



NADIA MONTGOMERY: A NOVEL

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by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PART	
I. ....	4
II. ....	40
III. ....	102
IV. ....	162
WORKS CITED .....	211

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Sixty-five years ago, J.D. Salinger published *The Catcher in the Rye* and captivated readers with its moody, cynical narrator and coming-of-age motif. The novel tapped into an element of adolescent existence that resonated with readers so greatly that today, it is still being taught in high schools across America. While it is inarguably a highly influential work within the history of American literature, *The Catcher in the Rye* has perhaps gone stale—the issues and environment Holden lived in are now foreign to modern-day readers—but what will take its place in the hands and hearts of today’s young adults?

During my research, I found that there were few, if any, novels that shared such a coming-of-age journey as *The Catcher in the Rye* does, and even fewer that feature a female main character. In an article, “Why There are no Female Versions of *The Outsiders* or *The Catcher in the Rye*,” Paul Thompson attributes this absence of female-led classics to an overall invalidation of the female experience in literature and society’s tendency to write off works of fiction featuring women as frivolous. I found this lack of material troubling and decided to fashion my own attempt at writing a novel from a female viewpoint inspired by Holden’s story that would captivate readers and validate the experiences of young women.

In crafting this thesis project, my goal was to create a Young Adult coming-of-age novel that features a female protagonist and the struggles she has internally, which



influence how she views the world. The twenty-first century female perspective of this work is crucial. *The Catcher in the Rye* follows white, sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield as he runs away to New York City in the 1940's, whereas my thesis follows biracial, twenty-one-year-old Nadia Montgomery as she runs away to Washington, D.C. in the current year.

As I wrote this, I aimed to capture the complexity of the female experience. I thought it was important that Nadia celebrate female role models, such as Beyonce, Michelle Obama, and Ada Lovelace, and I also thought it was important to write a predominantly female cast of characters to demonstrate how women need to support each other, and also to provide the reader with more than one female character to study. Additionally, I sought to include various elements of a woman's daily life in order to validate those experiences, such as the desire to feel and look good, the shame women are made to feel for having sex, and the fear of possibly being harmed by a male predator on the streets.

In the spirit of *The Catcher in the Rye*, however, I also aimed to parallel some of Holden Caulfield's qualities and experiences. One of the themes I deal with in this is the compulsion to run away—both physically and emotionally. The premise for my story is that Nadia runs away from her college town and her classwork obligations, at the same time she consistently attempts to run away from her memories, feelings, and vulnerabilities; thus, she is often defensive, blunt, and moody, viewing the world in a cynical, disaffected manner—much like Holden. However, it was not my goal to merely rewrite *The Catcher in the Rye* from a female point of view, and therefore while elements

of Holden and his journey—his slightly detestable and ungrateful nature, his poor academic performance, his eventual acceptance of therapy—may be present in my thesis, Nadia is still her own unique personality and embarks on a journey true to her character.

The process has been emotionally grueling, but I have spent a lot of time listening to Nadia's voice form and watching her tale unfold. I believe that I have created an insightful, emotional, and telling story that taps into what it means to be a young woman in today's world. Ultimately, Nadia faces many of the issues I've observed my fellow women—and even myself—cope with and endure, and at the end of it all, she represents something larger than herself: the challenges of inhabiting young womanhood in a world vastly different from the one Holden knew, making her voice and her journey incredibly relevant to today's young readers.

## PART ONE

Ellis says I'm "unapologetic." She says I'm a lot of things, but she also says I'm unapologetic and I think that's very fitting. Ellis is my best friend and so if anyone's qualified to call me things, it's her. She knows me better than my lousy parents, or that stupid boy Julian I had a crush on for a week, or even my aunt—who's basically my favorite adult—and especially better than I know myself. But if I had myself all figured out, that'd be really boring anyway, don't ya think?

Ellis says I'm unapologetic a lot, but she also said it one day when we were in line to check out at Goodwill.

We were shopping at Goodwill to get some new fall clothes. It was the beginning of October, and the summer heat was finally cooling off, and as with any fairly dramatic weather change, Ellis and I were itching to get some new clothes. I was looking to stock up on some flannels, and she was on the hunt for some cozy sweaters. She and I are all about shopping second-hand because it's cheaper and better for the environment, to re-purpose clothing rather than buy sweat shop clothing and then throw it all away in four months. We like to be activists when we can be.

In any case, I had found a really dope orange and yellow flannel, along with some cool combat boots and a black velvet shirt, and she had picked out an armful's worth of sweaters—all of which I approved during our fitting room session—and we had headed

to the checkout. There were two people in line so far, and both of them only had a few items. As we approached, at the last minute, I got distracted by a wooden horse figurine displayed on the checkout aisle end cap, so I took a few steps out of line to pick it up, because as much as my mother hounded me as a child not to touch everything in stores, I still have to touch things I'm interested in. Anyway, so I turned over the wooden horse—it was unpainted, slender, the size of my hand—and, when satisfied and bored with it a second later, put it back and stepped back beside Ellis.

“Go ahead, cut me,” I heard from behind me.

I turned around, because I got that weird sense when you know somebody's talking to or about you even though there was no pretense, and there, behind me, was this middle-aged, small white woman with graying brown hair and a shopping cart piled full of clothes. She wasn't looking at me, though; she was staring ahead, her eyes set firmly on some point beyond us—I don't know, maybe she was looking out into the parking lot. I wasn't sure what the heck she was talking about, so I asked, “What was that?”

Ellis kind of half-twisted around to see what this exchange was, innocently holding her sweaters in her arms. I was focused on this old bat.

“I said, ‘Go ahead, cut me.’ It's fine. I was here first, though.” The woman would not look at me. She was resolute in staring beyond me, and I was so annoyed I didn't even really look at her face or anything, but her whole demeanor was aggressive, especially in the way she was defiantly leaning against the cart handle, hip popped and shoulders tense.

My blood was really going at the nerve of this lady. My mouth just took over. “Uh, what? We were here first. We got behind these people and then you showed up. What, you want to go first or something? You have a whole cart of shit and I have three things.”

I glanced at Ellis and her eyes were wide and her mouth was shut as she turned back around in line and stepped up to the conveyor belt to set her stuff down. She knew once my attitude came out it was best to stay out of the way, even if she disagreed with how I handled things.

The lady behind us pursed her lips and cocked her head a little bit, and she finally made eye contact with me. Her glare was like a dare, but she didn't say anything. I took it as a surrender on her part.

Before I let it go once and for all, I had to say one more thing. “And if it's ‘fine,’ then there was literally no point in bringing it up.” With that, I turned my back to her and crossed my arms, my clothing items draped over my crossed arms.

“God, you're so unapologetic,” Ellis whispered, suppressing a smile and shaking her head in bewilderment at my confrontation. I couldn't help but beam and shrug.

So anyway, it was a successful shopping trip all around. We even got a student discount.

We got the student discount at Goodwill because we're college students and one of the perks of attending college is that you get discounts on certain things, which only slightly makes up for the vast amount of debt incurred by being foolish enough to go to college,

but that's just how it is these days, so if you're gonna basically be forced to get a degree, you might as well take advantage of that student discount all you can. I go to Bentley State University, which sounds like it could be all prestigious but it's really just a basic state school. It's not bad—I met Ellis here, so at least one good thing came of it, anyway.

Which is kind of miraculous because I can't stand most of the people at my college.

“Actually, I prefer the term ‘Caucasian,’ not ‘white.’”

I tuned in during Human Evolution class just in time to hear this particular gem of a comment from some white girl sitting up front. I was sitting towards the back—which I usually do because I don't need to be in the front rows, all up in the professor's business and the professor all up in my business, too—and so her voice was faint to me, but she still said what she said and I couldn't believe it.

I'm very light-skinned. I mean, my father is very mixed, so I have a nice tint to my skin, but some people are rude enough to call me white. I correct them, because I am what I am and I want people to know what I am, but if I were white, I'd own it—I wouldn't beat around the bush with this “Caucasian” nonsense, and I certain as hell wouldn't be ignorant enough to interrupt class with some comment about being offended to be called white. I mean, my mom's white and she's never in my life said anything about preferring to be called Caucasian, and my mom is very vocal about things I do that she doesn't like, so that's how I know I'm not out of line.

The classroom was very long and narrow, and there were a lot of students in it because it's a basic science class that a lot of people have to take, so the professor's

comments got drowned out in all the shuffling of papers and keyboard clicking and the super loud air conditioning unit that lulls me to sleep. Dr. Jameson's voice didn't carry very well, either, which is another reason why I was hardly paying attention in the first place, but I was kind of curious how he responded. He was a younger guy, very fit, and had dark hair that was balding, which made me feel bad for him, and he always cracked me up because he'd wear button-up shirts and sweater vests, and even from the back I could see his armpit sweat stains when he lifted his arms. Anyway, just from watching him it looked like he sort of shrugged off her comment and resumed with the lesson, but my eyes were rolled so far back in my skull that I could practically see my brain short-circuiting from my irritation at her stupid comment.

As Dr. Jameson resumed talking about Austria-holograms or whatever the pre-human ancestor of the day was, I tuned back out and turned my attention back to my laptop. I had Facebook open in one tab, Tumblr in another tab, and movie theater showings in another. I know how to pirate literally any movie or TV show to my Amazon FireStick, but there's something that I just love about going to the movies. Probably most of it has to do with the incredibly salt-and-butter-saturated popcorn—it certainly isn't the broken theater seats or the sticky floors—but I love going to the movies. In any case, nothing good was showing, so I closed that tab and continued to scroll through Tumblr.

Then another girl in front of me raised her hand, except I knew this girl; I didn't like her either. She had really long, bleach blond hair with dark brown roots showing, a really oval face, and she dressed like she was still in middle school, by which I mean she'd wear these over-sized Yoda hoodies or other ill-fitting apparel, and her wire glasses

sat on the very edge of her nose so she literally talked with her head tilted way back. I knew this because not only was she in my Human Evolution class, but also she was in two other of my classes, which was my misfortune because she was always raising her hand straight up and providing very unsolicited, know-it-all opinions.

“Ummmmmm...” And that’s another thing. She always began her comments with a long, drawn-out, high-pitched “um.”

I just can’t stand students who talk too much in class. I’m in many discussion-based classes because I’m an English major, and so in those cases, it makes sense that students contribute a lot during class, but in these lecture-style classes, unless you have a question, you need to shut up and take notes. But this girl monopolized the floor and was always providing these slightly-relevant, “I read once in some article...” comments to what the professor was teaching, and I get so annoyed with that.

Anyway, she was also sitting in the row right in front of me, which is at least halfway back, and I never understood why she would sit so far back if she intended to have all these discussions basically one-on-one in front of the whole class. At least sit in the first row, so I can tune you out better.

I looked over at the guy next to me and rolled my eyes because I needed to share my annoyance with someone. He glanced at me without moving his head and gave a small smirk. He had on a black backwards baseball cap, and he had this whole “James Franco” from *Freaks and Geeks* vibe going on, jean jacket and everything, and—actually, he was pretty cute. I smiled back.



I went back to Tumblr and kept scrolling through pictures. I stopped scrolling to read a short comic about three panels long that hypothesized what animals are truly thinking. The one was about how birds sound so beautiful and majestic, but the comic pretended that the bird was shouting some obscenity in bird-language, and I snorted in amusement—and the James Franco dude looked over at me again. I angled my laptop screen towards him more so that he could read the comic, and as his eyes scanned the picture on my screen, I noted that he had green eyes. Beautiful green eyes.

He smiled, and we exchanged another look before I turned my laptop back towards me and continued scrolling.

At some point, the know-it-all girl had stopped talking, and Dr. Jameson was describing some diagram he had projected onto the white board—sorry, “Caucasian” board.

After another ten minutes, I got bored with Tumblr and started looking through Facebook. I don’t really give a shit what anyone on Facebook is doing, but it’s more entertaining than Human Evolution. It’s not that I don’t like Human Evolution; it’s just that the chairs are so uncomfortable, and Dr. Jameson’s voice is so far away and so soothing, and I really would fall asleep if I didn’t go on websites like Facebook, and what’s more disrespectful? Falling asleep in class or perusing Facebook half-heartedly? I was also kind of hoping that James Franco boy would see my name at the top of the webpage.

“Well, we only have five minutes left, and I don’t want to get into a new chapter, so we’ll start off class on Thursday with the next unit,” Dr. Jameson was saying. Sweet. I

closed my laptop and grabbed my backpack from the floor beside me to start putting it away. Everyone around me started shuffling and packing up their stuff, too, closing notebooks and standing up.

“Don’t forget about your second exam!” Dr. Jameson shouted over the bustle. “I know it’s in two weeks, but start studying now! Cramming doesn’t work!”

I stood up, zipping up my backpack which was sitting on the desk. “Cramming totally works. I do it all the time and I’m a straight-C student,” I said, more or less to myself but also out loud so James Franco would hear.

I shouldered my backpack and looked up as James was shouldering his backpack. “For real, I don’t even know how to study,” he said with a sideways smile.

I shrugged. “Well, if you wanted to figure out how to study together... You know where I sit,” I said, raising my eyebrows and sheepishly smiling. We both made our way out to the aisle from our row of desks.

“Hm, I’m willing to learn,” he said, grabbing his backpack straps so that his elbows stuck out.

He was a couple steps behind me, and I turned around and smiled with my mouth half-open, sticking my tongue out slightly to the side. “See ya Thursday,” I said, and walked out of that goddamn Human Evolution classroom.

I was making myself comfortable in a third-floor hallway of Kellerman Hall. I tend to do that—make myself comfortable—but this was made easier in Kellerman Hall because they have lounge chairs set up along the hallway for when you’re waiting between classes

or something. I always wait in the hallway before class until the very last moment, so I don't have to be in the damn stuffy classroom any longer than I have to be.

Kellerman Hall is the English Department building, so naturally it's one of the older, crappier buildings on campus, but they try to make up for it by setting up all these cushiony, colorful chairs. I'll take what I can get. I was sideways in one of those chairs, my feet slung over the arm rest and the side of my head leaning against the back. I was listening to music through my ear buds and playing Solitaire on my phone. Solitaire is dull as all get out, but it came on my phone, and I refuse to download any apps, so that's what I have for entertainment.

The fluorescent lighting in the hallways is very harsh and flickering, and the floor is a very uninspired white tile that sheens and reflects the fluorescent lighting so that the whole hallway is this headache-inducing white brightness that hurts your eyes, kind of reminiscent of how high school hallways feel. The only picturesque part of the Kellerman hallways is the giant windows at the end of each hallway, spanning from the floor to the top of that floor all the way up the three floors. It's an L-shaped building, so there are six of these windows.

These cushiony chairs I was talking about earlier are grouped in twos or threes along each hallway, dispersed randomly between classrooms. I usually go for the green striped chair by the window wall, so I can absorb as much natural light as possible before subjecting myself to the classroom's dose of fluorescence, but today I had to sit near the elbow of the hallway because some bitch was sitting in my usual chair, which is fine or whatever, but then she had all her shit piled in the chair next to her—her water bottle, her

backpack, and her laptop. She was just sitting in the chair, listening to her music through ear buds and staring at her phone screen, not even appreciating the view of the window or watching the tiny little ant-people walk around in the parking lot below, and taking up two chairs in the meantime! She was a chubby girl, but all of her fit in the one chair, and there was easily enough foot space to set her backpack next to her feet. Or even between her and the window!

Clearly I'm not the kind of person to let these injustices go un-challenged, but right as I was reaching the top of the stairs, realized she was wrongfully taking up two chairs, and was about to ask her if I could take that seat, she gave a giant sneeze into her elbow, and when she brought her head up, she gave a hefty sniff, and I could hear all the mucus scuttling back up her nostrils.

So because I didn't want to get sick over one lousy chair, I grinded my teeth and walked right by her and continued on down the hallway until I found another empty cushiony chair that would do the trick. There were wooden benches along the hallway too, that I'm assuming were left over from the pre-cushiony-chair days but were in decent enough shape to keep around for the heck of it, but it's harder to get comfortable on a bench, as you can imagine, so I settled into this yellow polka-dotted chair instead. And because I didn't have a great view, I begrudgingly opened up my phone and searched for a little game to occupy my salty mind.

Anyway, I'm an English major, so that's why I was hanging around there and have so many feelings towards the building. A lot of people tell me that English seems an odd fit for me, on account of me being so brazen and vulgar sometimes, and because I

like so much to hate on English majors, but here I am. I guess I decided to study English because I do love books and reading and picking things apart, but also I'm English because I don't really have any serious passions. I don't even know if English is a passion—more of a hobby—but my parents basically didn't give me any other option than to go to college. I'm an only child, so they have the money, and plus, they only have one shot at raising a kid so they tried to do it “right.” Joke's on them because they screwed up way early on—before the divorce, even.

But yeah, I like to dog on English majors. Even though I am one, they suck as a group.

“Hey,” I heard from the world outside my ear buds, and I looked up from my riveting game of Solitaire to see some redheaded dude standing over my shoulder. Jesus Christ, it was Benny.

“Sup,” I said, nodding at him, pulling out one ear bud and twisting it between my fingers.

Benny is a skinny dude, fair-skinned, and that day he had a golfer's hat on. He's the perfect example of what I'm talking about with English majors. This is the kind of dude that must spend every waking moment with his nose in a book because for everything we read in class, he has five references to other similar works and inexplicably knows detailed background information about every author. He just brings up obscure references that only the professor understands, and then they share this moment of, “Wow, that author is great; we are so intellectual to know this author and their works. The rest of you should read this author, too.” He's got a goatee, too—Benny.

And actually he prefers to go by Benjamin but I call him Benny. It's kind of like how I prefer that people use the word "important," but instead he uses the phrase "of great import."

Anyway, when his head's not up his own ass, or a book's ass—if books have asses—or the professor's ass, then he's pestering me. His favorite thing to do is talk to me right before class starts, and I'm trying to SparkNote the reading. Benny will tell me about how he saw a guy in a dinosaur onesie skateboarding around campus, and I'll be on my phone, screaming in my head, "Leave me alone! I'm trying to SparkNote this book!"

But that day, I was not SparkNoting before class, because we were supposed to read *The Great Gatsby*, which I have incidentally read at least twice. It's short, and I love reading books with asshole characters.

"Have you started any of your papers yet?" he asked, sitting down in the green chair beside me. I should have put my backpack on the chair seat so no one would sit there.

"Haven't even thought about it," I said, still holding the one ear bud so that he could see I was ready to put it back in my ear at any second now. How dare he bother me outside of class to talk about schoolwork. I'll be damned if I think about any of my classes outside of the allotted class times.

Benny nodded, pursing his lips and looking off down the hallway, presumably out the giant window at the end of the hallway. He stroked his goatee—I'm not even kidding.

I put my ear bud back in.

“I can’t decide if I want to write about…” Benny started saying, and he went on about what grand ideas he was considering for his papers, but I couldn’t really hear him over my music, and I just nodded and made affirmative noises where they seemed appropriate based on his mannerisms. I pretended like my music was quiet enough for me to hear him, and besides, he didn’t notice anyway because the whole time he was speaking, he was staring upwards as if talking to the gods or something, which I’m sure he thought he was because he’s so absolutely profound, and he gently wafted his hand through the air as he spoke, and I completed a suit in Solitaire, before I interrupted him with the time and he rushed into the classroom.

I waited until three minutes after class started to make my entrance, and slunk straight to the back of the room.

“Don’t forget it’s your father’s birthday.” I got this text as I was watching TV at Ellis’s apartment. I do have other friends, by the way, but none of them are as cool as Ellis, and therefore I spend a lot less time with them.

“Goddammit,” I muttered, and started a new text message addressed to my father. Ellis had this great sectional couch that practically six people could sleep on. I mean, it wouldn’t be a very comfortable sleep, all crammed together, but it would serve its purpose dutifully if they were all drunkenly passed out. Anyway, I had myself sprawled out along the longer part of the couch. *Dateline* was playing—this was our Tuesday night. Neither of us had class on Wednesdays, and Ellis didn’t work the next morning, so we were having a sleepover.

“What?” Ellis asked. She was curled up under a blanket in the corner of the sectional taking a hit from a joint I had rolled. She ashed it in an ashtray sitting beside her on the couch cushion; the ash didn’t fall with the flick she gave it, so she had to gently brush it against the bottom of the ashtray so that it would fall off.

“My aunt texted me. I forgot it was my dad’s birthday,” I said. I typed, “Happy birthday” and hit send. There—my daughterly duties completed.

She leaned towards me, extending the joint with her arm. I sat up and took it from her.

“We need a joint-passing service,” she commented, settling back down into her corner. “So that we don’t have to get up every time it’s the other person’s turn.” Her apartment was dark except for the light from the TV and a lamp on the end table on her side of the couch, but I could see her shadowy, high grin.

“Dude, that would be so cool,” I said, hitting the joint and tasting the savory smoke. “It’s annoying because I’m basically doing a crunch every time we have to pass it, and that’s pretty upsetting to my strict ‘no exercise’ regime.”

“We’re so lazy!” she exclaimed, and giggled cutely, pulling the blanket up to her face. Her long, dirty blond hair framed her face, and she sighed contentedly. “Wait—you said it’s your dad’s birthday?”

“Yeah,” I said, and I ashed the joint in a “Las Vegas” ashtray sitting on her coffee table. Oh yeah; we each had our own ashtrays for minimal required movement. As Ellis said: we are so lazy.



“Are you gonna call him?” she asked, her voice getting spacey. I smoke a lot more than Ellis does, so my tolerance is a lot higher. She was already getting silly.

“No,” I said, doing a crunch and extending the joint to her. “It’s not like that. I texted him.”

“Well how old is he?” she asked, taking the joint from me.

I shrugged and shook my head. “I don’t know. Like, fifty?”

Ellis’s jaw dropped and she raised her eyebrows. “Fifty?! Happy fiftieth birthday!” She giggled again.

Eh, he probably wasn’t turning fifty—maybe he turned fifty last year, but I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t that close with my dad, nor my mom, for that matter, so I never paid much attention to it. I figure after you turn twenty-one, you join this club where your age has become irrelevant and not worth keeping track of.

I opened up the text from my aunt again, on second thought. “Thanks for the heads up,” I texted back to my aunt. Aunt Karen wasn’t even my dad’s sister—she was my mom’s sister—but she was really close with us, and had a pretty good memory for dates, unlike my mom and me. Actually, my parents are divorced, so it’s not even that my aunt had any obligation to my dad anymore, but Karen’s basically the most good-natured soul I know, so she stayed in touch with my dad’s side of the family anyway.

It’s also not that I would have “gotten in trouble” if I hadn’t told my dad “Happy birthday,” but it was better to keep in good enough graces with him because he kind of paid for my apartment and all my bills every month, and while he didn’t expect much from me, I figured I should at least do the bare minimum.

In any case, I didn't want to be talking about this, and so I tried to change the topic. "The neighbor totally did it. He was totally stalking that bitch!" I said to the TV after a short silence between Ellis and me.

Ellis shifted her focus from some ethereal point near the ceiling and zoned back into the real world, looking blankly at the TV. "What?" She remembered the joint between her thumb and pointer finger and handed it back to me.

"The neighbor," I said. "There's no way he didn't kill the redhead girl. The family already suspected that he was stalking her, and after she was murdered, they found a ton of her hair in his room, and some of her mail, and pictures taped up on his wall," I explained. She nodded, still watching the TV. "But the one dude was saying that they can't prosecute him because there's no evidence he killed her—just that he was stalking her—and he had some sort of alibi or something, which was clearly a lie, but..."

"Yeah, that's totally a red flag in my book," Ellis said. She looked around and picked up a book off the coffee table—it was *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which I had brought over to read in case I felt like it—and pretended to draw in it. "See? I'm drawing a red flag." She flopped the book down next to her and fell into a fit of giggles.

I took a substantial drag from the joint and chuckled. "You're ridiculous," I said. "But I'll kill *you* if you draw in my book."

She knew I was joking, and as I ashed the joint, she laughed and chanted, "Citizens arrest!" at the TV while pumping her fist.

On Thursday in Human Evolution class, I slunk to the same seat I sat in on Tuesday. I was really proud of myself because I showed up two minutes before class even started, and I plopped down in the chair, twisting to take off my backpack and unpacking myself, “setting up camp,” as I sometimes viewed it; I only wished I had s’mores to go with it.

The seat next to me, where the James Franco boy sat on Tuesday, was empty. I had made a bee-line to this same spot without looking around the room because I figured since we left on a good, somewhat flirtatious note last class, that he would just come back here this class, so we could make a habit of our interactions. I pulled my laptop out of my backpack and opened it, setting my backpack on the floor by my feet and waking my computer up.

“All right, let’s get started,” Dr. Jameson said, which is what he said at the beginning of every class period when what he really meant to say was, “Everybody shut the hell up, so I can do my job and get on with my life just like the rest of you.” If only he would allow me to translate for him.

I almost hadn’t even come to class today because my bed was so warm and so cozy, and I just bought a new package of cookies the other day I was dying to rip into on just the right occasion, smoking a good bowl and watching a movie—maybe *Kill Bill*, which was one of my favorites—but just before I had to leave I remembered the cute dude from last class, and I *had* said, “See ya Thursday” to him, so I should probably show up just to pursue whatever would come of that. So, I pulled on leggings and went to class after all.

It was five minutes into class, and he still hadn't shown up. At first I was thinking, "Nice, we have that in common—being late to class." But after the first ten minutes went by and I couldn't pay attention to even my Tumblr feed because I was waiting for him to show up, I started getting a little anxious. Why wasn't he here? Did something happen to his beautiful face? How were we supposed to go on the date I had planned for Friday night if he didn't show up so I could ask him out—or even better, so I could tempt him into asking me out? My ass was killing it in these leggings, as per usual, of course.

I really was too distracted to pay attention to Tumblr, so I actually took a gander at my surroundings. The classroom shades were drawn in front of the windows, like always, to make the room darker and drowsier. The girl sitting to my right was the same girl as last class, but the girl on the other side of her was different. Or maybe it was the same girl—ah, these girls all looked the same: some pink baseball cap with sorority letters stitched on it, pulled down so the bill of the hat was basically resting on the bridge of their damn noses, hair pulled into a sloppy pony tail or braid so they could look effortless and sporty, and then a long-sleeved sorority shirt or an oversized sweater and leggings. I was guilty of wearing the leggings, too, but that's just being smart—leggings are so comfy, and they honestly go with basically any outfit.

The know-it-all girl was in a different seat today, but she was in the row in front of me again, just farther down the row to my left. Everyone sat in the same general area class-to-class, even if they changed seats. We're all creatures of habit; that's something my aunt used to say. "People love their routines," she'd go on, poking fun at the way

people panicked when any obstacle interfered with their daily rituals, even though Aunt Karen had her own routines, such as eating a raisin bagel with plain cream cheese every morning, but she acknowledged this, and readily offered herself as an example.

As I scanned the room—which was mainly just me looking at the backs of everyone’s heads—I noticed a jean jacket that looked familiar. My heart sank a little as I realized it was James Franco’s jean jacket, and that he had chosen to sit in the third row from the front of the room this class.

What? Why was he up there? And I don’t think he came in after me, so he must have shown up early to take that seat. Why wouldn’t he sit in the same spot? Maybe he forgot this is where we sat last class. I certainly hoped he hadn’t forgotten about *me*. Maybe he was sitting up front because my beauty was too distracting, and he wanted to do well in the class, or maybe he wanted to take good notes so that when we “studied” together he could impress me with his knowledge or help me learn better so that he seemed cooler and smarter. All right, James, I was on to you: smooth move.

I had to give him props for coming up with that one. Man—cute and smart? Okay, I was now super stoked for this date night. I couldn’t wait for class to end, so I could go up to him and say hi again, or better yet, so that he could eagerly approach me and offer to help tutor me. I could learn a thing or two from him, I was sure.

Class dragged by, of course. Tumblr was not nearly interesting enough for me, and Facebook disappointed as usual. Eventually I just stopped paying attention to my laptop and wound up daydreaming about what Friday would be like. I think we should go to the movies—even though there wasn’t anything good playing, it’d be classier than

“Netflix and chill” yet less formal than a dinner date. While at the movies, I’d suggest going for sandwiches afterwards. Sandwiches are casual.

Finally, through the fog of my fantasies, I heard Dr. Jameson say, “Okay guys, I’m going to pause it here, and we’ll pick it up next class.”

I looked around, and I noticed James standing up and gathering his things, so I hurriedly packed my laptop into my backpack and squeezed behind the girls sitting next to me, out of our row and into the crowded aisle of students filing out of the classroom. James was headed out the door, and I weaved through the bodies to catch up with him. He must not have seen me!

“Oh hey!” I said, once out into the hallway, and James was only a few feet in front of me, paused to check his phone.

He turned around, looking somewhat surprised, and then realizing it was me, said coolly, “Ah, hey. What’s up?” He glanced at his phone again and then put it away in his back pocket.

Today he didn’t have the hat on, but his hair was a little long and wavy, pushed back off of his face, but a few short pieces dangled around his temples. His eyes were so intense and his jaw so strong—my heart skipped a little.

Students streamed around us as I tried to figure out something cool to say. “Not much,” is what I came up with. “You?”

He shrugged, and gave a weak smile. “Not much.”

I waited a second for him to say something else, but he just stood there staring at me. Okay, maybe he was smart and cute, but he was definitely not a good

conversationalist. Come on, bud, weren't you interested in me? Look at my butt! Ask me out!

He still wasn't saying anything, so I had to step up. "Man, it's so hard to stay awake in that class," I said drily, rolling my eyes and giving a smirk. "And that exam's coming up? I should really start studying for that. Oh!—hey, what's your name? I'll add you on Snapchat, and we can study together..."

I pulled out my phone and went to open Snapchat.

"It's Julian..." he said, after a pause, except the way he said this, it sounded like there was a "but" coming.

I looked up at him, shaking a lock of hair out of my face, and I was a little thrown off by his tone but kept going ahead with it all. "Julian? That's a great name! My name's Nadia—Nadia Montgomery."

I looked back down at my phone to type in "Julian" into the Snapchat search bar. "Oh, I know," I heard him say.

Ooooh, so he had taken the bait from Tuesday after all! I looked back up at him to flash a grin, but when my eyes landed on him again, my face fell, because he wasn't smiling; he looked... serious.

"Some of my friends know you," he added, his face still hard and frowning almost. I frowned, too, because I didn't know why he was saying it like that. "Rob DeMarco? Chris Adkins?"

My heart gave a loud thump at those names, and I froze, my hands suspended midair with my phone still in them. As if that weren't cruel enough, he kept going, the

corner of his mouth upturned slightly, as though he were enjoying this, enjoying me squirming.

“Andre Waters? Oh—and Jeremy. Jeremy Peters.”

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat and mustered every ounce of defiance in my body. “Okay, what’s all that supposed to mean?”

His eyes darted to his right and then back to me, and he looked like he was grasping for words that were too obvious to even form. “Uhhh, it means no thanks? I’m not interested in your services?”

I was livid, and I was hurt. He went there. He went right there, with no regard for my feelings, no regard for how long ago that was—or how long ago that felt, for me, anyhow—and no regard for all the editing his friends may have done to their stories about me. He must have told them about me—a cute girl in his class named Nadia—and they all connected the dots. My vision flashed, and I needed to go away, storm away, somewhere far away where shitty boys like Julian couldn’t pollute my brain with such cruel noise.

All I could do was shake my head at him. We stood alone in the hallway now, the whole class having dispersed and gone their different ways. I bit the inside of my cheek and fought the urge to cry angry tears, still shaking my head. I looked down at the floor and then up at him, who waited expectantly for my final reaction. He almost wore a grin—no, he did wear a grin.

“You’re fucked up,” is all I could choke out. I imagined him telling his friends later what happened, and I tried to decide how I wanted to represent myself; then I



realized it didn't matter what I did, because Julian would tell them whatever he wanted to tell them—just like his friends did to him—and they wouldn't have a choice but to believe him because they weren't here. “You're fucked up,” I repeated. “And your friends are fucked up. Tell Chris, tell Rob, tell Jeremy, and tell Andrew that they're fucked up. Oh, and Ethan. Tell him he's fucked up, too.”

I don't know what he did after that because I stormed off, and I was so seething with anger that I don't even remember how I got back home, somehow during the storm of my tears and the shouting in my car on the drive home and my absolute blind rage.

It's true, I know Julian's friends. They're shitty people from a time in my life when I made some really bad decisions, and they were a part of those bad decisions, but it wasn't all my doing—they all put a lot of pressure on me for the decisions I was making. I was a lot different my freshman year of college, and it wasn't right for Julian to throw that in my face so harshly. I put a lot of that shit behind me, especially with the help of Ellis. I was seething that he made me confront all that, so out of the blue.

I fell into my bed when I got home and sobbed violently, beat the shit out of my pillows, and then got stoned off my ass and devoured the entire package of cookies. I watched *Kill Bill*, *Kill Bill Volume 2*, and every other Quentin Tarantino movie that was on Netflix before I finally fell asleep and got away from this stupid world for a little while.

So I got this crazy dumb idea.

I was on my way to the gynecologist. I know that's kind of like, "Whoa, TMI!" but I think it's important for me to specify this because my lady doctor is the only doctor I still keep up with, and that's only so that she can hook me up with more birth control. My teeth haven't been checked out in years, and you can forget about those annual check-ups you're supposed to have growing up that just kind of stop happening once you grow up, but I will show up for my lady doctor even if I have to skip class for it. Which, incidentally, I did. No big deal. Plus it worked out because I just didn't want to go to class if it meant seeing Julian because I knew I'd lose my shit again if I did. But I'm over it.

Anyway, it wasn't necessarily a sunny day, but there were a lot of clouds in the sky so that you could only see a little bit of the blue behind them, but the clouds were very light and almost white, so that you could tell the sun was right behind them trying hard to shine through. I had the windows cracked just a half an inch because it was a little too chilly to drive with the windows down, but I can't stand a stuffy car, and it's that weird time of year when it's too cold for the air conditioning but too warm for the heat. The trees along the freeway were changing into the warm colors of fall, and honestly, I was kind of in a good mood because of how nice the view was.

I had my SZA CD playing and so I was jamming along to that, watching the view, racing along the freeway, and this odd sensation flowed over me. I don't drive on the freeway very much—I typically only drive around Jordan, which is the city that Bentley University is in. I don't have much of a need to go outside of Jordan, so I never do. I just don't think about it.

And so, it was kinda cool, this feeling of going somewhere different, somewhere outside Bentley and outside Jordan. It was just me, flying solo, on the freeway, navigating myself to my OB-GYN. Skipping class, being outside the city I'd been anchored to these past couple years...

That's when I had this ridiculous epiphany: I can go anywhere I want.

I'm the kind of bitch who does what she wants and doesn't take shit from anyone. I think that's pretty clear. I choose my battles, of course, because sometimes I just don't care enough or feel like engaging, but I'm pretty self-assertive. That's why this realization was so surprising to me—I can do anything I want, meaning I can go anywhere I want, too.

I started to feel kind of baffled that the implications of this freedom hadn't really landed with me yet. I just felt so automatically tethered to Jordan—which I viewed as the “escape” from my home town where I grew up, three hours away—that I never expanded my options beyond that.

Once I realized that I have total freedom over my actions, I got really restless. In fact, I almost blew off my doctor's appointment and just kept driving until I wound up in China or something utterly fantastical. It's kind of like that feeling you get when you think about something really reckless and stupid out of the blue, like, “What if I just yanked the steering wheel really hard to the right?” or “What if I just threw this cup full of water across the room?” and then once you start thinking about it, you're super tempted to do it and see what happens, even though you know it's not a smart idea, but

it's something so unconventional and uncommon to do that you want to see how it plays out.

Of course, I did end up keeping my appointment, but once the reality of my power to do as I please sunk in...

The wheels were turning—both literally and figuratively, of course.

As soon as I got back to Jordan after my appointment, I had to meet up with Ellis. I always have to talk through my ideas with Ellis, and I do my best thinking in the car and in the shower, so after the 45-minute drive there and back, I had had my fair share of ideas. (Oh, and the gynecologist said I looked A-OK, by the way.)

She ended up coming over that evening, and we sat outside on my balcony in plastic lawn chairs looking over the buildings below us. My apartment was near Bentley, but it was about a six-minute drive from campus near the residential part of Jordan. It was the only apartment complex in this neck of Jordan, and it towered seven floors above the houses that surrounded it. The houses were mostly old, painted colors like yellow and purple and blue, and some of them housed college students and some of them families. There was an elementary school in the area, and it wasn't a bad place to live; there were always people wandering down the sidewalk at all hours of the night and day, but crime was relatively nonexistent.

Ellis and I were chilling on my balcony on the fifth floor, overlooking the roofs of the houses on the other side of the street. It wasn't very late, but the sun had already dipped, and so it was almost completely dark outside. I had some Christmas lights strung

around my sliding door, so we had a little bit of light—plus all the glowing street lights below us, and the light from the neighbors' windows, so we could still see a little.

Like I said, I'm super fancy, so I had two plastic lawn chairs we were sitting on out there. I held a joint in my hand, my elbow propped up on the arm rest.

"I have this joint, but first I need to run something by you, and I need your sober opinion. So this will come afterwards." I set it on the ground next to my chair. The balcony was basically a platform of concrete jutting out from the building. Super sketchy.

"You mean, it'll be my reward if I give you the correct opinion?" Ellis asked, smiling at me. Even in the dark I could see her shit-eating grin. I scoffed.

"Yeah, yeah, we'll see," I said dismissively, waving at her and looking the other way. She laughed, and I turned back to her. Her hair was up in a sloppy bun, and she had on a gray sweatshirt and sweatpants, which was basically what I was wearing, too.

"All right, so what is it?" she asked, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees. This meant I had her full attention.

Even though I had been thinking about it all day, I still wasn't totally sure where to start, so I just decided to go for it. "I'm gonna run away."

In the soft glow from my apartment lights, I could see Ellis blink once. Like, that was her response. She blinked.

"That's it," I added.

She blinked again and cocked her head to the side, the bun on the top of her head tilting as she did so. "Uh... You mean, you're thinking about running away?"

“No,” I said, repositioning in my seat to sit up straight. I brought my legs up on the seat and crossed them with some effort. I looked her in the eyes. “I’m going to run away.”

She sat back in her chair and looked out at the rooftops. “Well what do you need my opinion for? It sounds like you’ve made up your mind.”

I sighed dramatically. “You’re acting like a freaking parent or something. Quit being like that.”

She frowned, shaking her head, and put out her hands palms-up, as if to say defensively “What the heck?” I rolled my eyes.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m used to you coming up with these crazy ideas, and I feel like I’m always trying to talk you out of them, but you always end up doing them anyway.”

“Yeah, but I always like to get your opinion because it helps me get a little perspective on them, which helps me out when I go through with them.”

She shrugged, defeated almost. “Okay, I see. So, why do you want to run away—sorry, why *are* you running away?”

“Well,” I started. I rolled my lips and thought for a second. After I decided where to start, I told her about my drive to the gynecologist that day and how I realized the utter freedom I had and how tempting that was—and how ultimately, I needed to give into that temptation, because the fact that I was so tempted by it gave insight to how much I actually *wanted* it.

“So you’re running away because you can?” she asked, flatly, and I could tell she was trying to adjust her tone, so it didn’t come off to me as condescending. I appreciated the effort, but it still felt condescending.

“No,” I said with emphasis, drawing out the “o.” “I also just think it’s time for me to move on from Bentley. It’s been cool and fun here and all, but I’ve done the party thing, and I’ve tried to do the college thing, and neither of them have worked.”

She leaned in a little bit and lowered her voice. “This isn’t about what that frat dude in your class brought up last week, is it?” Ellis asked gently, squinting her eyes and frowning.

I rolled my eyes again. “Not that, either. Although that’s a perfect example of why I’m done with Bentley! Even though I was done with that crazy shit over a year ago, it still follows me! I don’t need every guy I try to hook up with dragging me down and making me feel like garbage just because I used to fuck around with all those frats.” I sighed heavily and abruptly sat back in my chair, crossing my arms.

“I know,” Ellis said softly. “And you don’t deserve that. And no one should make you feel guilty or anything about it. If anything, people should be making those guys feel bad about how they lured you over every weekend and got you drunk so that they could take advantage of you and then string you along until next week. Now *that’s* shitty.”

I really didn’t want to go into this. That’s not what I wanted to end up talking about this night, so I tried to change the subject.

“Anyway, I’m just not interested in my classes—and really never have been—and this whole big life is mine for the taking, and I have the complete freedom to do whatever

I will; I can choose to do anything I want and just *do* it. So why not? That's way too much freedom for me to not take advantage of. Can you imagine how good it'll feel for me to just be on the road, with only myself to influence my decisions, my future? It'll be awesome." I was beaming as I said this.

Ellis looked at me, then looked at the cement ground. "I don't think it's wise," she started, and when I made a noise to start talking, she gave me a look that said, "Let me finish." She scratched her forehead with her thumb and then went on. "I don't think it's wise, but it sounds like something maybe you need to do. Clearly, I think you should stay and finish your degree because you don't have that long left anyway, and it'd be a waste to throw it all away, but I know you and I know how you are, and once you've made up your mind, you've made up your mind..."

She stared at the ground as she said this, and I watched her carefully as she spoke to the ground. When she finally looked up, I smiled. Of course I knew she'd disapprove from the start, but I just needed her to understand where I was coming from. She smiled with one side of her mouth at me, in a sort of begrudging smile, and shook her head.

"I wanna dare to live," I went on. "I'm not meant for this sleepy shit. I need activity. I want to dare."

"I understand," she said. Suddenly she shook her head and looked up at the floor of the balcony above us. "God, I'm the enabler of the year," she muttered.

I laughed, and reached down to pick up the joint from where I set it on the ground. "And now that you've caved, time for celebration," I said, pulling a lighter out of my sweatpants pockets and sparking the joint.



Ellis rubbed her face in her hands and groaned. “What have I done,” she said into her palms, and I took a hit and threw back my head, laughing into the night, while Ellis demanded that I pass her the joint.

I stood in my room with my hands on my hips, looking around the place.

I had lived there two years. I moved in just before my sophomore year of college, after having lived in the dorms for a year. Basically what that means is my room was a mess. Give me any space, and in 24 hours I can make it look as though I’ve inhabited it for a year. Give me two years, and I can make it look irreparable.

You don’t *really* want to know how bad it was, but basically it looked like a decorated dumpster. Let me give it a go at describing it anyway.

My bed was in the corner. I have a queen bed, so it took up most of the room. Of course, I never make my bed, so the black and white comforter and all the random throw blankets and quilts I had accumulated throughout my life were strewn across my bed in whatever position I happened to throw them off me five minutes before having to leave my apartment for class or whatever lame obligation was lined up for me for the day. Then, since my bed is so big, it had all this other crap on it because if I wanted to be in my room, I basically had to be on my bed. So there were clothes, books, pens, chargers, tissue boxes, used tissues, a potato chip bag, a bag of popcorn, a bottle of pain killers—for cramps, I swear—a lighter, the remote, an ash tray, and tons of pillows.

My floor was basically like my bed, in that it had very similar contents strewn upon it and was practically unrecognizable as a floor. Old Starbucks cups, wrappers,

bobby pins, my backpack, string, cigarillo packages, guitar picks—I don't even own a guitar—jewelry, shoes, clean and unclean clothes alike, batteries, incense, random papers, parking tickets, hair ties, deodorant, makeup, and much, much more littered my floor. Basically I made sure everything somewhat valuable stayed on my bed because I was forced to walk upon the stuff on my floor as though it were the floor itself.

The walls were cool, though. I had two tapestries hung up. One was a warm-hued mandala pattern and was above my bed, and the other was a photograph of the night sky from the woods and I had it hung up on my ceiling above my bed. I had a calendar of shirtless men hanging up on one wall, and a few posters of badass women, like Beyonce, Michelle Obama, and Wonder Woman. I also had a map of the world, and a bunch of magazine pages I ripped out and taped up, and a corkboard with pictures of me and Ellis and Karen and a few other people tacked up on it.

In the corner diagonal from the corner my bed was in, I had a tall dresser with my TV on top of it. Naturally, my dresser was basically empty because all of my clothes were elsewhere in my room; the peek-in closet—this is what I called the “walk-in closet” in my room that was so shallow that you really couldn't do much “walking in”—was in the same boat, and stored mostly old Halloween costumes, piles of books, a humidifier, the vacuum—which I had yet to use—and some boxes from when I moved in.

Anyway, I lived by myself, which was lucky for literally everyone else in this world. My parents kind of paid rent for me, so I was able to live on my own and not have a job. They said they wanted me to be able to focus on school and not have to divide my

time for some stupid part-time job, and I was cool with having to do less work, so that all worked out for us.

That's also how I was able to save up some money. Each semester they'd ask me how much I needed for textbooks, and I'd give them a high estimate and then borrow the textbooks from the library or mooch off a classmate if need be, and textbooks are expensive, so I sort of swindled them real nice on that one. Also I had some cash from holidays and birthdays, and if you participate in research studies they pay you, and I managed to sell a lot of things I don't use anymore on this Facebook page to people in the Jordan area. So I was pretty crafty with my income.

So anyway, I was standing in the middle of this heap of garbage I called my room, hands on my hips, taking it all in, trying to pack. I hate packing, for pretty obvious reasons.

My duffel bag was open on my bed, and I finally gave up trying to strategically pack and wound up just picking up random things and deciding either "yes" or "no" in the moment. Black jeans: yes. Green hoodie: no. Gray hoodie: yes. Heart (the band) shirt: yes. Leggings: absolutely yes. Old moldy bowl of cereal: no. It was a pretty slow process, but it was what I had to do. All the "yes"s got tossed on top of the duffel bag to be folded at the end of it all; all the "no"s got tossed back onto the floor, but in more of a consolidated heap. It actually sort of doubled as "cleaning."

Packing got me even more excited to go. Packing always has that effect on me, which is why it's something that I usually do last-minute, not just because I'm lazy, but so that way I get really excited right before I leave.

When Ellis asked when I was leaving, I had told her, “Soon.” That was a couple days ago; I had to get some things in order before I left—not my room, obviously, but I had to eat at all my favorite Jordan staples for a last time, like the Mexican restaurant on the other side of town, and the sushi steakhouse down the road from me, and I also had to get my car’s oil changed that I should have done a month earlier, and I had to get my key copied for Ellis because I lost the spare key somewhere in my room. I didn’t have a dog to feed or plants to water in my absence, but I wanted Ellis to have a copy of my key to come over and check the place out and smoke in it every now and then, so it’d still smell like weed whenever I came home from my running away—if I came back from my running away. In any case, as I shuffled around my room packing, I knew I’d be leaving probably the next day.

So in the end, I had packed some jeans, some leggings, some sweatpants, a bunch of t-shirts, a few fancy shirts, some hoodies, a couple jackets, a ton of underwear and socks, some boots, and then my journal, my charger, a stack of CD’s, pepper spray, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and my weed paraphernalia. I didn’t really know why I brought that book, because I had only read it once or twice and that was several years earlier, but I remembered that Holden had done a similar running away thing and maybe his story would inspire me on my running away, and if I got bored I could read it, and in any case, it’s an American classic, so I guess what that kid has to say can’t be total garbage.

I didn’t want to tell anyone when I was leaving—not that I really had anyone to tell, and I definitely wasn’t about to tell my parents or my aunt—but I found myself at Ellis’s door

on my way to the freeway. She lives in an apartment about ten minutes away from campus by herself. Her place is right next to the freeway entrance, and as I was approaching the freeway, I couldn't keep driving and just not even stop. Before I knew it, my hands were tilting the steering wheel into the turning lane, and I wound up parked in front of her apartment.

Her complex is a bunch of these cute, little boxy one-person apartments. I stood on her patio a moment before knocking, looking at all her hanging and potted plants crowded on the rectangle of cement in front of her door which we all have the audacity to refer to as a "patio" even though it's basically a cement welcome mat. Ellis's patio was grander than everyone else's, though, because she had all the plants set up. It felt exotic, like I was in a jungle. Most of the time, we hung out at my place, because it was closer to campus and all the hype downtown, but we still had had some good memories at her place. Many nights we sat among these plants, passing a joint back and forth, and talking about conspiracies and stress and TV shows.

The blinds on her two front windows next to her door were open, and I squinted to see if I could peek inside. The glare from the sun was too great, so I knocked hard a couple times.

She answered the door, and something about the way I must have been standing there, careening on the edge of something ethereal, she knew right away. "Is this it?" she asked, as tears welled in her eyes, and she hugged me, so that I knew I didn't have to answer. I hugged back.

"It's not forever," I said.

“Just be careful,” she said, and I tried to pull away, but she held on.

“You’re being such a sap,” I said.

“I just hope this is everything you need,” she whispered, and let go.

I nodded at her, finding myself shockingly choked up at this goodbye, realizing why I hadn’t wanted to say goodbye to anyone, especially Ellis, but being glad I did anyway. We nodded at each other in some sort of unspoken understanding, and in less than five minutes, I was in my Chevy Malibu, cruising down the freeway with Joan Jett blaring, wondering how long it would be until my car broke down or I ran out of money, but also very excited and very determined to make it work no matter what came my way.

## PART TWO

I didn't make it more than thirty minutes before I got bored and hungry, so I got off the highway and made a pit stop at a gas station, some sketchy as hell Mobil—you know, the gas station that you never actually refer to by name, but by “gas station,” because you can't really remember the name, just that it's blue and red and there's some white in there too somewhere.

This gas station was super small, so there really wasn't anywhere to park other than at the pump. That's kind of a dangerous move, too, because some people get real angry when you park at a pump and don't get any gas, especially if they need to use the one you stopped at because of which side their gas tank is on. I don't really care, but the gas station was totally empty when I pulled up, so I felt perfectly content leaving my car at Pump 1.

I opened the door to the gas station—almost entirely covered in signs like “We I.D.!” and “Ohio Lottery!” and “Budweiser”—and made a mental note not to touch my face until I got to some hand sanitizer because the place felt really shady and looked dirty as hell. A bell tied to the inside handle rung as the door knocked shut behind me.

I was immediately struck by the uncomfortably close quarters of the place. Every possible section of the interior was utilized to display something tacky, like Rasta-colored lighters, or some suspicious food item, like 50-cent hot dogs on slimy rollers, or if not a

product itself, the space was being used to advertise for a product. Honestly it was just overwhelming; I didn't know where to look. I was totally disoriented—I think places like that would be better off employing the whole “less is more” trick. If they had like two potato chip options and a freezer of Pepsi, I think I'd be able to calm down enough to make some sort of decision, but with all these different brands competing for shelf space, I was too frazzled to decide if I wanted Fritos or Cheetos or Lays, and beyond that, if I wanted sour cream and onion, or cheddar, or barbeque, or salt and vinegar, or maybe I didn't want chips at all, and I actually wanted Little Debbie cakes, or maybe Hostesses, or this oatmeal cookie was kind of giving me a look, and it was just way too much. All this hit me in an instant before the weird guy behind the counter could say, “Hello” in his gravelly voice.

“Hey,” I said dismissively, looking around at all the snack options. I made a couple slow steps forward, trying to pick something out I could hone in on.

“Looking for anything?” the guy said again. It sounded painful for him to talk.

“No, just browsing,” I said, still not looking at him. I wanted something salty... But I wasn't in the mood for chips after all. I actually remembered then that I hate chips. You know what I mean? Sometimes you forget you don't like certain things. Okay, so chips aren't bad—they actually taste pretty good—but they always get stuck in my teeth and it ruins the whole point of eating for me. So I thought, “Chips sound good—no wait, they don't. They're actually really annoying.”

I started down the “aisle”—essentially one side of a shelf—that had the granola bars and chips and pretzels and trail mix. Given my options, the chips were starting to



seem less and less of a no-go. Healthy snacks are so boring. It just feels like eating leaves and twigs, but less filling. I grabbed some Lays barbeque chips.

Then I checked out the coolers. They had more beer options than pop options. Three of the five coolers contained beer, while the other two had Pepsi, Brisk, and Rockstar—the holy trinity of non-alcoholic beverages—and water, for the people who stopped at gas stations for trail mix and aqua. I'll admit it was pretty tempting to take a few road beers with me, but I grabbed the can of Rockstar and headed to the counter, which was basically just like turning around.

“That it for ya’, Sweetie?” the gravel monster asked as I set down the bag and the can. I finally looked at the dude, and immediately regretted it. He looked like one of those guys who comes off as forty years old but is really only twenty-five years old. Greasy, stringy hair, facial hair like he only shaved parts of it on certain different days, sunken eyes, skinny as hell except for around the middle, wearing a gray hoodie and some over-sized Rolling Stones shirt. Man, sad as hell. I bet he smoked Marlboro Blacks—Marlboro Blacks are for people who have smoked since they were six years old and like the taste of tar and cancer. I used to smoke cigarettes for a year in high school, and so I know for a fact that Marlboro Blacks taste like bold-flavored cancer.

“Um, yeah,” I said. I averted my eyes to the shit I was buying. I carefully watched the bag of chips as he picked it up and scanned it, the can as he picked it up and scanned it.

“It’ll be \$4.13,” he said. I looked up, pulling my wallet out of my jacket pocket, but as I looked up, I noticed the wall of cigarettes and cigarillos behind him like a

beautiful patchwork quilt of nicotine, and remembered I wanted to buy some shells for a blunt, which in turn reminded me that I should probably get some gum for those times during my trip where I just couldn't make it around to brushing my teeth.

"Oh, actually, can I get a pack of Swisher Sweets?" I asked. As he stepped back and reached over to grab them, I plucked a pack of Orbit gum from the rack beside the register and added, "And this, too."

"You sure that's it now?" he asked, deeply chuckling. "You want the shirt off my back, too?"

I don't know what the hell he meant by that. I get that I changed my mind, but the shirt comment was weird as hell. Maybe I misheard him, but I just said, "That's it."

"My girlfriend's always changing her mind too. Women are never sure what they want, huh?" he asked. I stared blankly at him as he spoke, noticing the beige tint of his teeth, darker around the gums. I might have crinkled my nose in disgust, but I'm not really sure.

"Uh. So how much is it now?" This guy was creepy, and I just wanted to pay for my shit and get out of there.

He scanned the Swisher Sweets and the gum and told me the total. As I handed him \$11, he said, "Hey, Sweetie, it's a free country. You're allowed to smile, yeah? Smile, you'll be prettier if you do." He took the money from me and opened the register.

"Okay," I said, the "oh" and "kay" split between two different intonations, spoken in a manner intended to mean, "We're done here." Smile? Really? After he had just told me that the entire sex I belonged to was a fickle bunch, unable to stand by a decision?

And he's not the only dude in my life to tell me to smile—I've been told by family and strangers alike to smile more throughout my entire life. Granted, I have a mean resting face, but I wasn't in a bad mood, not until he told me to smile, as if I owed it to him, as if it was his payment for insulting me. I frowned and waited for my change.

“Come on, don't be a bitch,” he said, holding my change in his hand but not placing it in my outstretched palm.

“My change,” I demanded. I was half tempted to take my shit and walk out of there, fuck the change, just get the hell away from this weirdo perv, but I didn't want him to have any cent of my money for himself. I glared at him directly.

Finally, he released the change to me, but his hand had let go of it such a distance above my hand that a couple pennies missed my palm and bounced off the counter. He gave a shrill chuckle, and I swept the rogue pennies into my hand off the edge of the counter. “I don't need a bag,” I said, dropping the change into my jeans pocket and grabbing my shit.

“Wasn't gonna offer one,” he said, still recovering from his loose laughter. I turned and walked to the door, ready to kick dirt I got out of there so fast, but I stopped. I was about to walk out of there, leaving this fucker laughing to himself at my ridiculously amusing bitchiness, and me, bent out of shape about it. Talk about giving this loser the satisfaction. I turned around to face him again.

“You got something to say, sweetie?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. Man this guy had some nerve. My eyes flashed again, and suddenly I was going off.

“It’s cute that you harass unsuspecting women,” I spat. “Trying to assert your dominance over a group of people who you feel like you have some biological power over because you have no control over your fucked up life. I don’t owe you a fucking smile because I’m not some show dog waiting to take commands from some scrawny, perverted fucker in a jacket that hasn’t been washed in fifteen years, who probably goes on a smoke break every five minutes to shoot up heroin and uses his bathroom trips to jerk off to the thought of his mother!”

He started shouting at me halfway through, and started to come at me from around the counter, but I whipped a rack of cookie packages onto the floor in front of him and bolted out the door. Adrenaline was storming through me, and in a whirlwind, I was in my car, chanting, “Oh shit, fuck, fuck, fuck, holy shit,” my snacks flung into the passenger seat, fumbling with my keys to start my car as the Gas Station Jerk came running outside after me, still shouting, practically hobbling towards my car, and I started my car and sped off just as he got to my car, giving it a slap on the hood before I was gone. In my rearview mirror, I could see him still following me until the end of the gas station parking lot.

I whipped out of the parking lot and made a right, and by a miracle, got the green light to enter the freeway again, and then there I was, driving along too fast because my adrenaline was still bursting within me, not at all hungry anymore and very, very unnerved, but very, very excited and proud of myself.

“Holy shit, holy shit” I said to myself frantically. I was shaking, trembling really, my hands jittery and senses on hyper-alert. *Holy shit!*

I knew I was a badass, but I didn't know I was "Call out creepy stranger dude and destroy innocent gas station cookie shelf" badass. Wait, were there video cameras in there? I hoped not; I hoped it was too crappy of a gas station to have functioning surveillance. Was I going to get in trouble? Maybe there would be a warrant for my arrest, for destroying and fleeing the premises. But it wasn't technically my fault, right? I don't think I actually destroyed any property or goods, though; the rack could be set up again easily, and plus, it was in self-defense because he charged me first.

*Holy shit.* I couldn't believe I had done that all by myself. No one was even there with me to witness how badass that was. I couldn't wait to call Ellis and tell her. I wanted to call her right there and then, with my blood still pumping strongly, tell her the whole thing with all the energy now built up in me. But I was almost too panicked to drive, and so I was definitely too wired to talk on the phone and drive at the same time. I can be reckless, but I try not to be just plain stupid.

*Holy shit!* I decided at my next stop I'd write down what happened at that Mobil so that I'd remember to tell Ellis—and, for legal reasons, too, just in case, but mostly for myself, and so I could tell her later.

I ended up stopping thirty minutes later, after I chugged that can of Rockstar, which I drank after the adrenaline finally wore off, and I started to crave that sort of high energy again, because I had to pee really bad. I stopped at a Burger King along the freeway.

As the pee was rushing out, and as some poor lady in the stall next to me was birthing some odorous monster into the toilet, I started to think about where I was going.

The whole point of running away was to just go wherever the wind took me, but I was feeling a little aimless and like I wasn't making too much progress. I had already stopped twice, and it really hadn't even been an hour yet.

I didn't want to make a plan for myself because then it didn't feel as spontaneous and natural, but it was kind of weird feeling so loose and free. It was almost overwhelming and scary. But these thoughts were interrupted because the bowel movement in the stall next to me started getting serious, and so I exited the bathroom as quickly as possible—making sure to sing the full ABC's as I washed my hands—and dodging by the Burger King counter, so I didn't have to look at the employees and feel guilty for using their bathroom but not buying anything.

Once I got on the road again, I popped in a Janis Joplin CD to inspire my free spirit. A good road trip requires good music, and I was in the mood for some of her groovy blues.

As I said before, I do my best thinking in the shower and on the road, so without really even trying, my mind started to wander. I usually keep a pretty good grip on my thoughts, so they don't slip into places I don't want to go, but the endlessness of the freeway in front of me lulled my thoughts into a weird, reflective state, and I started conjuring up all these old memories from all these obscure associations.

When I was in maybe seventh grade and living with my mother, we had this autumn wreath she hung up on the front door of our house. This was back when it was just my mom and me living there, after my parents had divorced and Mom had been granted full custody. I still saw my dad every other weekend, but we had never really

been that close, and so by that point, it was just a formality, just an appointment I had to keep because Mother required it.

It was a Saturday afternoon in November, and I had just gotten home from a friend's house. It was one of the weekends I didn't have to see my dad, so I had gone down the street to the park to hang out with some kids for a few hours. We sat on the picnic tables under the pavilion, gossiping about other people in our grade and talking about movies. While we were there, some other kids rolled up that we weren't really friends with, and they ended up joining us. They were kind of assholes, these other kids, and so basically—I don't want to get too into it—but they had ended up making fun of me for my hair, saying that my hair was nappy and straight hair was hot but my curly hair was gross and dirty, and black people just naturally had disgusting hair. Back then, I wore my hair about shoulder-length, so I was pretty embarrassed and ended up running home while my friends stayed quiet, and the other kids shouted things at me as I was leaving.

I don't know; I was a kid, and my feelings were hurt because I grew up in a very white neighborhood, so I was one of the few black girls at my school, even if I was light-skinned. As I ran home, my feet pounding along the sidewalk, tears streaking down my face, all I wanted to do was be home and have my mom tell me I was beautiful and that the kids were wrong, and I was going to ask her if I could change schools because that wasn't the first time I got that kind of shit from my classmates, but it was starting to really get to me.

When I got up to the house, I noticed a new wreath on the front door—it was this very autumnal wreath, made of red, orange, yellow, and brown leaves in a circle, and it

had a little piece of wood on the bottom that said, “Thankful,” or something generic you would pick up from a craft store. When I got inside, my mom was sitting in the living room in the recliner, watching Food Network.

She had on sweatpants and an old, stained white t-shirt, and her hair was all frizzy and disheveled, like she hadn’t brushed it at all in a couple days. One of her sweatpants legs was rolled up, and she sat slouched in the recliner, her one arm lying over the arm rest and onto the TV tray set up next to the recliner, her hand resting around a glass filled with something brown. The first time I ever saw her drink this, I figured it to be iced tea, but by this time, I knew what it was.

I was out of breath and panting, standing there in the living room, my eyes still red from the cold wind and my heart deeply hurt. “Mom,” I sort of whined, and she looked over me.

But her eyes were different. “Did you see the wreath?” she asked, her voice sounding funny, and not at all like her usual tight, stern voice, but like her words were sliding together.

At that point in my life, I knew, but I didn’t totally understand what was wrong with her. She was just being stupid, and it was never harmful, just annoying, and sort of a pain to deal with, so I stood there and played her game.

“Yeah,” I said, still catching my breath and wiping my eyes. I guess I would have to ask her about moving some other time.

“Do you like it?” she asked, and took a sip from her glass. Her head sort of bobbed, wouldn’t stay still on her neck.



I nodded.

She frowned at me, setting down her glass and pointing her finger at me. “I said, Do you like it?” she asked louder.

My lip quivered and I blinked heavily, the tears returning and streaming down my face. “Yes,” I said, in a high-pitched, squeaky voice.

“Good,” she said, settling back into the recliner. “You know, I made it.”

I stared at her in disbelief, my face wet. She turned her attention back to the TV, which was in one of those old wooden entertainment units that had the glass doors beside it, where you could keep DVD’s and knick knacks and family photos, except ours were empty. There was nothing in the entertainment unit except for the TV. The whole living room had an old vibe to it; the carpet was a worn blue, the trim was simulated wood grain, and the recliner and a small love seat were the only items of furniture in the room aside from the TV. The living room opened up directly to the kitchen, which was also very linoleum and old-style. It was a small, ranch-style house just enough for the two of us—well, it had plenty of space for the two of us, actually, because we had so few possessions. My mom had no hobbies, hung no pictures, and owned no knick knacks, so there was plenty of space for her and her five outfits, and for me and my few toys. It felt very lonely, and very empty.

I stood there and looked at my mother, so thoughtlessly absorbed in some cooking show, staring at a TV that had no personality surrounding it, none of my school photos, and none of my artwork. Her feet were propped up on the recliner, and she laughed stupidly at the show at a point that I don’t even think had any comedic element to it. I

couldn't believe her, so pathetic, so apathetic, sitting on that chair, having only acknowledged me—me, who was crying right before her—except to lie to me about a wreath that she forgot to take the Pat Catan's store tag off of.

It was the autumn leaves lining the grass on either side of the freeway that did it. As I was driving along the freeway, all the autumn leaf colors swirling in the wind and matted together on the ground, and my open canvas of a road before me, lulling me into carelessly remembering times long ago, that triggered this memory. Having realized I let myself slip, I shook my head violently to snap out of it, and popped out Janis Joplin. I felt around the passenger seat and grabbed the next CD I found—Lady Gaga—and put that in the player instead. The fast-paced pop music woke me out of my memories and, with a little effort, brought me back into the excitement of the road trip.

Something about driving along the freeway in the sunset makes me feel romantic as hell. I hate when people romanticize stupid shit, like how they make abuse survivors seem romantic as hell by painting them as “broken” and “interesting” and in need of “fixing,” but I think sunsets are beautiful and natural enough to be appropriately deemed inevitably romantic. Plus, I guess sunsets have never been scorned or wronged, so my comparison doesn't seem totally relevant, but I swear—I only brought it up because the romantic connotation of some things is far too played up sometimes.

Either way, the sun was setting behind me and the moon was rising in front of me. The sky faded into a yellow-orange gradient as the sun dipped down, while blues and purples mingled before me, the white moon just sleepily blinking its eyes at the world. It

was pretty cool, and I took it to be a positive sign about this whole trip of mine. I'm weird about signs. I'm not super superstitious or anything wacky, but occasionally I can't deny signs, or I'll make up a sign. I don't know, it's stupid, but if I'm driving through an intersection with a traffic light, I'll think, "If this turns yellow before I clear it, then it means insert-name-here and I won't end up sleeping together tonight." And then if it turns yellow, I know what that means for me. In my head, I know it's all a load of bull, and the only thing destined for all of us is whatever we make happen for ourselves, but it's just a compulsion I have. In the end, the signs probably prove themselves true because then I get it in my head and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, but it's more or less an activity for me to occupy myself, and occasionally it does give me peace of mind if the sign turns out to be a good one.

In any case, the sun began to set, at which point it dawned on me that I did not have anywhere to sleep that night.

Of course, I could always sleep in my car. I think I intended to sleep in my car, in the early stages of coming up with this grand road trip idea. I was all, "I'll just sleep in my car; it'll be so rock and roll." In fact—dare I say it?—I may have romanticized sleeping in cars overnight. Because after sitting in that machine all day, driving and driving on my butt, the idea of sleeping in it sounded absolutely dreadful. I had a headache from hunching over my steering wheel for four hours, and I really just wanted to stretch out in some fluffy bed. Thus I decided to stop at a Holiday Inn, and I resolved to sleep in my car the next night—maybe.

I could have chosen a Super Motel 8 or a Days Inn, but a girl's gotta have standards. I know it sounds elitist to say, but I really can't do motels. They're just inherently shady. I can't do it. I mean, they're always noisy and they've got some weird smell to them, and the blankets are scratchy and I just know I'm going to get bed bugs from them. And I do not need bed bugs. And can you blame me? I've done some pretty low things in my time—mostly induced by alcohol—but if I'm not drunk, I'm not settling.

I said I decided to stay at a Holiday Inn, but for a little while it wasn't looking too good for me. I was in those Pennsylvania mountains, rolling over the land, yawning—I had been yawning since I set out—and no exits or hotels anywhere in sight. I kept driving, thinking, "It's been a long time since I've seen an exit advertising food and lodging," using the term "lodging" with pleasure because I had seen so many exit signs with the "food and lodging" category at the top and people really don't refer to hotels as "lodging" often enough.

It's a weird feeling not knowing where you're going to be sleeping tonight. I started to even panic a little bit, wondering if I might have to sleep in my car after all, and if I did, where would I even park it? On the side of the road? It felt like that could be potentially dangerous, because I didn't want some random creepy dude showing up, seeing me sleeping in my car, and break in and kidnap me, or shoot me through the window. I know that sounds dramatic, but these are the things you need to worry about to make it in this world, because if you're not trying to avoid shit like that, shit like that could happen to YOU when you're not looking.

Things started to get bleak after forty-five minutes of no sign of civilization. I kept passing through these little towns scattered upon mountainsides or spread out at the foot of a giant hill, but nowhere that had more than a Dollar General or a “Mama and Papa Smith’s Darling Little Diner,” which sounded like Mama Smith was the one delegated to name the place; either that, or they catered to a demographic of old women with darling little hearts and darling little affections for darling little things.

Eventually I hit the jackpot though, and my journey led me to a larger small town with a few fast food joints and a couple hotels and gas stations. It was between my Holiday Inn and an EconoLodge, which was a no-brainer. Honestly though, what were they doing when they named it EconoLodge? It sends a clear message to the traveler on a budget, but it’s completely uninspired and definitely tacky, and don’t even get me started on what they were trying to accomplish by referring to it as a “lodge,” as if it were some cozy log cabin where you curled up in front of a fire on your bearskin rug with a significant other and a steaming mug of hot chocolate. I pulled into that Holiday Inn ready to soak in a hot tub and flop into a white-sheeted mattress. I was real glad I threw my swimsuit in my duffel bag last minute.

So I’ve never booked my own hotel before, and I haven’t really stayed at too many hotels in my adulthood, so I just sort of wandered into the place and approached the front desk with mock confidence and said, “I’d like to book a room for tonight.” I have a strong policy for myself about pretending like I know what I’m doing even when I don’t, because half the time people will take advantage of you if you’re not strong in your convictions and act assertively. At least in situations like this, anyway.

“Let me see if we have anything open for you,” the girl behind the desk said. *If?* What kind of lousy hotel doesn’t have rooms to sleep in? She clicked a couple times on the computer in front of her.

The girl started making “Mmmmm” noises and squinting occasionally, like she was nervous that if she didn’t indicate she was working on something, I’d think she was just standing there staring at a blank computer screen. I stared at her tight ponytail, her hair a dark, clearly fake red hue—almost black—and super straight. She looked young, maybe thirty, white skin and a thin face with a pointy chin. Her name tag said “Taylor.”

“Well, I’ve got a non-smoking room with one queen and a smoking room with two queens,” she told me after a minute.

I mulled it over. “Do you have a hot tub here?” I asked.

“We do not have a hot tub unfortunately, but we do have a swimming pool with lanes and a smaller soak tub,” she answered curtly. I get a kick when people say “unfortunately” when they answer “no.” Just because someone tells me “no” doesn’t mean it’s unfortunate.

“And you said that was a non-smoking one-bed?” The desk was higher on the two sides than it was in the middle, so I rested my arms up on it.

“That’s right.” Taylor didn’t blink—her eyes were so wide and eager. She smiled a bit, too, but not too much. Not in a fake way, just in a way that was barely sure of itself.

I asked her a few more questions—“What’s the rate? That’s too much!” “When’s check out?” “You got Wi-Fi? Any decent hotel’s got Wi-Fi”—to let her know I wasn’t about to be duped by her system. She seemed genuine enough though, like she could

have two kids on her own and met up with girlfriends for play dates on Thursday evenings and had a mom pretty involved in her life, so I came to trust dear Taylor and her possibly cunning but probably honest ways.

She needed to see my ID and my credit card and all that, but once we finally got that paperwork nonsense sorted out, she handed me my keys, which were really just swipe cards with Spongebob cartoons repping the Holiday Inn, and I started off towards the elevator. Suddenly I remembered a very critical question and backtracked a few paces to the front desk.

“Hey, I almost forgot—what time’s breakfast? I feel like such a noob at this for forgetting to ask!” I waved my hand dismissively and gave my fake laugh.

“Oh yes! Breakfast starts at seven in the morning tomorrow and goes for three hours until ten o’clock,” she said, nodding and smiling. She herself gave a short fake laugh.

I decided to go for it then—not for any reason, but in the moment, entirely spontaneous, I threw back another fake laugh at her. I really did like her but I was tired as hell and feeling ornery.

But get this: she fake-laughed back at me *again*. Was this shit on purpose? Were we having a moment? I squinted at her slightly, and gave my fake-laugh. It’s very high-pitched, you should know, and has a fast rhythm to it. It’s stupid, I’ll tell you.

So there we were, the two of us pretending to laugh at our own silliness, not totally sure of why the other was doing what we were doing.

Then, I had had enough, and in the middle of one of my giggles, I just stopped laughing entirely, turned, and approached the elevator.

My room was on the third floor, and it took me a couple trial swipes to get the hang of the timing, but I finally got in there and flopped onto that queen-sized bed. Everything was so white and cool on the bed; what is it about hotels that they always use white towels and bed sets? I mean, white is definitely the worst color you could pick for a linen that countless strangers use for making themselves presentable to the world again. Why not black? Why not brown? Hell, even gray would be better, just so that I didn't feel like a dirty rotten jerk for wiping my makeup on the bathroom towel at the end of the day.

They didn't have a hot tub, and I didn't want to sit around a pool while a bunch of kids ran around screaming, their shrill voices reverberating around producing horrific acoustics. It was ten o'clock at night, but something I've learned from my travels in my younger years is that kids in hotels are constantly buzzing about the pool at all hours of the day, and especially at night. I don't know if it's because families are on vacation that kids are apparently allowed to stay up late, but they are always up at the worst times, running up and down the hallway, talking loud, creating pandemonium.

Once I fell down on the bed, I did not want to move. I should've brushed my teeth, after all the energy drinks I had, and the chicken McNuggets, and the milkshake I got, and I may or may not have had a few tacos or several burritos from Taco Bell, but I just didn't want to move. Actually, now that I think of it, I probably felt so exhausted because I had been gone since eleven in the morning. Granted, I didn't get too far, on



account of all my pit stops, and I did a little sight-seeing, such as various rest stops and a few stores, but it had still been a long day for me.

I reached for my duffel bag, which was lying next to me on the bed, and dug around inside until I found the hole in the in-seam. I dug in it and pulled out a little container and a glass bowl.

This is gonna sound awfully pathetic of me, but in my years of smoking weed, I had grown accustomed to smoking so much that I had a hard time falling asleep without it. I mean, it was possible for me to fall asleep if I was really tired or if the bed was really comfortable, but on a normal night, I preferred being a little high as I drifted to sleep. I don't know if you've ever been a stoner before, and maybe if you have it's different for you, but I liked to be a little loopy and relaxed as I drifted to bed.

I took a couple hits from the bowl and put it back away in my duffel bag in-seam. I was still sprawled out on the bed, and I pried off my shoes using only my feet—a feat very impressive to High Nadia; I love doing mundane everyday tasks when I'm high, because I always feel way more proud of myself in an enthusiastic way when I do something semi-decent and I'm high. It's stupid, but I patted myself on the back and drifted off.

The good news is I slept like a damn log. I woke up a little stiff after several hours, stiff from laying face-down diagonally across the bed, but then I shifted around and the rest was bountiful and beautiful.

The bad news is the rest was so bountiful that I missed breakfast, and I almost missed check-out too, except the light from the translucent curtains kept bothering me. I

guess I shouldn't give the curtains a hard time because there were other, heavier curtains I could have closed, but I didn't think about it at the time.

I was kind of bummed because I didn't get to enjoy any of the amenities included in my stay. Really I felt like I wasted the entire opportunity because all I did was sleep, no swimming pool, no gym (not that I would have used it anyway), no continental breakfast. I was a little disappointed that what I used Holiday Inn for, I could have used my car for. But, it was safer, and it was more comfortable to stay at a hotel.

As I checked out of the room at the front desk, I decided to stay another night. The lady—a different one—gave me a fake laugh. I fake laughed back.

Maybe that's a damn requirement to work there. Hell then, I should have been hired on the spot.

So now that I had another opportunity to do this hotel experience right, I got immediately to work and snatched a complimentary apple from the fruit basket at the front desk. I don't know if it's some sort of healthy initiative, but it seems like hotels usually have some assorted fruit basket at the main desk, as if anyone would prefer fruit to a chocolate bar—I don't know, maybe the typical business people that travel a lot and stay at hotels like to consume nutritionally advantageous snacks, but I think the average person would be more thrilled and alert about chocolate than fruit. Plus, if I'm being honest, I hesitated for a second before grabbing the apple because I had a moment of doubt where I wondered, "Is this real fruit, or plastic fruit?" but then I decided if it was plastic fruit, that'd be even cooler, and I'd want the apple even more. I think fake food is hilarious.

Little kid kitchen sets with all the plastic equipment is so funny to me. It's just miniature, fake versions of what adults have to deal with. I mean, it's really sad, too, that kids are being bred to be adults from the get-go, have to be taught it's fun to do everyday, ordinary tasks, but it's also kind of hysterical that adults' vision of what's fun for kids is cutesy versions of the stuff they do.

Anyway, so I grabbed the damn apple that I certainly deserved for the price I paid for the room, and then I went back to my room to unpack and spread out. I used all the hangers in my closet for my clothes (the five of them that were provided) and folded and put the rest on the shelf in the closet. Then I spread all my makeup shit—makeup remover, eye liner, tooth brush, mascara, tooth paste—all over the bathroom counter. Last, I set up my literature on the desk beside the bed. I had to use the Bible in the bedside table drawer and the service telephone as bookends, but once I got it all set up, it really started to feel a little homier. I made a couple doodles in my notebook and tore them out to stick on the wall as faux-posters, but then I realized I didn't have anything like glue or tape to adhere it, so I settled for spreading them out on the desk next to my books.

The next order of business was to take a shower, which lasted about an hour, or long enough for my fingers to be pruney for at least half the shower. I love hot showers. I hear all the time about how they're not that great for you—dries out the skin and such, and I also heard it can make your acne flare up, but honestly they feel so good that the consequences are menial enough for me to unapologetically continue taking hot showers.

It just relaxes me so much, and then the hot steady water beating against my back like a massage like physical therapy. I'm telling you, a hot shower can solve a lot of problems.

So I basically stood in the shower for an hour, feeling too sensual from the hot water to tear myself away from its pleasure. I also had music playing, so I guess I danced in the shower more than I stood in it. The shower is my favorite place to dance: naked, warm, alone. Plus I'm all revved up about the hot shower that the enthusiasm I get about music just brings my mood to a ten. I can dance as awkwardly as I please and feel good about it.

The reason I finally got out of the shower was because my stomach was starting to growl from being so hungry, and I started thinking about how absolutely satisfying it would be to devour some fries or a hamburger. I was still a little salty I had missed the free breakfast. Tomorrow I was sure to wake up and get my money's worth.

I got dressed, did my makeup, danced a little more, and then left the hotel with food in mind.

Some hotels are placed in the middle of really booming, beautiful cities, full of life and stores and people—like, there's a mall across the street, a Red Lobster next door, a Chik-fil-A down the road, and a Target only a mile away. Other hotels are placed in the middle of absolutely nowhere, devoid of life, meaning, and a sense of reality—like, there's some scuddy Mobil gas station that shares the same parking lot, there's a Hardee's two miles away, and a Burger King/Taco Bell hybrid on the side of the freeway. This Holiday Inn was a product of the latter environment.

I walked into the Burger King/Taco Bell establishment looking for a Whopper but, in a moment of weakness, I ordered a Whopper and a couple tacos, and some nachos, and of course I had to get fries and a shake. I'm only human, after all.

I hadn't eaten the apple that I nabbed from the front desk—it was at “home,” sitting on my desk quite aesthetically juxtaposed next to my books—so I was really hungry.

As I devoured my food—as promised—in the dining room there, I watched other customers enter and exit and conduct their business. It was mostly trashy-looking white people that kept coming in. For example, there was this one dude, who looked like every other old country dude, who walked in there by himself. He was bald, but in denial about it—either that or really lazy about it—which I say because he was balding but still had some longer pieces of white-gray hair along the sides of his head, and then he had this bristly, bushy white beard like a rectangle from his chin. He had a blue, plain t-shirt on and light blue jeans and dark brown, muddy work boots. His face was very oval and shiny and he had a wider build, even wider around his middle where the shirt stuck out almost as though a basketball were hidden under there—I don't know, maybe there was. But he came into that Burger King/Taco Bell and ordered some inhuman amount of food and took it to-go in two bags. I watched him take it to his pick-up truck, which I totally expected. I bet he had three daughters but wanted three sons. I took another hearty bite. I wondered if he was a drunk, or if he was a good, loyal family man.

This other lady came in, in all jersey fabrics, or so it appeared. Her shirt was some soft, stretchy material, a pink three-quarters-length sleeve shirt, and navy blue sweat

pants that didn't even make contact with her white tennis shoes. I could see her white, ankle-height socks. She was quite a large woman, and appeared to be in her middle ages, though some sad vibe I got from her made me feel like she was younger than she appeared. Her thin hair was some dead-colored gray-brown styled into a shabby pony tail with a hair scrunchie. She had to shift her weight from side to side in order to walk, and I started to hate the town I was in. Her name was probably Melody or Grace or something else beautiful like Harmony. Did she think she would be here at this age? She ordered only one thing, and then sat by herself at a table near the window and ate her salad. I took another bite. I wondered if there was any series of events that could ever lead me to ending up in her shoes.

I started to eat my food faster because I wanted to get out of there. I couldn't take looking at these people. Usually I love checking out people; I'll see what they're up to and judge them and figure out their lives, but something about the quality of people that were frequenting that Burger King/Taco Bell made me too damn depressed to enjoy my chocolate milkshake, so I finished the food and took my milkshake back with me to the hotel where I could finish it without feeling guilty for being young and not stuck somewhere.

I was pretty disappointed that was all that was there for me, though. I was hoping I'd find a mall somewhere near or at least a dollar store that I could score a pathetic but cheap bathing suit for the hotel pool. I started to wonder if I just wore a matching bra-panty set if anyone would notice it wasn't a proper suit. Then I remembered I only had

light gray and black bras, which didn't match anything because all my underwear was dark gray or blue.

How does someone end up with only certain color underwear? My favorite color was purple, and I didn't have a single pair of underwear that was purple. How does that happen? I guess I hadn't bought underwear in at least three years because I was predominantly the same size as I was in high school, and I guess when I buy underwear, I don't think about the color too much in relation to my preferences. I guess I was just like, "Hey, this looks like it'll fit" and pull out the credit card. I resolved to buy purple underwear some time along my trip.

I thought it'd be real cool to have the day off in a hotel, just checking everything out and living like a queen, but I very quickly got bored and sort of lonely. I guess my impression of kicking it at a hotel was informed—or rather, misinformed—by my years spent watching *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*.

After wandering around for a little while, I concluded that besides the swimming pool, laundry room, and workout room, the only other thing as thrilling was the ice machine. There was an open room by the lobby, with TV's playing and the ghost of where breakfast was laid out, which is where I ended up hanging out. My room was too lonely and didn't have enough personality for me to feel comfortable in.

There were all sorts of characters in the lounge area of the hotel. By "all sorts of characters," I mean that there was a handful of people, but they all belonged to a similar breed of people: self-righteous, standoffish, middle class, white-collar workers. Okay, so

I can't say I know for certain that they all shared all those characteristics, but they definitely came off that way. I mean, when you read a magazine like *People* looking real hard down your nose as you do, sitting straight up with your perfectly-set blond hair with brown highlights and occasionally raising your head to call, "Jackson, no, get back here" to your four-year-old who keeps pulling hot chocolate packets out of the basket by the beverage table, then I'm sorry but everyone with some sort of intuition is gonna probably infer that you're a little pretentious and self-assured about it.

Anyway I got sick of looking at those people and not talking to anyone, so I went up to the reception desk and tried to strike up a conversation with the robot lady who helped me this morning.

"Uh, you have anywhere to shop around here?" Truthfully I should have been saving my money, but I really just wanted somewhere to go and see new things. I like to shop when I'm bored, even if it means just wandering around a store soaking it all up. Besides, I could always shoplift.

The lady, Beatrice according to her name tag (honestly I didn't know the name Beatrice existed outside of literature), was flipping through her own magazine behind the desk ledge, and looked up a little startled at me. Her thin pink lips pinched together as she racked her brain. "Well..." she started, half-mindedly brushing away a piece of her clearly dyed golden-red hair from her face, a piece of hair was too short to stay in the high ponytail she had. "There's a Mobil right next door." I almost choked. "What sort of shopping are you looking to do?"



I leaned my elbow up on the desk, being real casual and like I was gossiping with a friend. “Like underwear stuff. I want to buy some real nice panties,” I said plainly. My new goal became to try to shock this lady. See if I could shake her very pristine resolve. Sometimes I like doing that—pushing the boundaries of social conventions to try to see how people deal with this sort of violation of expectations. Occasionally that involves being silly or just downright lying or being kind of vulgar, but it’s a fun practice to remind you how scripted our interactions are.

“Hmm, so like a Walmart?” she asked innocently. “There’s one about a twenty-minute drive off of—”

“Nah nah,” I interrupted. Beatrice was doing a better job at shaking me than I was of her, clearly. A Walmart is what she came up with? “I’m looking for a Victoria’s Secret, you know, that sells the lingerie and sexy-type panties. The real slutty stuff.” I developed a Boston accent during the course of this conversation.

“Oh—uh—I see now,” she said, sucking in a deep breath. Tiny shock. I could do better though. “Not really in the area... You could probably find one at a mall off the freeway...”

“I don’t feel like driving,” I said. This came off as just plain rude. I tried to reroute my method—I wanted to be shocking and brazen yet friendly. Reel it back in, Nadia. “I just think a woman should have a good pair of panties in her favorite color. You know? Like every woman just needs to have that pair of underwear that she feels real damn hot in, even if no one sees it. And I’m looking for that. My favorite color’s purple, if you’re wondering. So I’m on the hunt for this purple pair of panties for my pussy.” The

last part just slipped out—I was on an alliterative roll and I knew it was a cheap “shock value” shot, but I went for it, and I couldn’t do anything about it once I had already said it.

To my surprise, instead of frowning and looking around as if on an episode of “What Would You Do?”, Beatrice was trying to restrain a thin-lipped grin and nodding her head. She looked a little sheepish, and bit her lip for a second. Beatrice! You were supposed to be a prude! You have exceeded all my expectations for you!

“I totally agree,” she said quietly, glancing around, then looked at me. She smiled.

I didn’t really have anything to say. I mean, I guess I could keep expanding on the subject, but then I’d just be having a conversation with a slightly-frumpy older lady about underwear. Maybe she was the one playing a game with me. Should I keep going with it, or back out? I was pretty bored. I went with it.

“Yeah, ‘cause there are plenty of things in this life that we get stiffed on, or can’t enjoy because men think we only enjoy it because they enjoy us enjoying it, but goddammit I’m gonna love my underwear in solitude and I don’t even think I’m gonna wear this pair of purple panties for any guy. The only time I’m gonna wear it is when I deliberately choose not to have sex.” I was making it up as I went, and while I was suddenly very impressed by my idea, I knew if the panties were sexy enough, I couldn’t help but wear them to get laid.

Beatrice seemed to swell with inspiration as I kept going. Her shoulders seemed set farther back and her chin up higher. “Exactly.” She said this with so much quiet force that I started to see her as a possible protestor back in the civil rights days. I don’t think

she was that old, but perhaps I had totally misread her, completely underestimated her. “Well, I’m sorry I can’t help you find a store that suits your needs,” she said, and it made me feel like she was wrapping me up, so she could get back to her magazine. “I hope you find that pair of purple panties.”

“Yeah... Me too...” I said, sort of bewildered with what just happened, and feeling totally like my new sister had written me off a little bit. Maybe she put on that “meek” demeanor as an act. Maybe she was a fighting feminist, and that’s what she had to get back to work on. Apparently I wouldn’t know. I walked away feeling confused and really inadvertently revved up about those purple panties.

I was lying on the hotel bed backwards—feet by the pillows, head by the foot of the bed—when I decided where I wanted to go with my whole journey. It hit me, just like my revelation about the purple underwear.

I remembered in middle school on a school trip going to Washington D.C. It was one of those whirlwind weekend tours where they try to compact every major site into a tightly-scheduled, jam-packed itinerary; it felt like a pre-determined package, including all the most touristy tourist spots: the White House, the Washington monument, the Lincoln memorial, the Arlington cemetery, the Capitol building, the Smithsonian Science Museum and the Natural History Museum, and whatever WWII or Vietnam memorial could be squeezed in beside the rest. It was probably the most pointless trip of my life, because while I got to see all these famous things, we sped through it all so fast that none of it really sank in for me. Like, the couple of girls in my buddy group and I ran around

the Smithsonian trying to see everything in the hour we were allotted before we had to re-meet up with the rest of our school's tour group that I don't really remember anything about it; we'd get into one room, lap around it, snap a picture, and run on to the next room. I have hundreds of blurry photos of exhibits that I don't even know what they were for.

And of course we had to buy all the typical tourist stuff. I needed—*needed*—this hideous sky blue pullover hoodie that read “Washington, D.C.” across it in letterman font, like a badge of my tourist-iness. I probably spent like \$40 on the thing, and I wore it during the trip and maybe once after; it's long been disposed of in one way or the other. It was real hideous and fit horrifically, baggy as hell, way too much fabric for my lanky pre-pubescent body. It'd probably still be too big on me, almost ten years later.

Really the only good part of the trip was that my aunt was able to chaperone. Even though I was in a “group” with a few other girls, the groups were assigned to us, and they weren't really my friends or anything, so mostly my aunt kept me company and made me feel more welcome on the trip.

So, I'd been to D.C., but I had been too young to really appreciate it, and it was such a brief trip that I didn't remember much of it. When you're thirteen, how much of a place can you really experience? I mean, it's kid-friendly-ish in D.C., but I was curious what the night life was like. Where were the good clubs? What parts of the city were hiding from the tourists?

Anyway, I started thinking about all this because I was on my phone, and this girl I went to high school with posted some picture of the Peace Arch in D.C. I guess she goes

to college out there in Georgetown, and I guess I had known that, but that never really meant anything to me until I got to be on this road trip of mine, and possibilities started opening up to me. I mean, when you're in your normal, average, everyday life, you just get into this groove, and you stick to the track and don't think about things in a possible or probable way; you see pictures of D.C. and you're like, "Other people are so lucky for being able to go there," but you don't realize—you don't *realize*—that at any moment, any moment at all I mean, you can just get up and go. You can be struggling with your research paper proposal one minute, and then just get up and walk out to your car and go—go anywhere. You are not at all bound to anything, and free will is abundant and available. And that's how I was—I didn't even think of some things as at all possible. This bitch from my high school would post pictures of D.C., and I'd be like, "Damn, that'd be cool to be at," but some sort of wall prevented me from believing and realizing it is totally easy for me to just go there myself.

So when I saw this picture at the hotel room, at first I thought to myself, "That's badass," and went to keep scrolling, but then I stopped myself. Why was I being boring and lame in a hotel room thinking about how I'd like to see this Peace Arch but not actually making any effort to go and see it? Wasn't that the whole point of my trip? To go off and do the things I wanted to do? I kicked myself in the ass and decided: I'm going to D.C.

After that, I couldn't be in that hotel room anymore. It was just such a good idea—D.C.! The east coast! New England! The city!—that I don't know why I hadn't thought of it before, and I didn't want to wait any longer. My trip so far had been

underwhelming—all I had managed to do was piss off some misogynist at a gas stop and overshare about my underwear dreams and aspirations with some apparently feminist hotel receptionist. I was restless for the real action to begin, no more pussy-footing around.

I started packing up my shit again. It was kind of annoying because I had just unpacked it all and established myself in the room maybe four or five hours earlier, and here I was undoing the work I had done. But it was in the name of my true road trip realized, so within fifteen minutes, my shit was consolidated, and I was giving the room a final look-over to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

"I'm on the road again, Beatrice," I announced, slapping my room key card down on the front desk counter. She looked up, a little startled, from her magazine, and frowned slightly.

"You'd like to check out?" she asked, wiggling the mouse to her computer.

"Yes sir," I said. "Er, yes please." Sometimes "Yes sir" is just an automatic response for me—I had a teacher that would say it all the time, and I kind of formed it as a habit myself. I'll sometimes use "Yes ma'am" instead, but people get offended by weird things, so you never know what to say. I'm not the most sensitive person ever, but if I can correct myself after calling a woman a "sir," I will.

"All right," Beatrice said, ignoring that I had called her "sir." She clicked some things loudly—to clarify, she wasn't forcibly clicking anything, but the mouse was just really loud—and then printed something she asked me to sign. "Unfortunately, your money won't be refunded even though you're not staying the night," she explained.

“It’s whatever,” I said, signing the paper with a green Holiday Inn pen that gave me goosebumps because the ink didn’t flow so well, and it just felt like scratching paper. I looked at my signature, basically a wavelength of lackadaisical hills and valleys, and pushed it back towards her.

“Then you’re all set to go,” she said, making eye contact with me and giving a small smile. “Anything else I can do for you before you leave?”

“Just this apple, miss,” I said, snatching an apple from the basket. I thought about how this place just made a nice deal off my early departure; they’d probably have the room booked and filled within the next twelve hours. “Well, maybe these two apples,” I said, taking another one. I shoved them in my jacket pockets with a little bit of forcible stretching of the fabric and gave Beatrice a short wave. “Thanks, B.”

“Have a wonderful day. And good luck on your purple panty search!”

I almost choked as I was heaving my duffel bag over my shoulder. I started laughing and waved at her again, heading out to my car.

And then I was on the road again, this time with a clear destination. Having a destination sort of pissed me off because I had wanted just to go wherever the wind blew me or some romantic shit like that, but also I knew D.C. would be worth it, and if it turned out to be awful, I had the ability to go wherever I wanted. I knew that now—I was so full of hope for D.C.!—and the liberation of it drew me on.

Four hours later, my lower back was aching, and I was sick of all noise. When you first start out on a road trip, you’re all excited to listen to your favorite jams and sing along to

all the songs, and then after you exhaust all the top hits of your playlist, you start to dig into the archives and pull out the long-forgotten songs, the music of yesteryears that serve as a fun little blast from the past, and then eventually after all that, you get to the point where you're sick of digging for more music to listen to, and you're sick of driving, so you put on the radio for whatever random songs happen to play, and then after a while that crap gets annoying, so you shut off the whole thing altogether, and all you can hear is the loud grating hum of tires on freeway—and that's annoying, too, but you've got a headache from driving, and you just want silence and a pillow. So that's where I was at, grumpy as hell and wishing my ears could close up.

I was real close to D.C., and starting to wonder where I'd sleep for the night. It was halfway into the evening and growing darker. Traffic was stupid—I don't know what day of the week it was or what all these nincompoops were doing, but none of them could drive, and everyone was trying to curse everyone else via Morse code on their cars' horns. I don't understand Morse code, but I contributed some aggressive honks to add to the general cacophony of the city.

I was fifteen minutes away from D.C.—well, fifteen minutes away if there hadn't been any traffic—and figured I ought to stop wherever I could to check into a hotel. I know I had had all these grand notions of sleeping in my car, but this was the city, and it's just not safe for a girl to sleep in a car in the city. I'm not a super city slick, but I feel like that's common sense. Plus my lower back and my butt were sore as hell, and I had to pee a bunch, so I saw a Marriott off the freeway and cut off a couple cars in order to make the exit and see if they had an opening for me.



“We have one two-bed smoking room, but that’s it,” the front desk dude said. This guy looked real schluppy. That’s not even a word or anything, but that’s exactly how he looked. Kind of like a weasel or something, like you know if he was about to be tortured, he’d spill anything he knows in a heartbeat before they even laid a fingernail on him. Skinny, tall, maybe later thirties, and black and greasy—probably gelled, actually—hair, combed to the side from a deep side part.

“I’ll take it, pal,” I said. His name was actually David, as his nametag schluppily informed me.

“Okay, I just need some information from you. I’ll need your ID and your credit card.”

“Take it all, my friend. But I really need to urinate, so the faster, the better.” I took my wallet out of my backpack and dug my cards out of my wallet.

He looked somewhat annoyed with how casual I was being with him. “There’s a restroom across from the elevators,” he offered, taking the cards from the counter.

“You’re a real hero,” I said drily, leaving my bag sitting on the counter and walking off to take full advantage of this bathroom—excuse me, this *restroom*.

It was a one-person deal, so it was a large square restroom that the hotel tried to decorate with fake plants, very Olive Garden-y tiles and whatnot, and paper towels sitting in a little woven basket. I was kind of glad I didn’t have to blow dry my hands, but I also kind of judged them for not making people blow dry their hands compulsorily. You can always tell that a place is fancy when it doesn’t have to be environmentally friendly.

Back at the front desk, I was good to go after a signature, and so I grabbed my bag and headed off to my new room. What an enlightening trip so far—just hopping from one hotel to the next. I was already sick of them, and their fake plants and their hundreds of replicas of the same rooms in the same styles offering the same generic product. But a girl has to sleep somewhere.

The room was definitely a smoker's room. I forget that smoking in hotel rooms is still a thing. How? I don't understand how the law says people aren't allowed to smoke indoors, but somehow a hotel room doesn't count. In any case, as soon as I walked in, the smell caught the back of my throat, and I started hacking. I mean, I'm a smoker of sorts, and this room was bad even by my standards. Perhaps a train had enjoyed a prolonged stay in this room prior to me.

I was pretty pooped, so after I exerted the last drop of my energy on hacking and coughing and wheezing, I cranked the AC hoping it would drive out some of the lingering stench and fell asleep under all the blankets without even unpacking or doing more than changing into sweatpants and taking a hit from my bowl.

I hadn't set an alarm, but I managed to wake up the next morning twenty minutes before the free continental breakfast time slot ended. I sure ate my weight in Belgian waffles. I love those things. I think it's kind of obnoxious that you have to make them yourself, but I'm somewhat of an expert at it. I just hate the beeping noise the waffle makers make when the waffle is ready. I prefer waffles so much to pancakes though.

Another thing I just want to say is that my ass rolled out of bed and down to that breakfast room, so I looked about as rough as possible, hair tangled and pressed flat on one side, greasy face, morning breath, sweatpants and yesterday's B.O. There were some people in their pajamas—little kiddos running around in their sleepwear—but most people were dressed, and there were a handful of business-looking lads and lasses in suits or professional attire. They kind of made me angry because who are they here to please? Like, what are you trying to prove? That you can function without eating breakfast? I'm sorry to hear that. I'm damn sorry to hear that. Me, I have to eat within a good twenty or thirty minutes of waking up, otherwise, I'm a real demon. I'm just saying, even if they're on a business trip, they could lighten up and wear their pajamas to breakfast.

Anyway, I still hadn't decided if I wanted to stay another night there yet. Hotels are a pain because you can't check into them until usually after 3 PM, but you have to check out of them usually by 11 AM. I just feel like if I'm paying around \$100 a night just to have somewhere reasonable to sleep, I should be able to leave my shit in the room all day while I sightsee or whatever.

After breakfast, I was feeling sort of restless, so I definitely wanted to get out of there. Also when I walked back into my room after breakfast, the smoke odor caught my throat again, and I started coughing so hard my eyes were red and teary. I had gotten somewhat used to the smell, and then breakfast and the break from the smoke stench destroyed the tolerance I had built up. My throat was so sore that it wasn't at all worth it to me to suffer again when I felt like I could find a better setup.

I hadn't really unpacked, so there wasn't much to put away. I snuck in a quick shower and shoved the mini bottles of shampoo and body wash in my duffel bag exterior pocket and made my way out of that smoke room.

My friend David wasn't at the front desk that morning. It was some other guy, Raymond, who looked boring and dull like David did but in a less fun way. Man, I really missed Beatrice. Raymond was so bland he wasn't noteworthy; at least David was bland in an amusing way. I don't even know how I would describe Raymond—he just had an expressionless, plain face and plain light brown hair and the plain uniform. Blah. I even missed David's schluppiness. Raymond was so monotonous. I thought about suggesting he get plastic surgery, just so they could rearrange something about his average face to make him look more interesting. Like if they gave him a bigger nose or a lopsided smile or a couple blemish scars, he'd be more intriguing to the eye. But he just looked so... Meh. I yawned when he told me to have a good day.

The metro wasn't far from my hotel, so I tossed my bags into my car and walked to the station. I figure it'd be easier to travel around on foot than by car, and I paid my dues at the Marriott, so I'd be damned if I wouldn't help myself to usage of their parking lot.

The metro is crazy. I'd never been on it before, but I had seen a bit about it in movies and stuff, so I had a general idea of what it was like. First of all, you take an escalator underground, and it starts to feel like some Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle type of shit for a second. It seems like you'll be traveling along the sewage river but it's really sewage-free tunnels, which is a nice surprise. Then they've got these machines that look

like vending machines, but you're supposed to load money onto a card with them because it turns out the metro isn't free. Except I had no idea what I was doing, which I guess was obvious, because some friendly guy asked if I needed any help while passing by. I took it that he worked for the metro because he was headed towards a "Staff Only" door when he asked me; either that, or he just really played by his own rules.

"Uh, yeah. I guess I don't know what I'm doing." Boy I hate admitting when I'm not a professional at whatever task is in front of me.

"Where you tryin' to go?" he asked, stopping and shifting his weight to one leg.

"D.C. I guess," I said, scratching the back of my head. It didn't itch, I just was a little uncomfortable.

The man exhaled abruptly, I guess as if some sort of exasperated laugh. "D.C.'s a big city. Where at in D.C.?"

I felt real stupid at that point. I mean, duh. I hated how obvious it was that I was new to this.

"Uh, the monuments, I guess." Did I just say that? The monuments? That's the most touristy thing I could have said. But I knew it'd get me to the heart of the city, and then I could scavenge for the good parts off the beaten path.

"You doin' an awful lot of guessin'," the guy laughed. He was definitely laughing at my expense.

"All right, so how do I do this?" I asked, motioning to the machine.

He came over and started reading the chart at the top of the machine and told me how much it would be. “You loadin’ this on a card?” I shook my head. “So you need a card?” I nodded my head. “All right.”

He told me how much it would be and I inserted the money after he adjusted some things. I wanted him to walk me through all the steps, so I didn’t ever have to have an exchange like this again in my life, but he was so quick about it that I didn’t feel like interrupting and struggling to understand all the buttons. A card popped out at the bottom, and he said I was good to go.

“So...” I said, holding the card between my thumb and pointer finger. I didn’t know where to go or what to do.

The way the dude was kind of dancing a bit and talking real fast, I got the impression he had better things to do, or things he was fixing to do, but he walked me over to the entrance and gave me directions.

“Good now?” he asked, already taking steps away from me.

“I’ll figure it out if not,” I said. There were one-man gates lined along the entrance, so you had to swipe your card against a sensor for the bars to let you through. I waved my card over the sensor, but the gates didn’t go down, and I tried it a couple more times. The man sighed, took it from me, slid it along the sensor in one smooth motion, and the gates went down for me. I thanked him, and he gave a half-salute and speed-walked off before I could bother him with more ignorant questions.

The metro was crazy indeed. When the train stops, you have like two seconds to jump onto the car before the doors mercilessly close on you. You’ll get squished if you

don't hustle. I watched the doors smash around a man who was boarding with his toddler, and he had to really fight to get through to the car, and he was not a small fellow.

When the metro whooshed up, the sound echoing all down the tunnel in some eerie, Ninja Turtle type way, the doors opened, and I boarded. Inside, it was a lot like a public transit bus, with all different rows of cushioned bench seating, and some people standing and holding onto bars. My cab was pretty empty, except for a few random people dispersed along the car, all seated though.

My stop came up pretty fast—I got off at the Smithsonian stop, so it was not a surprise to me when I got off and worked my way up back to the living world and found myself in the heart of all the Smithsonian museums. It was neat emerging from the metro and having the sky open up again, and you remember, “Oh yeah, daylight exists, and the sky is this great big thing that's wide and not a dark, concave tunnel above you,” like when you leave a movie theater and it's still light out. I wasn't even on the metro that long, but it was still an experience.

I was super overwhelmed immediately though. It was like I was back in that crammed gas station, except it was the gas station multiplied by a million. There was traffic, and buses, and people, and cameras, and tons of buildings, and more people and more cameras and all these giant museums and monuments you see on TV or in movies or on the news in person. It was pretty amazing, but I didn't know what to do with myself. I walked around until I spotted the National Mall, which was something I actually remembered from the middle school trip.

Except there were all these tourists flocking around the place. I was kind of annoyed, because they all had cameras up to their faces and their necks bent over phones, and they were all taking selfies and asking strangers to take their pictures in front of things. There were a whole bunch of people around the Washington Monument posing like they were holding it in their hands, and other people stood far enough away so it looked like it was on top of their head, and other people pretending like they were leaning on a smaller version of it... Tourists do the wackiest, most typical things.

I mean, I guess I was technically a tourist, too, but I was there for a more noble cause—for the cause of freedom! My personal liberation! And to see what all the fuss was about. In any case, I felt more like a “traveler” than a “tourist,” which is a fine line, but one I draw in my head. I couldn’t explain the difference, except that I wasn’t taking any selfies with a monument. I was trying really hard not to be on my phone in case I missed anything important. And none of these tourists were really appreciating anything. It got me all distracted and bothered, thinking about them, so that I couldn’t appreciate the monuments myself.

And so I walked around the Washington Monument for a little bit before I got too overwhelmed by all the people—I wasn’t used to being around so many *people*—that I really couldn’t take in all that stimuli because there was too much buzzing, and I was so annoyed by everything that they were doing.

I ended up wandering away from the National Mall area and up towards the downtown area. That was a little better because there was less touristy stuff to do, but the sidewalks were also crowded, and it was mostly fancy restaurants. I was hungry, but I



couldn't choose between Chinese or Mexican, cupcakes or sandwiches. And I felt really weird and under-prepared, and there were so many faces that I just needed some alone time to regroup now that I knew what to expect. I don't know why I didn't expect it to be crowded, but I think after all the alone time on the road and in the hotels, I had forgotten what it's like to be in a city.

And so I went back to the metro. As it turned out, there was something very genuine and tender about it. Sitting on the metro, staring out the window at the darkness, the dark tunnel walls sliding by. I looked around at the other people in my car, and I knew instinctively that this was one of the few places where people reveal something honest about themselves. Everyone's faces are so solemn, or so expectant, or so uncertain.

Nobody really talks on the metro; all that's there is the rushing of the train and the whoosh of the machinery. It's pretty soothing, actually. We're all underground, in a moment of quiet, where we can reflect on where we came from or where we're headed or even just close our eyes for a moment of sleep. One woman sat across the aisle from me, and she wore a blue pencil skirt with nylons and black flats, and her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and she wore a tan blazer. She kept her arms firmly crossed and her head down, eyes shut. Her body rocked with the movement of the metro. I don't know what her job was—everyone who lived in D.C. seemed to dress nice, and I knew there was a million different job titles for all the different bureaucratic positions out there (Chair of Departments, Department Head of Management Oversight, Manager of Operations—I made those all up, but they sound just as legitimate as they do vague).

I don't know, she just looked really tired. And if you saw her walking down the street, you may not know that about her. When you cross paths with someone, you only see them for a second, on their route; when you share a metro car with someone, you get a minute to watch as they unfold in the moment when they are forced to stop, wait, and stay still.

I ended up riding the metro for a while that evening. I stayed put when the car got to my stop, and watched the passengers get on and off at various stops. I was sick and annoyed with my road trip; I had a headache and needed to go to the bathroom, and I kept having to pop my ears. But that metro was the only place where I felt somewhat connected to anyone, even if we weren't speaking or even exchanging eye contact.

So it was dark when I got back to my car and took it to a nearby Best Western I had booked earlier that day on my phone. The front desk character was another Taylor but this one didn't smile and had crooked teeth. Maybe that's why she didn't smile.

The next morning, I was fed, showered, and dressed, and desperate to enjoy myself.

I headed to Georgetown. I had to take the metro to a different stop and walk to Georgetown because the metro didn't have any stops in Georgetown—something I thought strange, given how popular it seemed to be. I mean, popularity doesn't mean much to me, but I just feel like the demand is there, so... Well, in any case.

The walk wasn't too bad; I made my way over a bridge and through a park of some sorts, and then Georgetown opened up to me. I have to admit I love the way it looks, all the old buildings built practically right on top of each other, pressed tightly

shoulder-to-shoulder. I walked down the streets admiring the architecture and trying to ignore how typical it was of me to be there.

There were shops and restaurants, just like the day before, except these shops felt less forced. I can't explain this phenomenon, but it was just a little more relaxed, a little less pathetic.

I passed a clothing store and suddenly said aloud, "Oh yeah!" The woman passing me turned to look at me, but I grimaced, and she kept going. I had forgotten—I wanted to buy purple underwear! I cut into the store.

It was one of those boutique places, where everything is beautiful as hell, but if you touch anything, they'll have to charge you your mother's soul because it's all so damn expensive. The fabrics were gorgeous, and the clothing unique. I knew I could find similar stuff to it all for a fifth of the price at some place like Forever 21, but something about boutiques make them feel more authentic, and you just feel better about buying their products. I can be a good shopper when I'm not being cynical about how companies brainwash consumers. Or maybe being cynical about how companies brainwash consumers makes for a good shopper.

There were so many floors to this place. A downstairs, an upstairs, and then more stairs leading to other floors on each of those. It was pretty neat how the store just seemed to work around the layout of the building; obviously the bones of the place had been there for a long time, but this boutique came in and didn't try to change or streamline anything of the structure, just cosmetic things. I liked that.

“Uh, you got underwear here?” I asked the girl at the checkout counter in the center of the first floor. I had wandered around for a minute, but I just wanted to get straight to business, and I’m not shy about asking people for things when it’s a situation where I’m not an idiot for being clueless.

The blond girl—in her tight, tight jeans—responded, “Yup! Second floor, back right corner.” She had a lanyard around her neck with some employee identification card, and an earpiece like a walkie-talkie. Must have a lot of clothing emergencies around here to warrant that sort of communication system in a small boutique like this. That, or they needed it because of all the different damn floors and constantly losing each other. I imagined this girl, Rachel, being lost in a sea of sweaters on floor F-3, and her manager, Lucinda, frantically running around the places with an armful of denim jackets shrieking, “Rachel! Rachel! These distressed denim jackets won’t restock themselves!”

“Thanks,” I said, and I made off in that direction, wearily avoiding the wall of menacing sweaters threatening to swallow me up.

I found the underwear without much of a problem, but not what I was looking for specifically. They all had stupid sayings on it, like “I heart tacos” or “Booooring” or “Pizza before boys”—all of which are true statements, and I can’t disagree with any of their sentiments, but I just don’t care to have that sort of thing advertised on my underwear. I’m a no-nonsense underwear wearer.

They had more serious underwear, but those were white or the wrong color purple or red or black, and the one purple pair had freaking unicorns on it. I don’t understand why unicorns are always considered such a girly thing. A unicorn is literally a horse with

a phallic-shaped horn on its forehead. What's manlier than displaying your power to pierce and penetrate things for all the world to see—unapologetically? Whatever. Unicorns are badass, and men are missing out for shying away from them. But I still didn't want them on my underwear because girly or not, I'm not too into unicorns.

In any case, I couldn't find a single pair of my imagined perfect purple panties, so I rather discouragingly exited the shop. Rachel cried some generic store parting to me—a “Have a good one!” or “Thanks for stopping in!”—but I just wasn't in the mood to acknowledge it. Sometimes I'm rude like that, but it's too much energy to know if strangers are talking to me and then feigning some sort of meaningful response. That happens to me all the time. Employees at a store will be like, “Hi, how are you?” and they're nowhere near me, and I've never seen them before in my life, so I'm thinking, “Are they talking to me? Did I wait too long to reply already? How do I even respond?” so I give some half-hearted nasally sound that could pass for a noncommittal “Fine” and hope that I'm not in a position to need their assistance later in case my reaction was rude in their eyes.

I hit up a couple other stores after that, but they either didn't carry underwear, or the purple underwear they had would have just sufficed if the price hadn't been outlandish. I mean, who pays \$30 for underwear that I'm not over the moon about?

And lingerie—I don't get lingerie. I mean, I *understand* the *purpose* of it, but it's so pointless. Guys are gonna think I'm sexy whether I'm wearing lingerie or not—because if I'm wearing lingerie, we all know where this is going—and the clothes have to come off anyway, so... I'm paying big bucks for a guy to look at me, say, “Nice,” and

then rip off my pretty undies? Nah. That's why if I ever buy lingerie, it would be for my own fun. Guys don't appreciate jack, especially not good underwear.

I kept striking out on the panties, so I gave up that hunt and resorted to a Plan B I had been mulling over for a couple days. The bitch that I went to high school with who went to Georgetown—she was all right; not my favorite person, and definitely a spazz, but I had somewhat of a general okay-ness with her existence, and so I did something not totally like me but something I knew I had to do, just to try to get the most out of this damn running away business.

Her name was Candice, and I texted her. Ellis would be so jealous to know I was meeting up with another girl on my trip. She'd think I was replacing her as my best friend—okay, not actually, but she'd probably be a little salty that I could ask Candice to dinner but couldn't text her back, her texts which started accumulating and I was doing a lousy job of responding to. I don't know, it's just that I read her texts absentmindedly as I was doing stuff, like crossing the road or browsing the boutique, so I wasn't fully present in the moment of the text, and then consequently I forgot about them, and they just built up, and before I knew it Ellis was texting me in all caps, inquiring if I was even alive or still interested in being a member of a society that used technology to communicate. I replied, "Hey what's up." She sent back a middle finger emoji.

So I texted Candice to see if she wanted to get dinner. I didn't know how long it would take for her to see it or read it or if she was in class or if she was free at all, but a couple hours later (after I continued strolling through the streets) she said that she actually was free tonight and could meet with me at a place called Sweet Green. I had no

idea what Sweet Green was—maybe it was a place where all the desserts are green, or where people go to eat their vegetables lovingly, but I had seen a couple of them around and agreed to meet there. She gave me a description—the corner of I and 23<sup>rd</sup> would get me there, to the one nearest to her, she wrote, which meant for me a long walk according to my phone, so I headed out.

It turns out Sweet Green is a salad place, which is a despicable place to meet up with somebody for a reunion meal if you ask me, not that this was going to be much of a reunion, but I hadn't seen her in two years, so it was reunion-y enough. I feel like any good reunion involves having a lot of emotion at stake—the whole “I can't wait to see you! I miss you so much! I'm so excited and happy!” Our “reunion” was more of an “Oh shit, you're in town? Okay, I've got nothing better to do” kind of situation. Perhaps “meeting” would be more accurate—more professional, less emotionally invested.

The place was a total east coast creation. It was basically a Chipotle for salad; I guess that's called a salad bar, but whatever. It was sleek and refined and modern and organic as hell. I got there before Candice, which is always the absolute worst. I walked into the place and immediately realized my mistake; I should have waited around the corner and not entered until I spotted Candice heading in. That way, I didn't have to be in the dilemma I was currently in.

Which was: Do I wait until she shows up to order? Do I order but not eat? Where do I sit? Somewhere she can see me easily? But if we're meeting, I'd rather sit somewhere private and comfortable. Would she even recognize me? And I am not in the

mood for a freaking salad. What would that feel like, to be in the mood to eat a salad? I just can't relate to salads at all.

So somehow I processed all those thoughts in the first three seconds I walked in the door. I almost booked it right then and there, said "Screw it" to this whole idea, blocked Candice from existence and ever shaming me for blowing her off, when wouldn't you know it, the blond bitch blew in right behind me and cried, "Nadia! Hi!" I bet she did the waiting-around-the-corner trick, the goddamn genius.

"Hey Candice!" I said, and she went for a hug, so I guess we were doing the hugging thing out of nowhere. It's not that I'm anti-hugs, it's just that I don't usually like people touching me. I guess if anyone cool ever hugged me, I'd enjoy it, but I'm so in the habit of eluding contact that I don't even remember what I'm missing out on to crave it. Banging guys doesn't count as touching, either, because if you've ever hooked up with someone, then you know there's so little sentiment involved that it's like we're not even there together. So it'd been a long time since I'd had a hug, outside of Ellis, and Ellis knows my policy on hugs, so those are all limited to half-hugs and under-two-seconds hugs.

Candice must be a serial hugger because she kept us in that bad boy for a good four seconds before stepping back and asking how I was doing and why I was in Georgetown.

"Living the dream, dreaming the life, you know, type of stuff," I answered. I sounded so lame to myself all the sudden. Who says such vague meaningless shit?



As I was answering, she began walking towards the salad bar, and I know how cues like that work so I followed. I'm convinced you could get anyone to do anything if you nodded enough and were subtle enough about your movements.

"Have you been to a Sweet Green before?" she asked, which is a very polite thing to ask someone visiting your city when you take them out for food.

I told her no, biting my tongue to prevent myself from saying "Hell no." Candice was nice and made some recommendations about certain types of salad leaves, and honestly it was nice of her, but I just ended up choosing something basic and asking them to put every type of meat they had on it, so I could forget I was eating a salad maybe for a second.

So after I customized my meat lover's salad and she created her incredibly green salad, which was basically spinach and olive oil and maybe a hint of cauliflower—I was too depressed by it to ask—we took a seat in the back corner and tried to make these salads disappear from their horrible existence.

"How have you been?" I asked, because I realized I never returned the question. I guess I didn't really care, but I was sort of curious what she had been up to after peaking in high school.

"Oh, I'm great!" she replied, then ate a forkful of green. I've come to learn that response is either a masked response to cover a heroin-laden lifestyle or a modest response to downplay how actually amazing life is. I glanced at her arms for track marks. Nothing.

“Well what’s new?” I asked. I can’t stand cheap replies like that. I need hairy details. “Where do you live? What do you do? How’s life great?” Where do you get your heroin?

Candice smiled and nodded through the bite she took, waiting to swallow before speaking. While she did that, I glanced around the restaurant at all the other salad lovers. It was a store full of hipster college kids and business adults, students in sweaters and combat boots, businesspeople in suits and gelled hair. So east coast college town. I’d love it if I didn’t tell myself I hated it.

Candice giggled as she finally swallowed—probably she was trying not to gag it up, the poor girl and her poor salad—and said, “So many questions!” Tucking a section of hair behind her ear, she looked at me and nodded again, saying, “Well, I live on campus, Copley Hall, if you know of it, and I’m a full-time student. Treasurer of College Democrats, President of The Office—that one’s just for fun—and I’m a TA for Organic Chemistry and I’m in Alpha Phi Omega. I’m also trying to start up a book club, you know, to keep my brain active.”

All right, maybe she didn’t peak in high school.

“That’s great and all, Candice, but shouldn’t you be doing at least one thing you can put on your resume?”

At first I could see her eyes wondering, so I gave her an eye roll and a half-smirk to let her know it was okay to laugh, which she did.

“I forgot how sarcastic you are!” Candice chuckled. “You almost had me there.”

“I guess some things never change,” I shrugged, and ate a forkful of chicken and ham, carefully leaving the lettuce behind.

“But what are you up to, then?” Candice asked. “Are you in Georgetown for a conference or something? Or are you thinking of transferring? You should transfer!”

Damn. “Uhhh, no and no, although sorry to disappoint,” I said while chewing. Whoops. I swallowed before going on. “Uhhh I’m taking a break from school right now. I needed some time for myself, I think. Just decided to get in my car and go. And here I am. Solving the world’s problems and conquering youth, or something.” I didn’t sound sure of myself, and I could hear it.

But Candice didn’t catch the tone, only became entranced by my words. “That is so cool!” she squealed. “That’s so crazy awesome! Ugh, I’ve always wanted to do that.” She waved her fork around as she spoke. “I’m so happy for you! I wish I could do that. But I’ve got class and clubs and all these obligations. Not to mention my parents would kill me. And I don’t know if I’d be able to get back into Georgetown after something like that, you know...” Her eyes landed on the table thoughtfully, and she got lost for a moment, hooked on staring at the table.

“Well, you can do it,” I offered. “You don’t have to—”

“Oh I could never,” she sighed. Suddenly Candice bounced back—forced herself to bounce back—and moved the conversation onward. “So how long have you been on the move?”

We talked for a little while about what was going on in our lives and other typical stuff like that when you play catch-up. I started feeling pretty bad for her right off

because the way she talked so proudly about everything she was doing it was like she was specifically trying to check off items on some sort of predetermined checklist. I mean it was all really impressive, but it was also pretty boring and kind of like she had convinced herself she was happy or satisfied but felt empty to me.

But as sad as her life kind of made me feel, it did feel nice to reconnect with someone familiar and know a soul in this new place.

I think Candice always liked me because of my sense of humor, or just my dry way of stating things, because once she caught on again how I express my disdain, I had her laughing and laughing at the stuff I was saying. Some stuff I wasn't even trying to be clever with and I had her going on it. If I didn't know better I'd say she had a crush on me.

"You're too much," Candice said, exhaling from a laugh, grin still beaming.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Thanks," I said. Compliment or not, I liked how she said it.

"Anyway, I've got to get back and start on some homework because unlike you," she said, her eyes widening as she said "you" and flashing me a coy grin, "I have class I'm actually attending and trying to pass. Some of us are what you might consider normal and have lame obligations." She began collecting her garbage and purse. "But I'm actually going to a party this weekend that I think you should go to. I think everyone would like you and I could introduce you to some of my friends." Candice shrugged.

I would most definitely be down to check out a Georgetown party! I hoped it wasn't something that turned out being lame, like an awkward high school party where

everyone stands around the kitchen making small talk about the lack of conversation or commenting on the music choice. But if I was gonna be there, I'd make it interesting, because if Candice told her friends anything about me, then they'd be expecting someone badass.

I figured I needed to actually spend at least one night in my car so I could actually experience what it was like. Plus I wanted to get stoned and fall asleep, and I felt sleeping in a car may necessitate smoking prior to it. The day I met with Candice, I took the metro back to the hotel I had left my car in and drove it out to the freeway. I pulled off when I was away from much hubbub. I used a magazine I had, an old credit card from my wallet, and some Swisher Sweets shells to roll it all up, using the light from my cell phone.

I love facing blunts. It's like eating a cake by yourself. There's a certain point where you know you don't need to keep going, you're full, but you have to keep going because once you start you must see it through. Anyway, if you take a blunt to the face, you feel so incredibly high and warm and it's a special moment where you are nestled inside this planet.

Clearly I've thought about it a lot because I lit that magical yeezy up and laid down across the backseat. My legs didn't fit all the way across though, so I had to curl up, and after a few minutes my hip got sore, and the angle I was at was weird. Then I started wondering what the protocol is for sleeping in a car: do you lean back the front seat? Lie across the backseat? Hop in the trunk? I crawled back into the front seat and

pushed the passenger seat all the way back. Headlights illuminated my car every few seconds, so I was able to see what was going on even though it was dark.

I turned the car into that half-on mode where it still plays music and curled into the passenger seat, feet resting on the dashboard.

I was getting pretty high, and I kept greedily hitting the blunt to get higher and higher. I don't always smoke to get stoned, but that night I was definitely trying to get stoned—except, one thing I didn't account for was how lost in my head I get when I'm stoned.

Carole King was playing in my car, and her sweet, nostalgic voice lulled me into a weird, reflective mood. *Snow is cold; rain is wet. Chills my soul right to the marrow...* I started remembering things again—things I hadn't thought of for a while.

I thought about one night, when my aunt Karen and I were lying on my bed. I was a young woman, somewhere between seventh grade and ninth grade, and at that point, Karen had moved in with my mom and me. I was never given a clear answer why Karen moved in—there were fragmented, dismissive explanations, so that she was either there because she was having financial problems, or she was there because she was in between jobs or houses, which may have been true at the beginning but Karen was with us for a couple years—far too long to be between houses—but part of me always kind of thought, or hoped maybe, that she had joined us to be some sort of protector for me, a buffer between my mother and me.

Karen was lying on my bed on top of the white and light pink quilted comforter, with these little pink flowers patterned on it. Back then, I didn't have the queen-sized, so

it was a little twin-sized bed. For whatever reason, my mom went through this phase where we lived minimally, inhabiting the small house with no toys and no name-brand food, no fun gadgets like Gameboys or Play Stations like all my friends had, even though she had a high-paying job. It was right around the time my grandparents died that we moved in there, though, and well after my parents divorced, so I guess she was going through something. I don't know—she never talked about anything; we always did the things we did because “Mom says so,” her talking about herself in the third person to instill this grand sense of her authority in me. It wasn't until after Karen moved out when I was almost done with high school, Mom started buying me fancy things again, like my smart phone, and an Xbox, my big bed, my car, and all that.

Anyway, I was lying perpendicular to my aunt Karen at the foot of the bed, my legs dangling off the side of the bed. She was sitting there, propped up by my pillows and her hands folded over her stomach, and I was staring up at the white popcorn ceiling, searching for images in the various textures. It was kind of hard. The bumpiness didn't lend itself very well to my imagination because the bumps were too similar and too close together, so all I could make of them was “popcorn ceiling.”

She was telling me about a guy she used to know who washed windows.

“Your mailman reminds me of my old friend, Jimmy. He was a really friendly guy, but also very disarming. He had a way of throwing me off, but kind of in a gentle way.” Her eyes rested somewhere where the wall met the ceiling on the opposite side of the room from her. She smiled a little as she spoke.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, he only had one arm, and he was always asking people to ‘give him a hand’—you know, saying the pun on purpose—but then he’d chuckle about it. He never actually needed or wanted a hand, but he liked teasing people.” She laughed once and sighed at the memory, still staring upwards. Karen was older than my mom, but it felt like she had so much more life to her.

My room back then was way cleaner than my room at my college apartment was. For starters, I had a lot less clothes and junk when I was living at home, so even if I had scattered all my possessions on the floor, I would still have been able to see the tan carpet. I had a wooden dresser, but no walk-in closet, and a small wooden desk next to my bed that matched the dresser. My walls were mostly bare, just painted white, except for a calendar featuring different breeds of dogs hanging near the light switch.

We had been hanging out in my room for maybe half an hour. We had both been home all evening, ever since I had gotten home from school that afternoon, but we had both been doing our own thing until then. Karen ordered Chinese for us to eat, but I had been reading on my own, and I think she was watching TV or doing something on her computer. She was staying in the guest room right next to my room; we shared a wall. Mom’s room was in the master bedroom across the hall from us, and the bathroom was at the end of the hallway, closest to my door. Mom had her own bathroom, though.

My mother still wasn’t home from work yet. Karen had knocked on my door around 9:00 P.M., and after I had called to her that it was open, she popped her head in and asked, “What’s up?” She had dark brown hair, and it fell in gorgeous, full-bodied



waves down to her shoulder. She had a square jaw and had a very curvy, womanly build, and was about my height at the time.

The thing I appreciate about Aunt Karen was that she always made sure to carve out time for me. Even if she had no real reason to talk to me, she'd visit with me all the same, and we'd find something to talk about. I never got that with anyone else. She always listened to me when I wanted to speak, and when I didn't, she would find something to tell me—a story from her college years, or an article she had recently read, or an opinion she had about some current event.

After Karen had popped her head in, and I had told her I was only reading but that she was welcome to keep me company, she disappeared and returned to my room with her record player. It wasn't an old school record player, but one of those record players that came in a brief case and were super mobile. She plugged it in and set it on my desk, setting Carole King's "Tapestry" album onto it. Carole's sweet voice played in the background as we talked.

But just as we were starting to talk about Jimmy more, we heard the front door bang shut and keys rattle as they crashed down onto a table, presumably the little table next to the front door. Karen and I looked at each other silently, exchanging a somewhat concerned glance.

"Why is it so dark in here?!" we heard my mom yell from the living room. Karen shifted and swung her legs off the bed, and I sat up, looking at her to know what to do. She stood up and looked at me with a small nod and a serious expression, mouth set in a

straight line, as though to bolster ourselves. I stood up, too, and Karen walked over to my bedroom door and pulled the little gold knob, opening it inward.

“Hey, Vicky!” she said cheerily, exiting my room into the hallway and pulling the door closed behind her before I could follow. Her voice was muffled now, but I heard Karen ask, “How was work?”

I stood up against the door, my ear pressed to its wood-grain surface. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but they must have been in the kitchen because I kept hearing the harsh, pointed thunder of my mother’s heels on the kitchen linoleum. My aunt had been wearing fuzzy white slippers just a moment ago, and I happened to know my mother loved wearing heels. She was a very thin lady, and so they suited her well; however, she was an ER surgeon and never wore heels to work, so she always wore them on her time off, even to the grocery store. Some days she went out after work, and so she always had a change of clothes in her car, including heels. It must have been one of those days since she had gotten back so late and sounded so angry.

“Goddammit, this is *my* house!” I suddenly heard my mother’s voice scream out above the muffled sound of my aunt talking. “This is *my* house!” She had been shouting a lot more lately, going off unpredictably. She sounded drunk, anyway. At least I assumed she was always drunk anymore, no matter what.

Something shattered, and I heard more of the heels’ hard clicking and my aunt’s frantic yet pleading voice. My mom shouted something inaudible, and I backed away from the doorway and crawled into my bed, pulling the covers—some small degree of

warmth still remaining in them from when my aunt and I had been lying there just a little before—over me, staring at the wall next to my bed, the overhead light still on.

“Get out! Get out!” My mom shrieked, so high and shrill that I could hear her clearly. “Get out of my house or I’m calling the police!” She was drunk, obviously, but she meant what she said.

I laid there thinking there was no way my mother could call the police on my aunt, and there was no way Aunt Karen would leave me alone with my mother in this highly irritable state. My mother wouldn’t hurt me—she hadn’t yet, anyway—but she was still a force to be reckoned with, and I didn’t want to be there alone with her. I closed my eyes, but the back of my eyelids were light from the room being so bright. I pulled myself out of bed and went to the door, turning the lock on the knob.

My aunt was shouting, “What the hell are you even doing with your life anymore?!” Karen rarely shouted. I lingered by the door to hear what was going on, and Karen’s voice was moving, into her room, and then back out into the hallway, and towards the living room, saying, “I’m only trying to help you! I’ve given up a lot just to be here, to help you get better!” Their voices quieted, exchanged ferocious words from behind clenched teeth, and I crouched down, my back against the door, and put my head in my hands and into my knees. Then, I heard the front door slam and my heart dropped far, far down within me, and I brought my head up as I heard an engine start in our driveway, and the clicking of those heels crunching over broken glass.

At some point during their fight, the record had stopped, and now spun silently on the player. I stood up numbly, and I took the needle off the record, then walked over to

my bed. The covers were pulled back, and I felt them, petting them lightly with my hand. They were cold again, all the heat having dissipated.

I did not want to be in that house anymore. It was Friday night, and although I had not been invited, I knew there was a party going on down the road. With a sudden revving of my pulse, I set my jaw and changed from my pajamas into a black dress Karen had bought me on a shopping trip a few months earlier, and I opened up the window next to my bed—which faced the neighbor’s house—and I popped the screen out so it fell into the yard just below, and I crawled out, careful not to rip the dress.

I lost my virginity that night, at that party.

But all this came back to me as I fell into a spiral of memories, accidentally following one thought to an associated thought until I was reliving how I felt sitting in my room, listening to the sounds of the two women I wanted most to love me—to choose me first, over the alcohol, over their own lives—abandon me, even if for the night. Karen came back early the next morning and apologized, said she hoped I understood, but I was still shaken from my time at the party and trembled underneath the cold quilt as Karen sat on the side of my bed, petting my hair.

“Poor baby. I’ll let you get some more sleep,” she said, leaning down and kissing my temple with her soft lips.

I stared at the wall without saying anything, just as I stared into the darkness of my car, curled up in the passenger seat, the tears whispering down my hot cheeks.

### PART THREE

The next morning, I woke up and shook my head clear of the previous night's memories. Today I was going to do things differently—I was going to change things up and pretend I was a student at American University, which is a college more in the heart of D.C. than Georgetown.

In any case, I was really looking forward to that party Candice invited me to. Honestly it's stupid, but I hate being left out of things, and so when I get invited to parties, I always show up, even if it's for five minutes to prove I'm better than the party. It's all about pride. Can't be left out, but can't seem desperate. There's a whole science to it.

I was on the metro when it hit me. The metro didn't hit me, but something else did, something I'm about to try to unpack for you. But I'm going to back up first.

I love the metro. We don't really have public transportation where I'm from, not like the metro. We use things like Uber, and there are buses but for the most part, everyone walks, drives, or bikes themselves. So this whole massive web of transportation is fascinating to me. So many people are brought together in this odd communal experience, and so the people-watching is abundant.

I'm a loud thinker. My thoughts are at the very forefront of every aspect of my life, and quite often I voice them because they're so close to my tongue, and they're

usually too bitter not to spit out. Even when I'm not actively thinking my own thoughts, I'm observing things loudly in my head, taking things in at full force.

I was people-watching when my thoughts went quiet that day. Or maybe my thoughts went quiet so I began people-watching. I was sitting by the aisle in an older metro pod—because they have some very new, sleek metro cars, ones with flat screens in them and refurbished seating, and then they have cars that are clearly aged, very worn seats, a noticeable lackluster stain to everything—and I was looking around, inconspicuously, of course, because I know how to be subtle about watching people. The metro rocked back and forth as it traveled through the tunnels, and the movement of the car was the only indicator that we were going forward because the windows only showed the black of the dark underground walls, an occasional light flitting by. A Japanese woman stood clutching a pole with one hand, iPhone in her other hand.

The woman looked 26 years old by my approximations, and she had a gray pea coat on and skinny black pants. I was admiring her look and thinking about how I should start wearing bold yet simple pieces in that sophisticated black-gray-white color scheme. I'm not incredibly into fashion, but I admire how a woman decides to present herself to the world, and the avant-garde trends have always resonated with me. Her phone case was sort of lame, though; it was an over-sized rubber bear phone case, the sort that you would think a child would have. I've seen a lot of girls with these sorts of phone cases in the past couple years, though, and I don't understand the appeal because the extremities of the animal always stick way out so that there's absolutely no hope of fitting it in your pocket, especially your girl pocket. Girl pockets are chronically smaller than men's

pockets, if you didn't know—you can fit the tip of your fingernail in a woman's pocket, and that's for the clothing items that actually *have* pockets and not just the illusion of a pocket.

Where was she going? I figured probably her job, at this hour in the morning. The car was somewhat crowded. It was past peak hours, so everyone on the car probably had late-starting jobs or just had the day off to head somewhere else. I imagined her name being Kate and her working at a coffee shop as a barista. I bet some nerdy guy came in all the time to her coffee shop because he had a crush on her, but he was probably sort of hopeless because she had no idea. Except I'm sure she knew—women can tell that sort of thing, it's a certain energy that we pick up on—but she probably pretended she was oblivious so that she wouldn't have to engage in any sort of awkward conversation with him, because she wasn't into him and besides, she was dating a cool server girl who worked at some edgy restaurant on the other side of town.

Or maybe her name wasn't even Kate. I'm pretty sure the rest was true, but the name I could be wrong about.

Anyway, so I gave myself an eyeful and a mindful of Kate. She stood there, swaying, tapping at her phone, her shoulder-length black hair waving back and forth with the rhythm of her body. I wondered about what she was doing on her phone. Playing a game? Texting? Facebook? Writing a rap? Editing a photo? Reading the newspaper? Arranging a meeting with the *Die Hard* ultimate fan club? I wondered about where she came from. Did she live far away from the city, parked at a garage, took the metro into

downtown? Did she live in a flat real close by? Who did she live with? Did she have a dog? Was she happy?

That's how it went bad. It was so random, so unexpected. In the core of my heart, slow at first, but thick and climbing, a melancholy tar began to smother my emotions. Kate probably wasn't happy. She probably had dreams of being an actress—not in film, on Broadway—but never really made it big, but also never really tried to make it big, but also also never really had a steady back-up plan and all the sudden found herself in an awkward purgatory between her dreams and her real life. I thought about all the friends and family she had, or didn't have. Maybe she was alone in this city. Maybe she had friends and family, but they didn't know how she suffered. Maybe Kate and I had that in common.

Maybe we all have that in common. Sitting across the aisle and up a couple rows was a black woman, with long braided hair hanging loose around her. I would have put her at about 19 years old, probably commuting to class given the maroon backpack—with a couple pins on it—by her feet. I could only see her from a back and side angle, but she had on a denim jacket and patterned leggings, and Chucks. I imagined her name was Truth and that she wanted to be a doctor—maybe an animal doctor, but probably a pediatrician. Truth had in ear buds and gently rocked her head to her music, or maybe that was the sway of the metro. Was she happy?

I didn't feel like going to AU anymore. I didn't feel like being alive. I just felt like sharing a blunt with Kate and Truth. You know what? Fuck being happy. Then I didn't feel like being happy was relevant. Sometimes you just need to be engaged in your life. A



real active member of your own life. And even if being an active member kind of sucks, maybe it's more rewarding and more satisfying than being happy. You're not getting by, you're doing shit. You're doing shit more than being a pointless succubus on this dying planet—like me.

I wondered if Truth or Kate smoked weed. Kate probably did, because she was older and didn't really need to worry about random drug tests at a coffee shop, and wasn't marijuana legal in D.C. now anyway? Truth probably didn't smoke because she was serious about her studies and legal or no, didn't want to sabotage her career in any way. I bet she drank though, from time to time, and I considered actually inviting the two to drinks. Truth was underage, so we'd have to work around that...

But before I could form our little crew, the metro stopped and Kate got off with a small group of people—the people immediately replaced by new people, but no one quite like Kate—and I felt an odd angry regret forming in me. Like a “You missed this opportunity because you were too caught up in your damn thoughts” kind of nasty remorse. I scooted over a seat so that I could lean my head against the plastic window as the metro lurched back into motion.

Truth was still there, though, but it didn't feel right without Kate to balance us out. She would be the older presence, while Truth would be the younger presence, and I'd be somewhere in the middle, there to add cynicism and edge to the group. I imagined Truth being very organized but also very anxious, on account of her great ambition, whereas Kate was a more calming and encouraging figure. We really would make a great team. I could only hope we would wind up in a metro car together again one day.

And then after another stop, Truth was gone, and I was by myself, no longer paying attention to the stops but feeling utterly and horribly like I couldn't do anything. I had all these ideas for the day—ideas for roaming around AU, flirting with some dopey Mama's boy frat kids, pick-pocketing someone's student ID so I could get lunch on campus, maybe pretending I forgot my dorm key somewhere so I could hang out with someone cool in their room until "my roommate got back from her parents' to let me in so I could get my key from my desk—I'm such a doofus—that I forgot before class that morning." But now my heart felt heavy, and all my energy left me, and I was on that metro feeling weighted and terribly lonely, and like I could feel twenty times yuckier and still no one on this planet would care, so why bother reaching out to anyone who wouldn't understand?

I thought about Ellis then, but in my state of mind I brushed her off; if I confessed how I was feeling, she would only feel worse and powerless, and Ellis was such a caring person that it would only bring her down, make her want to come rescue me and tell me that she was right, that I shouldn't have gone to D.C., even though that's not something she would say explicitly—only with the tone of her voice. She wouldn't be able to focus on her classes then, and I would never do that to her, because of the two of us, she is destined for greatness, and I am destined to be riding in a subway feeling like I want to be under the subway after running away from one loneliness to replace it with a new and initially exciting loneliness, and trying to stuff that weird hurricane of sadness into a space too small for it in the back of my head, with all my might.

Eventually I got off the metro. It was a good thirty minutes of staring out the window into the darkness before I felt comfortable enough to pull my eyes away from my thoughts. Sometimes my vision gets locked on a particular scene, and I just need to stay looking at that one thing while my thoughts swarm. Whatever I'm staring at serves as a backdrop for my brain, and I often feel that if I'm forced to pull my eyes away too soon, I'll short circuit.

I tried to make my thoughts really loud again so I wouldn't have to stay in that weird zone I got myself into. I tried to listen to my music, and I tried to surf Facebook, but I didn't have service underground and all my music was old, like stuff I listened to two summers ago, like Destiny's Child and Taylor Swift and Rihanna. They're not bad, but it's just old music and not really what I felt like listening to.

I got off the metro near AU and took a bus to campus. I didn't have the energy to execute my plan like I had intended, but I still had a whole day to waste away, so I forced myself to at least hang out around campus. Maybe it would make me feel better. All I really felt like doing was disappearing. Suddenly my trip felt so meaningless. Suddenly all of my existence felt so meaningless. What was the point? What would I gain?

The bus dropped me off at the edge of campus, and I walked in the direction that many kids with backpacks were headed, because I figured they were all swarming near the bee hive. I had my backpack, too, to blend in. The ratty old navy blue Jansport hung off my shoulders, the pads in the strap long having been worn limp. I had a couple pins on it, like Truth, only mine said silly things like "Legalize" on one, and an alien spaceship on another one, and then I had a cool one where it was the female sex sign with

a pumped fist in the center. But I wore my backpack to blend in, but I also wore it because it had important things in it, like my weed.

I had a joint already rolled in my backpack, so I pulled that out and lit up as I was walking. The crowd of students headed to class had thinned out, so it seemed like a good time. I figured if I was high I would feel better and less icky, as is usually the case. I needed to feel giggly and have those loud thoughts again, and whenever I'm high, my thoughts get really loud. Like, I can only hear my thoughts, and it's every single thought loud and clear through a megaphone.

The first hit was magic, and after that things smoothed out for me. I found a nice grassy knoll between buildings and laid out in the grass, arms stretched, bringing that heavenly joint back to my lips again over and over, holding the smoke in me as long as my lungs would allow—but not too long between hits, because I wanted to take advantage of all the smoke from the little paper joint as possible.

The architecture of AU was so predictable. Beautiful, but predictable. The buildings were old and white and fancy, and I don't know much about architecture—I mean, I've read *The Fountainhead*, if that counts for anything—but I liked the look. Very east coast, as I kept thinking. Old buildings, landmarks with history. That's what I was thinking as I looked around at the buildings. I wondered how long AU had been a school. I wondered how long they had let women into AU. Who had laid in this same grassy strip between these rows of buildings in the past? Right where I was? I took another hit before the joint was out and I stubbed it on my shoe and pressed the butt into the dirt. It would decompose.

I laid back, using my backpack for a pillow. It was a little hard, because I had some books and snacks and my sunglasses case and some other shit, but after a little rearranging it felt better under the back of my head. It was a sunny morning, and although the ground was a little damp, several other students were sitting out on the lawn. AU wasn't a big campus from what I could tell, so what little grass they had available to them seemed highly valued.

For the most part, the students seemed a lot like the students at my college. Well, I guess it wasn't *my* college anymore, since I ran away from it, sort of swore it off for now. The only thing a little different about AU was that everyone seemed a little more studious, a little more serious, a little more anxious. And there was a slightly smaller portion of white people here from what I could see walking around campus, although there were still a lot of white people.

A piece of notebook paper suddenly went flitting by me, and out of instinct I sat up and grabbed for it, successful after a few grasps and after standing to stumble after it. Following behind, a girl who had been sitting about ten yards from me under a tree cried, "Jesus, the freaking wind!"

I picked it up and turned to hand it to her. She was very cute and freckly, which I noticed immediately now that I was up close. She had a nose ring on her left nostril—my left, her right—and a dirty blond wavy bob haircut. She also had these cute, wiry glasses and was wearing an oversized brown sweater and skinny jeans, and I felt like I instantaneously had a crush on her.

“Thank you so much. I thought I was gonna have to run after it across campus like an idiot,” she said, taking the paper from me. Her large sweater’s sleeves covered part of her hand as she grabbed the paper.

“Oh, no problem!” I giggled. Damn I was high. I wondered if she could tell. Sometimes I’m good at hiding it, but I felt really exposed at that point.

She turned to head back to where she had her bag and textbooks laid out. I was thinking really hard at what I could say to keep the conversation going, but all I could come up with was weather talk and small talk student stuff that would be so obvious I was trying to get to know her. Like, “So are you a student here?” Duh. “Do you like AU?” Lame. “The breeze feels nice, except when it’s stealing your homework!” I’m better than that, goddammit.

My heart lifted when she called over, “I guess that’s what I get for doing my homework outside!”

I looked up, and she was cross-legged at her textbook, looking down and shaking her head with a smile. “That’s what I get for trying to enjoy the last of the nice weather.” She looked up at me again. “Oh well.” The girl shrugged and started putting away her stuff in her messenger bag.

“Yeah!” I said, and gave an awkward laugh. Boy I was really off my game. “Uh,” I tried to say something, but couldn’t come up with anything. “So you’re gonna give up on the nice weather and go inside now?” Stupid. And here I’m supposed to be the cool chick.

“I was actually looking for a good stopping point anyway, so I could get some food. I’m gonna head over to the market place and get a bagel or something. I’ve been craving a bagel all day,” she said, grabbing the strap of her bag and standing up.

“Aw man, I love bagels,” I said, suddenly very excited by the idea of a bagel. Munchies, man.

The girl shrugged again. “You can come with me if you want,” she said, and started walking.

I quickly jumped up and swung my backpack over my shoulder as I took a few quick strides to catch up with her.

“I’m Nadia,” I said, eager to know her name.

“Cool, I’m Anne,” she said, smiling at me, and she pushed up her sweater sleeve before putting out her right hand. I shook it. Her hand was warm and soft.

I followed almost a step behind her the whole way because I wasn’t sure where the market place was, but I didn’t want to let on that I didn’t know the right way. I was debating whether or not I should pretend I was a student, but I was too high to develop any sort of smart fibs on the spot—my brain gets slower when I smoke—and if we ever got married and had children, I couldn’t start off the relationship on a foundation of lies.

In any case, she could already tell.

“So what brings you to AU?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked, my voice sounding a little loud in my head. We entered a building and cut through it, coming out on the other side.

“I mean, you’re not a student, are you?” Anne asked, but it sounded more like a statement.

“I... am... not a student, you’re right,” I replied. “Uh, I’m a bit of a drifter right now.”

“That sounds so cool! I’ve always wanted to drift,” she replied, looking over and beaming at me with her wide mouth, and her perfectly quirky teeth.

“Yea, yeahhhh, it’s all right,” I said, hardcore grinning. In fact, I was what one might call “cheesing.” I giggled at myself.

“So what crazy stories do you have to tell about everything you’ve seen?” Anne looked over at me with wide eyes and a huge grin as we approached the stairs of another building.

Well, I got chased out of a gas station an hour after I hit the road a couple days ago, and then I got salad with Ms. Georgetown and had a depressive episode on the metro. I mean, summarizing it like that made it sound kind of interesting and zany, but in reality it had been a pretty uneventful couple of days. I didn’t want to tell her I had been drifting a mere four days or whatever it had been, because I was trying not to keep track of the time, so I could be totally immersed in the “present” of my trip. So I didn’t want to tell her I was new to the drifting thing because whenever you start off on something, people never think you’ll stick with it. Like, take vegans, for example. If somebody tells me they’re a vegan—which they most certainly will, if they are a vegan—and I ask, “Oh, how long?” and they say, “Well, it’s been four days now,” I don’t know if I’d consider them a vegan. Sometimes I accidentally go four days without eating meat or drinking



dairy, but that doesn't mean I'm a vegetarian or dairy-free. I guess the difference between the two scenarios is intention, but still, if you're "four days strong" on anything, odds are that people kind of write whatever you're doing off as a phase. They don't believe in you, at the beginning. Now, if somebody told they'd been a vegan for a year, then I would be more apt to view it as a permanent thing, a fact. "Damn, you're really committed, aren't ya? Stuck with it all this time?" After a year, nobody thinks, "Well it's only a matter of time before ya blow it." No! People take it seriously.

I'm obviously not a vegan, and I'm not a liar, but... Anne didn't need to know how inexperienced I was as a drifter. So I told her, "Hmmm, there's just so many to choose from; I can't think of one on the spot right now." Wow! So smooth I am!

Anne pulled open the door, and with a sudden gust of wind, we blew into the market place. Or, what I imagined was the market place, because I really didn't know, but there was an Einstein's Bagel place, so I directed my stride with more confidence.

"Come on, what's your favorite one?" she asked, reaching her hand across her face to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear.

I pretended to think for a moment.

The market place was pretty crowded, and a dull roar of conversation filled the cafeteria. In the corner, Einstein's had a pretty good line going. It must have been between classes, or a good breakfast hour, because that's when the cafeteria at my old college was the most populated.

We joined the line at Einstein's behind two guys in khakis. Ugh, guys in khakis. I fucking hate khakis. I hate khakis, and I hate when guys wear them, but at the same time,

I eat guys in khakis for breakfast like I can't help myself. The two dudes in front of us were wearing t-shirts with them, and they were the skinny type like I like my boys. Tall... skinny... small butts, but I could deal with that... Dark shaggy hair... Ew, nevermind. The one turned around and he looked like an I.T. nerd or an eighteen-year-old. When it comes to guys, I like them book nerdy—not computer nerdy—and the older, the better. Guys ten years older than I am are already too immature; I don't need to be dipping into the fresh meat. Besides, I was supposed to be focused on Anne... Who I forgot I had waiting.

“Oh! I thought of a story!” I turned to face her, and she stood with big eyes and her hands holding her elbows. Anne nodded.

“Okay, so,” I started. Okay, so, how can I make this sound cool? “This one is actually pretty recent.” She wiggled her eyebrows in excitement. Oh boy, here we go. “So, I was at a gas station a couple days ago.”

“Ooooh, super recent!” she interjected, moving her hands to rest on her hips. So cute.

“Yes,” I confirmed, smiling nervously. The line inched forwards. “I was at this gas station, and I just wanted a pack of smokes and some gas or whatever, and there was this creepy dude behind the counter. I mean, I feel like it's some sort of law that gas stations have to hire the creepiest motherfuckers out there, because I've never been to a gas station and not gotten the heeby-jeebies from whoever's behind the register. I'm actually pretty sure that it's legal for gas station managers to discriminate against normal people in favor of the creeps just so that they can uphold this natural order of gas station

plebs. Sorry I just said ‘plebs;’ I hate that word, and I am definitely not the kind of person who uses that word often, if ever. In fact I’m pretty sure that’s the first time I’ve ever said that.”

“All right, and so you were at this gas station?” Anne politely redirected my tangent. Damn, I was really rambling. I usually only do that shit in my head and reserve my vocal chords for the no-nonsense thoughts.

“Right, so I was at this gas station.” Man, I hadn’t gotten anywhere for how much I had been talking. “And the dude was super creepy, but I’m used to that; whatever. And so when I went to buy some smokes or whatever the heck it was, we did the whole transaction and all, but then as I was leaving, he was all, ‘Hey, smile,’ and I was all, ‘Ex-fucking-scuse me?’ And Anne, something you gotta know about me girl is that I hate when jerk-offs tell me to smile. I know I got a pretty smile, but I ain’t flashin’ it just so that the world can keep looking at my pretty smile. I mean, I got shit to do in this life, or something. I’ve got too many damn thoughts in my noggin to be rememberin’ to smile every second of every day. I mean, that shit just.... Ugh.”

“I totally agree,” Anne said, nodding. The khaki brothers started placing their order.

“So, and I don’t totally remember how this went exactly, but something to the effect of... I basically told him to fuck off or something, and—no wait! Oh now I remember, he had said some sexist thing to me and then he got angry when I didn’t giggle all cutely at it and *that’s* when he told me to smile, and I was gonna let it go even though I was angry about it, but then as I was leaving, he said some other thing to me—

super uncalled for—and I turned around, and he was all, ‘Wanna fight bro?’ and I was like, ‘Fucking yeah’ and I completely called him out on being such a misogynistic sack of shit!”

Anne was giddy at this point, her hands to her face and feet hopping around. “No way! That’s so awesome!”

“It gets even better,” I said, leaning into her excitedly. Her eyebrows rose, but that’s when it was our turn to order, so I had to pause. Damn, just as it was getting to the badass part.

Anne’s cute; she got a chocolate chip bagel with strawberry cream cheese. I wanted to be cute, too, so I told the cashier to double that and I paid for the both of us.

“What? You didn’t have to do that! We like, just met,” she said.

“What do you mean we just met? I know your name; we’re practically blood sisters by this point.” It just slipped out. It was admittedly a very strange comment.

But the bitch ate it up. “Maybe tomorrow I’ll learn your shoe size and then we can merge bodies and become one super human. Because that’s how well we know each other. And it will rain chocolate chip bagels with strawberry cream cheese.”

I was definitely in love.

Once we got our cute bagels, we took a seat by a window at a small table, so I could continue my story.

“Anyway, now we’re just getting to the good part,” I said, brushing some crumbs left behind on the table from its last occupants before unpackaging my bagel. “Okay okay.” I was way too excited.

“And so, I cuss the guy out. I’m like, a twenty-year-old girl or whatever, and I just cuss out this creepy stranger for being creepy, and bitch guess *what*.”

“Oh my god, what? Tell me!” Anne said through a mouthful of bagel.

“He *lunges* over the counter at me and starts chasing me. *Yeah*. Like what the hell!”

Anne’s mouth fell agape, and a half-chewed piece of bagel slipped out onto the table. “He charged at you? What did you do?! Did you call the cops?”

“He didn’t just charge at me, he full on chased me!” I took a giant bite of bagel. Damn, what a perfect combination of chocolate and strawberry and bagel and cream cheese. “I don’t know what the hell he was gonna do if he caught me, but I was not about to let him get his grubby hands on me. So I pulled a number straight out of a goddamn movie, and I bolted and—oh, not before I pushed over a snack shelf behind me so that it would stall him.”

Anne stared at me with a straight, awestruck face.

“Yeah, so I kind of knocked a bunch of shit over on my way out, got to my car, and literally squealed the fuck out of there. I mean, I’ve never made my tires make that noise before, but they were squealing like *pigs* out there.”

“That’s wild,” Anne said, shaking her head and taking the last bite of her bagel, her waves bobbing with her head.

“It was,” I said, and finished up my own bagel.

Anne and I sat there for a couple moments in silence, tidying up our crumbs and wiping our mouths from the last of our bagels. I liked Anne; she was a very likable chick.

I could definitely see her as my friend, and in a brief second, I hoped that she would like me too, and that we could meet again.

“I actually don’t have any classes today; today’s my day off,” she commented. “So typically I do homework, but I don’t have much to do, so would you wanna maybe hang out in my room?” Her hand tucked a piece of hair behind her ear that was already there.

Could it be? She liked me back? She wasn’t sick of me or my ridiculous stories?

“I know you’re busy and all, what with being a drifter,” she added with a smirk.

“Hey, drifting is serious business!” I snapped, smiling with a corner of my mouth. “But I think that sounds nice.”

The two of us headed over to her dorm room. Since AU is pretty small and apartments are crazy expensive in the D.C. area, I guess a lot of AU students live on campus while they attend school. Back at the college Ellis and I went to, it was kind of lame to live in a dorm beyond your freshman year. But at AU, I came to learn that dorm-living is just plain convenient.

Anne’s room was a sight straight out of a catalog, or from one of those highly aesthetic Instagram accounts. In the first place, her dorm room had a wooden shelving unit built in to the wall on the right when you walked in, with a dresser, shelves, and an opening for a television. The carpet was a static-y dark blue, and her bed was pushed in the back left corner along the far wall which had a room-length window. Her desk was beside her bed, and her roommate had a setup mirrored to Anne’s.

The décor was flawless. Instead of where a television would usually sit in the entertainment unit, an aquarium was set up. Her sheets and pillowcases were a salmon pink, and her comforter was a baby blue. She had a white shag rug underneath her bed, and a mobile with flowers hung above her bed. On her desk, she had a row of books against the wall, and a trickling waterfall zen garden next to it. A cactus lamp also sat on her desk, and an alarm clock in the shape of a cowboy boot had been placed on the window sill by her bed. Then there were plants everywhere. She had a hanging pot between the beds, cacti, a leaf fig tree, and other potted green vegetation that sat in giant planters and made the room exotic and lively. Anne had a small map, a painting of a woman in yellow's torso, and a couple Polaroid pictures affixed to the wall above her bed.

“What, no record player?” I asked, after I walked in and took it all in. How could a room this hipster not have a record player? I totally caught a glimpse of a typewriter under her bed.

“It's actually too big, so I left it at home,” she said, not picking up that I was teasing her.

Her roommate's side of the room was a little more streamlined, with more modern appliances—like a lamp, a digital clock, a CD player that all looked from Kohl's—and a zentangle tapestry.

Anne took a seat at her desk chair, and I sat on her bed. At first we talked about her room, me pointing out the different things I liked, and Anne giving a little backstory to everything that caught my eye. At one point, I admitted that her room seemed kind of

Tumblr, very much like she was trying very hard for a particular style, and she sheepishly confessed that she was very particular about her style, but it's all stuff that she liked. I guess I couldn't blame her, sitting there on her bed watching her get shy about what she had chosen to do with her own personal living space; I felt kind of guilty for shitting on it, so I tried to make it better by adding that it was a very photogenic space.

We mostly talked for a while, and halfway through, I had to borrow her room key to go down the hall to the bathroom. As I at first crept, and then boldly strolled to the bathroom, I thought to myself, "I could do this; I could be a student at AU. Anne could be my girlfriend. I could use this toilet every day."

As I was, you know, going to the bathroom, I started thinking about how maybe I should have tried to get into an Ivy League school, like Georgetown. Anne and I could commute to see each other; it'd be cute. And as much as I don't like to brag about it, I'm actually pretty damn smart. I mean, I graduated valedictorian of my senior class in high school, and I don't remember studying once throughout my entire academic career. I guess I just never really had to try that hard in school, so when it came to colleges, I didn't want to try that hard in college. But with the whole Ivy League thing, it seems like secondary education is like a "Choose your difficult rating" type deal, with community college being on easy, so I just wanted to cool it on the brains thing and ended up choosing a state university. I just wanted to be a cool nobody girl, not a girl genius.

Not because I don't value my brains. I do. I guess I just put a lot of pressure on myself to be perfect, and I wanted to not have to hold myself to such a high standard. "If I go to Yale, I have to be perfect. If I go to a state school, I just have to be good enough—



they expect less.” So I never pushed myself to go to a fancy, prestigious school because I didn’t want to have to try.

But I got so bored of it I ran away! Maybe I did need to push myself, to apply myself to my studies more and challenge myself intellectually; maybe then I wouldn’t get bored with the same old rigmarole and hate my boring, typical life. Maybe if I went to AU, I’d be more mentally stimulated and the students would understand me better here. I mean, Anne was the first person I met from AU, and she had become my future wife.

I flushed the toilet and walked out to wash my hands. I avoided catching the sight of myself in the mirror above the sink because I didn’t want to see how rough I looked. I bet my hair was a frizzy mess and I had bags under my eyes.

I saw movement in the mirror and my eyes instinctively looked up at the shifting image. Two girls were behind me, entering stalls side-by-side.

“Oh, Mindy, did you see what Emma was wearing in class earlier?”

The voice came from the stall as I pulled paper towels from the dispenser.

“Yes! Oh my god! Her titty popped out!”

“What! No way!”

Their peeing echoed throughout the bathroom. I was intrigued to be a part of this intimate conversation, so I lingered a little longer, drying my hands slowly.

“Dude, I’m sure of it. She was like leaning over the exam and she had been fixing her shirt the entire class—”

“—Well yeah, it was way too small!—”

“—and then her tit just... rolled out. Right onto the fucking desk.”

“Oh my god.”

“Right? We’re talking A+ right there on that stunt alone!”

I burst out laughing at the image right as the toilets began flushing. I quickly slipped out before they exited their stalls.

Anne and I hung out another hour before I felt like I had seen too much of her for one day. I’m the type of person who doesn’t like to overdo it; no matter who you are, I can only take so much shit from you. Except Ellis; I could be around Ellis all day, and it’s just so effortless and even when I’m annoyed with her, I still just like having her around. “I should really text her,” I thought to myself, but immediately dismissed it.

“Well, thanks for hanging out with me!” Anne said, after I told her I was about to hit the road again.

“No problem. You better get rolling on your school work, kiddo,” I said, standing up from her bed and grabbing my backpack. “But, in case you care for a nice distraction, here’s my business card.” I extended a crumpled-up Circle K receipt with my phone number written in crayon on the back. The receipt was probably for condoms or something, but it was at the bottom of my backpack. I hope she didn’t take it as an “I’m aggressively straight!” signal. Because I’m not aggressively anything, besides a bitch and a feminist.

With that, and a couple more “Nice meeting you!” and “Yeah see you later!”s, I left and crossed my fingers she’d text me. I was trying to feel out if she smoked at all—if she smoked weed at all—but I didn’t see any marijuana paraphernalia in her room, and

she didn't mention it at all. But then again I guess if you live in a dorm, you probably need to be a little more inconspicuous than I sometimes am.

I was picking a wedgie in front of the bus stop when I remembered about my purple panties quest.

“Oh yeah! Purple panties or bust,” I muttered to myself, smoothing out the seat of my jeans with a sweeping motion of my hand. The girl standing next to me glanced over; she had ear buds in, so either they were just for show or she somehow noticed me talking over her quietly playing music. I decided I would make it a game in the future to find out if people with ear buds are actually listening to music or not. You know, to occupy myself during boring or stressful public social situations.

The bus crept through rush hour traffic and took us to the metro. The bagel in my stomach was disintegrating quickly and the dude with the giant chocolate chip cookie in front of me on the bus was piquing my appetite. So when we were dropped off at Tenleytown, I bypassed the metro entrance and wandered down the street, checking out food options.

There were several chain restaurants along Wisconsin Ave, perfectly good dining options—a McDonald's, a Panera, some pizzeria, even a Dunkin' Donuts. The sidewalks were fairly crowded as the evening sun waned towards the horizon. I hate when it starts getting darker earlier because it's such a depressing state of affairs; I always feel rushed in the winter, because the clock says it's day, but then the sun is setting, and it's like the

sun is saying, “Okay can we speed this up a bit? I’m especially sleepy this time of year let’s go let’s go let’s go,” and meanwhile, I’m doing my errands like, “Yeah, but can you step off a second? I’m trying to do things like dinner and make the most out of my waking hours.” So the sun often gets on my nerves in the fall and the winter for that reason.

I didn’t want to eat at those chain places, though. I don’t know, I do eat at chain places but I really try not to. I get so cynical, and I really hate corporate bastards. But damn, a girl’s gotta have her Whopper every couple weeks. (I’ve always been a Burger King bitch; Ellis has always been a McDonald’s babe.) I do my best, anyway.

Speaking of Ellis... As I dodged into the Panera, I thought about texting her. Letting her know I was alive, meeting new people, eating food. I did kind of miss her, and she would have appreciated that I was taking the time to check in with her, for sure, but as soon as I had the thought, I caught sight of all the baked goods at Panera and went cross-eyed. Bread, cookies, pastries, bagels... Damn, I already had a bagel that day. But is there a rule that you can’t have a bagel twice in one day? Maybe unspoken, but I’ve never heard it, and so I can pretend I never caught on to it.

In any case, I ordered my Panera mac and cheese and my half a sandwich, because of course I went with the Pick 2 like any civil human being, and posted up in a corner by the window.

Panera Bread restaurants are interesting because they’re like feeding grounds for the worst kind of people. The upper middle class white people who want fast food but would never degrade themselves to actual fast food. The kinds of people who want gluten

free bread and soy everything and I've definitely overheard a woman with a Kate Gosling haircut complain that her mac and cheese was too cheesy. Despite the pain in the ass yuppies that are always swarming the joint, I still always want to come in and eat like a half-king among them. Usually I take my Panera to go, though, so I can eat without getting indigestion from how stiff everyone looks at Panera.

But since I was tramping, I ordered my food to go and ate it in-house anyway. First of all, there's no tax on to go orders, so as much as I hate to waste plastic materials when I could have been eating off a plate, I needed to save that seven cents in case I ran out of Swisher Sweets or found my purple panties or other essentials to survival. I'm very frugal, you see.

As I munched on my food in the corner of the dining area, I pulled my journal out of my backpack and opened it up to the last page I wrote in, from the first day, a short bulleted list of what had happened at the gas station. I was kind of disappointed I hadn't written more in my journal yet about what I had been doing; a lot had happened that I hadn't gotten around to documenting. I'm not the kind of person who journals about their feelings; I'm the kind of person who journals—or rather, tries and fails to journal—about stuff that happens to me or things I do. Actually, now that I thought about it, not much happened, but sometimes I feel like writing in the moment gives the moment more meaning than it actually has because you're already reflecting on it as it happens. Sort of a placebo effect; you think yourself into fabricating significance.

So maybe that's why my trip didn't feel significant yet. I looked out the window as I finished up my sandwich and watched all the D.C. folk rush by. My trip felt like a

dud so far. I felt just as funny and restless as I had back at school, only now I felt exponentially more aimless because I didn't know my ass from my head around here.

I guess I expected some cool, meaningful, exciting trip, where I met lots of interesting people and realized all these important things and felt changed by it all; I expected to find out something about life, discover a community that was more intelligible as social creatures than the succubus idiots back at my old college. Excluding Ellis, of course.

I decided to move on from D.C. It wasn't giving me what I needed. Maybe it just wasn't the right place for me. Nothing was tying me to D.C.; I could go anywhere! I was a drifter! Maybe I'd ramble over to the west coast next, and compare the sides of the country. I could see myself as a west coast gal. Aunt Karen was living out there now, so I could go stay with her; I was always welcome with her.

My phone buzzed, and it was a text from Candice. I opened it with my greasy fingers; it was the party details. Oh yeah, the party. I had forgotten how much I was looking forward to it.

I really wanted to check out this party, just to see what D.C. parties were all about. So I decided I would stick around in D.C. long enough to recover from my hangover from the party the next day, then hit the road. I'd have many a drinks, hopefully get really high, maybe meet some cool people, and show the east coast what I was made of, and vice versa.

I took a hearty shit before leaving Panera—in the bathroom, mind you—because it had been brewing in my stomach for quite some time, and tracked back to wherever I

had left my car, which was definitely coming to be a real pain keeping track of. Plus I was getting annoyed with it because I was honestly just super exhausted from not having a sort of routine. I hadn't gotten much sleep and had done a lot of mental and physical activity over the course of about a week, and it was starting to wear on me. Sleeping in the car the night before was definitely an experience.

First of all, it was a puzzle where I wanted to sleep. The options are as follows: driver seat, passenger seat, back seat, trunk. The driver seat and the trunk were automatically ruled out because the steering wheel intrudes too much in the driver's seat, and I do not need my alarm clock to be my car horn consistently honking because I accidentally fell asleep on top of it. And the trunk on my car is just way too small. So it came down between the passenger seat—reclined back far, of course—and the back seat. The passenger seat was appealing because the leg room was optimal, but the back seat was enticing because I could lay down flat. Either way, I was super high, and I'm already a heavy sleeper, so I was out before I had even decided—I fell asleep curled up in the backseat against the window. Which was hell waking up to hours later when I couldn't move my head to the left. All stiff and sore and feeling more tired than when I passed out.

So really all that was definitely playing into my mood, and I was getting annoyed with the whole D.C. scene.

I headed back down Wisconsin towards the metro and considered my sleeping options for the night. I could hit the hay in my car again, but that was not at all glamorous or enjoyable, and I felt if I was any more cranky I'd blow the whole place to bits, and I would definitely be cranky if I woke up with a stiff neck again. But I didn't want to drop

nearly a hundred dollars on another night at a lousy generic hotel because my funds were still in good enough shape, but if I kept up the hotel lodging, I would be out of dough in a week for sure.

As much as I hated to, and as much as I hated hating it, I landed on the lesser of two evils and decided to sleep in my car—just as I reached the escalator that would take me down underground into the metro.

Which, by the way, is quite a sight. So, the escalator leading underground at Tenleytown is something else. I always try to keep a cool disposition, but the giant gaping hole in the ground was pretty incredible, and it was the longest escalator I'd seen in my whole damn life. Wow.

It was pretty incredible until five years later, when I was still riding the damn thing down. And then just being in there, the giant cylindrical tunnel felt like a pipe and like the world's slowest yet most direct flush. I actually started a timer on my phone because I was so stunned how long the escalator was taking—so long that I bet people have to account for it in their metro commute—until I noticed that the left side of the escalator was sort of an “express lane,” where people walked instead of stood. Everyone on the right side was standing still, and I didn't notice they were deliberately on that side until someone came up behind me and said, “Excuse me.” I turned around and the woman made a gesture with her hand like “I'm trying to get through here” and I side-stepped to let her pass. Then I started looking around and checking things out and wondered why the hell I was just standing there anyway, why hadn't I thought to walk



down too? I scooted around the man standing in front of me and headed down, which expedited the process by eightfold, or something.

In thirty minutes, I was back at my car and starting it up. Today I decided to find a hotel, and I'd park in the parking lot and sleep there, instead of along a freeway where it looked more conspicuous. But before that, there was still some time left in the day, so I drove around smoking a joint and trying to find a hotel near some life, so I could get drunk before crashing for the night in my car.

I found a Hampton that looked decent for my purposes and parked up. But by the time I parked, I was getting sleepy and didn't feel like putting in the effort to drink, so I curled up in my backseat underneath a blanket and used a towel for a pillow while I drew some pointless doodles in my notebook. I felt really lonely again. I started wishing I had got Anne's number so I could text her. Then I thought about texting Candice to see what was up, but I didn't want to seem desperate or needy in any way. That's why Ellis was so great—whenever I needed company, she was always willing to make the trip to my place, or offer for me to come over. No matter what time of day or what she was working on, as long as she wasn't at work or in class, if I texted her, "What are you doing?" she'd reply, "At your service!"

But now that I was over a thousand miles away from her, it felt kind of impossible to text her knowing I wouldn't be able to see her, be around her, have her help distract me from my thoughts. I didn't like talking on the phone too much because it was more of a pain to make sure we could both hear each other than to just text, but texting was somewhat annoying to me also because it takes so long to get a reply unless you're both

sitting at your phone, and at that rate you might as well just call the person, but again, I wasn't into that...

Somewhat out of boredom, I opened up my text messages to see if I had forgotten anyone that might be of interest to me. I scanned through my list of recent text message threads and came up with no one. I did, however, remember that I had texted my father on his birthday and never got a reply from him. I opened up the text message and saw my "Happy birthday" staring back at me, a lone text bubble floating by itself.

I wondered if he had changed his number, and maybe some stranger ended up receiving the text I sent instead. Or, he was an auto mechanic, so it's very possible that he broke his phone or something and just either never got it fixed, or got a new one with a new number. He was one of those guys that was always ten cell phone models behind, so he stuck with those track phones from Walmart that you refilled each month with a card, and those are a hassle to transfer numbers over from.

In fact, the last time I had seen him... I put my phone into sleep mode and set it next to me on the floor of my car, on top of a few pairs of pants that were lying on the floor. I laid on my back and stared up at my car ceiling, the gray fabric in the darkness of the evening, an orange parking lot light fuzzily illuminating part of the car's interior.

The last time I had seen my dad was before he left to move back down south. My father was originally from Louisiana, actually—not Ohio, where he and Mom had me. They had met at a casino in Las Vegas, actually, one winter night, when my mom was there celebrating her friend's bachelorette party and my father was on vacation with his brother. Mom was originally from California, and after the two met, it was hard for them

to stay apart, I guess. They ended up running away to—of all places—Ohio, where they began and ended their brief marriage.

Anyway, a couple years ago my dad moved to Atlanta, just after my eighteenth birthday and his obligations to see me every other weekend ended. I guess that was convenient. I don't mean that he was a bad guy, or a bad father, but he just wasn't one. Wasn't a father. I don't really even remember his voice anymore.

In a way, I wanted to blame him for everything. My mother didn't really start drinking until the divorce, and after that, it didn't get really bad until my grandparents died in this freak car crash, because some asshole ran a red light, but I often wondered if my mom would have had a problem at all if the divorce hadn't triggered it. And because I never really had a close relationship with him, or even really knew much about him or his life, it was easy to make him the object of my frustrations, of my hatred, of my hurt.

I reached for my phone and opened up my texts to the thread Ellis and I shared. No matter how much I hated texting, I needed something to take my mind off of this.

“Hey,” I sadly texted her.

Almost immediately she replied, “Hey!! How's it going? How have you been?”

I ignored what I knew she wanted to hear about—my adventures, what I had been doing—and replied, “I need a distraction.”

“What's wrong? What's on your mind?” she wrote, again, almost instantly.

I set my phone down and stared at the ceiling of my car trying to rifle through all the awkward emotions colliding within me. I didn't know how to approach this. I didn't want to talk about it, and I always avoided talking about my parents with Ellis. It's not

that I didn't trust her, but it was a topic I didn't share with anyone, and besides, Ellis had really great parents—they were still married, they were supportive of her, and they were always coming out to Bentley to visit her. No offense to Ellis, but I didn't think she could ever understand how I felt about my parents, and I didn't want her to pity me about it due to her non-understanding. Ellis is one of the most caring people I know, but when someone is sad and experiencing something she hasn't, the automatic response is pity; she would never call it that, but I can see it in the way she frowns and pouts her lip, eyes glinting forlornly, and I get angry because I'm not a puppy in an animal shelter commercial, and whenever I tried to explain something like that to her further, I only dug myself a larger pity-hole. Anyway, I wanted a distraction, so her asking me about it was sort of defeating the purpose.

“I don't really want to go into it,” I typed. “Just tell me something.”

Ellis texted me a couple random facts after a few minutes, facts like how many plastic straws America uses in one day—spoiler: it's a lot—and what Mark Twain's real name was—which I already knew—and then a little joke about fish weighing so much because they're covered in scales. It was cute, and I could tell she had probably just Googled it, and I appreciated the effort.

“But how's the trip?” she texted me, after I had replied with a thumbs up emoji.

I shifted positions so that I was lying and facing the back of the backseat. “It's good,” I wrote. “No worries.”

We went back and forth a little more, and I asked her about my apartment, and she said it definitely still smelled like a stoner lived there, and she asked me if I had met

any cute D.C. boys, and I told her not yet anyway, and after a bit I said I was going to bed.

“Goodnight!” she sent me. “I hope you feel better.” With that text, she messaged a heart emoji.

I thought that I just needed to sleep the funk off. Aunt Karen used to tell me to sleep on things all the time. “You’ll feel better in the morning,” she’d say about everything, from breakups to bowel pressure. She helped me get through those old days, so I smoked another joint and tried to sleep, so I could feel better in the morning.

That was the last of my bud.

I woke up and my first thought was that tomorrow night was the party and my second thought was that my hip hurt really, unbearably bad. Sometimes when I sleep on one side all night, I wake up with a sore hip and the feeling that I need another six hours of sleep to correct how lousy I feel from the rest I just got. Sometimes sleep leaves you feeling so drained that you wish you hadn’t slept at all because you feel worse off. Plus my head was sore and my eyes felt sunken into my head.

The yellow glow of parking lot lights filled the car as the sky lightened in the moments just before the sunrise. I blinked my eyes and yawned, twisting my hips and squirming to get comfortable in a new, refreshing position.

I sat up briefly to look out the window, and the parking lot was filled and quiet. Just then, the parking lot lights went out as the sun finally breached the horizon and began its rise. I felt sleepier at the sight of it, as though I shouldn’t be witnessing such a

private affair that the sky performs before so few pairs of eyes at this time of day. The sky was a light blue with a pink haze, clouds streaking across the sky. I couldn't remember the last time I saw a sunrise.

I blinked heavily and tears filled my eyes, and I wiped away the condensation with the crusties from the corners of my eyes. Folding back up on the seat, I pulled the blanket up around me at the possibility of getting some more sleep.

I slept shallowly for about another hour, at which point the mild headache I had drove me awake. A few people from the hotel were active, heading out in their cars, but for the most part the parking lot was still uneventful, so I pulled some fresh underwear out of my duffel bag and a new shirt and changed on the floor of my backseat beneath the blanket.

I did need a shower, though, and since it was early in the day, I decided to get a legitimate hotel room that night and clean up. I also vowed to find my damn purple panties that day, so I could wear them to the party and also because I was running out of clean underwear, and if I didn't score the damn things soon, I was about to lose all interest in underwear and items of the color purple.

Truthfully, I really didn't even want them anymore. I had gotten over the idea, and I knew it. The purple underwear was just another random scavenger hunt I had come up with to entertain myself, to give myself a reason to get out of bed—or “car,” as it were—and something to occupy myself with. I knew after I bought them, I'd feel sexy for maybe an hour, and then just as easily as I purchased them, the excitement of my new commodity would wear off, and I'd still be a sad girl just with more shit.

I did that with the black beanie I bought back in sixth grade. I did that with the brown Jansport backpack I hunted down when I was a high school sophomore. I did that with the tie-dye acoustic guitar I bought as a freshman in college. I come up with these obscure objects and distract myself trying to obtain them, like some pathetic emotionally-distressed scavenger hunt.

Shut up, I told myself as I rolled on my deodorant. Shut up. Don't do this, don't start pitying yourself, don't expose yourself and ruin the game. You're excited about the panties. You're really going to wear them. You really need them. You really need to get laid.

So, I thought as I climbed over the center console to hop in the driver seat, maybe the new panties would bring me luck at the party.

I found a shopping area that looked promising and wandered around there after eating an apple for breakfast and sipping a coffee while pretending to read the newspaper outside a café. I like to do that, feed into this elegant newspaper-reading, coffee-drinking, patio-dwelling city inhabitant and just sort of contribute to that image. That way everyone else can see me, feel reaffirmed that this is exactly the cozy sort of sight that they would observe in their neighborhood, and do my part for the overall mood and climate of the local population. I'm doing a service, really.

So after I was done doing my duty for society, I finished up at Afterwords Café and walked around the district. It was pretty convenient I chose that area to peruse because soon, I came across a Victoria's Secret and I had to make a hard decision.

I hate Victoria's Secret. By this point, you should understand me well enough to suppose my qualms with it, but I'll break it down anyway. I hate Victoria's Secret, for a few reasons. First of all, their products are made in sweat shops, which exploit women's labor in other countries. Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, it's literally a store whose market prospers by making women feel insecure about their bodies. "Ladies, you need to have bigger boobs! Use these push-up bras to make your cleavage more impressive. Use this bra to make your saggy boobs look perky and desirable! Wear this underwear so that boys will find you sexually appealing!" I think the fuck not. And on top of that, they're super expensive even though you know it probably costs like three cents to make any of their uncomfortable bras.

However... As a woman in this society, sometimes you have to make a tough call and choose whether you want to continue boycotting a corrupt business, or if you want those fucking purple panties bad enough to support a horrible industry by ten dollars when you can't find those panties anywhere else and you know it will make you feel ten times better about your ass, and maybe if they're good enough undies, even your thighs and hips.

I had to make that decision that day, and it was not one easily made. But, I hadn't felt hot about myself since showing up in D.C., and I had been hyping these panties up in my head for way too long at that point, and in a moment of desperation that I am not



proud of, I entered a Victoria's Secret store with the intention of finding and purchasing underwear.

For anyone who's never been in a Victoria's Secret—although I'm pretty sure everyone has, male or female, because they've either gone in for themselves at some point or been dragged in by a friend or significant other—, the store is entirely black and pink. The lighting is low so that you can't see the cheap material in functioning lights—because then you would notice that the quality is right on par with Walmart-brand lingerie. Then there are mannequins everywhere, sporting underwear that probably wouldn't look good on an actual normal human but looks superb on the fake female torso. And then there's girls running around with tape measures trying to check out your rack, which I don't mind so much, but that's just part of the atmosphere.

I definitely sound like a hater, but that's just how I feel about the place, and I'm not sorry. All that being said, I was still present at Victoria's Secret and gearing up to make a purchase.

As soon as I entered, a thin blond girl in a black t-shirt and black jeans came over to me, arm outstretching a mesh bag to me. "Hi! Welcome to Victoria's Secret! Here's a bag for convenient shopping; can I help you find anything today?" She had an earpiece in and that telltale pink measuring tape around her neck. I bet the earpiece was for underwear emergencies. "Help, the underwear is no longer under there, it's moved—on top!! We'll have to rebrand it to topwear! Nooo!!!"

Anyway, I sort of repulsed at her handing me the bag and put up my hand with the palm facing her, and said, “Oh, yeah, I don’t need that. I’m just here for some purple underwear.”

Blond girl perked up at that and gracefully brought the bag back to her armful of them. “Anything specific you had in mind, style-wise?”

I frowned and shoved my hands in my hoodie pocket, producing a shrug. “Uh... Covers my junk?”

The girl looked a little hurt by my crude and uncaring attitude, but then bounced back with a nod and a smile she had to work for. “Okay,” she said with another nod, turning away. “You’d probably like the boy short fit then, which is over here...” She walked over to a table in the middle of the store, which had underwear laid out in various open-faced boxes.

She held up a pair with palm trees on it. They looked like elastic shorts. “What do you think?” she asked.

I shrugged again, then took a hand out of my pocket and bit my lip. “Normally these would be fine, but I want something a little sexier. But still covers the junk.”

She giggled briefly and set the boy shorts back on the table display. “All right, then how about our cheeksters?” She walked around the table and picked up a pair of underwear that was a very “V” shape. I shrugged again. “I kinda need my butt to be covered. Like, stuff like that’ll give me wedgies all day.”

The store was pretty empty at that hour so the blond girl and I roamed around the store mostly by ourselves, with the exception of a few “hip mom” type ladies and a slew

of other Victoria's Secret workers, because it always seems like they have fifteen girls on deck ready to talk underwear to you. Actually, that didn't sound like too bad of a gig.

Anyway, after narrowing down sort of which style underwear I liked best, we started checking out colors. I guess purple isn't too common because a lot of the ones I was finding were lavender or maroon or fuchsia. Eventually I separated with the idea of a true purple pair of underwear and was willing to accept other shades of it.

Then the blond girl—she told me her name was Bethany—and I found the pair that I could tell right away would be The Pair. I had a small bag full, after I had sheepishly accepted the bag finally, having found a range of options to try on, but even with all the other greatest options, I knew that this one pair would trump all the others.

Bethany led me to the fitting rooms and dropped me off at a stall in the back. The fitting rooms were even gaudier than the rest of the store because they were all decked out to look wealthy and luxurious, except all the drapery and elegance was literally just a part of the pink wallpaper. The mirrors were high definition and strategically lit to make you look as sexy and flawless as possible. I don't trust fitting room mirrors at all; they're all skewed and angled to make you look thin so you feel good in the clothes and buy them. That's why you always feel shitty about yourself once you get home and try them on again.

Anyway, she pointed out a freaking doorbell in the changing stall I could ring if I needed her to get me a different size or style, which was convenient but I thought a bit extra. I hope she gets paid well for that sort of service.

So of course, I tried on all the lesser pairs, and saved The Pair for last. The purple panties were generally good, and my butt was rocking it in this trick mirror. But they were all pretty normal or patterned or not really as sexy as I hoped. Bethany checked up on me once—knocked on the door and asked, “Everything going all right in there Nadia?” because she asked my name so she could use it a lot and make me feel comfortable and like I should buy something because we were pals now—and I told her I was doing fine, which was a generic thing to say, but I mean sometimes you’re just doing fine and you don’t really need a whole conversation about it.

The grand pair was actually more violet than purple, but I was willing to overlook that. The red tint actually made them sexier than if they had been the purple I wanted. I guess I’m a bit particular about my hues of purple, but I just paid really good attention during the color wheel portion of art class in high school.

The violet panties were a silky material with a thin mesh overlay, and they had scalloped lacy edges. The best part though, was that on the back of them, they had a teardrop-shaped cutout over part of my butt crack with ribbon criss-crossing over the cutout. It’s hard to explain, but boy they were sexy. Somehow the shape of them made my hips and thighs look round and full, and they laid perfectly over my ass.

As one must do to complete the trying-on ritual, I danced and posed in front of myself in the mirror for a while in them before finally changing back into my street clothes. I peeked at the price tag as I took them off and was only slightly shaken by the cost of sixteen dollars. Definitely overpriced for the quality and quantity of the material,

but at the rate I was failing at finding purple panties, I decided to bite the bullet and pull the trigger on these, since they were basically exactly what I wanted.

I had to walk through the perfume obstacle course to get to the check-out counter, and then I purchased the underwear and made off with my tainted spoils, feeling a little guilty but mostly giddy about wearing them. And also a little disappointed in myself for so easily falling into their Victoria's trap mindset, but also feeling conflicted because feeling good about myself is something I should celebrate and enjoy. Body positivity is tricky to navigate in a sex-driven capitalist market.

So I had achieved my one goal for the day. My only other goal was to take a goddamn shower, and so I called around and made a reservation at a Hampton a little farther removed from the heart of D.C. in hopes it was a cheaper move.

I spent the rest of the day wandering around Du Pont and playing games in my head about the people I saw. I tried out the ear bud game I came up with a few days before and found out that most people were actually listening to music, with a couple exceptions. The one really moody-looking girl on the Du Pont circle bench chair glared at me when I said lightly, "Your shoes belong in the eighth grade" about her Converse with the white tips doodled on with Sharpie. It would have been mean, but she was clearly my age, and if she had been listening to music she wouldn't have had to hear me anyway.

On the metro ride to the Hampton that evening, I wrote a little in my journal. I was trying to be better about keeping up with my daily logs. Of course there wasn't much to log, but it felt good to remove my thoughts from myself, and I had been feeling very

pensive and thoughtful about my whole trip so far. I really felt like I was just wasting my time, but I also sort of felt like doing anything was pointless anyway. Sort of just like how I felt back at home.

I was by the window in one of the rickety cars. My head was leaning against the window, vibrating against it lightly with the movement of the subway, and I was writing in my journal upon my lap. The lighting was harsh and fluorescent and the seats were orange. It was pretty much a ghost town in there, probably because it was after the evening peak hours, but there were still some other folks in there. One guy in particular.

So this dude was sitting across the aisle from me. Most of the seats in the car are set up to face one way, but there are a couple seats in each that face the middle aisle, to sort of allow for more leg room or whatever. This man was maybe forty years old, and he was very wiry and had dark hair and a five o'clock shadow. His eyes were pretty sunken, and his skin was almost as fluorescent white as the lighting in there. Anyway, he was wearing a plain dark red t-shirt and some jeans.

I noticed him in a dismissive way at first. I had looked up when he got on the metro one stop after I had gotten on, processed his presence, and looked back to my journal. I didn't pay him any mind or anything, but every time I would glance up when someone in the cab moved, boarded, or exited, I would catch him out of the corner of my eye looking over at me. The first time, I looked straight at him because my instinct is that if someone is looking at me, I look at them. His eyes darted to the floor when I did, so I returned to my journal. But every time after that, I noticed he was still staring at me, and I didn't know what to do.

So after the fourth weird feeling of being stared at, I closed my journal, set it in my bag, and folded my hands. I stared at him until he looked up from the floor at me. At first he held my gaze for a second, then nodded at me. I blinked and raised my eyebrows. He looked away.

I can be pretty confrontational. I don't like bullshit. I get angry easily, and over stupid things. I don't like when people think they can get the best of me, in any way. Even just by looking at me. This is my space. Don't look at me.

It's when he got off at the same stop as me that I started feeling less confrontational and more nervous. I guess I got up too soon to feel it out, but I stood up while the metro was still moving so that I'd be able to exit immediately after the cab stopped; I don't know, it was like one of those things where you walk down the escalator or open your door before you turn your car off. You know where you're going and what you're doing, so you get a little ahead of yourself because you know how it goes.

Maybe I should have stayed seated a little longer to see if the guy got up at the stop, so I would have had a better idea of his motives, but I didn't. I got up early and so after I walked past the guy, after I waited by the door to step out, after I had already set foot in the terminal, I noticed the guy get up and exit as well.

My heart picked up its pace a little, and so did I. I tried to be rational with myself. Maybe this was just his stop too. Maybe he wasn't in a rush, so he didn't hop off as soon as I did.

Other possibilities started forming, too. Maybe he was angry that I defied his staring, and now he wanted revenge. Maybe he was going to stab me to death and leave

me in an alley. Maybe he was just going to kidnap me, get his use out of me, then sell me to the sex trafficking industry.

I headed up the escalator—walking—and swiped my metro card to pass through the spinning things. Other metro-users buzzed around me, but I was predominantly focused on the presence of the greasy man. I couldn't tell if he was behind me or not still, but I walked with determination and my head up, suddenly hyper-aware of all movement. As I walked up the escalator to the streets above, I racked my brain for anything it retained from the self-defense class I had taken a couple years before. Walk with confidence... Avoid sketchy environments... Don't lead the predator to your home... Fight back... The technical defense moves escaped my memory, but the theories lingered. It would have to do.

It was dark by now, and while the city lights lined the sidewalks and buildings flooded their rooms with fluorescence, I felt vulnerable. I could feel my heart colliding with my ribs in my chest, drumming my nerves. I headed for a Trader Joe's that I knew was in the opposite direction of my car because I had passed it earlier, and I cursed as I approached a cross walk with a "Do Not Walk" sign flashing my direction. I stopped my quick stride and bounced on the balls of my toes, hands in my pockets and backpack tightly slung over my shoulders. In a twisting movement, I dared to peak behind me, and my heart clattered louder as I saw the greasy man, walking not casually but not hurriedly in my direction. My thoughts began to mute as the static in my head got louder.

Looking both ways, I hastily crossed the road despite the "Do Not Walk" sign. Only one pair of headlights drove towards me, and I had down enough walking to know



the timing allowed me to cross before the car was close enough to hit me. By this point, I was frazzled. I was a goner. What did he want with a girl like me? I definitely needed a refresher in the self-defense class.

I could see the lights from the Trader Joe's sign now and crossed the road to my left to get to the same side of the street as it. I kept peeking back and the man crossed to the Trader Joe's side a few intersections after I did. I picked up my pace, cold wind blowing in my face, but I couldn't feel it. My blood was racing. I had never been followed like this, had never feared for my safety like this. And now I'd be another number, another girl gone missing in DC to some creep. Why didn't I make more of my time here? I should call Ellis and talk to her as I walk, I thought. But it would be too late, and I didn't want to wake her; she values her sleep so much...

And then there it was, Trader Joe's. I thought I'd never reach it. I quickly ducked inside through the automatic doors and bee-lined for the bread, all the way in the back corner. If he followed me in there, I don't know what I would have done.

But I watched from the back of the store as a black shadow passed through the front windows—the greasy man—and slowly I crept forward, trailing his path with my eyes, and only when he stopped at a bench and waited for a moment—was he waiting for me to emerge? I would die in that Trader Joe's before I let him have me—before a bus eventually pulled up and he boarded it, whisked away into the night.

My armpits were soaked. My heart was still racing. I was shaky. I breathed deeply, almost cried in relief. I couldn't tell if he had given up or had intended to board the bus there the whole time. Either way, I “perused” the store for another thirty minutes,

then booked it to my car in the darkness as soon as I set foot onto the sidewalk. Running on a fall night through the city is such an interesting experience. Cold wind in your face, cooling your hot cheeks and making your eyes run, too... Dodging cars at intersections... Lights streaking by... My heart was loudly and steadily beating by the time I slipped into my car and sped off, blood pounding in my throat.

At my hotel room, I immediately stripped and got into the shower. I took the hottest shower of my life—by the time I got out, my thighs and stomach were beet red, and the fan in the bathroom couldn't keep up with all the steam.

I flipped on the TV and put on my sweats, then cozying myself under the blankets. I put on some random station and *8 Mile* was playing. Not my favorite movie, but whatever.

That's when I thought about what I had been trying to forget all day. I was dry—all out of ganja. I had calmed down from my fright earlier, but I really just wanted to lose all sense of myself and mindlessly watch television until I fell asleep. I hated being sober at night. It was impossible for me to fall asleep without some aid.

Despite how exhausted I was from my day, my mind couldn't cool down. I got comfortable underneath the fluffy white comforter and cuddled up to the cushiony white feather pillows, but my thoughts kept on thumping. I ended up finishing *8 Mile*, watching two episodes of *House Hunters*, and a marathon of *Antique Road Show* before I managed

to drift off into a headache-y half-slumber, my mind rolling around numbly in my skull to the thoughtless entertainment flashing on the TV screen.

I woke up to my alarm at 9:50 the next morning, which I only set so that I'd wake up in time to check out before 10:00. I guess "woke up" is a very generous term, because I wasn't really sleeping so much as tossing and turning all morning, but I was so warm and snuggly, and I kept trying to fall back asleep, but it wasn't really working, so I ended up just feeling more tired than the night before. It didn't take me long to get ready—just threw on some leggings and a hoodie—and was checking out at the front desk by 9:58.

Anne finally texted me as I was tossing my duffel bag in my back seat. She must be the early-riser type of girl.

"Hey!" she said. "Still in town?"

I kind of bitterly half-laughed to myself. Of course I was still in town. I was not nearly as cool as she probably thought I was. "Yeah, what's up?" I replied.

"Wanna meet up for lunch?" she texted back.

Considering my plans that day consisted of waiting like a pathetic loser for Candice to take me to some party where I wouldn't know anyone but hopefully score some sex and bum some weed, I was very pleased with this incredibly "adult" notion of grabbing lunch. I said it like that because it seems like people are always "grabbing" lunch, but all I know is that if anyone ever tried to grab *my* lunch, I'd certainly slap them at least.

I told her I could do that, and we figured out we'd meet up at a place called CAVA on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, which she promised was a really good place to eat and described it as a "Mediterranean Chipotle." I didn't really care where we met, because I'm not too picky.

Basically I spent the next few hours aimlessly driving around, and then aimlessly walking around, and then aimlessly sitting around, until it was close enough to 1:00 that I made my way over to CAVA from where I parked along the street.

It was kind of the same dilemma I had when I met Candice, as soon as I walked in the door, except thankfully Anne was already there, so the panic was immediately swept away. There she was, in skinny jeans, little black high-heel boot shoes, and a light brown blazer, glasses cute as hell and hair as adorable as ever. Smiling at me.

"Hey dude!" she greeted me, getting up from the table was sitting at near the door and approaching me.

"Sup playa."

"How are you?" she asked, and we automatically sort of started walking towards "Place Order Here" sign. It was set up exactly like a Chipotle, with employees at different stations lined up behind a glass buffet-looking spread.

"Kind of tired, you?" I said, my eyes scanning the menu board above the counter for something familiar or appetizing. I didn't know what any of it was. Falafel? I didn't even know how to say that.

“I can imagine, from all your adventures! I’m good; tired from classes, but that’s just how it goes.” There was only one person ahead of us, so thankfully Anne sort of stepped up first behind them. Good—it would buy me time.

“Oh, right. Well, I haven’t been up to much lately, just taking it easy and enjoying the city,” I said half-mindedly. I guess I’d go with a chicken pita? Sure, that sounded good enough.

Anne moved up to the counter as the person ahead of her side-stepped down the line, and she ordered something I couldn’t hear over the clatter of pans and chatter of customers in this horrible acoustics nightmare.

She was done with the first person within thirty seconds, and so I—not as confidently as I’d have liked—placed my order.

“Can I get—uh, a pita? With chicken in it?”

“Do you want rice?” the girl with dark black hair and light brown skin behind the counter asked, no inflection in her voice.

“Yes?”

“Okay, white or brown?”

“Brown?”

We eventually carried our masterpieces upon trays to a table upstairs. It definitely seemed like most stores operated on at least two floors in the area. I liked it; for some reason, stairs were exciting.

She led us to a table near the front of the restaurant near a big window wall, and I sat down across from her.

“Thanks for getting lunch with me,” she said, taking a sip of her fountain drink and then removing the lid from her... salad?

“Oh—no, thanks for inviting me,” I quickly replied. I took a bite of my pita. Not bad. Very “green” tasting.

“This is my favorite place to eat. I always come here to do homework if I need a change of scenery from the library or my dorm.” She took a bite, chewing with her lips together. Her lower jaw bobbed.

We ate and talked about different places we liked to eat, music we listened to, and movies we liked to watch. It was mostly small talk, but it felt good to talk to someone. I hadn’t realized how lonely I had been.

“So what’s your next big move?” Anne asked me. She closed her empty plastic container and added it to the garbage on the tray towards the end of the table, then she folded her hands and watched me with her large eyes.

“My next big move?” I said with a laugh.

“Yeah, your next quest. Where does Nadia go next? What does she do, what will she see?” Anne smiled at me with such pure admiration and innocent, expectant eyes. She really fed on this idea that a girl could will her own adventure.

I shrugged. “I’ve been thinking that I might be turning my sights westward,” I said, raising my eyebrows a little and looking off in the corner, where a large black girl sat with her Macbook, presumably doing homework. “My aunt lives out there, and I haven’t seen her in a year.” I looked back at Anne.

“That’s so cool!” she exclaimed, beaming and bouncing a little in her seat. “You should totally do that! Ugh, I’m so jealous. I mean, I don’t know what I’m going to do tonight, let alone what I’m going to do a month from now or even a year, and especially not after college.”

I pulled my hair back and twisted a hair tie around it to make a pony tail. “You don’t know what you’re doing after college?”

“Oh hell no!” she said, laughing. “I’m not even sure I want to do what my major is. I’m political science, but I’m pretty sure I’m just going along with it, because that’s what I’ve said I’ve wanted to do since I was in middle school. And it was easy to just keep with it so I did, but I don’t even know if I care about it. Sure, it’s interesting, but I don’t feel passionate about it.” She sighed and rolled her eyes, slouching a little. “But do I have to be passionate about my career? Can’t it just pay the bills and be done? You know? I just... I just... I want to be like you.”

“I want to be like me, too,” I said, before I even knew it was coming out of my mouth.

“What do you mean?”

Shit. What did I mean? “I don’t know, like...” My eyes traveled around her backdrop, wandering as I thought. It was easiest to talk to someone during conversations like this if you kept your eyes moving; eye contact felt almost inhibiting. I really wished we could spark a blunt and have this talk. “Like, what do you mean *you* want to be like me?”

“Uh, I want to run away!” she said as if it were so obvious. “Like, that would be so liberating, so bold! To just drop everything, to just have your entire world in your own control, to separate yourself from all the pollution of your own crappy, noisy life. To not give a shit—a *shit*—about what other people tell you is important. I wish I was brave enough to drop out of college, to do something that *I* truly wanted to do, to not have to follow this formula for what it means to be a successful woman in our times and wing it and—” The longing in her voice made my heart ache. I had wanted all the same things she was saying. And yet I did those things and... And I still felt empty. I still went to bed lonely and depressed the night before. She sighed, and I felt that sigh in my soul.

She started again, speaking slower and lower. “Like, you see the Instagram pictures where the girls look perfect and happy, and everything in their life is this perfect aesthetic that every other girl wants to be like, even if she already is like that. And the Twitter posts where people share about these cute little stories about their lives, like, ‘Oh, my boyfriend just brought me chocolates and new pajamas because I was feeling sad, and then we had a movie marathon night’ and everyone loses their shit and they’re like, ‘This is the sort of relationship you should have!’ You know? It sets all these standards for how we should live, and it glamorizes a certain kind of life, and then I start to internalize that and think, ‘Wow, I want that, too. I want to be the mom who gets wine-tipsy with her husband and then goes shopping at Target and have the perfect house by age thirty and adopt all the dogs’ and then I’m like, wait. I don’t even know if I’m romantically interested in men, and yet social media has me fantasizing about this white-picket life?” She stopped, frowning deeply. Her eyes were far off away from me, but as she spoke I



watched her intently, the way her mouth contorted with disgust and how her throat bulged like she was on the verge of tears.

She went on. “I want to run away from it. I want to have my own dreams. I want peace from everyone else’s bullshit and some silence from even my own muddled thoughts, my doubts, my hesitations, my insecurities, and—” Her voice was really low, like she was drowning. Her lips rolled inward, and she frowned and looked at me for the first time in many minutes, and with a hard blink, a few tears rolled down her cheeks. Quickly she put her head down and wiped them away, shaking her head.

“Hey,” I said, my own eyes feeling the pressure of tears looming. I parted my lips because it was easier for me to breathe through my mouth when I was upset. Anne looked up at me, her lips inadvertently pouting and her eyes shimmering and red. Her hair hung around her face, covering the outer sides of her eyes.

“It’s not like that,” I said, looking down at the industrial gray stainless steel tabletop. There were some condensation droplets in front of me from when my fountain drink was sitting there, and I ran my finger through it, smearing the droplets. “Like, you know you can run away at any time, right?” I looked up at her, and she looked away, down and to her right. I kept watching her though because I wanted her to hear me loud and clear. “You have free will. I keep telling people that they can do whatever they want, and they don’t believe me. You can change your life at any time—you just have to be motivated enough, and brave enough.” I thought for a second. “Or scared enough. But girl, you can do exactly what I’m doing if you wanted to.”

Her head still angled towards the floor; she glanced up at me with her big, damp eyes. I raised my eyebrows and gave a halfhearted smile, and she turned to me fully, still quiet.

“Listen,” I said. “They call it ‘running away’ for a reason. It seems badass, but—I don’t know.” I didn’t want to get into that, so I stopped and redirected myself.

“Anyway,” I continued, “It’s also badass to finish school. I admire my best friend Ellis more than almost anyone, and she’s back at Bentley finishing up her degree right now. She’s a girl who’s really got a head on her shoulders—she’s taking all these crazy classes, for like, I don’t know, criminology or something. Maybe it’s anthropology. Some –ology major, in any case. But she goes to school, and she works at this diner in town, and she still manages to be there for me whenever I need her. And technically, everything she’s doing in life is super conventional, and she’s checking all of life’s boxes, and yet she’s still one of the coolest chicks I know, and I kind of want to be like her.”

Anne widened her eyes at me, almost in disbelief. I watched her as she sniffled and brought up her hand, pulling her sleeve around her fist, and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “Don’t judge me,” she mumbled, smiling. “I don’t have any tissues.” I chuckled.

“Well, that’s good to know, I guess,” she said, louder. She shook a lock of hair out of her face and bit the inside of her cheek thoughtfully.

“And actually,” I said, realizing it myself as I said it, “you kind of remind me of her.”

Anne frowned, and tucked some of her hair behind her ear. My eyes darted over to the corner as the large black girl stood up and packed up her backpack. “Really?” Anne asked, pulling my eyes back to her.

“Yeah,” I said, and she seemed to sit up straighter at that.

She set her elbows on the table and laid her arms down against each other.

“What’s she like?”

I could tell that my analogy made her feel better, and I didn’t like seeing her so bent out of shape about basically nothing—well, not nothing, but about stuff that was common for people our age—so I decided to go into it a little. “Well,” I said, not sure where to start. I took a deep breath to gather all my thoughts. “Well, we met when I was a freshman in college, at a bar, actually.” I didn’t really think about how we had met that much—I had never told this story before, but I was a little excited to. “I went to the bars a lot as a freshman—I had a fake I.D. back then, but Ellis was already 21. She, like, changed her major halfway through college to something totally different, and then added on a minor, so she’s one of those people who’s been in college forever. I don’t know how she isn’t totally sick of it by now.” I shrugged. “Anyway, I used to go to the bars all the time when I was a freshman, and I liked to party, at, like, frats, and stuff. I don’t like to talk about the details or anything, but I got into some sketchy situations, and college boys are jerks and whatever.” I stared off into the distance as I recalled it all, my surroundings starting to fade away as I visualized the scene in my mind.

“Anyway, so the night I met Ellis, I was probably going to go back to one of the houses or something with one of the dudes, but when I was outside smoking, because I

used to smoke cigarettes back then, this girl came outside onto the bar patio, and it was really only me and her out there. She sort of paused when she saw me, and I just looked her up and down, because I was pretty drunk, and I was expecting her to say something snarky because she kept staring at me, and I was getting ready to fight her, and right before I was about to put out my cigarette to do so, she asked me if I had any gum.

“I was pretty shocked, but I just so happened to have some gum on me—like, two pieces—so I gave her one, and I actually put out my cigarette and popped the other piece in my mouth. Then I thought she was going to walk away, but she sort of lingered, and I was like, ‘What’s up? What do you want?’ and she just started talking to me. I don’t know why, I don’t remember about what, but she just talked to me, and she was pretty cool. She was all quirky—I don’t remember what she was wearing, either; I think it was a jean jacket, but she was interesting and neat, and we talked for a while.

“Eventually, one of the dudes in the frat came out and tried to get me to go back with them to the house, but Ellis, like, gently intervened, and she was like, ‘Oh, Nadia and I are old friends, and we haven’t seen each other in forever. I was hoping she’d be able to come back with me to my place and catch up more.’ And the dude—Glen, I think—looked kind of annoyed, and then he looked at me, like, ‘Really?’ and even though, like, I wanted to go back to the house because I knew what that would mean, and I liked hanging out with them because they gave me a kind of attention that felt really... I don’t know, it was like really, really good to have their attention on me, and want me around, even if it was for shitty reasons, but Ellis was so cool, and I thought, ‘Hey, maybe I’ll do something different this time,’ and so I agreed to go with her. And Glen

was pissed off, of course, but he stormed off, and we took an Uber back to her place, and we ended up just smoking weed and watching movies all night, and she made us popcorn, and it was really, really cool.

“And that’s really when I stopped hanging around all those guys, because Ellis started making me realize what I was really doing, and even though I didn’t really talk to her about the specifics of it a whole lot at first, she picked up on it all—I mean, I guess it was pretty obvious, especially with whatever rumors they told, and I don’t know, she really... She really helped me change all that around, with them. Because I had been getting into shit like that since before high school, and I had never had a friend like Ellis, someone who, like—” My eyes were brimming with tears, and suddenly I was jolted back into the present, and I looked across the table at Anne, who stared at me with such wide, attentive eyes, her arms at her side, her head leaning in towards me, and I was startled at how I had absolutely lost sense of my surroundings. I looked around quickly, the large black girl in the corner long gone, now replaced by a Saudi Arabian couple and their little son, and I turned back to Anne.

“Wow, I’ve never said all that before,” I said, blinking hard so the tears would retract, and swallowing the lump that had formed in my throat. “Anyway, I don’t want to go into all that.”

“You kind of did,” Anne said sheepishly, smiling kindly.

I sighed and slumped my shoulders. “Yeah,” I said flatly. “I guess you’re right. Well anyway, that’s my best friend Ellis, and now you know way more about me than you ever wanted to.” I lifted up my hands helplessly and shrugged.

“It’s okay!” she said quickly, waving her hands in front of her for a second to show she didn’t mean anything by it. Frantically, she blurted, “It’s my fault for getting all serious in the first place! I don’t know what came over me. I’ve been struggling a lot lately, and I think I’m about to start my period, so I’m feeling all these emotions like way more intensely than usual, and maybe I trust you because you’re a stranger, and I feel like you’ll judge me less or something. And everything you said, I’ll keep confidential. It’s really sweet everything you said about her, and I’m super flattered that you said I remind you of her.”

“It’s cool,” I said, taking my hair out of my ponytail to cover my face a little more, and looked down at the gray table again, now totally dry.

We both sat there in an exhausted silence for a moment, seemingly sorting our thoughts into different boxes to be put on the shelf and reflected upon later, in more privacy.

I looked around us. Most of the lunch crowd had disappeared, and only a few random students remained at tables on laptops or with their peers. A girl with bangs a couple tables down from us averted eye contact as soon as I looked over. They probably saw the whole thing. They were probably speculating why we were crying. Maybe one of us just had a bad breakup. Maybe we were cousins, and we were talking about our grandmother finding out she had Alzheimer’s. Maybe we were sharing our collegiate stresses.

“You said you didn’t know what you were doing tonight?” I asked amidst the lull.

Anne raised her eyebrows and bit her lip. “Hmmm, yeah, no, I don’t have any plans for tonight. What is it, Saturday?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I guess. Anyway, I’m going to a party tonight with this bitch I know—she’s not really a bitch, I just call people that sometimes—and anyway, you should go with me. I won’t know anyone there and I bet she’s not planning on hanging around me all night, so it’d be cool to have a friend there.”

“Okay,” Anne said with a smile.

After my lunch with Anne—and the unexpected therapy session it turned into which I was still somewhat embarrassed and surprised by—I texted Candice to see what the plan was for the evening.

“Party starts at 11, I’ll text you the address and meet you there.”

After I read her text, I was so glad Anne was going with me. I should have figured Candice was going to pre-game with her friends. Of course she wouldn’t want her random high school acquaintance to ruin her vibe—I wasn’t offended. But I was happy Anne was going with me, so I wouldn’t have to be socially awkward on my own.

Anne and I had split up after CAVA and decided to meet up later, closer to the party. She said she had some homework she wanted to get done, and we both probably needed some downtime to emotionally regroup. We made plans to get together at 9:30—I was going to meet her at her dorm—and we would start drinking then, so we were nice and tipsy for the big event. That’s the best way to do it; show up already buzzed so that it

takes the edge off of the social pressure. Maybe even show up drunk if you got too ahead of yourself.

I don't drink a lot, but I'm kind of a heavyweight. I'm not a petite girl, but I'm pretty athletically-built, and alcohol doesn't hit me like it does some girls. By which I mean, I can handle my alcohol pretty well. Still though, I've been known to take it too far and get damn near fucked up, yet still hold it together somehow. Basically I'm a badass.

Anyway, so in preparation of this I went to a corner store and got some booze. Usually I like to enjoy beer, but when I'm looking to expedite the drinking process, I go for the liquor. So, I got Anne and me a bottle of whisky and a six-pack of raspberry Smirnoff. I can basically just drink whisky, but the Smirnoff was for a chaser. I like to chase my alcohol with more alcohol. That's how I know it's going to be a good night.



## PART FOUR

“Just a minute!”

I took a step back from Anne’s door and looked down the hallway. Her room was the last one down this hall, so there was a long stretch of doors extending out to my right. It was sort of a dingy hallway. The walls were white-painted cement; the carpet was super worn thin and blue, and the doors were faux wood. Well, maybe they were real wood, but I wasn’t really qualified to judge one way or the other. Plus the lighting was kind of dim, barely lighting the hallway like an airport runway. I grabbed the straps of my backpack and twisted my torso back and forth as I waited absentmindedly. Anne’s name tag outside her door was in the shape of an umbrella, and her roommate’s was a raindrop.

“Clarissa,” I said quietly to myself. That was her roommate’s name. “Cla-ris-saaa.”

Suddenly the door was pulled wide open, and there was Anne, looking—somehow—perfectly windswept despite being indoors.

“Hey!” she said. She stepped to the side to let me enter. “What’s up?”

“Not much; you?” I said, entering her room and checking her out head-to-toe. She had straightened her hair, and it looked so edgy and soft framing her face like that and just hitting her shoulders. She was wearing a long-sleeve salmon pink shirt with a criss-cross cut-out where her cleavage was—nice breasts, Anne, way to go sister—and it

tucked into her olive green tailored dress pants. And then the same black high-heel boots from earlier. It was a daring outfit, but her nice round hips and natural “cool” vibe pulled it off. I was a little jealous.

“Just getting ready,” she said, letting the door go and walking back over to her desk where a make-up mirror and random brushes and tubes were lying. I watched her sit down. Her ass looked great, too.

“Okay you look hot as hell,” I said very factually, sitting down on her bed and dropping my backpack beside my feet. I finally noticed her roommate, sitting on her own bed with a magazine.

Anne giggled and smiled over her shoulder at me. “Thanks! You look seriously badass yourself. Oh—this is Clarissa,” she introduced, gesturing towards the girl.

“Hey, I’m Nadia,” I said, raising my hand.

“Hey,” she said. Clarissa had super long brown hair and was wearing sweats. She smiled and glanced back down at her magazine.

“But yeah, I do look pretty good, if I do say so myself.” I wiggled my eyebrows to the back of Anne’s head as she laughed and got up and went over to the full-length mirror on the back of Anne’s door to check myself out.

Even though you couldn’t see them, I was definitely rocking the purple underwear. I also had on some incredibly skinny black jeggings and a black velvet tank top, a red choker tied around my neck, and my black leather jacket. Plus I had straightened my hair that morning, too, so it basically looked like Anne’s but black, and my shoes were similar to hers as well. I looked so good.

“This is the first time I’ve worn makeup all week. It’s like I don’t even recognize my face right now,” I said, turning in the mirror to check out my butt from a side angle. It bulged in a perfectly rounded half-circle. I turned to face the mirror again and ran a hand through my hair. My eyebrows were done and shaped in the perfect arc; my eyes were outlined and my eye shadow was blended to the perfect gradient, and my eyelashes were super exaggerated. I rolled my lips in and smiled at myself. Dark red, pouty lips. I loved how my olive skin looked with that shade of red.

“Yeah, I’ve been wearing minimal makeup lately,” Anne said, outlining her lips with a pink lip pencil in her hand mirror. “So it’s kind of fun to have a reason to go all-out. It’s so artistic.”

“There’s something so satisfying about grooming yourself,” I said, walking back over to sit down on her bed again. “Like some sort of therapy. Self-reflection. Self-celebration. You know?” I said, catching Clarissa’s glance and directing the last part to her. She smiled at me. “I needed this. I totally danced in the Macy’s dressing room for like an hour after I got ready.”

“You got ready in a Macy’s dressing room?” Anne asked, turning around to me. “You could have got ready here!”

I shrugged, and felt the stiffness of my jacket, so I dropped my shoulders back and the jacket slid off. I tossed it a few feet away from me on the bed and leaned back. “I like big reveals,” I said. “I wanted the ‘wow’ factor when I showed up.”

Anne laughed.

“Anyway, I brought booze,” I said, leaning down and unzipping my backpack. I pulled out all the bottles. “I got whisky and Smirnoff. You’re welcome to have some, too, if you’d like,” I said to Clarissa. “I don’t know what your plans are but you can get turned with us.”

“Oh, I work in the morning so I’m just gonna have a quiet night,” Clarissa said, pushing up her thick-rimmed black glasses and turning a page in her magazine. I caught a glimpse of the cover finally, and it was a *Vogue*.

I shrugged. “Okay, hope you don’t mind us then. Can we put on some music? I’m feeling antsy,” I said.

“Oh yeah!” Anne said, and picked up her phone. She turned on a Big Sean song, and I cracked open the whisky.

“Let the games begin,” I said deviously. Anne threw up her arms and let out a whoop, and Clarissa smiled and shook her head.

We took an Uber to the party. I could’ve driven, but as fast and loose as I am, I do not condone drinking and driving. When I was in high eleventh grade, a girl in my grade got into a drunk driving accident and died. Before that accident, I understood drunk driving as an abstract problem; after I saw her parents sobbing in the office collecting the girl’s stuff from her locker in a cardboard box, I understood it as a more substantial issue—a reality. I think we all adjusted our habits at least a little after that.

In any case, we left Anne’s dorm building at about 11:30. The thing about parties is that any good party starts at eleven or later, and if you’re going to go at all, the later the

better. If you go too early, there aren't a lot of people there and everything feels awkward and tame. It's better to go once the volume amps up. I've only ever been to one party at the actual time it was set to start, and that was like getting teeth pulled.

"Where is it?" the Uber driver asked as we turned down a residential road. He had the GPS on his phone mounted on the dashboard, but it was dark, and we couldn't really see the house numbers and GPS's don't really give you the specific location; it's always just a generic approximation.

"Oh, we don't know. We've never been to this place before," I said. The driver was an older gentleman with white hair and a white beard. It felt kind of awkward looking like the way I was and thinking about all the shenanigans I wanted to get into with someone who could probably be my grandpa totally enabling my deviousness. At the same time, he probably liked what he saw in his backseat. I hate men sometimes.

"Well it says it's around here somewhere..." he said, slowing way down and reaching with his right hand to zoom in on the GPS screen.

"It's fine. We'll get out here," I said. Anne's face to my right was lit up by her phone screen in a white-blue glow. She looked at me, and I could tell she was nervous from the way her forehead wrinkled in the middle where her eyebrows creased together.

"You ladies sure?" he asked, glancing at us from over his shoulder. He sounded genuinely concerned about our safety, walking around in the dark by ourselves.

"Yeah, we're fine. Thanks!" I said, and scooted closer to Anne, so she would know to open her door, which she did, and we both climbed out of the car to the side of the road.

“Have a good night, ladies! Be safe!” he said from inside the car, still glancing back at us, and I shut the door with a soft slam.

I pulled my tank top down a little where it had ridden up and turned to Anne. We were standing on the curb. “Well, let’s have a good night, eh?” I pulled a flask from my pocket and took a swig, then offered it to her. The whisky burned down my throat and warmed the bottom of my stomach.

Anne shook her head, and I shrugged and put it back in my pocket. I had had a lot to drink, but the cool autumn night woke my senses and sobered me a little, so I was still in control of my inhibitions. Anne had tapered off her drinking a little earlier, only sipping a little over a long period of time. If there’s one way to get drunk, it’s to drink a lot and drink it fast; Anne was pussy-footing around. I had called her out on it.

“Drink, sister! Chug that whisky!” I had chided in her dorm room.

“I’m not really into whisky,” she had said, sipping her Smirnoff.

“Well hopefully they’ve got something different for you at the party,” I had said.

Now we were walking down the sidewalk of a quiet neighborhood, glancing around at shadowed houses with the lights off, trying to find some indication of the house number 1506.

When we came to a corner, we noticed a quiet ruckus reverberating from the house to our right. I checked the mailbox, and on the post it had 1506 vertically painted on it; bingo.

“Here it is,” I said.

“Do we just go in? Maybe you should call your friend,” Anne said, hugging herself.

“Nah, it’s fine,” I assured. “Follow me.” As we approached the house, I took another swig and set my shoulders back. Chin up.

As if I lived there, I sauntered up to the side door—between the house and the garage—and let myself in. Of course it was unlocked, and Anne and I entered.

The door led to a kitchen, and the overhead lights were startling to our eyes, which had adjusted to the darkness. Suddenly I felt very exposed—everyone could probably see my frizzy hair in this lighting, the bags under my eyes, the shakiness of my lipstick—and my vulnerability was exacerbated by the several people who were milling about turning and looking at us with unfriendly glances. “Who are they?” I imagined everyone wondering to themselves, whispering to the person next to them as they leaned against the white cabinets and countertops.

I turned to Anne, who was a step behind me, and I said in a low voice, “Remember: fake it ‘til you make it.” She gave a pert nod with wide eyes—her hair bobbing—and I turned back around and strutted into the adjoining living room, where the bass from a hip hop song increased in decibels.

The party was still in its early stages, but I could tell it was only going to get better. In the living room, douche-y guys and basic girls stood around with red Solo cups and Bud Lights talking and gesticulating and laughing and nodding. I scanned their faces for Candice—and thought I saw her once, too, but it was just another blond girl with her exact same build—but didn’t see her. The music was clearly coming from below us, and

while it was loud enough to necessitate speaking up from where we were, it wasn't loud enough to energize me.

I headed for the basement. Anne trailed behind, looking around as though she had never been to a house party before. It had never occurred to me that she may, in fact, not have been to one before, but I had just assumed that everyone in college has been to their fair share of parties. Maybe I was corrupting her; she did not seem in her element.

You really can't be shy at house parties; you have to invite yourself places that you wouldn't normally venture uninvited. It's every person for themselves at a house party, and if someone is hosting the event, they're basically opening up their abode for anyone to turn up in. I wandered through a couple emptier rooms before finding the stairs to the basement.

It was so humid down there. If someone had been wearing glasses, they would have fogged up. Bodies were crammed together, and the lights were low—basically nonexistent. The speakers were set up in a corner, and my ears ached as I felt the bass echo in my chest. I turned and grinned mischievously at Anne who gave a hesitant smile. “Relax!” I shouted in her ear, pulling her closer by her sleeve. “Everyone's drunk and stoned, and you look hot as hell!” She smiled more genuinely at me, and I went over to an unattended bar in the corner and pulled out a Coors Light from a cooler sitting next to it. I popped the tab and handed it to her, nodding enthusiastically as she slowly took it from me. I stuck my tongue out at her and beamed, being silly. She laughed and sipped. As she was about to lower the can, I put my fingers on the bottom of the can to keep it



angled up to her mouth so she would keep drinking. “Chug, bitch!” I mouthed. She did. “Good girl.”

I took the flask from my pocket and finished up the whisky that was left in it, starting to feel loose and social. Some people are angry drunks, but I’m a social drunk. And an angry drunk—but only if a bitch spills shit on me. Or bumps into me. Or looks at me weird. Well, whatever, maybe I don’t know what I am. I grabbed another Coors for each of us.

The song changed and Anne’s face lit up with the first few notes.

“I love this song!” she shouted.

“Well then dance!” I cried.

People were packed all around us so that it felt like we were on a boat, the mass rocking of bodies almost dizzying. I started moving my shoulders to the rhythm, swaying my hips and nodding my head. At my display, Anne felt more comfortable and started moving a little, too. It always helps to be in the dark and amongst a bunch of other people who are dancing; that way you don’t stick out so much. I’m pretty shameless about my dancing, but I knew Anne needed some support.

“There you go!” I shouted, and we both grooved and danced holding our beers with one hand. As she got more comfortable, I danced against her, shaking my butt against her and laughing, singing along with the song. She giggled when I did this, clearly shier than I was about it all. In my impending drunkenness, I started looking around the basement trying to scope out anyone attractive, scanning faces. All the girls

looked like bitches though, and all the dudes looked like tools. I wasn't interested in shagging a ditz or a meathead.

We danced for a while. Anne was definitely feeling more comfortable now, and I kept going back to the cooler to get us new beers once we finished the old ones. I was rolling now. And I really, really wanted to smoke some weed. The drunk-high combination is the perfect level of energy and contentedness.

Occasionally a dude would get closer to us, and I would notice them ogling us. Most of them were creepy, and I could see them sizing us up like candy bars—hmmm, was he in the mood for a Snickers or a Kit Kat? Anne would obviously be the Kit Kat in that scenario. I discouraged them all from chocolate of any sort by inconspicuously edging away from them, guiding Anne and me a few steps away in the crowd. Eventually they'd get bored with my elbows being thrown or my skilled aversion tactics and wander away. Anne was totally oblivious to what I was doing. She really should have thanked me; she'd have gotten an STD just by accidentally letting a guy rub—er, “dance”—against her for even a moment. But we chicas have to look out for each other.

I was getting kind of bored dancing with Anne though and was starting to lower my standard for the evening. No offense to her, but I wanted to flirt with someone, to have some sexual attention on me from someone I would gladly bone. I noticed a guy in the corner just sort of standing with his friends. He had longish wavy hair, was thin but naturally athletically-built, and tall. It was pretty dim, but he had a black t-shirt on and a great, angular face with a strong jawline. Not my usual type—the nerdy, timid kind, but I was in a different city, and so I was looking to try something new.

So I started staring at him, waiting for him to look over at me and make eye contact. God I was getting so drunk. Now and then I'd get bored staring and just go ham on my dancing and hope he would look over and see me; I'd get really low and pop my ass, dance with my lips parted and eyes low, checking myself out. I certainly attracted a few more creeps, but at this rate I just shouted drunkenly, "Go away!" to them, and they'd call me a bitch and back off. Anne was starting to fade away.

After a little while he saw me. He saw me seeing him. Watching him. He looked away at first, innocent and as though he was just scanning the room, but I lingered in his mind, and he reconsidered and looked back at me. I parted my lips and kept a strong gaze on him, then turned into my next dance move, breaking eye contact. I didn't look at him again for the next five minutes. I hoped he looked at me for the entire five minutes.

I threw back the rest of my beer and weaved through the bodies to the cooler. The hair around my face and neck was damp from sweat and my armpits were very moist and humid—so was my crotch. The entire basement smelled like B.O. I dropped into a squatting position and fumbled trying to open the cooler latch.

When I opened it though, there was no more beer in it. Damn. I dug through the melting ice to try and find one hiding at the bottom—oooooh the cold felt great on my hands—but it was empty. What the fuck.

I felt a presence beside me.

"Looking for something?"

It was the dude.

And he was sooo sober.

I usually don't trust sober guys at parties. I know that sounds counterintuitive, but why would you go to a party and not get drunk? As a guy, the answer is: to hook up with girls who have lost control of their inhibitions. It's easier to manipulate them if you're sober. You can pull the whole, "Oh, I'm a responsible, respectable fellow. I'm the DD. You can trust me. I normally don't do one-night stands, but... Oh wait, this isn't the door to outside; this is the door to Kyle's bedroom. Let's sit and talk. Let me put my hand on your knee. Let me... That's right, let me get you another beer..." Yeah. Total predator type.

But his eyes were so entrancing...

"Yeah—you," I slurred, and I'm sure my eyelids were drooping. I don't have a goddamn filter when I'm drunk. I say whatever the hell is on my mind. Ballsy as hell. "And a beer," I added, looking defeated down into the empty cooler. Well, not empty—there was still all that ice in there. I picked out a handful and held it between my hands.

The dude laughed, looking a little sheepish. "Well, I think I can help you with those things. At least one for sure. But I'm an over-achiever, so..."

"Yeah, find me a beer first," I said, standing up. He put out his arm as though to help me stand up, and I said, "I got it." He ain't getting it just like that. I may have selected him, but I could still change my mind. I had to see if he was going to be any fun first. So far he was just corny.

He laughed and said loudly, leaning in, "You can have some of mine. They're upstairs though."

He turned and started weaving through the crowd, and I stumbled behind him, mumbling, “Excuse me,” and “Watch the hell out,” breathily. We made our way upstairs, and he took me back to the kitchen, where I had to cover my eyes.

“Holy fuck it’s bright up here,” I said, blinking hard. He laughed again. “You keep laughing at me.”

He cracked the fridge and pulled out a bottle of Blue Moon. “Because you’re funny,” he said, offering it to me. I grabbed it from his hand.

“No, because I’m drunk,” I corrected, and tried to twist off the cap. My grip was too loose. He took it back from me and opened it, handing it back.

I rolled my eyes. “I could have gotten it.” I chugged a third of it.

He made a face. “Easy there.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” I went to set the bottle down on the countertop and struggled a moment to get the bottom of it flat on the surface. “Are you even drinking?”

He leaned against the counter, a few feet from me. He smiled at me closely. “Yeah, but I work in the morning, so I’ve been drinking a lot of water, too.”

My legs felt really rubbery and my body felt floppy. I kept shifting against the counter. “Whatever,” I said, turning around and looking at everyone else in their own groups around the kitchen.

“Do you go to AU?” he asked.

I turned back towards him and shrugged. “What of it?” I could hear that my words were so fluid, so sloppy, yet I couldn’t make myself sound normal. The more deliberately

I tried to speak, the drunker I sounded, like I was concentrating way too hard on enunciating. I was effectively fucked up.

“I can just tell you’re really smart and interesting; I’m just trying to find it beneath your drunkenness,” he said, smiling at me. I rolled my eyes.

“I’m not drunk, you’re drunk,” I scoffed.

“And anyway, you’re so sexy,” he said, growing bolder. Now I was interested.

“I’m aware,” I retorted, tapping my foot restlessly.

“I like the way you dance,” he said, and his eyes changed as he stepped in towards me. I felt underwater, and everything was slower, but I was still in tune with the unspoken. He looked down at me with hungry eyes.

“Yeah you do,” I mumbled. I reached for my beer again but missed and knocked it over. “Shit,” I said, and quickly picked it up before too much spilled. It foamed.

As I stood there watching it, the dude reached behind him and grabbed some paper towels, hastily wiping up the spilled beer as it rolled across the counter. I stood watching him, unphased. “It’s cool,” I said. “Don’t freak out.”

He tossed the paper towels in a garbage can by the fridge. “Maybe you should stop drinking,” he said, approaching me again, the hunger having dissipated from his eyes.

I wanted the hunger back. “Maybe you should make me,” I said, and made direct eye contact for a second. I saw a click in his eyes. I was finally feeding into his advances.

“Is that a dare?” The corner of his mouth only slightly turned upwards. Our eye contact held.

“No. Did I say the word ‘dare’?” I bobbed my head as I said this, attitude seeping from my voice. “But I can make it a dare: I dare you to make me.”

Holding our eye contact still, I reached for my beer and felt my body begin to tingle with sexual tension. This was fun—finally some banter. I grabbed my beer and brought it to my lips, and was just about to chug the rest of it when he grabbed it from my hand, tossed it in the sink next to him with a crash of glass, and grabbed my face, his soft lips rolling against mine in a powerful kiss. Damn, I missed having a man’s hands on me, guiding our bodies.

I pushed back with my own lips, thinking only for a second about my lipstick, which would probably get all over our faces, but pulling his hips closer to me and going harder with my lips. His tongue wove with mine, and I was brushing his hair away from his face as he was holding my face with one hand and groping my ass with the other.

“Get a room!” someone shouted nearby us, and I realized everyone was staring at us from him breaking the bottle in the sink and our spontaneous and aggressive making out. He pulled away; we both looked around innocently, and then he grabbed my hand and led me out the side door and into the backyard.

The cold air stunned me, but it felt refreshing against my moist skin. The kitchen had been cooler than the basement, but all the breath in the house made it still very warm. I wondered if this guy had been here before, or lived here, or was just making himself at home, or if he knew the people who owned the house. It seemed like a frat house—flags hanging up in the living room, worn couches, a lack of a woman’s touch—and so I was willing to bet he was somewhat familiar with the backyard, the way he led me so hastily

and confidently through the darkness. Some light from the house bled out across the grass, but he took me beyond it and just past the tree line and into a shed.

“Is this where you bring all your girls?” I asked, looking around, after he turned on a desk lamp on the window sill in the shed. There was a futon in there, and he pulled the short black curtains shut.

“Just the hot ones,” he said, and pushed me down onto the futon and began making out with me again. He started groping my breasts and rubbing against me, and ended up pushing me so that I was lying across the futon and he was on top of me.

“My name’s Nadia,” I said, drunkenly, between kisses. When I drink, I tend to blurt things out even more stupidly than when I’m sober, and I wanted to know his name so that when we hooked up it didn’t feel so cheap.

“Jason,” I think he said breathily back, opening his mouth and shoving his tongue around my mouth. He moved his hands to my waist and slid one down around my butt and the other back up to my boob. I put my hands around his waist, lazily making my way towards his pants zipper.

His full weight was on me now, and I couldn’t get to the zipper because his zipper was smashed up against my pelvis, and at that point the room started spinning. I felt like chemicals were creeping up my esophagus, and at that point I knew I was really plastered, and that I might end up blacking out. I started to feel a little weird and disappointed in myself because I had mostly moved on from unconscious hookups and...

“Hang—hang on,” I said, trying to speak through his mouth, and he moved his frantic lips down to my neck, which did feel pretty good, but I felt like I was going to



throw up. I gave him another minute, during which I was spinning in my head, watching the lamp swing back and forth in my vision like a pendulum, before I finally remembered to say something else.

“Hey, I’m gonna—I need to go to the bathroom,” I said sloppily, my voice breathy and low. He sat up so he was straddling me and started aggressively pulling at my pants. I put my hand over them limply, so he wouldn’t go on.

But he kept going on at tugging at them. “Hey,” I said, a little sterner now, sitting up a little, the pressure working its way up my stomach. I was definitely going to throw up. He paused mid-tug and looked at me.

“What?” he said, frowning angrily.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I repeated, trying to get up, but he was on top of me.

He frowned deeper and started kissing me again. I tried to shove him off me, and he sat back again. “Go after,” he said, trying to make out with me again.

“No, I—it’s an emergency,” I said. I can’t really remember the details of this whole exchange, but I’m pretty sure he said it could wait, and we sort of went back and forth, and he started getting really frustrated with me until there was a loud pounding at the door.

“Hey, hurry up in there!” someone shouted through the door, and as he paused to look up, I squirmed out from under him and shuffled to the door, my stomach lunging as I did, and I fumbled to open it as he got up and went to bring me back, but it was too late

because I had gotten the door open and was stumbling outside, past a couple who were on the other side of the door giggling helplessly.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Jason shouted at me, but I blew by the couple and into the darkness before I could find out what happened among the three of them. I felt so nauseous, and I scrambled through the dark to the house...

*Biiiiitch*, I thought, suddenly remembering Anne. I pulled my phone out of my bra and saw several missed calls and texts not from Anne, but from Candice. I stomped through the yard and back into the house, glaring at everyone in my path and frantic to reunite with Anne, poor Anne who I had accidentally ditched and not even thought about... All because I got distracted by a piece of shit. Because I was a piece of shit.

There were fewer people in the house now, and the party seemed like it was winding down. Everyone still there was pretty drunk—I was still pretty drunk—and bodies sort of swayed and flopped as they stood talking in the living room. I was headed back to the basement because that’s where I had left Anne, but as I was passing through the living room, a blond girl by the fireplace called, “Nadia!”

I turned, shocked someone here knew me, and realized it was Candice. “Oh, hey Candice,” I slurred.

“Are you okay? I called your name like a million times,” she said. If she was drinking, she hid it well. I must have looked so messed up to her if she was as sober as she looked.

“I’m just trying to find my friend,” I said, shaking my head. The room was spinning.

“You look awful,” she said. “Here, sit down.” She grabbed my arm and guided my loose body to the couch, where one girl sat slumped over the arm rest—totally passed out—next to a guy with a backwards baseball hat and heavy eyelids. “Scoot over more,” she demanded of him.

He shifted towards the girl more, and I flopped down on the couch. “I’m fine, really,” I said. “I just really need to find my friend. I’m such a piece of shit, I left her behind when I went off with this scum bag and I don’t know where she is...”

Candice stood in front of me, holding a red solo cup and looking blurry but concerned. “Did you text her?”

“Text her!” I cried. “That’s such a good idea, I should text her...” I pulled out my phone and tried to navigate to my text messages but I couldn’t even unlock my phone and I kept dropping it into my lap.

“Here,” Candice said, taking it from me. “What’s your password?” I told her, and she unlocked it for me. “What’s your friend’s name? I’ll text her for you.”

I wanted to fight Candice’s help, wanted to insist I could do it on my own. I thought I was sobering up, but I was feeling totally incapacitated. She glanced at me, sighed, and handed me her cup. “Drink. It’s water.”

I took a drink and she took the cup back so I wouldn’t spill it.

“What’s your friend’s name?” she insisted.

“Ellis,” I said, and my head slumped from my neck. Maybe I was drugged. Oh my god what if someone drugged me.

“I really want to smoke some weed,” I said, bobbing my head up.

Candice sighed and handed my phone back to me. “There. I texted her.”

“Who has weed? I just need to get high,” I said, slurring with my eyes closed. I turned to the boy next to me. “Come on, I know you’ve got something.”

“What? No, I don’t...” he said, and I sighed dramatically and threw my head back. I felt my phone buzz in my lap but couldn’t bring myself to move. Candice was chiding me but I wasn’t paying attention to her. I started feeling nauseous.

“Nadia, wake up. Drink some more water.” Candice held the cup to my mouth and I slurped the water loudly. I was so faded. I just wanted to get into my bed...

“I just wanna go home,” I whined. “I want to sleep in my bed.”

“What about your friend? You still have to find your friend. And you need to sober up before you can drive home.” Candice knelt beside me, growing impatient.

“What about *your* friends?” I said. “Don’t *you* need to find *your* friends?” My phone buzzed in my lap. “I want to sleep.”

“Well I don’t know where you’re staying but you can’t go home tonight. It’s too far.”

I rolled my head in circles. “What?”

“Nadia, you’re in D.C. Home is like ten hours away.”

“What?” Then my phone started buzzing nonstop. “Shit.” I tried to answer it, but Candice grabbed it from me before I could pathetically try.

“Hello?” I could hear Candice asking. “This is Candice, Nadia’s friend. She’s really drunk now, but she said she’s looking for you. Where are you?” She waited a

moment, and then said, “You went home? Well, we’re still at the party.” Another minute, or minutes. “She’s pretty messed up right now, but you can try.”

Candice handed me my phone and said, “She wants to talk to you.”

Somehow I managed to grasp it and hold it up to my face. “Hello?”

“Nadia! Oh my god, where are you? Are you okay? What’s going on?” Her voice sounded familiar, way familiar. Like home.

“I’m fine,” I slurred, and tried putting her on speaker phone but accidentally hung up. She called back a second later.

“Why did you hang up? Are you okay?”

I laid the phone on the couch arm rest and Candice walked away back to her friends while I laid my face down next to the phone.

“Yeah, I’m pretty—” I hiccupped. “I’m pretty fucked up,” I admitted. “Why are you calling me Ellis?”

“You texted me saying you were looking for me, remember? You said it was an emergency! You’re at a party?”

The liquids in my stomach swirled aggressively. “Hey Ellis, I really want to say I’m sorry. I haven’t been texting you nearly as much as I should be. You don’t deserve that. I want to tell you that you’re my best—*hiccup*—best friend in the whole world.”

“I appreciate that, Nadia, but you need to leave that party. Come on, you’re better than this. You put this life behind you. Nadia, you need to find somewhere safe to go.”

My heart was racing, and I felt hot and nauseous. I was sweaty, and my eyes were closed, and my face still pressed against the arm rest. “I met this girl who reminds me of

you. And you wanna know the fucked up part? *Hiccup!* She's been the best part of this whole stupid runaway thing. Like, this whole thing has sucked without you. Like, I wanna make out with Anne because she's so much like you. I hate D.C. You know what? I hate myself. I'm so depressed ,and I don't even think I like this—*hiccup*—stupid world or—”

“Nadia! You're scaring me! Please, do you know anyone at that party? Who was the girl who answered your phone? Let me talk to her! Give the phone to that girl!”

I started moaning into the couch and Candice came back over. She took the phone and did some talking, and the next thing I remember is her trying to position me upright instead of slumped over.

“Nadia! Nadia! Sit up.”

“I don't have anywhere to go,” I whined. “I'm homeless.”

“I texted Anne. Ellis said that's probably who you were trying to reach.”

My stomach jolted and I turned quickly and vomit poured from my mouth as I hunched over the arm rest.

“Fuck! Why the hell did I invite you to this?” Candice shouted, and I hung myself over the arm rest and continued to vomit.

A few hours later, I awoke on the living room floor. Everyone from the party had left except a few people unconscious on the couch. I looked around frightened, still groggy and not sure where I was.

“Finally,” Anne’s voice said, and I turned around. She was sitting on the recliner, forehead in her palm, elbow resting on the arm rest. “Let’s get out of here. I’m gonna call an Uber.”

“Okay,” I said, and noticed there was vomit all down my front. I didn’t even care. “Where were you?”

“Me and this girl found a room.” She was tapping on her phone and didn’t look up at me.

“Go Anne.”

“Where were you?”

“Me and this guy found a shed.”

“Go Nadia.”

“Not really.”

“Yeah, it didn’t end up good with the girl either.”

“I just wanna leave.”

“Me too. The Uber’s seven minutes away.”

We got back to her dorm.

“Is it okay if I stay over?” I asked as we swiped into her room.

“Yeah, of course,” she whispered. “But you smell horrible. You should take a shower. You can wear some of my clean clothes. You’ll feel way better that way.”

Somehow we both wound up in the shower. Parts of the night were coming back to me, and others were still a mystery, blotted out by alcohol. I was having trouble standing myself up, so Anne helped me undress in the bathroom and stuck me in the shower. It was quite late, so the bathroom was empty. She lent me some flip flops, although I didn't care at that point much about sanitation.

I don't remember much, but she wound up in there, with me. The shower stall was narrow, and our soft bodies slid against each other as she held me up or we shifted positions to get better access to the water. It was purely business—her helping me with basic functions—but I was captivated by her beautiful wide hips and her breasts...

And then I was finally coming down onto her bed. She dressed me in fuzzy pajama pants and an oversized t-shirt and rolled me to my side. She squeezed in bed behind me, facing the same way as I did.

“Goodnight,” she whispered.

“Goodnight,” I said.

The room was dark and orange streetlights glowed behind her curtains. The room was so quiet, except for her roommate breathing heavily in her sleep.

“Will you cuddle me?” I asked.

I felt her body close the coldness between us and a warmth press itself like a puzzle piece against me, parallel to my back, my butt, my thighs. She draped an arm over my stomach, and I could feel her breath on the back of my neck.



The hangover the next day was painful, but my sporadic memories of the night before were even more painful.

“I went off with this one guy, and he took me to his shed or something, and I think we ended up getting into an argument or something and I stormed off...”

Anne and I spent Sunday doctoring each other and recuperating from our evening the day before. We stayed in bed and watched *Friends* episodes all day, taking turns vomiting in her trash can and attempting to eat toast. We drank bottles and bottles of water and yet took minimal trips to the bathroom to pee—we were that dehydrated. The entire day my head felt achy and my brain felt like it was clumpy in some areas and empty in others. It’s a good thing her roommate worked that morning because she would have been disgusted with us. When Clarissa got ready for work, I heard her entire routine, but I had had a rough time sleeping all night, tired yet sleep resisted my efforts. We kept the curtains drawn all day. I texted Ellis a little bit in the morning, to let her know what had happened and that I was okay.

By the time Clarissa got back from work that evening, we had cleaned the trash cans and been able to keep down some PopTarts. We were still a pathetic sight, but Clarissa enjoyed hearing our dramatic recounting of the night. By then, I had remembered a little more, and reviewing my SnapChat story helped me piece together some bits that I hadn’t remembered on my own. Anne’s night was somewhat of a failure, and I told her about Jason the Jerk who was seriously pushing the boundaries of consent towards the end. I was sitting cross-legged at the foot of her bed, running my fingers through my greasy hair in an effort to comb it. Clarissa had left again to study at the

library where she could get some peace and quiet after we entertained her for a while— she worded it kinder than that though.

Anne and I started talking about other parties we had been to, and I told her about some of the wilder nights I'd been through. "Sometimes I kind of miss all the partying. All the excitement," I confessed.

"Nadia, do you like yourself?"

The question felt like a bullet, totally out of the blue. I glared at her.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking down into her lap. "That seems kind of off-topic, but I've been meaning to ask you." Anne sighed. "It's kind of none of my business since we just met, but it seems like everything you do, you do because you don't like yourself. You push away people you like, like your friend Ellis you were telling me about. You bum around when you could be challenging yourself to do something you really love. I thought the running away thing was really cool, but you're not running towards anything. You have to run towards something if you're gonna run away from something else. Like, what are you passionate about? What are you interested in? Besides sex and weed. And I don't mean those things are bad, but they're just coping mechanisms, and you're really cool, and I don't want you to run yourself into a gutter. I'm worried. Especially after last night, if that's how you really feel, like you want to go back to all that. You need structure in your life to keep you in line. Like, you gotta respect yourself enough to not try and kill yourself with alcohol, kill who you are so that you can be okay."

I listened until she ran herself dry on things to say. I listened to the quiet after her lecture, or speech, or whatever the hell she was doing. I stayed quiet, watching the

emotions tumble around in my brain like clothes in a washing machine, trying to figure out how I felt. I was angry, and I was defensive. What the hell did she know about me? She had no right to tell me how to live my life when a week ago she didn't even know I existed. I tried not to think about my mother.

On the other hand, though, ol' Anne had a point, and I think I was so angry because she was right, and her being right meant I'd have work to do. It was easier for me to hate myself and avoid my thoughts. I liked the negativity, the excitement of its drama; I liked the attention and feeling like a martyr.

I thought about all that as I frowned into my lap. I wanted to yell at her. But I was tired. I yawned. I avoided eye contact.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have said all that."

"You shouldn't have," I said, raising my eyes to look at her knee caps. "But I don't think you would have said it if you didn't think it'd help me. You're wrong about some of it, but I guess I needed to hear all that."

"Are you in love with Ellis?"

I looked at her suddenly, frowning. "Now *that's* none of your goddamn business."

"I'm sorry," she said, putting up her hands as if in surrender. "Now I'm done. I promise."

The room was growing dim as the grainy dusk filtered through the curtains. Anne reached over and clicked on her end table lamp. In the background, Ross was losing his cool but insisting he was fine.

“I guess I owe you. For taking me in like this and letting me bum here all day. I really have become a bum.”

Anne shrugged and smiled tenderly. Her hair was all mussed, and she had wiped off all her makeup so her light brown freckles stood out on her pale skin.

“Um, do you mind if I stay over again?” I asked sheepishly. “I don’t have anywhere else to go tonight, and I’m still really recovering from hangover-itis.”

She nodded with a smirk. “My roommate’s gonna think you’re a squatter or something, but she’ll get over it.”

Anne looked so cute, in her gray crewneck and gray sweatpants, all cozy and homey. I wanted to kiss her, but I still felt a little queasy still.

“Oh, I meant to tell you—your underwear is really cute. I noticed it when we were getting in the shower last night, and I forgot to tell you.”

I laughed for a long time as she stared at me in bewilderment.

Anne had class Monday morning at 10:00 AM, so I woke up at 9:30 so I could say goodbye before she left. I wasn’t totally sure when I was leaving D.C., but after all the weekend’s drama, I kind of had a feeling in my gut that I would wind up heading back to ol’ Bentley pretty soon, even if I didn’t go back to school.

When the alarm on my cell phone went off, Anne was already gone. I sat up and looked around the room, blinking furiously to clear the blurriness from my eyes, but also because even though only one of the beige canvas curtains was pulled back slightly, the

entire room was bright with the morning sunlight. I closed my eyes and rubbed them with my fingertips in swirling motions until I was able to look around comfortably.

I scratched my head and surveyed the room. Clarissa was gone, too, so it was literally just me hanging out in two strangers' dorm room. Just as I was starting to feel sad and immensely disappointed to have missed saying goodbye to Anne—I think in the back of my mind, I knew I wanted it to be our big “goodbye” before we didn't see each other again possibly for forever—I noticed her messenger bag leaning against her desk. Oh—duh. She must have been in the bathroom, brushing her teeth or something.

I picked up my phone to glance if I had any notifications from Anne or Ellis and was surprised to see a text from my father, who was the last person I expected to hear from.

“Thanks for the birthday text,” it read. “Hope you and Vicky are doing well. Sorry it took a while to get back to you. I've been doing a lot of mission work with my church to repair hurricane damages, but I'll call you sometime. Love you.”

My heart knocked against my chest as I began to read it and my pulse calmed as I worked through what the text said. Mission work... Hurricane damages... I knew he had moved back down South, but I didn't know he was near where the hurricane had hit... I vaguely remembered having seen some headline about it online a couple months before, but all those disaster headlines tend to blend together for me these days, and so I must not have considered the impact of it at all. Was my father's home ruined? Did he even have a home anymore?

And mission work—Jesus Christ, had my father become a Christian? Well, I guess he had always been a Christian, in a barely noticeable way, but mission work? Maybe he attended church now. I could see it. I was wondering if he was the same dude as before when the door cracked open, and Anne tiptoed in before noticing I was awake.

“Oh good! You’re up!” She smiled at me. She had on jeans and a crimson-colored pullover crewneck hoodie.

“Slummin’ it today, huh?” I asked, my voice sounding like it was the first sentence of the day—because it was. Hoarse and groggy. I cleared my throat and set my phone down, pushing away any thoughts I had about my dad. Was I happy or annoyed that he replied the way he did, bragging about his new life to me—or was he trying to make a truce, maybe? But I pushed those thoughts away.

“Yup, I felt like being cozy.” She had a toothbrush and some toothpaste in hand and walked over to her dresser, setting them on top. “Are you going to be here when I get back from class this afternoon?” She turned and looked at me.

I shrugged, and folded my legs cross-legged under the covers. “Probably not. I haven’t really decided what I want to do yet, but this might be our Goodbye with a capital G.” It was hard to say this to her because I didn’t want to say goodbye to her, but I couldn’t stay in D.C. for Anne alone.

Her eyes fell, but she nodded. After all we had talked about the past couple days, I’m sure she understood, and was maybe even happy for me under the mild disappointment.

“I guess I’m not surprised.” She walked over and grabbed up her messenger bag, hoisting it over one shoulder.

“I’m a drifter,” I said. “Remember?”

Anne rolled her eyes and held out her arms. She stood next to the bed beside me. “Well if you’re going to say ‘goodbye,’ get on with it.”

I smiled and got out of bed to give her a big hug. I nestled my face into her hair to get a good whiff of Anne shampoo smell. “What do you use, Garnier?” I asked her hair.

Her chest and throat vibrated against me as she laughed and we pulled away. “Tresemmé,” she replied.

“It smells good; I’m a get me some of that,” I said. I sat back down on the bed, legs dangling over the side.

Anne made her way to the door slowly, and with one hand on the handle, looked over her shoulder and said, “Well, I have to go to class now. Thanks for taking me along on the ride. Your problems have helped me reevaluate mine.” She smiled.

“Glad my fucked up life could shed some light on yours,” I said with a sarcastic tone. “Just remember: no matter how bad you think you have it, Nadia probably thinks she has it ten times worse, which is almost as bad as actually having it ten times worse.” I gave her a wave, and she laughed as the door clicked shut behind her.

I felt kind of funny watching her go. I don’t know; our friendship was so fresh that I felt disappointed we didn’t have more time together, time to get to know each other better and have more conversations about how lame life is and how to cope with it. I guess the great thing about being alive in 2017 though is that we have this miraculous

invention called texting that allows you all the communication of pigeons with a fraction of the hassle. I think it'd be cool to text via pigeon, actually. Maybe that was my next quest, now that the purple panties pursuit ended.

In any case, I gathered my stuff and put on Saturday night's old outfit, because up until then I had been wearing Anne's pajamas during my recovery period, and as much as I wanted to keep wearing her Smokey the Bear shirt and AU sweatpants and just mail them back to her, I figured that would be too great of a task for my lazy ass to complete, and I didn't want to be a borrow-and-dash kind of clothes klepto-stranger/friend, so I decided to do a delayed walk of shame to my car. Before I left though, I wrote her a little note using the back of an old chemistry worksheet and tucked it between two books on the shelf above her desk, which—hey, she had *The House of the Scorpion*, one of my favorites from middle school. It reminded me I had brought some books with me—I guess I had forgotten about them though because they had immediately made a home on the floor of my backseat of my car.

I'm not going to tell you what the letter said, because it's none of your business, but I guess in keeping with the nature of our brief friendship, I was a little more honest than I usually am in it. That damn Anne and how disarming she is.

My car had a parking ticket when I got to it. I had used a guest pass from the area desk of her dorm building, but I guess those only count for immunity during the weekend. I tossed it in the passenger seat of my car—which was already littered with receipts and crumbs and a few CD's and tissues, among an assortment of other, less-glorious garbage—and made my way to the Lincoln Memorial.



I made a stop to get brunch on my way, and I took the time to call Ellis. I happened to know her schedule because what kind of best friend would I be if I didn't know an intrusive amount of information about her life? Well, apparently a lousy one anyway because it was the first time I called her since I began my journey.

We talked a little bit about what I had been up to, now that we were communicating while I was sober, but mostly we talked about what I was going to do.

“I don't know if I'm more depressed than ever or if I'm more hopeful than ever. I kind of just want to go home and watch TV in my room and smoke and play *Tomb Raider* and hang out with you,” I said to her as I sat by myself in the corner of a little café. There was no music playing, but there was a consistent background static of chatter. It was a cute little French joint that served very elegant crepes and gourmet coffee. My empty plate and my mug of coffee sat before me. I had demolished my delicious—and very beautiful—strawberry and Nutella crepe probably within sixty seconds. It was the lightest thing I had ever eaten, and it was amazing. “But also I don't want to stay there, and I definitely can't go back to school.”

“I mean, you've only been gone—what—like a week or two? You could easily catch back up in your classes, right? You're more than halfway done with your degree, too. You should see that through.” Her familiar voice felt good against my ear.

I shrugged even though she couldn't see me. “Yeah, but I don't know if I want to. I know everything would be the same as it was before. I don't want it to be the same. I want it to be better.”

“Change your major.”

“To what?” I watched as a young woman with brown hair ordered at the counter. The whole place was red and white—the counters red, the floor white. A coffee bar was set up on one side of the counter, and there were hanging plants around the café. I sat at a circular table in the corner by a window wall, the backwards cursive font on the glass above the table next to me, which, from the outside, said, “Café Magnifique.”

“Psychology? Counseling? You could finally formally diagnose yourself as batshit crazy. Do something that’s useful for yourself.”

“How *dare* you,” I said with attitude, although I heard laughter from her end. I rolled my eyes.

Ellis stopped laughing and paused. “In all seriousness, though, Nadia, maybe you really should consider going to see someone... I mean, they have really great group therapy on campus here. A girl in my class said it really helped her last year when she was going through something... Maybe—”

“What are you saying?” I asked, frowning.

She sighed into the speaker. “I just mean that I try to be there for you as much as I can, but I can only do so much... Especially when you don’t keep me in the loop, and especially now that I’m about to wrap up my degree and start applying to grad schools. And you’ve never really talked about it much, but I know you have issues with your parents, that I try not to pry into, but I can tell it still bothers you, and... I worry about you. I worry about you a lot. I’ve lost so much sleep trying to help you—and I’m so

proud of how far you've come! But sometimes it seems like you don't even want to help yourself..."

What was it with people giving me lectures about my life? I set my fork down and stared out the window, not really processing any of the traffic or the passersby or anything but the weird sloshing of emotions in my mind. I felt first of all defensive, because I wanted to tell her she had no right to tell me that I had something wrong with me and that I wasn't okay, but at the same time I felt incredibly guilty because I hadn't really ever considered how much Ellis may have sacrificed for me—all those times she had dropped everything for me, and all the times I've disappeared on some silly whim. She sounded so pleading—so small and desperate, and genuine, on the phone. I guess maybe I could have used help. I always thought having a best friend was good enough, and that Ellis would help me with whatever shit came up in my life, but I knew she had a point when she made it seem like I needed to see someone who was a little more qualified and who could help me look at my issues from a different angle. Did I have issues?

We were quiet for a while on the phone. Eventually, Ellis added carefully, "I'm sorry I had to tell you that over the phone. It's something I've been meaning to say for a while, but I'm starting to get desperate, and I'm scared you won't come back to Bentley."

"I don't want to go back to school," I mumbled, staring tiredly out the window still. "I can't." I picked up my fork and scraped my fork against my plate, collecting some of the leftover whipped cream from the plate and licking it off the fork prongs.

She was quiet again. I think that's probably when she realized it was a losing battle, that I had made up my mind about not going back to school—and Ellis knew very well how stubborn I was.

During this brief quiet, I had the impulse to tell her that my dad had texted me that morning and to try and talk through what I was feeling with her. I had pushed it to the side when I actually read the text, but all the sudden I remembered it. It surprised me how much I really wanted to share this info with her once it came to me, and some part of me thought it'd be helpful to hear Ellis's opinion. But before I could figure out the way I wanted to say it to her, because now that I thought about it, I had never really told her anything much about my dad, she said, "Okay. Then answer me this: so what do you do now, if not Bentley?"

I rubbed my neck with the hand that wasn't holding my phone and decided if I was going to bring up my dad, I'd do it in person, and I shoved it to the side again. "Oh, um... I think I'm gonna go live with my aunt. In California."

Ellis started saying something, like she was about to go into another lecture. "Nadia—"

"Okay, before you start saying anything about this, hear me out," I said sternly, raising my eyebrows and setting down my fork on my practically licked-clean plate. "I haven't seen Karen in a few years, but she's the closest family I have, and she's got this flower business going on—"

"Do you mean weed?" Ellis interrupted.

“No! I don’t know; no, not necessarily. She says she’s a florist, and if that’s code for marijuana grower, that’s cool, too, but if she’s a regular florist, that’s still kind of cool. Botany is neat! Maybe that’s what I want to do.”

“Okay,” Ellis conceded.

“Anyway, so I figured I’d go live with her and get a job doing that with her, and I think Karen could teach me a lot now that I’m more willing to listen and I have more experience, so I’m able to understand better.” I stared into my coffee mug, then took a sip and looked out the window at the tall brick building—an apartment complex, it looked like—across the road. “And she’ll take care of me. She always has.”

“I take care of you,” Ellis said quietly, into the phone, and my heart hurt a little.

“I know.”

“Do you?” She said this so lightly that I wasn’t even sure that this was what she said, but it felt as though this wasn’t so much a question as it was a statement. My heart panged suddenly, aching. I didn’t have an answer.

We both thought for a moment before speaking again. I took another thoughtful sip of my coffee and looked out at the Café Magnifique patio, all empty metal chairs and tables.

“You could come with me,” I said. “If not right away, after you graduate. That’d be cool—my two favorite people with me in California. We could have a TV show.”

“That would be pretty cool,” she admitted, but she said it in a way that ended the discussion. It would be cool, but we would see how plausible it really was, is how it sounded.

“I am a little excited to get back to my apartment, though,” I said. “It’s gonna feel *so good* to take a shower in my own bathroom after tramping around all over this city.”

I heard her effortless laughter, which always sounded so genuine and easy to me; her laugh was something I envied, because I didn’t have a real laugh—my laughs were usually energetic scoffs. Her voice softened as she asked, “You are coming back to Jordan now, though? You’ll come back here first?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I promise.”

“And you’ll think about what I said? About—about all that? The therapy stuff?”

I sighed gently. “I’ll think about it. I promise that, too.”

“Okay, well I’ll see you soon, then, okay? Drive safe, Nadia.” She sounded so concerned, and at that moment I couldn’t wait to hug her again. I didn’t really want to hang up, either.

“Sure thing,” I said, grinning a little bit at the thought of seeing her again. “Also, before you go, I just wanna say thanks for being cool even when I’m not.”

It was code, obviously. It was my way of saying, “Hey, I know I’m a shitty, negligent friend who takes advantage of you, but I see that I take you for granted, and I want to make it better, but I don’t really know how to, yet, but I’m trying.” She understood, I think, because she said, “Of course. Love you, Nadia. I miss you a lot.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Me too.”

I went to the Lincoln Memorial next, before I left D.C., because it was my favorite monument. As much as I hate tourism and the cheap mentality of shallow sightseeing, I have to admit, I really do find the Lincoln Memorial to be a cool place.

When I had come to D.C. in middle school on that field trip, my aunt had chaperoned. She had to go to some crazy lengths to be able to do that, on account of her not being a parent or guardian of me, but she pulled some strings and persuaded her way into being able to go with us. I think she had argued that there were retired teachers volunteering on the trip, or some ingenious Aunt Karen thing.

Anyway, while we were rapidly touring the monuments, she had pulled me aside at the Lincoln Memorial. When Karen was younger, she had lived in D.C. for a few years, and so she knew all the best spots. In the main room of the Lincoln Memorial, all the tourists gathered, taking pictures of Abraham sitting stoically upon his white marble throne, a cacophony of voices echoing throughout the hall. Hordes of students, families, and couples crowded around, raising their cameras far above their heads in hopes of getting a picture of it without any of the other tourists photo-bombing.

“I want to show you something,” Aunt Karen had said quietly in my ear, and as I turned to see her beaming smile, twinkling, soft gray-blue eyes, and her shoulder-length chocolate brown hair voluptuously wavy, she nodded at me and lightly grabbed my elbow so that I would follow her.

We headed towards the exit—or entrance, or both—of the memorial, and I was alert and excited for what she was going to show me. Aunt Karen was always surprising me with things, like a trip to the movies or the current month’s issue of *Teen Vogue*. She

led me through a maze of people, but instead of descending the grand stairs in front of the memorial, she led me around the side, between the high marble columns.

“I used to come back here when I wanted to do some good thinking,” she told me, and we were walking side-by-side now, having left the crowd behind. A few people were taking pictures against the pillars, or strolling along and appreciating the quiet, but for the most part we were alone.

“It’s kinda cool how there’s no one back here,” I said. She agreed, and we turned another corner so that we were at the rear of the Lincoln Memorial.

“Wow,” I said, as I looked out before us. There was a road behind the memorial, and that road fed into a bridge that arched over the Potomac River, a cityscape beyond it. The bridge was flanked by two golden men on horses.

“I know!” she exclaimed, grinning widely. “Come on—let’s sit down.” She walked to the edge of the marble and climbed down to another ledge in the memorial. It wasn’t high up, but we sat down into it and watched the cars glide along the road, coming and going across the bridge.

“How do more people not know about this? Why aren’t there more people here?” I asked, turning to her.

Karen’s eyes squinted as her cheeks raised, the way her whole face lifted when she smiled. She had lines coming from her eyes and lines around her mouth from decades of laughing with her whole face, but rather than feel pity at the show of her older age, I admired those lines.



“People only ever want to skim the surface. There’s no immediate glory in the things they have to work for,” she said thoughtfully, staring out at the river.

“What do you mean?” I was in eighth grade, and she was too wise for me.

“I mean,” she said, eyes lost on the river, “that people just want to see what everyone has seen before. They want to take their picture of the Lincoln Memorial and run off to take a picture of the Washington Monument and so on, so they can show off their generic pictures to friends and family after they get back from vacation. No one wants to slow down and search for something new or something un-appreciated.” She glanced down at me, and saw that I was gaping at her with big, naïve eyes. “Stop and smell the roses, and all that shit,” she added, so that I could understand better.

“Oh,” I said.

She put her arm around me and drew me close beside her warm body. “Don’t look at the world the way everyone else does, kiddo. They want to be boring. Don’t be boring. Dare.”

I didn’t totally absorb what this meant, but I paid close attention to her words and tried to remember them. After a few more minutes, she told me we had better get back to the group because she was being a lousy chaperone, which she said she didn’t really care too much about because she had really only coerced her way into going so that she could get a free trip to D.C. with me, but she was still responsible for everybody’s kids, and we rejoined our group for rest of our last day in the nation’s capital.

Now, on this cool October day, I took my pilgrimage back to that same spot. It was a bit too chilly for comfort, but I layered up my hoodies and threw on a very large

blanket-sized scarf, and headed down the long stretch of the National Mall, facing the wind with my cold cheeks. At the last minute before leaving my car at the parking garage, I reached into the back seat and grabbed *Catcher in the Rye* to take with me.

Even though the air was crisp and it was a bit cold, there were still tons of tourists milling around, even on that Monday afternoon. Do tourists ever take a break? I guess not, because people come to D.C. from all over the world, and I guess it's all based on the convenience of scheduling. Still, I supposed I wasn't much better since I was there, too, and technically a tourist.

The walk took friggin' forever. The National Mall is a pretty open landscape, and the monuments are huge, so you can see them from far away, which can appear very misleading—you think you're close, but ten minutes later you're still not even halfway to your destination. I felt kind of quiet, inside me, though, for once, and I hadn't the energy to critique all the tourists quietly buzzing around me on that gray, muted day. The wind began to numb my face and chest, and it felt somewhat therapeutic to feel the sharp coolness on my vulnerable flesh, and as I walked alongside that long, rectangular reflecting pool, I felt connected to it, the way its smooth, sharp-looking surface glistened the world back at itself, a low-standing body of glassy water; I felt an odd peace. I looked thoughtfully at the families and couples passing by—a little Korean girl in a pink, puffy jacket running down the row of trees awkwardly, legs coming down wide apart from each other and her mother shuffling after her; a black man and a woman perhaps in their thirties strolling away from the Lincoln Memorial on the other side of the pool, the man in a gray pullover sweater with his arm around the woman's waist, leaning in close to her

and her throwing her head back in laughter; an elderly white man with a trucker hat standing at the reflecting pool, looking silently into the water, his jaw set firmly and intently. All this life around me, and I heard the omnipresent *whoosh* of the wind, but mainly a loud silence, with passing voices interspersed here and there as people passed me in my slow meandering.

It was powerful to me. I pulled the book to my chest and walked with it pressed to my heart, my arms crossed over it, and tears brimmed in my eyes, partly from the cutting breeze but also from the noticeably present peace I felt. I was entirely in that moment, and every other event that had ever taken place in my life fell away and revealed a wide open world before me. It felt like the first moment I had ever been quiet and let the world happen; my voice and my thoughts drained from me and what was left was absolute wholesome absorption; it was me, in this vividly real moment, experiencing life without thrusting my internal monologue upon it. In fact, it may have been the first time I was quiet, inside and out.

I was overwhelmed with how cleansing it felt. For a second, I thought upon jumping into the reflecting pool and baptizing myself, but I refrained. It would be too much; it would demand too much of me and shatter the moment. I approached the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and took them, looking up, still clutching the book to my chest, lifting each foot to the next stair without watching them, only looking up. The movement of my legs became automatic, and I continued only to absorb, observe. As Lincoln's marble head began to peek out from above the stairs, I marched upward, onward.

When I reached the top, my heart was loud, and my breaths were short. I had taken the stairs slowly, deliberately. It felt good. I drew in each crisp breath carefully, paying attention only to how the inhalations felt like they were cutting my throat, and it was satisfying. I let my arms drop to my sides, clutching the book with its spine in the crux between my thumb and pointer finger.

I rounded the corner and walked between the wall and the pillars, glancing up and around me at how high the columns were beside me and the overhang above me. I didn't think anything about it, just looked at it for what it was—very large, and very gray-white. The rounded grooves all the way up the column; the name for them didn't matter, I just looked at them. I saw them. A red Jeep among the gray and blue cars, driving along in the distance behind the memorial. The hedges and bushes surrounding this marble memorial's platform.

When I finally rounded the corner and to the left, I noticed I was alone. The wind whipped my hair to the side suddenly, and I wiped a lock of it away from my face, turning my head to face to the right, toward the direction of the wind, pausing, closing my eyes for a moment, and then opening them to the sky—the gray, overcast sky. It felt so pure to turn my face upward, though. I did it again, and then I continued to the spot where my aunt and I had sat—ten years ago? No, when I was fourteen, must have been. However long ago that was. I didn't do the math though—allowed the thought to dissipate without effect.

I climbed down the side, stepping down onto another block of marble, and sat down on the ledge. The marble was cold, and I felt the cool of its smooth surface through

my jeans on the seat of my pants. I was starting to get so cold from the wind that my skin almost burned, and after climbing the steps—even slowly—I had begun to sweat a little, and so the cold felt nice through my clothes. I stretched my legs out straight in front of me; the ledge was long enough so that my thighs and calves pressed against the cool stone as well. I looked out across the field at the bridge, and the same golden men on horses that flanked it, and the steel gray Potomac River that stretched like a premature horizon before me and the cityscape on the other side of it.

I brought *The Catcher in the Rye* from my side and placed it in my lap. I guess I had intended to read it here, and that's why I brought it along with me, so I opened it up to the first page. I read the first couple lines, but then I stopped and looked back up. I couldn't do it; I couldn't read on.

There was no room in my mind for Holden's thoughts. I was so engrossed in my meditative trance that his voice would ruin the serenity of this moment for me. The quiet I had finally achieved. The quiet I didn't even know I craved, or the quiet I didn't even know I would enjoy so thoroughly. This feeling that was transcendent.

And I felt tired. With a giant sigh, I became aware of how exhausted my brain was, my body was. But also I felt so awake, so alert. And content.

I don't know how long I sat there. I just looked around, watching the cars, and occasionally overhearing people walk around the Lincoln Memorial behind me, and allowing myself to be enveloped by my non-thoughts. I was zoned out, but without destination. It was relieving.

Yeah, I don't know how long I sat there, but it didn't feel like long enough because I was greedy for the serenity. Eventually, though, the daylight began to dilute into dusk and my nose started running and my legs got stiff from sitting tensely after I cooled down. I knew it was time for me to go. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, the cold, rectangular brick of technology, and noticed that it was getting time for me to head out.

I had set my book to the side after I decided not to read it, and as I was standing up, I looked at it, sitting stark red against the light gray. I stooped to pick it up, and stood back up, but then I reconsidered—I turned it over in my hands, thinking about Holden and his entitled ass and his lousy attitude and his stupid rants. I kind of hated him. I also kind of liked how the book looked, sitting there on the marble, the contrast, the little book against the huge memorial. I bent a little and dropped the book carefully so that it would land on its back in the same spot I had it sitting, tilted slightly and the cover facing up to the heavens in yellow font, *The Catcher in the Rye*. I tried to remember the ending, but I couldn't think of it exactly. I was pretty sure he ended up in an institution, though—therapy. I kind of hated Holden because I wanted to be better than him, even though I knew he and I shared something. I turned away.

And then I climbed back up the ledge, onto the main walkway around the memorial. If I ever felt like reading the book again, I could get it out from the library or buy it or something, but I had ways of obtaining it. I just didn't feel like bringing it back with me. I felt very done with that book in that moment.

It was getting real damn cold though, and I was starting to emerge from whatever thoughtless state I was in. I hugged myself in the wind and made my way around the memorial, but this time, I decided to go the opposite way I came, so that I'd be making a loop around the building.

As I was walking along the side, I was watching my feet walk, my hair being blown into my face from the wind facing my back, my arms still crossed in front of my chest, and about halfway along the memorial, I looked up, and—with a startled pang in my chest—caught sight of the back of a woman, standing, looking out at the trees and the field beside the memorial, standing between two columns, her wavy, slightly frizzy, shoulder-length faded brown hair whipping in the wind to the side. I stopped in my tracks, my heart skipping into a thudding beat. She was wearing a black, long winter jacket with a fur-lined hood, and she had on these black dress pants and black high heels. I couldn't be sure, and I wouldn't know why should would be there, but it looked like—could it? Was it?

My first instinct was to shout something to her, cry, “Mom?!” in disbelief. My next urge was to hug the lady, because—because why?—I guess I longed for that physical reassurance, that touch, and take my chances if it turned out to be a stranger. But I fought those feelings, and I ended up standing there, stark still, staring at her back, as she stood stark still, staring in the same direction that I was, yet unaware of my presence. I felt colder still.

I didn't know if I should walk away, keep going. There was no way it could be her. And if she did see me, there was no way she would be happy—I know my mother,

and the first thing she would say would be, “Nadia? What the hell are you doing in D.C.? Don’t you have class?” and I would feel hurt, slapped, that the rationale to question my being there came first to her mind rather than the impulse to hug me, to sigh, “Oh, it’s so good to see you, sweetie.” But here I was, going through these scenarios in my mind, instead of running up to her and giving her a hug.

There was no way it could be her, though. Why would she be in D.C.? On a conference? She was always traveling places for conferences, and D.C. would be a prime location for a conference. Or maybe she was in town to visit—and I almost repulsed at this idea, for some reason—a guy? Or did she live here now, my mother? I hadn’t spoken to her in months, and the last time had been pure business, rent talk. And yet, as much as I questioned the likelihood of her being there, right there, at the same time I was there, right there, I knew by the way she stood so powerfully, so commanding in the way her legs were rigidly straight, making a narrow V-shape, her shoulders pulled back confidently, and that it was from she who I had learned to fake it, absolutely fake it until I made it. And yet, also, her arms hung limply at her sides, and I wondered if she had made it after all, or if she was still faking it.

Before I had decided whether to keep walking or to announce myself, the woman was turning around, and my heart skipped a rapid beat as her head turned, and I studied her profile in a millisecond before she was fully turned around and my heart was sinking, sinking, sinking...

The woman before me was a stranger, her eyes too close together, her lips too full, her nose too wide to be my mother, and only the recognition of my unfamiliar



presence flashed across her eyes. She frowned briefly at me, staring at her inexplicably, before she turned and walked away with a stern clicking of her heels with each step, and my stomach felt as though it was knocked on its ass, my blood pounding through my veins in shock, my external body unmoving as my internal self sputtered and choked.

And here I stand, realizing with utter disbelief, how badly I wanted it to be my mother, and how absolutely disappointed, how sorry I am, that it isn't her, the clicking of the stranger's heels echoing through my head. I wanted it to be her—for all the emotional negligence, the screaming, the distance she wedged between us, I still wanted it to be her.

I stand here, watching that faux figure of my mother get smaller and smaller in the distance, feeling lonelier than I have felt in a long time. *I need someone*, I think. I think I am ready. I'm sick of missing someone I hardly know, missing something I never had from my mother, sick of not even knowing who my father is, sick of dealing with my parents' shortcomings by myself.

I get back to my car and head to Jordan. I decide to tell Ellis some things when I see her again. It's a start.

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