe out to the bar with four other friends, including our grad colleagues Sean and Michelle. He accepted and brought his roommate, Chris, along. As I walked with Joe and Chris to the bar, I wondered how successful my plan to mix friends from different groups would be. There was always a risk they all might not mesh well, but it couldn’t have been a better night. Everybody got along and Joe was engaged, in a good mood. He introduced himself to my other friends and talked easily with the others.

“Are you interested in Joe?” Michelle asked at one point.

“Um, yeah,” I said. “We’re kind of hooking up.”

“Okay,” she said. “I didn’t know if you were into him or his roommate.” I didn’t know why Michelle was so concerned about this since she had a boyfriend. Later in the night he gave me another firm look and invited me to go home with him. Once inside his house he led us past the kitchen into a small living room where we both sat down on a worn, gray futon. He turned on the TV. Then he reached over and put his arm around
me, pulling me against him as he laid us both down – like a couple might lay together casually watching TV.

“Let’s watch Meet Joe Black,” he said.


“Yeah, it is a little,” he said. “But it’s kind of sweet, too.”

I couldn’t believe he was being so affectionate and wanted to watch a girly Brad Pitt movie with me. I laid against him staring at the screen, but my mind was reeling. *What did this mean...Was he trying to be romantic...He didn’t have to choose a romance film...Did he like me as more than just a casual partner?* I got distracted because we started joking and kissing and I told him I wanted to go to his room. We left the movie unfinished.

The sex this time felt more familiar, perhaps because we felt more familiar to each other. There seemed no mistake that he wanted me there in his bed with him. I wasn’t just a random warm body. “That was...oh, wow, that was amazing,” he said, catching his breath. His neck tasted like salt. His chest had hair on it, but not an overwhelming amount. He farted and I wasn’t disgusted. He was only human.

“Man, Thursday sucked,” he said, holding me to him. “Wednesday was awesome and Thursday sucked.”

“Why was Wednesday awesome?” I asked, hoping I had something to do with it.

“Because I was with you,” he said.

“Awe,” I said, burrowing my face into the crook of his neck. Although I loved hearing this, I didn’t totally believe it. I didn’t say how much I liked being with him,
either. I wanted to, but I just couldn’t allow myself to show that much vulnerability. Getting naked and having sex was as far as I could go.

The next few times we got together were enjoyable, too. He seemed into me as much as he could be. There was no weirdness or him trying to avoid me. As much I’d hoped the attraction would wane after finally sleeping with Joe, it only intensified the more I did it. I didn’t know if it was just the sex that kept me returning to him or just attention from an attractive man. I think it was a little of both. I never came during sex with him (or anybody for that matter) and he never seemed particularly concerned with whether or not I did. He could be a rather selfish lover, but coming wasn’t necessary for me so maybe it wasn’t just the sex. I still liked the feeling of our bodies joining and moving together. I liked the evident pleasure this gave him. It made me feel like I possessed a certain amount of power. I loved to look at him. Loved his hips moving above mine. His long legs and the shape of his thighs as he bent over to slip on a condom. I simply wanted him. I wanted as much as I could get of him. I thought I’d never lose him because he would never be mine anyway. If he had no discretion about who he slept with, then at least I would always get a piece of him.

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3. You were pissed that I said you'd had sex with Laura because you were lonely but it was really just because you were horny. I honestly don't remember saying that and I really don't see what difference it makes. Horny, lonely, whatever. You say I was the one making a big deal about it, but when you first told me about it I remember you said that both of you were treating it like a huge mistake and were avoiding each other. You said you regretted it. Maybe I heard wrong considering I was drunk when you were telling me, but I do not agree that I was making a big deal out of it.
If you're on good/civil terms with her now then fine. But that's not the original version you told me. Of course when telling me that version, you were trying to make me stay the night with you after my party, so maybe that had something to do with it. Regardless, I don't care about what happened between you two.

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We got together one night because the previous night he didn’t have condoms. I went over to his apartment since I felt like getting out of my house. When I arrived, he immediately went to the fridge and got me a can Pabst Blue Ribbon, a beer tantamount to piss water. I followed him into the living room where we sat on the futon. *Star Trek* was on TV. He stretched his legs out on the coffee table among an abundance of empty beer cans. He sat so far away from me that another person could have fit between us. One hand was in his pocket and the other held his beer. He made no move to touch me. I guess we were being friends tonight and only touching when necessary. I had wondered when this would finally happen – when he would take advantage of the casual aspect of the relationship and start being lazy and disinterested instead of romantic. It’s the reason why I never let my guard down. I don’t know why I thought remaining guarded made any difference, though. It didn’t make his indifference any less disappointing or confusing. The room was freezing – very different from the first night in his kitchen that had been filled with heat and possibility.

“You like *Star Trek*?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I like the older episodes because the costumes and makeup are hilarious.”
He was so fucking odd, which only made him that much more interesting to me. When the episode ended he changed the channel to a crime show we’d been watching the previous night. The room seriously felt like it was no more than sixty degrees. I wasn’t sure there’d be any point in telling him I was cold.

“Do you have a blanket or something?” I asked.

He thought for a second. “No,” he said, shaking his head. His eyes stayed on the TV. He didn’t even move over to put an arm around me or take the hint that I was cold. He was like a different person from the night he played Meet Joe Black. I knew people’s moods could change but I figured he wouldn’t invite somebody over, even a friend, if he felt like being alone. He freely talked, though - it just wasn’t very animated.

“My girlfriend worked for the government,” he said. I guess he said this because the detectives on the show were interviewing a man running for governor. “She’d text me at work complaining about all the bureaucratic bullshit she had to do deal with. She’s probably still down in Georgia working there.” It was interesting and a little disconcerting that he still referred to her as his girlfriend – not his ex. I was surprised there was a woman out there whom he could offer commitment. Maybe he didn’t just want to fuck everybody.

He finished his beer then got up to get more. He came back with one for me as well, even though I was still working on my first. Ironically, we were watching a scene where one of the detectives is giving a speech about making amends at an AA meeting.

“I can’t say I’m sorry,” Joe said.
“Excuse me?” I asked, looking over at him. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my sweatshirt for warmth. He just looked at the TV.

“I can’t apologize to people,” he said. “I just can’t do it. I can say, ‘I’m sorry you’re upset’ or ‘I’m sorry you feel that way’ but I can’t say I’m sorry for something I’ve done.”

Well, this was not an auspicious confession. Was he warning me not to expect him to apologize when he inevitably disappointed me – like now? How can a person never say he’s sorry and expect to still have relationships of any kind? Why say this to somebody at all? Was he gloating or expressing concern about this aspect of himself?

“What about when you apologized to Karen and me for ditching us the night we invited you to watch the movie,” I asked. I couldn’t wait to hear this answer. He thought about it, never turning to face me. “In that situation, I was apologizing for something I didn’t do,” he said. “I told you I would come over to watch the movie and I didn’t so I was sorry for not following through.”

“Well, you should be,” I said. I got up to go to the bathroom. What a ridiculous argument that was – and so random. Like the time he told my friends at the party he didn’t call women back. The best thing to do would be to walk out the door and get away from the shadiness that was always lurking around the corners of this man, but I was caught now like a fly in web. I remembered how it felt when he was nice and in a good mood. I had seen another side of him, similar to that first hot night in September when we’d talked in his kitchen. I didn’t want to leave him just because he was moody. As unpleasant as they were, the moods were part of him.
We continued watching TV and drinking more beer for the next four hours. I was confused. Were we ever going to have sex? Wasn’t that the whole reason I came over? Sure, we called it “getting together” or “hanging out,” but we both knew why we were meeting. I didn’t expect us to actually just hang out. Wasn’t his interest in me sexual more than anything? I didn’t necessarily need to have sex, but I found it weird that he didn’t care whether or not we did. I fell asleep with my head on his lap, and awoke to him nudging me awake.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“It’s a little after one,” he said. “Let’s go to bed.” He was speaking my language now. We got into bed and I wrapped my arms around him and began kissing him – something I thought he expected and would like. Something I had wanted to do, too. I had waited hours for this, enduring crappy beer and moodiness. But he turned his face away from mine.

“No,” he said, chuckling. “We are going to sleep.”

“What?” I said. He turned off his bedside lamp and put his arms around me. His breathing became slow and steady almost immediately. I liked being held by him, but found it very weird that he was too tired for sex. I had always been the one to turn down sex in past relationships and it was usually because something was wrong. If he wanted to sleep I could do that, but I didn’t like that he seemed to be the one calling the shots regarding what we would do and when. Maybe he was too drunk, but even his decision to keep drinking throughout the night without considering that I might have wanted to have sex showed a certain amount of self-centeredness.
You should only message me if you’re not a bigger egoist than me...

In the morning I opened my eyes and found my arms and legs entangled with his. My face was pressed against his bare chest. I breathed him in. I kissed his chest. Then I worked my way up to his neck, his jaw, the corner of his mouth. He opened his eyes, grinned, and turned his face away from me again. “No,” he said. What the hell was this? I knew he was tired the night before – maybe too drunk to perform – but it was morning now. I thought he should want sex – or me – by now. Forget the sex, why didn’t he even want to kiss me?

“Do you realize you’re rejecting me?” I asked him. I rolled away from him to the other side of the bed. “No,” he sighed, taking my hand and kissing the palm. “You’re just so passionate.” Ugh, what the hell did that mean? I took my hand away from his lips. What did he mean by that?...Was being passionate a good or bad thing?...Didn’t men like it when women embraced sex more?...Remember, this is the same man who doesn’t say he’s sorry...What man turns down sex??!!

We slept for a few more hours and then I got up and put on my clothes. He moved to the edge of the bed and gave me a goodbye hug. I looked into his eyes. I still couldn’t tell what color they were, and I didn’t like it. He was smiling. Apparently all was copacetic to him. Either he didn’t care about having sex with me or he was trying to avoid it. It had to be because of me. I believed that men in general didn’t turn down sex, especially not men who liked having it as much as Joe. Karen had told me that he had told her (while drunk) that he had once visited a prostitute. His dating profile stated that he’d had group sex. He didn’t know that I knew all of this about him – he never talked
about that stuff with me. I was convinced, though, that this was a man who wouldn’t turn down sex if offered to him. I really never considered that maybe he was just tired and hung over and didn’t feel like he had something to prove to me.

The next night I was doing homework with Karen on my front porch when I decided to find out how much he wanted me – and how blunt I could be with him. I saw his neighbors on the floor above him were having a rowdy party. I assumed he was with them. I took my phone out and texted my risqué message:

Are you going to be a cock block again tonight?

I waited a few minutes, wondering how he would react. I didn’t have to wonder long:

Only if I don’t get stupid drunk.

Classy, I thought. Not that my text was classy, either. I texted back that I was not going out tonight due to the crowds for Homecoming weekend, but if he wanted to come over to Karen’s house we would be drinking and hanging out there. He texted back: okay, cool. This answer was infuriatingly non-committal, which was probably the point. At least I knew I could be blunt with him about sexual matters. I wasn’t sure whether or not calling him a cock block would offend him. I don’t know why I was worried about that, though. He seemed impossible to offend. I texted him a couple hours later that Karen and I were heading over to her place in case he wanted a ride. His response: Phone’s dying, don’t know. Karen and I looked at each other, disgusted expressions on our faces.

“He’s ridiculous,” she said.
“Fuck him,” I agreed. I knew he didn’t owe me anything. I had told him I was cool with a casual relationship. It should have been a relief to add more fuel to the fire of reasons why he wasn’t worth my time. Why was I even surprised? I knew from the beginning that he admitted to treating women like shit. I knew this would happen at some point and I wasn’t naïve enough to believe I would actually change him. But I was caught in the web of wanting to be with him even though I knew he didn’t care whether or not he was with me. It was a tug of war between reality and desire. I had been ready for unromantic, careless sex the first time but he had surprised me, tricked me with passion. If he hadn’t raised the bar so high to begin with, I wouldn’t expect so much of him now. I just wanted him one more time. He was like a drug. My stomach ached and my heart raced the way it did during an anxiety attack or when I thought I’d lost something. I was losing control, not that I’d ever truly been in control of the situation. Reality was just getting harder to avoid because I didn’t have the comforting sex to hide behind.

The next weekend was Halloween and my friends had talked me into throwing a last minute party at my house. I wrestled with whether or not to invite Joe. We hooked up earlier in the week and the sex had been what I’d expected it to be the first night: mechanical and careless. We might as well have been two strangers. And he never responded to a text I sent him after class the next day asking if he wanted to hang out. I hated being ignored more than I hated indifferent sex. He didn’t deserve to be included in a party when he didn’t care about excluding me. But I knew I wouldn’t enjoy the party completely if I knew he wouldn’t be there. There was still the possibility he would show
up being “Nice Joe.” Being near him still gave me this odd rush of anxious excitement mixed with calmness. He was both poison and antidote mixed together. I emailed him the invitation.

While I cleaned the house before the party, I wondered whether or not he would even show up. If not to see me, the opportunity to drink with a bunch of people seemed like it would be incentive enough for him. At 5pm I received a very excited text from him (he even put an exclamation point after his “Hey”) asking if he should bring anything to the party. I texted back “booze.” I felt a sense of security knowing I would see him even though I had no idea how it would turn out.

The party was going strong two hours in. I wasn’t much of a party decorator, I usually just bought some snacks and booze and expected the guests to enhance the scene, but this was the first party I’d thrown in grad school and I wanted it to be special. I wanted a festive ambience to make up for how confused and empty I was feeling inside. When Joe showed up it was like the party could really start for me. Things went from moving at a fast, frenetic pace to a slower, more tolerable speed. I was able to concentrate when people talked to me. I wasn’t wondering when he would arrive. He brought a bottle of champagne and a bottle of bourbon. Apparently he had taken my request for booze quite literally. He was dressed as a “Binder Full of Women,” the phrase made famous by Mitt Romney. He had attached a white binder to his crotch and written the word “WOMEN” across the cover. It was tastelessly funny, kind of like Joe. He was already drunker than I’d ever seen.

“She’s ya go!” he said, shoving the bottles in my face.
“Thanks,” I muttered. His eyes looked brown; dirty.

As usual, we hardly talked during the whole party. I couldn’t bring myself to converse with him like everything was okay. I could control that much. I wanted him to make the first move. He hugged people and told them he loved them way too often. He told loud stories. At one point he spilled his drink on the floor, which pissed me off since I had just cleaned it.

_I spend a lot of time thinking about whether or not I’m an idiot…_

Around midnight a lot of guests wanted to check out the Halloween festivities in town. I preferred to stay where I could keep an eye on Joe, but if my party was leaving then I would go with it. We all broke off into different groups on the walk into town and I couldn’t find him. The idea that I was not going to see him for the rest of the night was unacceptable. The panicky feeling in my stomach returned. Okay, I gave up. Attraction, obsession, whatever this was had won. I would contact him. Almost against my will I sent him several texts asking where he was. He didn’t respond. I never thought he might actually end up back at my house. I pictured him talking up some random woman on the street and going home with her. Disappointed, I walked back to my house with Karen, but the majority of people went home.

When we got to my house, Michelle, who had also been to the party, was sitting on my porch.

“Hey, Kyle,” she said. “Joe was just here and he was so wasted.”

“He came back?” I asked.

“Yes, we came back together,” she said.
Together?

“But he was so drunk,” she said. “And he was trying to drink more so your roommate and I had to walk him home.”

“Jesus,” I said, sitting on the porch ledge.

“Also,” Michelle said. She sat next to me. “He came on to me.”

“What?” I said.

“He was trying to get me to come home with him,” she said. “But I told him I knew you were into him and had some kind of thing going on. I mean, I’m in an open relationship, but I’m not going to mess around on friends.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He just said something like, ‘Kyle and I haven’t defined anything.’”

“Ugh,” Karen said. “Charming.”

“But, Kyle,” Michelle said. “If you want him to come over I can make that shit happen.”

Before I knew what she was doing, she took my phone out of my hand and texted him. She handed the phone back to me. I looked to see what she’d sent.

Baby, I wanna suck your dick. Let’s fuck until the sun comes up. I’m in my bed.

I just stared at the keys with my mouth open. It stated what I wanted (mostly) but I would never have thought of writing it that way. I’d sent sexy texts before or “sexts,” but they’d always been something like “Wish I was in bed with you.” Although, I had accused him of being a cock block the week before and he hadn’t minded. He’d been drunk, though, the way he was drunk now. We heard a door slam down the street and
then footsteps walking quickly toward the house: Joe. I kept my head down, embarrassed for him - and for me. The others left after he arrived, including Karen, who said she was feeling sick from drinking too much. I didn’t know what to say to Joe as we both awkwardly stood on the porch so I just told him something true.

“I’m so hungry,” I said. “But I don’t really have any food in the house.” He looked down, like he was thinking of something. Then he said, “I’m trying to think of what I could make you. I have…no I don’t have that…Umm, I can make you…pancakes.”

I never thought I’d end up sitting in his kitchen while he cooked for me. We said little as he mixed the batter and poured it into neat circles. When it was ready, we took our plates into the living room where he turned on the TV, our usual routine. When we finished eating he pulled me to him, like the night of the romance movie, and I stretched my body over the length of his. Being together this way was so nice when he let it be. I sucked on his neck until he moaned. He wriggled out of his pants and lay expectantly beneath me.

“Why did you ignore my text Wednesday night?” I blurted out.

“What?” he asked, opening his eyes.

“Why did you ignore my text after class Wednesday night?”

“I didn’t,” he said, shaking his head. “I went home right after class and went to bed. I was exhausted.”

“Well, why couldn’t you have just texted me that the next day?” Our faces were inches apart.
“Because you’d sent it the night before,” he said, sighing. “I didn’t think it was important to text back at that point.”

“Did you come on to Michelle tonight?” I asked. “She said you were begging her to come home with you. Were you?”

“No,” he said, still lying beneath me. “She was coming on to me. I mean, honestly, I probably would have fucked her tonight but I wasn’t coming on to her.”

“What!”

“Kyle,” he said, frustrated. “I can’t be a boyfriend right now.”

“Why not?” I asked. I regretted saying this as soon as it came out of my mouth. I wished I’d said that he didn’t need to go around fucking everybody just because he wasn’t interested in being with one person.

“I just got out of a two year relationship,” he said. “I’m only going to be here for a couple years.”

“Well could you at least not fuck anybody else in the grad office, please?” I said.

“Umm,” he said, cracking a sheepish smile and looking up at the ceiling.

“Who else have you fucked?!” He was spreading through the office like a cold.

“Laura…” he said.

“You fucked Laura?!”

“It was only one time,” he said.

“I need to leave,” I said, getting up.

“No, no, no,” he said, pulling me back. “It was right at the beginning of the year and it was only one time. We both regret it. We avoid each other. She got all weird after
it happened and now we just don’t talk.” He rubbed my back. “But I like you, Kyle. I
don’t want you to think I don’t like you.” He admitted that he liked me. His sincerity
was dubious considering how drunk he was and that he was trying to keep me from
walking out the door, but it felt wonderful to hear. I hadn’t expected it. I thought he’d
simply say, “You said you were cool with a casual relationship.” His response surprised
me the way his first hug surprised me; and the first night we slept together; and the night
he told me he couldn’t say he was sorry. He may have just said he liked me to get me to
have sex with him, but I was not going to do it that night. Too much had happened. He
didn’t pressure me, though – something else I wasn’t expecting. For the rest of the night
we just lay together and talked about school and books. He complimented my writing.
Before we fell asleep he made one more unexpected statement.

“I love having sex with you,” he said. I was lying on my stomach and he was
spooning me. “I know you say you’re really inexperienced, but it doesn’t show. You
know what you want and you know what you’re doing. Okay, that’s it. I just wanted to
tell you everything since we’re confessing tonight.”

“Thanks,” I simply said, stifling the joy these compliments gave me. Nobody had
ever said I was good in bed. I was always self-conscious about how well I satisfied my
partners. Assuming he was telling the truth. But why would somebody lie about that?
Why would they want to encourage somebody who was bad at sex to keep having it? I
fell into an untroubled sleep, hoping things wouldn’t be different in the morning.

They weren’t.
He covered me with the blanket when he saw it had slipped off of me in the night. He never stopped touching me, whether it was to wrap his arms around me or stroke me from breasts to groin. This was the kind of attention I’d been craving from him. And he was giving it to me – he didn’t have to give it to me. Part of him must have wanted it, too. I sat up and peeled off my T-shirt, tossing it on the floor.

“Cute shirt,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said. I lay back down with him, ready for whatever would happen, but he just held me. This time I wasn’t riddled with self-doubt about why we weren’t having sex. I knew he was extremely hung over. Sometimes it was like he was trying to be the next Bukowski. His eyes looked lighter today, clearer. I still couldn’t tell what color they were, though.

“Ugh, I’m not usually one of those people who says, ‘I’ll never drink again,’ but I think I reached that point this morning,” he said, rubbing his temples.

“Ya know,” I said. “Michelle was the one who ‘sexted’ you last night. She took my phone out of my hand and did it.”

“I wondered why you were all just sitting on the porch!” he said. “I was totally confused.”

“She’s so off-putting about sex and making awkward comments purely for shock value,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “She seems kind of crazy.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. My head had taken residence against his chest, its usual place when we lay together. “And Sean was kind of putting the moves on me last night.”
“Really?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “He was, like, putting his arm around me and squeezing my hip. He was really drunk, though.”

“Huh,” he said. “He was putting the moves on you.”

We stayed in bed into the early afternoon. We never mentioned the confessions from the night before. If I mentioned them, I risked finding out he might have forgotten saying them. I didn’t want to know that much truth. I needed to keep this pleasant calmness last night had given me.

“What are you doing with Joe?” Karen asked later that night at her house. “You were so mad at him and now what’s changed? I mean, he told you he would have fucked Michelle. He is not a giver, he’s a taker.”

“I don’t know that anything’s changed,” I said. I could feel myself getting defensive. “But I feel like we have more of an understanding now…”

“Oh, he made you some pancakes,” she said. “Big whoop. That’s the first decent thing he’s done for you.”

“Look, Karen,” I said, raising my voice. “Not all of us have the ideal boyfriend like you. Sometimes you just have to work with what you have. It’s not like I’m going to marry the guy.”

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt,” she said.

She didn’t understand that the way I felt when I was with him overruled any possibility of getting hurt. I couldn’t see beyond the attraction, especially since there was a possibility he actually had feelings for me beyond sexual.
After class the following week, he was still attentive. We sat together at a table with the others, but mainly talked to each other, rarely breaking the conversation to speak to anybody else.

“Michelle still maintains that you came on to her,” I said, sipping the beer he’d bought me.

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Well, I know she’s shady,” I said. “Because yesterday she told Karen that I sexted you myself Saturday night and that it was ‘so awkward’ for her.” I still wondered if Joe had come on to her, but I kept it to myself.

“I was mad because I thought you had told Michelle you liked me before telling me,” he said.

“I didn’t,” I said. I didn’t know what he meant by that. He had no idea that I actually liked him even though we had been sleeping together for a month? Did he really think I would keep having sex with somebody if I didn’t at least like them a little bit? What did it matter if I told a girlfriend before telling him? Girls did this all the time. He got hung up on strange things.

“Let’s get breakfast this weekend,” he said. Was this really happening? He was never the one to suggest we do something or make plans. Maybe his confessions on Saturday night had been genuine. When we got to his apartment, I couldn’t help but say that when I looked at Laura in the office I felt weird, as if I had slept with her. “Don’t do that,” he said. “Don’t go there.” The way he said it made me feel like I’d been crazy for bringing it up. Like what we had was different. The sex that night and morning was
hungry and desperate – like the first time. I couldn’t believe how much things had turned around since just the previous weekend.

When I saw him at school on Friday I invited him out for dinner and beer with friends that night around six. He said he had to teach until 6:15 but he might make it. He looked tired and out of it, as usual. But he did end up coming to the bar where we had a great time. I wondered if he would feel pressure or like I was taking things too seriously or moving too fast because I had invited him to dinner with just my girlfriends. But he sat comfortably next to me and engaged in answering questions about himself and in listening. When my friend Hayley brought up the Michelle texting incident, Joe seemed amused.

“Yeah,” he said. “I went back to the house because I thought Kyle sent the text.” So he liked this form of communication. He liked bluntness. He would come if I called. He wanted me.

But when we went back to his place he seemed more reserved. Distant. We ate burritos he made and watched TV in silence. The apartment was freezing again. I didn’t even bother telling him I was cold. I didn’t want to give him a chance to disappoint me by not warming me up. When he went outside to smoke a cigarette, I bundled up in my coat. Apparently, he didn’t notice my additional clothing when he came back in. We watched hours of more TV. When what seemed liked the 100th episode of Twin Peaks was over, we sat in the dark and stared at the blank screen. Then he looked over at me.

“Are you cold?” he asked.
“Um, yeah,” I said. “Why do you think I put my coat on? Because I like the way I look in it so much?”

He finally reached out his arm and put it around me. I leaned into him. We sat that way for a while. He seemed perfectly content to just sit in the dark even though it was three in the morning. Maybe he wanted me to leave and that’s why he didn’t suggest we go to bed - so I did it for him. “I’m so tired. Let’s go to bed.” I didn’t want sex, all I wanted was sleep. I wasn’t sure if we would touch as we fell asleep or go to opposite sides of the bed. When I climbed in after him, he wrapped me in his arms and I was soon asleep.

In the morning I got up to go to the bathroom. The house was colder than ever. When I got back in bed I tried to put my arms around him. “Ah!” he said, moving away from me. “You’re cold!” Was he fucking kidding me? Yes, I was cold. Hence the reason I was crazy enough to think he might want to warm me up. He eventually allowed me to lay against him. Then I started trying to interest him in sex. I was ready. I kissed his neck the way he liked. I grazed his beard with my lips. During the night he had woken me with kissing and I had given him what he wanted. Now it was my turn.

“I want to have sex,” I said into his ear.

“Now?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “You don’t want to? I know your room is right next to the kitchen but…”

“Yeah,” he said. “And my roommate’s out there right now.”
I was hung up about the balance of power. I didn’t like how he seemed to be the director of sexual operations. We always had sex when he wanted. Normally I wouldn’t want to have sex when a roommate was nearby because I wouldn’t want to make things awkward for anybody. I didn’t even want to have sex – at this point I just wanted to do it out of frustration because I felt he owed me one. I wanted to show him that I was not going to be navigated by him, a poor excuse to have sex. This motivation for sex had gotten so twisted that it had nothing to do with what I really wanted it to mean. I wanted to have sex with him to show him affection, to make him feel good. I wanted it to mirror something like making love rather than fucking, but I couldn’t admit this. He began talking about all the work he had to do for the day. It seemed he wanted me to leave. He gave me one of his awkward hugs good-bye. I’m tired of this rollercoaster, I thought, as I walked to my house. He likes me…He likes me not…This is fucked.

I was doing homework later that evening when the idea occurred to me. I hadn’t planned on trying to see him that night, or maybe ever again. But I still felt like he owed me sex somehow. And I knew he was being “Moody Joe” today. Moody Joe wouldn’t want to be affectionate and stay the night. I didn’t want him to if he was going to do things like push me away me away for being cold or act indifferently without warning. I convinced myself that I just wanted him to come over and fuck me and I thought he would if I texted him the message. He had come running only the weekend before. He didn’t mind bluntness. To hell with formalities. I grabbed my phone and texted:

OK, this time it’s me sexting J  Sex in my bed later tonight? (Not the whole night). Or are you too tired?
I didn’t know whether or not he would respond. I thought he would at least text, “Not tonight” or something. I didn’t put my life on hold to wait, though. I went over to Karen’s house and he could respond if he wanted. I never heard from him, though. I woke up the next morning angry and offended. I couldn’t believe he would ignore me when I thought I was giving him what he wanted. I didn’t offer sex to just anybody. I thought he would jump at the chance considering he “loved” having sex with me and I told him he didn’t have to stay. That’s like the Holy Grail for guys. He made me feel like a fool. I couldn’t believe he’d ignored me again. And I had put myself in that position. There was no way I could contact him now and still look at myself in the mirror. I couldn’t just let it go either. I wanted him to know why I was mad at him even if he didn’t care. I needed to do what I never did with my ex – be completely honest with Joe about how I felt and what I thought of him. I knew he probably wouldn’t care. I just needed to do it for me. I’d often heard girlfriends say they needed to tell their exes how they felt – especially when they’d been jilted – because it gave them “closure.” I also wanted him to know that despite everything, I didn’t regret sleeping with him like Laura did. I just regretted the way he treated me. And I wanted him to know that I was concerned about him. I could see him ending up a sad, lonely man because he didn’t seem to care about people. I emailed him all of this over Thanksgiving break.  

On the Tuesday evening after break, I was shocked when he texted me to see if I was home because he wanted to talk. I didn’t know what to expect. Would he yell? Would he be mean? I had been pretty harsh at certain points in the email, telling him that I had a problem with him sleeping with any woman who seemed willing. I’d also said
that I had never known a person whose interest in and engagement with others ran so hot and cold. It would be a challenge for me to stand by my anger – but I had to try. I had invited this possibility with that email.

I sat on the porch and waited for him despite the cold. I didn’t want my roommates to overhear. When he showed up he took out paper and a can of shitty Pabst Blue Ribbon. He handed me the beer. “I thought that might make this easier.” Another inauspicious statement from him. I wished I could tell him that I didn’t need a beer to talk to him, but I opened it gratefully.

“Okay,” he said, looking at the papers in his hand. “I made some notes.” He looked them over and then said, “You pissed me off.”

*Now you know how I feel*, I thought. “Look,” I said. “Before you begin, I just want to say that I know I’m not perfect. And maybe I should have talked to you instead of emailing but you are not the easiest person to approach.”

“I know I’m not,” he said, opening his own beer.

“But, I just – I care about you, Joe.” Even though I didn’t want to.

“I care about you, too,” he said, setting down his notes. “You’re, like, the most awesome person I’ve met here. I feel close to you and Sean and Jordan and Nicole. And I just want to say that I moved around a lot when I was a kid so I have trouble meeting people and maintaining friendships. I always make friends at first and then I don’t know how to keep it going. I admit, I’m a fucked up person.”

*It’s even more fucked up that you’re still using that as an excuse*, I thought. If he knew this about himself then why didn’t he try to change?
“I really just wanted us to be friends,” he said. “But you wanted sex and, in my experience, sex and friendship don’t work very well.”

His words stung like a sucker punch to the gut. So this was all my fault? I had acted alone in the procuring of the sex? What about the look? What about him saying he liked me? What about his comment saying he liked having sex with me? What about the damn dating site rating that he never acknowledged? He was taking it all back as if none of it were true and he hadn’t wanted any of it. He made it sound like he’d only had sex with me because he didn’t know how to refuse Kyle, the poor little nympho. He was retreating back to the dismissive way he’d acted when I first emailed him. He was more of a coward than I thought. He could pat himself on the back all he wanted for coming over to “talk it out” with me, but he didn’t really want to be honest. If he were honest he would admit he was attracted to me but not seriously interested in a relationship. Why else would he have sex with me for a month when he never saw me as anything more than a friend? Like he accidentally fell into my vagina every time.

“Also,” he continued. “You pissed me off when you sent me that text.”

“I did?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I was playing video games and I saw that text from you and I couldn’t believe it. It didn’t even sound like you. I just couldn’t believe you would do that considering the confusion with Michelle and her text. It totally offended me. I mean, I have feelings, Kyle.”

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings,” I said, shocked.
I offended him by offering casual sex? He had never minded my bluntness before. Now nothing made sense...I’m interested in long-term relationships, short-term, casual sex...

“And you keep going on about Laura and me,” he said. “You’re making it into a bigger deal than it really was. It was one time, and you said I had sex with her because I was lonely. It wasn’t because I was lonely – I was justhorny.”

Why was this even an issue? He told me that he had regretted it. Now he apparently had no regrets – because he had been horny. He was a horny man who was insulted when I suggested casual sex.

“Sean really likes you, though,” he said.

“What?”

“Yeah, he told me he really likes you. I talked you up to him and told him how awesome you were.”

“Oh,” I said. He was hitting me with so many random subjects, I felt like a dart board. “Sean’s nice but…”

“But you tend to go for assholes like me,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Well, there also just wasn’t anybody I was interested in or attracted to all last year.” He wanted me to be with somebody else? This was not the way I wanted him to feel.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “What about Adam? He’s a good guy, I’d fuck Adam.”
I thought I would scream. His insensitivity was unbelievable. Had he even really been offended by the text?

“I want to give you a hug,” he said. He bent down and hugged me the way an uncle might. Unlike the first hug he gave me, there was no mistaking what this one meant.

“I know I probably owe you a hundred apologies,” he said. He didn’t actually apologize. He couldn’t let himself say he was sorry. The porch light illuminated his eyes so I could finally see what color they were. Had they really been blue all along? He looked like a stranger. When he left I felt like he had taken something of mine. I no longer felt anxiety like I’d lost something, the way I usually felt when things weren’t working out with him. I had anxiety over the thing I knew he’d taken: my heart. I went upstairs and sat down in front of my computer. I had one more email to write.

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4. I'm truly sorry that you were angry or felt cheap by the text that I sent you but I don't apologize for doing it. It seems that most of our relationship was based on sex so I don't see the problem with me having some sexual agency and being up front about suggesting it. I honestly thought you would want to since you displayed no anger or embarrassment about it the week before. The only reason I said it wouldn't be an all night thing was because we had just been together the night before and we had both gotten together other times without spending the night. I meant it to be playful. I certainly didn't mean to disrespect you. My major problem with your reaction, though, is that you say my text didn't sound like me. Well, I dealt with fluctuation in your personality a lot. Sometimes you were sweet and affectionate and then without warning you'd be disinterested or treat me like a buddy. When I brought that up the other night you just seemed to dismiss it as "going with the territory
of a casual relationship." So you can decide what mood to be in or what direction the relationship goes and I can't? Only the weekend before you admitted you probably would have fucked Michelle so I don't think my text was any more insulting than that. At least I was extending the invitation to you and not some random person.

As convenient as it would be to be friends, I think too much has happened for us to be that. I'm just not comfortable with it. At this point in my life I only have patience for friendships where I feel like there is an equal amount of stability and support from each person. Obviously we'll work together in class and see each other on campus but I think it's best if we leave it at professional acquaintances from now on.

- Kyle