The V Clause

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
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in
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by
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I met Will at the Super Petz just after I’d loitered around the cat cages long enough to get offered a job. I was in training, he was buying dog food. Will was shy, quiet, handsome in an unconventional way that didn’t draw attention. Like all pet owners, he had to keep responding to the needs of his animal and buy more food. To my joy (and great inner turmoil—he made me hyper aware of myself) he came back and back again until he was a regular. I looked forward to seeing him professionally, if one can call employment, wearing an apron screen printed with a yellow parakeet at a place ending in Z, professional. But like all other humans I met, I wrote him off as being disinterested in everything I had to say before he had a chance to listen to any of it. There was no way he wanted to hear me talk. I was such a bore, anyway. Most conversations ended badly because I was trying too hard to make them mean something. One day he asked for my help, though. Just out of the blue, like I was a regular person.

Girl meets boy. Boy buys dog food. And eventually, Girl fucks it all up. Down the fucking tubes, it was doomed to go. Like all things “Alexandria.” I should have acted busy right then, like I had something to fix on the register. Why didn’t I do that? Or take out the trash? Stupid.

“Tell me about these dog beds,” he said, gesturing to the wall of animal-print plush and flashing a big, crooked grin at me, and I’d never been so happy to explain the merits of Memory Foam versus Polyfill. He ran his hand over the back of his neck, leaned to one side of his jeans. Good lord, I got excited. He asked my name even though I was wearing a nametag (Al-ex-on-dree-uh, I pronounced for him, with exaggerated
tongue flourishes), and he nodded patiently and practiced until he got it. He had a nervous energy about him, and he swayed side to side as I talked, taking his hands in and out of his jean pockets. Must be making him nuts to be around me, I thought, because I’m such a loser. But I caught him looking at my tits for a minute when I reached up to grab a dark blue plush model.

That’s not nothing.

He lingered a little long in the bed aisle before choosing a sensible dark brown microfiber bed with a thick cushion. I nodded my approval.

“What kind of dog is this for?” I asked casually as I rang him up. Ooh, I was smooth. I could tell he was into me and I was playing right into his little friendly-guy routine. Even though I knew better than to trust him to like, actually be into me.

“Oh, uh. Sorry. Lab. Black lab. You have any dogs?”

OBVIOUSLY I didn’t want him to know about my cats—my ever-growing cadre of sycophant roommates and the cornucopia of smells wafting from my open windows. I laughed with one of those big open-mouth magazine girl laughs that show your teeth. Ha, ha, ha. Instant regret. My teeth aren’t that awesome, and neither is my laugh. “Oh, you know, I have a cat-s—few. Never been much of a dog person. I think people who have dogs are—oh.” I caught myself mid-sentence. I laughed again, nervously. “Sorry.”

He smiled at my slip up like a patient teacher; the look was patronizing, but he didn’t seem mad. He was making a conscious choice to overlook my flub. “So, um, what days do you work?”
I couldn’t believe he was still talking to me. I was so fucking awkward. “Well, mostly Tuesday to Saturday,” I said quietly.

“Cool. See you around.”

I was “socially awkward,” they said, but they always said I’d grow out of it, too. While waiting for “it” to “grow out” of me, I, Alexandria, (Al-ex-ON-dree-uh, I was constantly pronouncing for the idiots, not AN-DREE-uh) started looking for a way to release the anxiety I felt building up inside, cold and itchy, each time I’d put my foot in my mouth. I found that release the day—at twelve—I bought a bag of goldfish at the Wal Mart on Main (And really, wasn’t I always undoing things before? I never liked stuff done up or confined… I’d been untying my shoes on purpose since I was old enough to have laces…). I walked the three blocks to the park, and stabbed the fish baggie over the pond. The dancing corps of orange-red tumbled out with the water (and were eaten, almost immediately, I realized too late, by the larger, native fish). The rush and release of bodies invigorated me like nothing I’d ever felt. Momentary freedom. Did it work out that time? No. But that didn’t matter to me. Alexandria (It doesn’t rhyme with Andrea—please) always had this desire to let go. To take things out of other things.


There was always something for me to free.

After the goldfish? A bad fight with Dad. Rabbits. I lifted those bunnies from their cage in the house, one under each arm, and plopped them down on the cool grass of the backyard. I only let them go in the yard—a minor compromise—just to see what
would happen; but without water, shade or food it ended a lot like the goldfish. Well, if the goldfish had been screaming in the late summer morning heat, too; if I had closed the window hoping for the best and shut out their rabbit yells so I could sleep in. Come to think of it, it was nothing like the goldfish except in the way it ended, but even that death had a different feel to it. The next afternoon (I couldn’t bring myself to look at first), I stepped outside and inspected two stiff, wide-eyed white bodies that lay against the house (still hopeful I’d open the door).

This was no solution, either.

The compulsion to release, to send out, to give away and break confines didn’t fade, but the macabre slowed me down for a time. For a while I concentrated my energy on release of things, of objects. Though I still couldn’t resist the temptation just to tip over a tucked up cat as I walked by the arm of the couch (So many legs, hidden underneath! Such an easy rush!), most of my attention went to stuff.

I left a half-edible, humdrum trail where I went, a mix of crumbs, pretzels, paper clips, post-its balled up and broken hair ties. I scattered rocks from my palm. In grocery stores, I would take palmfuls of dry beans, drop the cool bodies so they’d bounce on the tile. I made an odd little Gretel. What was the opposite of a klepto? I wondered, but I knew I was it. I released rather than retrieved.

Sometimes I’d grab a handful of grapes in the produce aisle and give them to a kid. Or money. Like the time I grabbed the wad of cash from Dad’s wallet in high school, stuffed my pockets and waited for a delicious moment to let it flutter out the window just below the frame as my cousin Mick drove up 99 to Sacramento. It brought me more joy
to see it go in the mirror than I ever could have bought with it. Every time I let shit go, I felt better. For a time, anyway.

Things closed up—they gave me an itch inside my spine and my fingers would start to twiddle as I thought about letting them out. By the time I was out of college I’d already moved cities a few times to get away from people knowing too much about my bad thing. Sometimes I let too much go, took it too far. People asked questions. It had to be my secret, the dark truth I kept for myself alone. I learned to hide it better. I’d drive in the country, stopping to open pens, to let animals wander free, but now I looked to see if the owners’ cars were in the drive. Country people have guns, after all, and I wasn’t tryna get shot.

But heaven help me if there was a better feeling than seeing the sheep head out across a field through an open gate—*my* open gate, the one I left waiting for them. They spread out, white dots against the green landscape. I gave them opportunities others just wouldn’t give. I knew by then to take off before it got ugly, and the Sacramento Valley offers enough towns that are “just far enough” from each other that I could start over with a new set of expectations.

And so by twenty-six I lived a solitary life in a small apartment in scenic, metropolitan (ha), high-minded (ha) Galt, California (where discussion centers on such erudite topics as whether the air smells of skunk or cow, tonight). I lived free of human companionship at home, anyway, but I started to collect, to amass things that would feel good if I let them go. It gave me an excuse to be helpful, to offer just what someone was
looking for, to appear to be one of the normals. *Oh, here’s a complete set of Michael Jackson albums on LP—I found them just for you when I was at the Flea Market. Oh thank you so much,* they’d tell me, *you’re the best.* Who wouldn’t want my kind of attention? I knew I wasn’t so deft at people, really, so I gathered and catalogued and waited for the day I could let things go into the proper hands, buying myself more release, more steam let out of the pressure valve; I’d make people like me in spite of myself. I hid my weirdness by giving shit away. Everybody likes a present, right? I counted on that. I hoarded—but not like those awful shows on TV. My stash was for *giving.* For *release.* To *let go.*

And I adopted the cats. I guess in that way it was like those shows, but without the cat skeletons. Lots and lots of cats, all alive. Like, an obscene amount. My apartment had a smell that permeated everything I owned. It hit me in the face on warm afternoons. I told myself I needed living things for company. But always in the back of my brain was the nag, the itch, the thought that should push come to shove, they could be my grand project, my *magnum opus.* It felt like Jenga, like balancing one thing on top of another. It made me nervous, but it also felt like money in the bank. I knew it was going to come down, and I was afraid of more death.

But I invested in those cats, I put cats in the bank of *Things I Can Give Away If Things Get Too Bad.* They brought me small joy, didn’t judge, didn’t label me awkward or walk away when I tossed out my line out for a compliment (like people, who never did what I wanted them to do). Each day my cats would wake up glad to see me, unaware that even in talking to them I begged for attention the same way that I did from people.
“You love me most of all, right? You do? I’m the best mommy ever!” I’d say.
“Come on, Mr. Peebles. You know you love me the most, right?” And to his credit, Peebles would purr and rub his cat face against mine and play right into my fantasy. Affirmation, that’s what he was. Peebs kept me from feeling like I needed people. I didn’t really like those cats as much as they seemed to like me, but I liked that.

And for the moment, that was enough.

I was patient. I learned to mete out my fixes (my releases, my go time) in regular intervals to keep myself calm. When work at the pet shop (for what better place to work if one is collecting cats?) got stressful, I spent time walking down to the creek, throwing rocks into the water, or weekends in my own apartment making messes and hacking websites, unscrambling bank accounts and personal access codes, sprinkling bits and bots from various city and state websites in places they didn’t belong. The hacking was easy—college had been a breeze of computer programming (the refuge major of the early-labeled weird kid) and I’d learned enough tricks to keep my addiction mostly virtual. Sometimes the release was as easy as pushing a button, routing my signal through a few different proxies, and boom: informational freedom. I didn’t even kill anything (not even accidentally like those damn rabbits). On the internet there were always people waiting to scoop up the megabytes I trailed behind like twenties on the freeway. The computer kept my life quiet enough from outside eyes that I settled into what I thought must be normal.

I had yet to find a respectable college person job, hence the whole Super Petz thing.
Anyway, Will did (see me around) because he was back the next week like a man on a mission. He burst through the door right after I packed a cricket tub, marched into the store and came right up to me at the cash register. Awkward. I was so anxious to see him come at me with such boldness that I reached a hand under the counter and tipped a tub of paperclips over on the shelf. The delicate clang of thin steel wires together sounded softly as they slid over each other and out of the container. I exhaled.

“Alexandra—“ he started, then self-corrected. “I’m sorry—Alexondria?”

I couldn’t speak, but let myself look him square in the eye.

“Alexondria, you’re coming out with me after work Friday.”

I could tell he was into me, but there was something car-salesman-y about him too. Something not trusty. “Um, no, Friday I’m busy.”

“No you’re not. You’re coming out with me.” There was the grin again. “You know you are.”

Why did that work on me? Ugh. The intensity of his attention pushed me off guard. I had the odd sensation I might need to release something big, this time. I fought it back. “Look, you don’t want—I mean, I can’t—I—“ I couldn’t get out a damn sentence. “I’m not good for you—uh—I’m sorry, I don’t feel good right now.” My go-to excuse.

“Come on. We’re going. Pick you up Friday after work, and I’m taking you out.”

And there it was. I wasn’t sure what to make of it in the moment, or what to even think about days later as I tried to decide what to wear (well, stuff in my duffel bag to stuff in my locker at the Super Petz until I finished my shift at 7:00) or how I was going
to be interesting for a whole night. So I agreed, but then I worried over it for days until the itch began to nag at me. Thursday night I stopped at the hardware store for “supplies,” then dumped a whole tub of ladybugs all over my neighbor’s roses and watched them scatter into the breeze. I knew I couldn’t get through life at the rate of a tub a day, but seeing their red bodies disperse into the evening calmed the uncertainty—a little.

And nothing died, so it was good.

I was sweaty. I caught myself eyeing the breadbasket on our dinner table and wishing I could tip it over—what a beautiful fan of sliced French it would make as it hit the plum carpet. I knew my shoulders would relax as it tumbled out of its neat container, crust shattering into crumbs on the floor. No, I told myself. Don’t be weird.

There had not been many dates since my freshman year of college. Most of my recent interactions with men happened over the internet and as a result of hack jobs and were just about as far from salacious as one could get (Do you know the shortcut into the city server? MMKay, thanks.). Generally they started to turn creepy or sexual too fast (and internet sexual is not like real people sexual) and I got the hell out. But back when I did date (could I call it that?) things ended badly. Always. I’d end up in a bawling ugly-cry; they’d run screaming in the opposite direction. The curse of the college student who searches out dates in class: guaranteed awkward glances in Western Civ (or the like) after it didn’t work out.

At Super Petz I’d been afraid to look Will in the eye, but in my nervousness now at dinner I stared too long across the table, imagined myself too far into the conversation.
He was acting every part the gentleman, but in that way that people seem like they might be putting one over on you. At least that’s what I always thought in my not-trusting. My mind kept buzzing. He must sense my nervousness. Why would he be with me unless some tragedy had befallen him and he had no other choice? I knew I was untested for a woman my age. I should know more about men. I should know how to fill the silence.

How was I going to make him like me?

(And then, quickly, too far:) make him stay long enough to fall in love with me? I searched my brain for the tie that would bind him to me for years into the future. Adrenaline made my pinkies tingle.

His eyes darted quickly from my face to my breasts. Was there a way to address such a thing, anyway? Who was I, right now?

He passed the bread. I buttered mine, unwrapping the pent up cream, savoring the act of releasing it. The nerves took hold, my half-constructed fantasy of our future relationship won out over better judgment. I looked to him, assuming we were both a few steps ahead. I blurted out, “So, how many women have you been with?”

“Um…” He nearly choked on his bread, then gave a little cough. “What?” He pressed his napkin to his lips. “The fuck--?” he said to nobody in particular, kind of softly.

“Oh, never mind. Never mind.” I was ashamed. But really, I wanted to know. That was always my problem, asking things too early, not knowing how to read someone. I hated myself for it. I feel like other people know how to ask really personal questions. I
usually either don’t ask or I do this thing where it comes out and we can’t ever talk again, because, this.

Will paused briefly before scooping up the conversation. “How has work been lately?” he asked, immediately redirecting things away from my faux pas. Smooth.

I wanted to let him go before I made it worse. I hesitated.

He filled my pause with talk of himself. His dad’s construction business. His dropping out of college because it was like, so a waste of his time. Again his eyes went to my boobs. Fear and pride swirled inside of me. Scary pride. Again, I allowed it. The boob thing wasn’t so bad.

He continued on, telling me about his hopes for his future in construction management. I interrupted, asking him if he thought I was as attractive as the waitress.

Will smiled but didn’t respond like I’d hoped. In fact, he didn’t respond at all. I knew right away that my attempt at manipulating him into a compliment didn’t work. And now I hated myself. Again (God, when did I not?). I searched the room for something to open, to tip, to unlock, to release. Something that would get this cold, anxious irritation out of my arms and my chest so I could breathe. I tapped my fingers. People pushed forks through their lasagna and laughed with confident, open mouths. I pulled at a lock at the back of my hair, then untangled a curl. I pursed my lips together, then grabbed a handful of sweetener packets from their boxy confines and gently scattered them across the side of the table. I could hear the grains inside settle. Ahh.

Dinner was fine, the conversation (after my initial gaffe) mundane, and the food was better than I expected. Will was more than generous—smooth, in fact—in the way he
pretended like the first bit of our talk didn’t happen, but still I put on a lightweight pout for the rest of the evening. I knew that my blunder just revealed what I already suspected in my own head: that it was Will who was normal, Will who was in charge because I managed to mess everything up. When he drove me back to the Super Petz parking lot at the end of the night (Why had I not thought this through better? A parking lot of a pet store for our grand finale? Seriously, Alexandria.) he lingered a long while with his hand on the key in the ignition. I figured he couldn’t wait to be rid of me, but here he was taking his sweet time, prompting me to keep talking. Well I wasn’t having it. Nope. I needed this to be over. I put my hand on the door to let myself out.

“Wait, Alex—“ he blurted, running around the back of his red Civic to my side. Had he called me Alex? The nerve. I told him at dinner how I hated that. He met me just as I stood up, but held his hand to the door. I had robbed him of his chivalric gesture, but he tried anyway. “Alexandria, I’d like to see you again. This was nice.” No it wasn’t. I knew he was trying to make me feel better. “Listen. Actually, could we go back to your apartment…?”

“Yeah, it was nice for me, too. Oh no, I can’t… I mean, another time. Sure. But I’ll have to see what my work schedule is like.” I looked into his eyes—hard to see his brown irises by the light of the parking lot, but there were the whites—and I felt an overwhelming urge to kiss him. No. To have him kiss me. I was fifteen again, standing under the plum tree in my neighbor’s yard, staring and waiting for a kiss that wasn’t going to come. I already felt depressed about what wasn’t about to happen, but I felt like

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his seeing my apartment was bad juju. And certainly there wasn’t going to be another date after tonight.

My eye settled on a pile of gravel just beyond my feet. I wanted to kick it over. Feel the rocks tumble away from my feet.

No sir. For God’s sake, we were in a pet shop parking lot. And I wasn’t fifteen. I could have planned better for this, or I could have, you know, not been myself. Stupid. This had to end.

Will stood for a second with his hand on the open door, examined my face, and gave my arm a pat. “Well, okay. I’ll see you soon, I’m sure.” His head nodded toward the shop.

I wanted to go inside and let all the crickets out.

Will did see me at work and then he did see me again for dinner (why I don’t know, but I found I couldn’t resist persistence). And then he did end up taking me back to my place—yes, just like he suggested--and coming up with me. Yes, up with all the cats and the litter boxes (I know what you’re thinking and don’t think I didn’t feel bad about it) and the smell and he didn’t say one thing when I opened the door and rushed around, opening windows to try to air the place out. No, he played dumb and took it all in like it was no big deal, like he actually liked me. I knew better, though, so I tried to keep myself moving around the apartment, you know, to fill conversation and keep things light. It went against my better nature to scoop things up and clean up, but I was sure if I
didn’t, he was going to think something was up with me. Well, something else was up with me besides being completely unable to sit still or to talk.

He sat down on my sofa. “Alex.”

He said it more as a command than a question. Like, Alex, stop. Alex, pay attention. Alex, come here. And then he said that too.

He patted the couch next to him. “Come relax, Alexandria.” I looked down at the stack of papers and dirty dishes in my hands. I set them down. Then I sat down next to him.

“Come talk to me,” he said. But “talk” didn’t mean that.

The sex was fine at first. I guess, I mean. I didn’t have much to compare it to. There were a series of awkward maneuvers and grunted apologies more functional than hot, but soon it was clear things were about to wrap up. He was behind me with his hand pressing down into the small of my back, along the flat diamond of muscles just above my tailbone. I braced my hands on the couch leaned my head back so that my hair tickled my spine. I felt pretty. Desired. Almost okay.

But then he took his hands and held them to my waist—around—like he was measuring it. Encircling my middle with the length of his fingers. Holding me in.

“Don’t—“ I pulled forward, away, looking back at him. “What are you doing to me?”

“I just like it. You’re skinny.”

“Don’t. Don’t measure me. Don’t hold me like that.”
“It’s nice, though. You’re…” he put his hands around me again, pulled me back
to him firmly and kissed the back of my neck. “It’s nice.”

“Mmmnn-hhmm,” I murmured, looking forward again. No. But his grip only
loosened for a second, tightened more. I felt the grip of anxiety in my chest, the tingle
running along the nerves of my arms. “Will. Will…”

He kept at it. In me. Grabbing. Pulling. Holding me in.

All I could see in front of me were things done up. Library books in stacks. A box
of bobby pins. Pens in a cup on the desk. Newspapers, bound. Everything contained. All I
could feel were his hands holding me. Keeping me. Not letting me go. I wanted to run.

It was silent as I waited for him to come. I stared at all the things before me that I
wanted to undo. I let him finish, gripping at my sides, somewhere else in his mind. I was
painfully present in my body and unable to escape his hold.

He left and to my credit, I sat inside the house for three hours. Three hours of
trying to make a plan, trying to squelch the braggart of a voice that nagged and scraped
away at my confidence. I kicked the half-empty cat food bag across the kitchen. I
dumped the pen cup on my desk; I scattered a deck of cards like confetti. None of it
helped. None of it made a lick of difference. None of it quieted the scream building inside
me. Three new kittens huddled together into a corner, blending into the herd of cats,
imperceptible. I did not feel their presence, only my need to let something out.

But after three hours of impossible hand-wringing, my sights turned to my
companions, the ever-curling, ever-moving bodies that filled my apartment but not my
need for confidence. “You guys think I’m okay, right?” I blubbered through tears, waiting moments only for responses that didn’t (couldn’t, really) come. Even my pack seemed disinterested today in a way that suggested one source of fault, my own. I was sure it didn’t much matter how one pronounced one’s name or whether or not I was the smartest girl in at Super Petz, but dammit I was pissed about not being able to even be happy about my night with Will.

I opened the sliding glass door to my patio, offered the cats an opportunity at freedom they seemed to covet for so long (why did they always stare out that window, anyway?). But they didn’t take the bait. The small orange tabby nosed the edge of the carpet, but scurried away, afraid of the reality of the too-big world. Mr. Peebles even walked outside and sniffed the edge of the patio, paced a few times, then returned to the safety (and familiarity) of his favorite couch cushion. As if by his lead, others—calico, orange, Prussian blue—would venture out in twos or threes, but ran back inside at the slightest noise.

And I watched. And I waited. “Go,” I said. “Go outside! I’m not keeping you here anymore, you can leave,” I sobbed, and I nudged them with the side of my foot toward the open door. When that didn’t work, I became frantic, dripping tears and nudging cats and trying to grab furry bodies under my arms.

But cats don’t go where cats don’t want to go, and it took me some time to work them out of the house. I would grab them in armfuls and set them on the patio, then shut the door (keeping them put with my foot until I could grab another batch and do the same). They howled. Eventually they were all outside. And I set to work at tossing them
over the edge, hoping that they’d hit the grass and realize that freedom awaited (and why shouldn’t they want to be away from me? I did. They meowed and howled and some even pawed at the door, but I said “no” with great conviction. And there were cats everywhere. And it wasn’t like I imagined—it never is, right?—but it felt a bit like the ladybugs. Slower crawling, angry, furry, fat ladybugs that started penned up with me but now made their way across balconies (looking for another way back in? I didn’t know.) and climbing over and over each other. The kittens—I thought myself wise to choose the ones that were not so small, and thus would have a chance to really make it out there in the world—stayed close to the other cats in the back corner near the building. But I knew they’d go, too. Eventually. It was meant to be.

I sat on my balcony in an old metal folding chair. The fear that overcame me all day became still as I closed my eyes to the world, felt the release of cats around me. I felt their energy releasing from my small, sad apartment.

Felt myself free of the odd restraint of companionship.

###
B+

B+. The entire second act of Swan Lake is mostly about B+. Sure, there’s that whole thing where you break out of it for a little bit and the swans go nuts and run around a bit, flap, flap, flap, but let’s be real. The whole thing breaks down to B+, that twisted bitch of a pose where you stand on one leg for what feels like an hour before you inhale and get to delicately switch to the other side. That’s where you feel your real pain. I’m not even sure where that term “B+” comes from, really. I’ve been afraid to ask since I got here. I think it’s a Balanchine thing, but I wasn’t raised on Balanchine, and if there’s one thing I was raised on, it was not asking questions in ballet class (even when they got answered, it didn’t really go well) so I know better than to raise my hand and ask about the history of something like the terminology of a position where basically you stand on one leg and pretzel yourself so your opposite leg is behind you and your toe box of the opposite shoe is crossed over so far that even if you’re standing stage left, someone in house left could see that you, like, have a leg from their vantage point. Which means that your leg is nearly twisted from the back to the front and don’t you even think for a minute about leaning any weight on it. Although, everybody does. (Because who could stand there with their arms crossed “gently” [ha] over themselves like wings for almost 40 minutes not looking like it takes any air or like you have to pee or like your sweat is dripping down your face and into your eyelashes that itch and are about to pop off, and not put some weight on that back leg?) Secretly.
But it wasn’t B+ growing up, it was *croisee derriere*, which, for a few reasons, is a whole other thing. The first being that *croisee* doesn’t have a hard R in French, it’s almost a W, like cWoisee, but more in the back of your throat, like a cough. Like if that W and a cough had a baby. *Croisee*. I mean, *Croisee Derriere* was a whole THING with capital letters in the Cecchetti method (that *is* what I was raised on – the Cecchetti method, from Cecchetti, who was a guy, who was Italian, and he had a method of teaching ballet). Ballet breaks down into three schools of thought, three ways of teaching kids, and three philosophies: Italian, French, Russian, and we all get to think that our way is the best way because our way is the only true and authentic way, and then talk smack about each other (it’s kind of like barbecue is to the South, really), but not nearly as much smack as we talk about the people who don’t follow any kind of method because who are those people kidding, the *Dolly Dinkles* people, my ballet teacher used to call them. Those people just want to play at ballet, to take your money and babysit you for an hour and then fool you for forever and suddenly you’re in college and you’ve been *en pointe* for oh, I don’t know, ten years, and you find out you don’t have a single muscle.

And Balanchine, well, I don’t know shit about him, honestly. Which is, like sacrilege for a ballet dancer to admit. At least one who dances in this company, we’re a *Balanchine company*, they told me when I got here to apprentice, like I knew what “a Balanchine company” meant any more than B+. If I could figure out which of the three schools of thought Balanchine comes from, it might make more sense. I know he was, like, a big deal, and he did all those ballets with no story and the black leotards, and I get the whole NYC Ballet thing, but in my small-town ballet school, in Lodi it was so easy to
not know about things like Balanchine, even when I was seeing his ballets. Because when you’re eight, who cares what’s an authorized work.

But I guess we are. Authorized.

What I’m saying is, you couldn’t stand here in B+ for forty minutes if you were raised on Dolly Dinkles. But I can. So I just fake like I know Balanchine, B+, Les Sylphides, etc. I’m in, faking until I’m making.

Can I just ask you for a second, though, how does everybody seem to know all of this stuff except me?

Anyway, as long as you train in one of the real methods, you can pick up the others. They’re all in French (even the Italian and Russian methods—don’t ask), so here’s me doing B+. The names will be different for some of the steps, but the movements are the same. So nobody sat me down and explained that today we were going to be calling this B+ instead of croisee derriere, they just scream Olivia, cross your leg! More!, and I do as I’m told, I stand here on one leg for 40 minutes like it’s the last episode of Survivor and I’m in the final four. (And anyway, croisee derriere actually has the back leg extended, but my old ballet teacher always used the term kind of interchangeably, which always led to some confusion, but since croisee means crossed and derriere means in the back, she was right so I didn’t argue. One of the best things you can learn as a dancer is Don’t argue. And do what you’re told. I guess that’s two, but they kind of go together. Anyway, ballet beat the desire to argue out of me. Not literally hit, except that one time. Ballet taught me to cry alone in the dressing room or the bathroom.) I don’t need to know where B+ came from, I only need to keep my mouth
shut in class and keep my eyes open when the company ballet mistress (who is not exactly drunk at tech today, did not bring a half-empty bottle of wine onto the stage for warm-up class this afternoon, did not slap me on the ass when she walked by me at the barre so I would tuck said ass under) flaps her arms in a series of wild gestures that indicate what we are to do with our feet/body/arms/head/trunks.

*And one and two and three and out and one and two and three and side and back and two and front and side and up en tournant piqué da-dum.*

Class is a series of wildly-flapped commands, half-demonstrated hand movements, barked corrections. Soon we are flying across the stage. Then it’s the end of class, across the floor. Freedom to fly and leap and turn. Across the floor is my favorite. Across the floor is why we do any of it, really. Just like being on stage is why we do B+. Pain for glory—that’s ballet in a nutshell.

We take a short break in the theater and we’re back to tech rehearsal. By the fifth? Sixth (I’ve lost count)? time we have run the second act this morning and I am sure I have no less than five open blisters on the tops of my toes and I can feel the blood and clear ooze making the toe pad stick where my skin used to be. This is the norm. I am sure that once this rehearsal is over I will find that skin and satin and canvas have seared together to form a swollen, round, pig-thick lump of flesh unrecognizable as my foot. I will do just as I did yesterday. I will remove what tape and lambs’ wool fibers I can from this monster. I will watch as each toe swells, red and pulsating, into the straps of my flip flops while I walk to my car. I will go home, shower, and I will come back tomorrow and do this all over again. Maybe I will put some Superglue over the blisters, which I know is
bad, like, in a health sense. But in a layers-of-things-protecting-my-innards sense, it seems to be a good idea that I keep my insides in.

Anyway, it can’t be half as risky as smoking like a chimney (which everyone here does) or not eating (which everyone else here does) or doing even dumber shit like eating cotton balls soaked in water to feel full (not as many, but some) or sleeping around, religiously (which, I don’t have the numbers on, nor do I want to, but I am sure this rivals nearly the number of people either smoking or not eating, and seems in no way to correspond to anyone’s identified sexual orientations or their identified romantic attachments, and I am sure constitutes some kind of health and/or career risk, when you mix in the fact that some of these sleeping around deals involve some vertical hierarchy and/or visiting-artist crossovers within the company [in addition to the obvious horizontal maneuvers that accompany said interactions.]) The superglue holding my guts inside my toes is the least risky thing happening concerning anyone in this building.

Second act. Line up again. Second act. Start over. No, on the lines. Girls, why can’t you get the lines right. On the Marley. You have to get the lines. Swan Lake is about lines. B+, cross it over. Olivia, more. More, Olivia. Mary, more. That’s it. Here we go.

The music plays and we dance the second act. About three-point-three seconds in, I raise my right hand above my head, elbow out, in classic “swan” pose. I look away from my arm. As I push out of this pose and into a deep lunging arabesque, the deep one before a cross and a hop hop hop, I notice that the ribbons of my right pointe shoe are untied.
Oh shit.

Because on a sober day, on a day when she hadn’t drunk half the bottle of wine, hadn’t slapped me on the ass at the barre to remind me to tuck it under, on a good day, on a normal day, just a day when my toes were fused to the lambs’ wool inside the shoes and I felt the biting pain of not having any protective layer left to cover whatever things reside inside my feet and my muscles felt like they just could not take any more of the beating I put them through on a regular eight hours of being superhuman—on that day, even, I wouldn’t want to piss her off by having her see my ribbons untied. I never—never—want to be the one who draws attention to myself from the audience, not in Swan Lake, and not in the corps, and certainly not today when she’s “cleaning” the thing to make sure every arm and head and leg is in the same place. And here are my two dirty pink ribbons, flapping around my right foot like a flag that says HELLO, PLEASE LOOK RIGHT HERE AT ME! OLIVIA NEEDS YOU TO YELL AT HER.

I am the typo. She is the editor. The last thing I want is to get cut.

So I have a decision to make, because I am already in some shit with the ballet mistress, basically, no matter what I do. I mean, it really does not matter which way I go with this because I am going to pay for it and the second act is nearly forty minutes long, so I have, like, forever to contemplate the depths of my punishment. I have a carefully composed Tchaikovsky piece to contemplate my punishment. I have a scene on a lake to contemplate my punishment. I have the dancing of the little swans and the big swans and the pas de deux and the whole thing to contemplate the thing where she is going to come at me and I am going to be like, “I know, I know,” and I am going to look at the floor and
shift side to side and I am going to want to die. It is my fault and there’s no winning because if there’s another thing I learned in ballet, it’s that *there’s no talking back* and *for God’s sake there’s certainly no winning*. If you have the big dressing room that you share with all the other girls (as opposed to the small dressing room that you have all to yourself), you don’t win shit. Ever. I’m a cog. A pawn. I’m scenery, and today I malfunctioned.

In that moment: Do I want to reach down and rip off my ribbons, drawing attention to myself, which means I am going to be out of place for at least three seconds of choreography (punishment: long lecture), or do I want to be the swan who lets her ribbons trail behind her for the entire act, all forty minutes of it, through B+ and the whole bit, a sloppy scribble of a line trailing behind me like I am some kind of afterthought the artist doodled in the margins, not the carefully placed soldier on the stage I am meant to be (punishment: undetermined)? I have to decide, so of course I do what I am good at doing: I do not decide. Which, come to think of it, is like making a decision. For now.

I do not know which is worse; I am pretty sure either way, it is bad. Since I leave them alone, they trail along behind me. I don’t miss a beat; perhaps I’ll earn points (the smallest number of points) for trying to maintain the choreography and keep in step with the others. Perhaps somehow this will lessen my sentence—it’s a silent act in hopes of pleading mercy.

She must be able to see my heart beating from the audience. It’s louder in my ears than the music.
I slide again into arabesque and catch the eye of another apprentice, Sophie. Sophie is tall—too tall to be a dancer, really, which is why she hasn’t been called up to the ranks of company member even though her skill surpasses my own and she has the body type for it. She can’t stop herself from growing. Her unfortunate height means she’s too tall for a man to partner, and most companies won’t even look at her. Her skin is so pale and fragile that when I stand behind her in class I can see the blood vessels in her neck flush. She’s clear, almost. She opens her eyes, wide, as we pass on the stage. Her temples are red. Her expression doesn’t change, but the shift in eye opening is large enough for me to know that she knows. You are in so much fucking trouble. Do something. Because really she knows the third truth about being in a ballet company. Trouble that lands on me is likely to land on her, too. (I shudder to think about the time someone didn’t clean the microwave at the studio and wouldn’t own up to it and how we all paid for it for almost an entire month with even more grueling lectures and classes that seemed specifically torturous.) In the split second of our passing, I give her wide eyes back. I can’t. I can’t! There’s nothing I can do. And she knows that, too, because she knows that stepping out of line for even a minute to yank the ribbons off is death, too.

She’s gone in a split second, anyway. Flap, flap, flap.

And I’m back to B+, stage left. Back to being a swan at the edge of the lake. Back to having my leg tucked behind me, which gives me a break from fear for a minute. I can tuck that leg back there and hope that the oomph I give my right leg is enough to send the ribbons trailing off toward the curtain. Hope that she’s watching the soloists, center-stage, instead of plotting my fate and writing notes to herself (exclamation point,
exclamation point!) about how I’m out of the show and my B cast replacement will do the whole run—or worse still, how I’m done with the company forever. I struggle to breathe. The hook-and-eye closures of the white bodice are too tight, today, or maybe I’m just swollen.

In front of me is Keira, whose bodice doesn’t ever fit right over her giant boobs. In this company there seems to be a correlation between big boobs and big roles, though. So she straps them down and stuffs them into the sweat-stained hand-boned bodices we all share (the ones with at least five rows of eye closures each to fit different girls on them, the ones that aren’t washed until the end of the run of a show). One of the most painful things a dancer can have are big boobs. Who needs those things getting in the way when your partner is spinning you around or making you feel the forces of gravity when you’re doing brisées across the floor? I do notice the girls wear their thinner leotards when certain choreographers are in the room—the bohemian thing with the nipples doesn’t seem to bother any of the men. It isn’t lost on them, either.

I met Keira the first day I was in the company—well, the first day I was there, officially. It was an audition. She was nice to me, and I didn’t know then that nobody likes to talk to her because she’s a slut and she’ll basically sleep with any choreographer that comes through. But really, she’s still nice. I mean, that doesn’t have anything to do with me, although I don’t really like that she gets parts that way—and in some respects, I think it’s been good for her career. I mean, besides the obvious, the good parts. Having those good parts has meant she had to do harder stuff, which meant she got better, which meant she was really more deserving of better parts. So maybe the lesson here—which is
funny, because I’m starting at her back in a corps part, but she’s just filling in while we’re doing a different cast—is that sleeping around is good for one’s ballet technique.

Still, that doesn’t help me with my untied ribbons. At least the thick elastic is keeping the shoe on my foot, but I’ve never hated myself more for not being able to tie a good knot. You’d think I’d be able to do this right by now. It has certainly been enough years of the shoe-tying.

The Act ends and I run off stage, but nobody will talk to me. Like, no one. I understand this. They all know that a potentially loud, awful lecture is coming our way courtesy of me and I am certain they don’t want to be seen talking to the one who couldn’t get her act together. I run into the bathroom, rip off my ribbons and get a big drink of water from the fountain. Then there’s nothing to do but sit backstage and wait.

The rest of the ballet finishes (it’s long, like, the longest) and the most anyone can manage is a look of pity. Finally Sophie comes over and stretches next to me.

“That sucks, Olivia.”

“I know.”

And in that exchange is so much understanding. We don’t have to even go there because we’re both already there, so wrapped up in the understanding and fear of what is about to rain down on me and possibly everyone else.

My feet are killing me and my right hip is starting to ache. I roll from a straddle into a right split, then lay my torso on the ground, wrapping my arms up over my head. I just want to go home. I am the deadest of the swans.
House lights come on and we’re summoned to the stage following the show for notes. *Quelle surprise*, it’s like I have leprosy. I sit alone on the left side of the stage while the rest of the company gathers stage right. Everyone is glossy with sweat and bright with makeup. We look like clowns against our white costumes in the regular light. Mimey clowns. I expect my punishment to come first but it does not. There are notes about lines (normal), notes about leg height (normal), notes about the big swans and the little swans and the long solos and an issue with the scrim which meant you couldn’t see Odette flapping around behind Odile going “no way, she’s not me.”

Technical stuff:

Everyone is like yes, yes, no problem, okay. All the while I’m waiting for the guillotine to drop. I’m still sitting there with my shoes on, my one ribbon wrapped around my ankle, and my other bare ankle like a scarlet Nothing. We all know. We’re just waiting. Nothing ever happens like this. You just don’t screw up like that.

There are notes about rehearsal tomorrow, a change in who will be teaching the warm-up class. Finally, a glance to me.

“Olivia?”

I look up. Oh, God.

One raised eyebrow. “You know.”

I don’t ask questions.

###
COCOONED

Cody’s been wearing these jeans for three weeks straight without a wash and they’re starting to get kind of grimy and too loose. He can’t stand Junior English.

His eyes follow Miss Dunbar as she writes *imply* and *infer* on the board. He isn’t really thinking about anything she’s saying, but he watches as she draws the round letters with a dry erase marker. Her face isn’t awful-looking for a woman in her forties, but she’s damn awkward. Today her black pants stop just short of gaudy Christmas socks that just don’t fucking go in September. Her striped, angular ankles bulge out of square, black shoes. She has a weird, winking facial tick that sneaks into her lectures and the kids can imitate pretty well. Cody wishes she knew the kids made fun of her all the time – maybe she’d change a little -- even though that’s not the kind of thing you can tell a person. Maybe she should stop coming to class dressed like such a damn mess, at least.

How much longer does he have until the bell rings?

His eyes search the room as Miss Dunbar begins to flip pages and hold the book in front of her. Her right eye twitches and she blinks hard. Cody knows he isn’t going to pass her English class this semester. He doesn’t much care about that, though. At least when he shows up for school, nobody will get too nosy about home. Against the back wall, Alexis Paige and Bryce Gaines shove a piece of folded binder paper toward the narrow space between their two desks. Bimbo Barbie and her boy Ken, two living stereotypes. They laugh openly at other kids in class, whisper audibly and use names. Alexis’ eyes widen as she raises her eyebrows at Bryce. She leans her head, nudges the air toward a band geek picking his neck scabs at the next table. Bryce stifles another
laugh. They’re so distracted by their judgment of others that Bryce doesn’t hear Miss Dunbar ask him a question.

“… don’t you think, Bryce?” she asks again. Miss Dunbar’s stare leads Cody and the rest of the class’ eyes to Bryce, catching him mid-stroke as he brushes a piece of Alexis’ hair out of her face. Alexis freezes in a silent laugh with her lips hanging open around straight, white teeth. She raises her eyebrows at Bryce suggestively as if to say _ha; she caught you_. Cody doesn’t get girls like her. He also doesn’t get how guys like Bryce seem to.

“Mr. Gaines? I’m waiting.” Dunbar’s eye starts twitching harder.

Bryce buys himself some time. “Wait. What was the question again?”

“I asked what the scene with Sunny is all about. What is Holden looking for from her?” Cody looks down at his desk. Holden, he knows from class. He has no earthly idea who this Sunny person is. He never even checked out the book from the library. Please don’t call on me, he thinks. Please don’t even look here. He holds his breath.

Bryce sighs audibly, sucking up Dunbar’s time and attention. “I dunno,” he chortles, disgusted that she’d interrupt his time with Alexis. “Like, maybe Holden isn’t into chicks.” He looks around to make sure his audience is with him. “You know what I mean? Huh?”

They do.

“Perhaps if you were paying attention, Mr. Gaines, you might know what we were actually discussing.” She waves a thumb toward the other side of the room. Cody feels sorry for her, but he hasn’t been around adult women enough to figure them out, either.
“Go. There, in the empty seat where Alexis won’t distract you.” Bryce starts to pull his stuff together slowly. Even when he is in trouble, he takes charge. His neat hair reflects the fluorescent lights of the classroom as he drags his backpack across the floor to his new seat.

Alexis laughs like Bryce invented the asshole student routine. Her connection to him serves her well, helping her to maintain a glittery, lip-gloss life that other girls covet. Life is about selecting the right brand of purse, the right hairstyle, and apparently, the right boyfriend.

“All right. Would you like to stay after class, too?” Miss Dunbar asks.

Alexis giggles nervously. Under her breath, she mutters, “what... ever.” She rolls her eyes toward Dunbar. “I... uh...”

The bell rings.

Miss Dunbar sighs, and Cody sees a look of pained resignation on her face.

“Forget it.” Cody wonders if she means Alexis or the lesson. “We’ll talk about the prostitute thing tomorrow, I guess. Please don’t forget your books. You guys can go.”

The class stirs and shuffles toward the door. “Jennifer? Hang on a sec. I’ll get you that absent work for next week.” Dunbar moves toward her desk, turning her back to the door. There is the usual murmur of conversation in the shuffle out.

Cody hangs back a second so he won’t have to fight his way out through the throng. Bryce, of course, pushes his way toward the opening, shoving his inferiors out of the way. But as Cody squeezes past a girl who’s stooping to pick up a dropped paper, something cold hits his arm. It’s wet and thick, and he realizes it’s all over the front of his
pants, too. Bryce is standing just inside the doorway, grinning and holding a bottle of hand sanitizer – a makeshift water gun. Without thinking, Cody throws his weight into Bryce’s face, a swift yet sloppy movement that somehow ends with his fist making contact with the side of his jaw. Bryce falls into the desks, and there’s a thud: the thunk of Bryce’s back against the desk top, then a crash of metal desk legs against each other as he falls ass-first onto the floor.

“Ow, fag! The fuck?” he yells.

Miss Dunbar spins fast and sees Bryce on the carpet, rubbing the side of his face. Cody paces at the front of the room, the residual anger still powering his restless limbs. His face is red and his bare, thin arms are flushed. “Fuck. You,” he growls at Bryce.


“Bryce?” she gestures to the corner. “Go stand over there.” She lowers her tone as she looks at Cody. “Cody, wait by my desk. Everybody else, out.” Cody wonders if she’s taking his side. Why does she want him by her desk? He watches Bryce’s temperament change entirely. As he stands to move to the corner, he switches on a smile, tries to work his charms on Miss Dunbar. He leans into her boldly as he walks past and flashes a grin.

“Aw, come on, Miss D...”

Miss Dunbar holds a finger in front of his face. “Wrong tone, wrong person.” Bryce grits his teeth and tenses. Dunbar turns again to Cody, and offers a smile. He hangs his head, feeling awkward as he tries to wipe the clear gel from his dingy jeans. She reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder. It feels awkward, but it’s warm. Cody isn’t sure what to make of a teacher touching him. People don’t really touch him.
Bryce puffs up his chest and continues to pick at Cody from across the room. “I can’t believe you fucking put hands on me, bitch. It was just a joke. Maybe if you weren’t such a fag, nobody’d pick on you, Cody.”

Dunbar takes a defensive stance, moves just in front of Cody so she’s in Bryce’s line of sight. “Bryce, I swear to god. Shut it. Now.” She dials security but keeps a controlling finger pointed at him, holding him in place.

Behind her desk, Cody hunches over his wet pants like a wounded animal. It’s not like he can really do anything but wait, and he feels awkward standing still. The school security officer arrives and takes Bryce out the door. “Come on, Bryce. What was it this time?” Bryce flashes the same confident smile, seeming to know that nothing is going to happen to him. The officer groans. “Miss Dunbar? I’ll come back for the other one in a minute. Better I don’t take them together. Can you keep an eye on him for me?”

“Yeah, yeah. No problem.”

The door slams shut. For a minute, Miss Dunbar sits on the edge of a desk in silence, staring at Cody. He reads her trepidation and her gaze as discomfort—or maybe that’s his own unease he’s projecting onto her face. He tugs his thin t-shirt down over his elbows and kicks at the chair leg with his foot. He isn’t comfortable with her paying this much attention to him. Her eye pulses as she looks him in the face. Fucking twitchy Dunbar. Fucking Bryce.

“Cody...” she pauses, starts over. “Cody, what...” But her voice drops off again. He just stares at the wall behind her head, alternately tensing and relaxing the muscles in his jaw. “Cody. Why?”
He doesn’t tell her about the hand sanitizer. Or that he’s hungry. He doesn’t tell her that he heard Bryce and Alexis making fun of her frizzy black hair and that she is a joke to all of them. He doesn’t want to waste his time. That all day he’s wanted to punch someone in the face. That the last straw was when that rich asshole slung a handful of hand sanitizer at his pants. He doesn’t tell her that hitting Bryce was the first time in a week or so that he felt fine. That it felt fucking great to feel his fist land. All he gets out is, “I don’t know. He deserved it.”

A few days later at the fall dance, Cody watches Bryce stand at the head of a circle of his friends, outside the gym. Cody leans against the brick wall, wondering why he thought this would be a good idea. What the hell is he going to do at a dance, anyway? He watches Bryce. Each boy in the circle seems beholden to Bryce’s popular power. He glows with a kind of dominance that comes from wearing designer jeans and being told that he is special by all the women in his life. Bryce has his crew hanging on his every word, clearly telling how he fucked with Cody in English. Cody doesn’t want to hear them laugh at him, but he can’t stop eavesdropping – he can’t not know what they say. The group’s silence means he’s able to catch the tail end.

“And then, we’re walking out of class and I’m like--Imma get this asshole. So what I do is--” He stopped to laugh before he got to the best part. “I fill up my fucking hand with hand sanitizer—you know? The clear stuff?—and, real talk—I’m like, this fuck is gonna look like he jizzed his pants. So I throw it at him when he tries to walk by.” Bryce breaks to laugh, and looks over to where Cody stands. He covers his mouth and
tilts his head to the side in celebration of his own act. On making eye contact with Cody, he switches his tone to something low and almost inaudible. He nods his head toward the wall. “And then that pussy Cody fuckin’ hits me. Good thing Miss Dunbar pulled me offa him, ‘cause I was ready to fuck that little bitch up.” He gives Cody a glare to show he means business. Cody looks at the ground.

The group erupts in peals of laughter. Alexis emerges from the bathroom nearby. Cody notices her first, and she doesn’t see him watching. She wipes at the sides of her mouth: a habitual check to make sure no traces of vomit remain. He’s known she’s been puking for about a month or so, but he doesn’t think other people know yet. He’s noticed the more she does it the happier she seems. She sees Bryce as her right ring finger is still at the corner of her mouth. Immediately she drops her hand away and runs to him.

“Brycie!” She squeals, jumping into a hug.

Bryce keeps his eyes to the nameless grunts in his circle, making sure they recognize that she is his. All around him knowing smiles break across young faces. Alexis is the pick of the litter.

Bryce tries to look coolly disinterested. “Oh, hey Lexie.”

Alexis hangs on his shoulder and squeals something Cody can’t hear. Her body curves into his like she knows she fits there, like all Bryce has to do is let her be and he gains some kind of power. Cody doesn’t really understand how people know these things. They’re all using each other.

Bryce’s minions share a few sidelong glances and disperse so he can be alone with her. He raises his eyebrows at one of his friends over Alexis’ shoulder, then bites his
lip. He mimes an ass-grab behind her back, out of her sight. The boys laugh and take off. Alexis releases him but stays close. Cody watches.

Alexis and Bryce disappear into the pulsing gym. The music thumps so loud it almost masks Cody’s nervous heartbeat. He wants to dance, or at least be where people are dancing, but how to even begin such a thing? The language Bryce and Alexis speak is foreign to him. He circles around past the door, almost goes inside once. He changes his mind just as he’s about to step inside. Nope. Too embarrassing. What if they see him and realize he doesn’t have a clue? He looks back like he forgot something and takes off for the fence beyond the hallway. At the same time, Miss Dunbar heads towards the corner bathroom where girls sneak swigs and tokes in quick, fearful intervals. Cody leans with his hand clutching the link of the fence above his head, watching his peers like fish in a tank. He is so out of place but he doesn’t want to go home. He stands, immobile, contemplating his own social awkwardness. What was he doing here?

Twitchy Dunbar seems to wonder the same thing. She recognizes him and makes her way toward the fence. At the sight of her, Cody starts to turn away and look through the links to avoid her gaze. He pauses, though, and changes his mind. She had been kind of nice to him after the classroom fight. Never mind him getting suspended for three days after that… that was out of her control. Never mind the angry blows from his dad after the school called… she didn’t know that would happen.

“Cody…?” She stops short, seeming to find herself at a loss for words again.

He kicks at rocks at the corner of the asphalt. “Hey, Miss Dunbar.” He wants to take off, but there is something about her that draws him in; she always seems kind. Still,
he keeps the side of his face turned away from her to hide the remainders of a bruise under his eye. A purple crescent is still there and he doesn’t want her getting curious. The quad had been dark enough to hide it, but here in the hallway? Not so much.

“You okay?” she asks, positioning herself to get a better look at the side of his face. Dammit. So much for that, he thought. He pulls at his shirtsleeves self-consciously, but she notices the rest, too. “Come over here Cody, around the gate. I just want to talk to you a little bit. It’s okay. Come on.” His body releases involuntarily with her kind words and he starts to walk toward her. He begins to feel like maybe someone does give a shit. Maybe this is okay. She’s a teacher. It’s her job to be nice. It’s her job to ask questions.

What Cody knows about women, though, is next to nothing. He feels weird being alone with her. It’s always just been him and Dad, and Dad doesn’t much want anything to do with him either. He imagines there was some woman – some “Mom” – in his past, but she’s a faceless body cobbled together out of commercials and magazine ads, and she wasn’t there for him any time when it might have counted for shit. Dad says they don’t need women, they can do for themselves just fine. When he’s piss-drunk he starts throwing out terms that don’t quite describe Dunbar anyway, as far as Cody thinks. Dad seems bitter, fixated on his ex-wife in a way Cody doesn’t try to understand. He knows enough not to ask questions and they leave it at that. Dad’s plenty happy to let it lie.

“Come inside, Cody. Over here.” Miss Dunbar gestures into the department office door. She needs to get some specifics from him, she says. She can’t let those bruises go unnoticed or unreported, she says. She has a legal obligation to file a report, she says. She doesn’t want him to hate her for what she has to do, she says. It’s her job to care about
him. He can see that the office is isolated, that she’s asking him to step inside and be
alone with her. But he trusts her judgment in place of his own.

“Um…” Cody looks to the bright lights inside the door and rubs his arms. It
looks warm, at least, and he still doesn’t have a coat. “Okay, I guess.” He steps in front of
Miss Dunbar and heads inside. She places a reassuring hand on his back and follows him in.

He tells her all of it—that after Bryce provoked him he couldn’t take it anymore
and he snapped. That he hit that fucker and it felt fucking good. Miss Dunbar doesn’t
seem to disagree with him about Bryce being a little shit. And he tells her that the school
called home when Dad was in a fit and he hit him harder and longer than he could ever
imagine. Dunbar says something about a cycle of violence. He doesn’t know what that
means, really, but it sounds good. It feels good to talk. Once he starts, he can’t stop. The
words charge up to his mouth faster than he can get them out. He taps into something
wonderful – yes, he is telling her his most secret shame, yes he shakes as he speaks, but
she is listening. He is keeping her interested. She doesn’t look away. In fact, she leans
into him from time to time to stroke his hand sympathetically. He revels in the attention.
The warmth. He talks and talks until he can’t think of anything else to say. They sit there
for a minute in silence, then they walk toward the door.

Outside, Miss Dunbar puts that hand on Cody’s shoulder again. She’s proud of
him, she says. “It takes courage to tell something like that.” The truth about Cody’s living
situation, about being knocked around, is hard to hear, she says. Probably even harder to
say. She can’t imagine how he makes it to school all the time. She can’t believe his dad
knocks the tar out of him like that. She feels so sad looking at his arms. She is glad she convinced him to let her do something. He thinks it makes things easier between them, this shared secret. It makes him feel like he’s inside something, like this must be how people feel who are a part of a clique or who have their shit figured out. Suddenly Miss Dunbar looks less awkward to him.

She slides her hand down his arm to his hand, which she lifts in front of his face. “Hey.” His eyes meet hers. He’s not sure how to read this attention. Maternal? Is this how it is for moms and their sons? “I’m always here if you need anything. You understand? I mean it. We’re going to get you some help, okay?”

Cody can’t say anything back but he lets his body fall into hers and he hugs her. Surprised, she opens her eyes wide and glances behind herself quickly. She wraps a sympathetic arm over his shoulder and rubs his back.

“It’s going to be okay, Cody.” They stand there for a minute, both wanting to believe that she is right. Then she walks him back over to the gate, opens it, and watches him walk away.

By Monday it’s all over school, though neither Cody nor Miss Dunbar has a clue at first. For Cody, this manifests itself in an unusual visibility. All day, as he walks to his classes, he feels, for the first time, like people are seeing him. Girls hold the doors open at the ends of hallways, and guys turn their heads to him, nodding their assent as he passes.
What Cody didn’t know that night at the dance—what he pieced together from bits and pieces of gossip he heard during the first few hours of the day—was that Bryce and Alexis had left the gym briefly to drink vodka in the empty quad. Alexis had burst out of the gym just in time to see Dunbar enter the office with Cody. She called Bryce over to look and the two of them watched from behind a pillar. And Miss Dunbar and Cody had given them every delicious image they wanted to see. Bryce was already pissed about the fight—he wanted back at Dunbar for ratting him out and he wanted the chance to fuck Cody over. He put on a straight face to tell Vice Principal Shires, but he enjoyed every syllable. It didn’t take long for the story to reach every student on campus, and today they pass it back and forth with glee.

In her classroom the next week, Miss Dunbar preps for her next class, unaware, flipping on the lights and double-checking her copies. The phone rings. She looks worried, utters a few yeses and nos, grabs her purse, and heads out the door, leaving her students unattended.

The investigation into the alleged relationship between Delia Dunbar and Cody Cooper took only a matter of days—Cody confirmed that nothing had happened between them but denied that he was being abused or that there had been any kind of report anyone was going to file. He says the bruises on his face and on his arms came from a bike accident. Miss Dunbar is cleared but there is still suspicion hanging in the air. There is no undoing the rumor. Whispers about Miss Dunbar persist in homes and grocery store aisles across town as much as they do in the halls. Cody doesn’t mind. In fact, he starts to
believe what they’re saying, at least in the spirit of it. She was kind of touching him a lot. She did do that thing where she lifted her hand up in front of his face.

Cody starts to let people think it happened. He starts to wonder if there was more there than what he saw, at first. He starts to let himself daydream.

The rumor continues to spread. Stories begin well you know what I heard and are followed by you know nothing’s gonna happen to her anyway, it’s impossible to fire a teacher. Parents confirm I always knew. By the time the story spreads it has grown to include several nameless boys and Delia Dunbar committing all manner of sins in her classroom, office, and even her car. The lie echoes everywhere until it becomes its own confirmation.

Cody benefits the most from the rumors. Though he knows it is wrong, he lets people think what they want. It’s so easy, and the longer he does it the more it seems like they’re probably right. He knows they are starting to look at Miss Dunbar and notice that she is kind of pretty under all of the awkward shit she wears. Though she had been the only person to offer him kindness, whenever someone asks him now about what happened with Dunbar he just shrugs, silent. That’s all it takes for them to fill in the blanks. He isn’t the boy she preyed upon. He is the guy who crossed the invisible line between student and teacher, and that teacher might be kind of hot. Maybe some kind of awesome conquest for the poor, quiet kid. Is his life still fucked up at home? Sure. But now people talk to him.

He starts to wonder if the two of them could be something more than teacher and student. People already believe it. And she did say she’d do anything she could to protect
him. He Googles Dunbar and reads everything he can find. He finds her address and invents reasons to walk by her house. She can’t let me know right now, he thinks, but she is going to call me and when she does I’ll be ready. He starts saving his money in a jar in his closet. He reads ads for apartments; sure that’s the next logical step. He plays two roles at school—the one of grinning teacher-seducer for his peers, and the other of the sad and beaten student for Miss Dunbar. He knows that’s what she’d want him to do so they don’t start to question what’s between them.

Miss Dunbar, however, isn’t letting him know that she’s thinking the same things. He lingers by her desk after class, but she scurries away. He tries extra hard on his assignments, confident she’ll write some comment that will offer a hint about their future. She barely speaks to him. She isn’t biting, but he knows he’s important to her. She meant what she said. He is largely ignored, but he can be patient.

Cody doesn’t have to keep up the dual act for long. A few weeks later he comes to school and Miss Dunbar’s gone. The week before she’d been looking haggard, tired. The eye twitch that used to be an occasional sign of frustration with her students became a constant and habitual flutter. She stopped wearing makeup. Her outfits became more and more erratic. She spent most of each period staring into space from her desk. Though they cleared her name, technically, the stories followed her everywhere she went and it seemed to affect her more than Cody. He doesn’t understand why. Nothing happened to them when people thought they were together. Nobody can prove anything.
Cody waits through all of this to figure out what to do, and he is sure as soon as she disappears from school that it is a sign. “Where’s Dunbar?” he asks the sub. The dried up old prune who replaces her doesn’t have much in the way of an offer of information, but mumbles something about taking over for the rest of the year. When Cody asks Vice Principal Shires the same question, he shoos him from the office, as though Cody’s very presence there suggests more impropriety. Cody continues to Google, to search phone books, to think about getting his life together and getting in touch with her.

He calls her house and sits silently on the other end of the line. For a long time he’s not sure what to do after she picks up. He makes his calls late at night so she is sure to be home. At first she’d just pick up, surprised, and hang up when nobody answered. But now she calls him out by name.

“Cody,” she pleads quietly. “Cody, stop calling.” She doesn’t sound like she loves him. Maybe she’s scared to let him know yet. Sometimes she just lets it ring and ring and ring.

He waits in silence. He isn’t brave enough. She has to be brave enough for both of them again.

“Cody, you have to stop calling me,” she says one night as he breathes into the phone. “I don’t want you to call me. I’m already on paid leave. It’s inappropriate. If they knew, they could…”

He exhales slowly. He lets her hear him, lets her know he is there.
“Cody…” she never seems to complete her sentences when it comes to him. That had been how they’d started, too, he remembers. He starts to gain courage and he calls her during the day. He leaves messages.

“Miss Dunbar—um—Delia…” Should he use her first name? He thinks so. It’s a step toward their future. “I… um… I was thinking we should have coffee together sometime, you know, or dinner, because I need to see you. I wanted to tell you some more stuff about what’s going on with my—um—my dad.” He plays the card he knew got her on his side in the first place. “It’s been real tough at home, and…” He isn’t sure how this is supposed to work, really. He never leaves his number, but he is sure she knows how to find him if she wants to.

She doesn’t respond. Cody isn’t sure how to take this. Some days it makes him sad. So sad he stays home from school, not even able to enjoy the residual effects of his new social status. Other days it makes him rage with hate. He calls her late at night, wanting to call her bitch, whore, all the things he learned from Dad. But he can’t work up the guts to do it. He loves her and he hates her.

She stops answering her phone. He calls and calls. He leaves messages, pleading.

One day the number changes. No longer in service. He’s confused.

Cody waits in front of her house. He’s shaded by a tree in a park across the street and he can watch her come and go. He waits for hours, keeps logs in his room about her habits. Always planning. Always waiting for the day the rumors become true. She had been so kind to him that night. So warm. That had to be real. He knows he has to stop in and see her. It’s what she wants, even if she is too afraid of getting caught.
He just has to wait for her.

When she’s gone one day, he goes through her yard looking for a key. He finds it in the backyard, in the underside of a fake bunny statue—just like his next door neighbor has. He slides the bottom out and the silver key drops into his hand. He slips into the front door and shuts it gently behind himself. He knows she won’t be home for a few hours.

The air inside is still, but it smells like her. He’s always loved the smell of other people’s houses. His always smells like grease and sweat, but Dunbar’s smells like something nice, a home. He inhales deeply. It isn’t enough. He tests the couch in the front room, runs his hands over the microfiber cushion.

Feeling brave, he peeks into each of the rooms. He opens the closed door to her bedroom, half expecting to find her there. Wouldn’t that be perfect, he catches himself thinking? Then it would just be as it was meant to be. Then I could stop waiting. Then we could just be. He slides the closet open, reaches inside and feels the sleeves of her blouses hanging there, brings them to his cheek. Remembers that night she lifted his hand up, looked into his eyes and told him it was going to be okay. Surely that was a sign that they were going to be together. He buries his face in a sweater.

He looks at her bed. Can’t help himself. The soft comforter covering the mattress looks like a cloud dotted with small orange and pink flowers. It’s everything he doesn’t have, and he imagines her laying there every night. He flops onto it, lays his head on the pillow—her pillow, and breathes in her smell. It’s like a hug. He feels like he’s inside her
clothes. His skin prickles with excitement, the danger and rightness of it. He knows that
being close to her is the safest place for him.

He rolls over, pulls the comforter around himself like a cocoon, balls up a handful
of it in front of his face. If he breathes through it, he can smell her, just like she’s right
there.

He breathes warm, soft blanket air. Falls asleep inside her scent.

###
AISLES

I.

There is absolutely no reason why, at 32 years of age and responsible, stable position in life, I should be going to the grocery store high as a kite, but here I am. There should be absolutely no reason why at 32 years of age I should have gotten myself into this mess in the first place, because I am a high school French teacher, the responsible kind, the kind who does not smoke pot (until very recently, thanks to some newish teaching friends) and I am the kind who would most certainly not forget to buy milk. But here we are, the party wrapped up early, and we are out of milk, so I walked to the store. I know better—high or not—than to get behind the wheel of a car, stoned, and anyway, I am pretty sure you can’t tell that I’m high anymore. Can you? My eyes don’t look so bad. I checked in the mirror. I think I checked in the mirror.

Milk. That’s what I need. If I can just concentrate on it I know I will be fine. Nobody would suspect me of being on anything and I checked five times before I left, before I walked over here and I made sure my hair was fine and I don’t look like a goddamn junkie or anything, so nobody would think that in my twinset I have been taking hits off a joint—do they call them joints?—for God’s sake, I don’t even know the lingo—and drinking beer with the cooler crowd in my backyard and falling victim to the peer pressure I managed to avoid being even exposed to in high school because nobody even cool enough to pressure wanted to be my peer.
What the fuck was I thinking anyway? I don’t smoke pot. If I get caught and I’d lose my job and that would be the end of me. I just need to get some milk. Goddamn it.

Just some milk.

If my stomach would cooperate here, I would feel much better. Something tonight was different than the first few times. Something in this was “medical grade” and apparently “medical grade” plus my anxiety disorder is a bad mix, because today “high” is feeling just like “panic attack.” Cold limbs. Tight stomach. Prickly spine. Shallow breath. The need to shit when no shit is there.


People do this for fun?

It might not have been so bad if I hadn’t been the butt of everyone’s joke. Look how we got Sandy high. Look what Sandy’s doing. It barely took anything. Sandy, you’re such a lightweight.

And I am and it didn’t, but you know, shit, you guys. I’m just hating myself now, feeling the cold milk jug handle against my hand in line and wishing today never happened and wanting to take it all back because nothing about it was great at all; in fact, the greater thing here would have been to have stood my uncool ground. Remained a square.

A tap on my shoulder. “Mrs. Washington? Is that you?”
II.

Carrots.

Mushrooms.

Pearl onions.

What the hell are pearl onions? I lean over the top of the butcher’s counter, looking for the butcher. Maybe he’s seen a recipe like this before. Maybe he can help me. Tricia’s in the cart, back by the tortillas, next to my yellow purse. She’s got a pacifier in her mouth and she’s digging for the squished up bag of Cheez-its in the bottom of the purse. Whatever keeps you happy, hon.

He’s behind the glass. “Hello? Hello, sir? I just have a—“

He’s holding up a finger. Wait. No, goddamn it. I just need to get this stuff figured out so I can leave, start the recipe before 2:00. I check the list again. Pearl onions. Why didn’t I look this shit up before I left the house? He picks up the side of beef. I glance back at Tricia. She’s grabbing at Tortillas. “Honey, no.”

She lets them slide to the floor. Slip. Plop, plop. I decide I’ll get to them in a second, after I talk to the butcher about this boeuf bourguignon.

Guy in a pair of polyester basketball shorts and a do-rag walks up and stands behind me. Gives me the you’re not gonna pick up these tortillas? look.

No. My whole world is pearl onions right now. I just need to get this done. Then the tortillas. Jesus.

My flip flops are sticking between my toes. I wish I’d worn shorts instead of a skirt so there’d be a layer of fabric between my legs to absorb the sweat. I lean again at
the counter. “I’m in kind of a hurry—do you think you could answer a quick question for me?—about a recipe?” I call back to the butcher.

Basketball Shorts is standing too close to Tricia, making me kind of nervous. I can’t tell if it’s because he’s by Tricia or if it’s because he’s got a full view of the back of my legs, but I’m having to stand on tip-toe just to get the attention of the butcher, here, and I’m barely succeeding at that. Maybe I should move my cart, but I’m worried that if I do I’ll lose the attention of the guy in back. If I could just…

“Excuse me?” The butcher is ignoring, now. Just not even looking.

I glance behind me. He’s got his hand on the cart, right by my purse. Tricia is smiling and reaching for him.

“Tricia… Honey.”

It’s a weak attempt at anything, but it gets him to drop his arm. He doesn’t back up. He stays next to my cart. Next to my purse. I hate myself for the thought that flashes. Being male is not a crime. There’s no reason my purse isn’t safe. My child isn’t safe.

I look him in the eye—Basketball Shorts—and he smiles a cool disarming smile at me. I don’t trust it.

Finally, the metal door swings out. He’s washing his hands. “What can I do you for?”

We’re gone before he reaches the front counter.
III.

“Hi there.”

“Hi.”

“So, would you like paper or plastic tonight?”

“Paper, please.”

“So, you have any weekend plans?”

“Yeah, actually I'm going to work on a choreography project all weekend in town. That's why I'm shopping tonight.”

“Choreography? What’s that?”

“I’m a dancer. I make up dances for dance companies.”

“Oh, like for little kids.”

“No, uh—“

“Are these red potatoes?”

“Yeah. Uh—anyway, no. I’m a choreographer. I work with a local Contemporary dance company.”

“Is that like that show? Like Dancing with the Stars?”

“Um, not really. I mean, it’s dancing. It’s not ballroom, though. That’s a different thing.”

“Oh! Can you make a lot of money doing that? Choreography thing?”

“No.”

“But I saw on TV that Julianne Hough makes a lot of money.”

“No.”
“Um, so, it doesn’t make you any money, what’s your real job?”

“That is my real job. But I teach dance classes, too.”

“Oh, my niece takes ballet. She’s two. Do you teach at her school here in town?”

“No. It’s not really like that either. It’s adults. Professionals.”

“What is this?”

“Lettuce. Listen, never mind, it’s not… it’s complicated, I mean.”

“Do you do that ballet thing where they stand on their toes on those shoes with wood in the ends?”

“There’s no wood in the shoes. That’s not a real thing. And I used to, but now I do Contemporary dance, which is something different. Like I said, it’s complicated.”

“Yeah, but could you be on Dancing With the Stars, like, if you tried out?”

“I think you’re mixing up Dancing With the Stars and So You Think You Can Dance. Those are too different shows. One is ballroom—which I don’t do—and the other one I’m too old for. Anyway, I went to college for dance. I have my Masters. It’s kind of a different thing.”

“Ooh, Masters. How long did that take you?”

“A couple of years.”

“So did you do that so you could get a job where you make a bunch of money?”

“No, like I said, I can’t make a bunch of money doing any of it.”

“So, you went to school for a long time for something that isn’t going to make you any money… Why would you do that then? Why not just be a doctor?”

“It’s not… it’s complicated.”
“Okay, well, you saved 5.88 tonight, Ms. Samuelson. Can we help you out to your car with that?”

IV.

She’s looking at me. Her shaggy-haired, Spiderman shirt-wearing kid has a stream of mucous running straight from his nose to his mouth and some kind of brown cookie crumble paste from his lips to his ear. He’s screaming, he’s kicking his feet against he back of her cart like he wants to break a hole in the metal. She’s ignoring him, thinking about something far off; she’s looking through me.

Never am I more aware of my lack of kid or family than in this aisle. I don’t feel as out of place looking at hummus as I do in the cereal. Cereal isn’t adult, although somehow we’re all still ripping open bags of the stuff every morning until some better idea comes along that saves us from having to fry up an egg, for heaven’s sake. But we all know, kinda, that Cap’n Crunch isn’t really for a grownup.

I’m out of place. Like the bananas that somebody decided should be placed here in front of the shelves on a stand, for impulse buys. I’d never buy one of these bananas, even if I was here for banana shopping. They seem, by virtue of their placement not in the produce section, to be inferior. I am sure that someone, somewhere, is tricking me into buying them if I so much as touch one.
She pushes her cart closer. I stay next to the sensible, brown cereals of the grown. The kid runs a thoughtless, chubby finger through the snot, points at Lucky Charms, then at me. “You…”

“Stop it,” she shushes, pushing his hand down without looking at me.

The kids on the Wheaties look too cheerful. And too blonde. Like his boys are, probably. The kids he should have been thinking about when he called me. When we drank too much wine at that “friendly dinner.” When he came upstairs. When he came back over the second time and we fucked again in the dark.

As much as I wanted skin on me, I wanted to be proven wrong. Well. Not really. I wanted someone, somewhere to prove me wrong. To prove that men want women for life. And for one of them to want me for life. I didn’t want to think about what he had at home, about the ties that were still wrapped around him, about the smiling young faces he was blocking from his consciousness.

I wanted him for me. That night. The future. I couldn’t help it. Since before, when he was with her.

She reads the nutrition information, her finger running a judgmental trace over the black and white label. Probably fiber. Always, everyone’s looking at fiber. His snot finger touches three boxes of Froot Loops. Mom pushes them back into formation.

I eye a box of Raisin Bran with a heavy heart. What I really want is something artificial.

When she called me, I let it go to voicemail. What was I going to say to her, anyway? Sorry I fucked your husband? I didn’t know he’d go right back?
V.

I walk past the plastic-wrapped rounds of iceberg my mother used to buy and head for the darker greens. I check the bottoms of green leaf, Romaine. Romaine seems the freshest, as the ends are clear-white, not red.

Her blood and teeth were on the white tile by the lettuce. I still hear the wet thud she made when she hit. You would think it would have been like a pumpkin dropping, or a watermelon, but it was more like rotten zucchini in a plastic bag. Her teeth in her blood on the tile, though. That’s what I scared me when I was eight. She hit, they all ran over, she rolled to her side, and those two cracked teeth lay unattached in a pool of blood in front of the lettuce. The misters kept misting. The music kept playing. My mom told me not to look.

I slip on the tile—it’s wet from the misters by the Romaine. Catch myself with the cart. My adrenaline surges.

“You okay?”

A plaid shirt comes from behind me. A warm, strong hand on my elbow. I’m shaken. More than I should be. The teeth.

“Yeah, yeah.” I laugh. The blood. The ends of the green leaf. He’s looking at me, to make sure.

She was wearing a blue and white mumu. The skin on her arms was paper thin. Blood poured from her open mouth. Her hair was clear-white. The music didn’t stop.

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m fine. Thanks.”
He gives me a nod. “I need to buy some ‘mesclun mix,’ Do you know what that is?”

I point him in the direction of the bin.

We didn’t go over to help her that day, but we didn’t leave the produce aisle, either. The first instruction not to watch, ignored. Just stood by boxes of croutons and stared as the others, the manager, eventually, come to her aid. I wanted to do something, but I was eight. It looked like a movie.

*She’s hit her head,* they said.

*She broke a few teeth.*

She was crying. The tears ran into her mouth, soundless. People pushed carts around her. Eventually they brought a stretcher. We paid for our groceries.

An orange drops behind me.

I wanted them to clean it up so she wouldn’t have to see her own teeth, there, in a pool of blood. I wanted her to close her mouth. It was too big, too raw. Seeing her insides there with the broccoli and the lettuce made me feel cold and heavy. But I felt like if I ran that would be worse than watching it happen.

It’s all rotting.

She’s still bleeding. I see her on the floor every time.

An employee lifts broccoli, rearranges it so it looks like nobody ever took any from the stack. Trims the brown. Tosses it in a box on a cart. What happens to the refuse?

###
The coffee grinder screamed in the background like an impatient toddler. Jane tried to blink the patronizing look from her eyes and humor Chuck by putting on her listening face so he could finish his lecture. He was the boss, after all. “I don’t know what you want me to do with that information,” she laughed.

“Nothing, really. I just wanted you to know in case you were thinking about asking for time off. There’s been way too much of that around here.”

_Not from me, though_, she thought. She raked her fingers through the back of her upswept hair. _Jesus, I work for the dumbest man alive. Do you really need to get mad at me for the crap other people do?_ She’d had enough of the lectures about what everyone else was or wasn’t doing. She knew she was managing okay at her job. She turned to back to her work. The grinder lever snapped; she dropped in grounds and tamped them down.

“Hey Janie, kiddo, can you mix some more chocolate milk before you leave, too?”

“Got it.” _Always do_, she added in her head. At least he was leaving for the night. She tried not to get caught glancing at the clock in front of him.

_Closing with Grace meant nobody was going to look over her shoulder or remind her to do things she already knew to do. The radio went louder, the breaks went longer._ She got to play coffee shop just like when she was eight, but with real money and real
customers at her disposal. Freedom. She kind of liked playing shop. The store was fun at night. Less serious. Not so busy.

Grace’s pans clanged together as she dragged them around in the stainless steel sink. Jane funneled shots for tomorrow’s iced lattes into a glass bottle on the counter. She tried unnecessarily hard to drizzle each shot into the bottle without slopping espresso on the outside. Each pull at the Italian machine, she timed perfectly, creating rust-brown crema to ensure happy lattes with notes of roasted earth. The full bottle of espresso shots at the end of the night gave her a sense of finality, completion. It was like a book, just finished, or a full spreadsheet of data—deeply fulfilling. She liked that fullness even though she hated Chuck’s rule that they pre-make the shots for the iced drinks.

She’d read about coffee shops in Seattle with real baristas who could layer the drinks each time they were ordered, suspending espresso beneath a slight cloud of milk froth and just above the milk. They’re different densities, she read online. Espresso is lighter than milk but heavier than the foam because of the air. When there was time to goof around, she got fancy with her own drinks, imagined the fancy life that went with them. Anybody who uses the word “fancy” really isn’t, though, Janie thought.

Her shoulders hung heavy at the thought of her high school friends, where they must be right now. They all left, while she was still working in the same town at this coffee shop job. Getting good at coffee, not that it mattered. She was sure that their university lives included independence, travel, the kind of jobs you could get with a degree. Janie felt stuck. To be nineteen now, and nowhere… to be here… it was nothing. Somehow the world moved on but she was still at home, still under Mom’s thumb. Still
protected from the world, protected from learning and from life. Still stuck in the same soil where she was planted. Still invisible. She wanted more but her lack of direction was paralyzing. She paralyzed herself right into this coffee shop job and she didn’t know how to leave.

ETHIOPIA! shouted the poster across the dining room, the words hovering over a terraced hill of red coffee berries. Jane’s eyes traced the square Helvetica and the round of a bird perched on a branch. She tried to imagine such a place. Was it lush, like the green, layered hills in the photo, or harsh like the strict lines of the lettering? Jane’s imagination sketched it somewhere between. Ethiopia rolled off her tongue like a fruit basket of vowels, but it was as impossible to her as Mars. I’d settle for LA, Seattle. College. Something.

A bell at the door jangled at the arrival of the married Tuesday regulars. She continued filling her bottle but tried hard to look available as they finished their conversation. Eavesdropping and spying without appearing to do so--these were her coffee shop specialties. Jane loved this couple, everything about them. They were so smart, so attractive, so much in control of their stylized image. They were everything she was not. Though they were mismatched in age--he was clearly younger--they complemented each other even in their dichotomy. Their age disparity even made them seem like celebrities.

Jane’s eyes fixed on the man’s hand, tattooed with two small swallows flying eternally up to the wrist, as it rested on the counter. “...anyway,” he continued to the
blonde, “It’s not like I couldn’t get another gig that paid just as much. I’m only doing it as a favor to Rick.” Jane blinked out of her trance and peeled her gaze from the birds.

Her coiffed head turned up to the menu while the mouth made a pout. “Yeah, but honey. We could use the money for our trip.”

“Whatever. I don’t need to take every goddamn thing that comes along, is all I’m saying. I’m better than that. We’re better than that.”

“Well I’m glad you think that you and I--”

“I haven’t made up my mind, anyway. Dude--I’m not talking about you and me, though. I mean me and the guys. Not you. Jesus, I mean, that’s... Hey Jane, can we get a dry Capp and an Americano? I mean if you are so worried about money, why don’t you stop... shopping?” Without so much as a glance in Janie’s direction, he tossed his ten on the counter. Jane’s infatuation with them made her excuse the insult; she was happy enough that he talked to her that she made excuses for his rudeness. Manners weren’t cool, right? She was, after all, insignificant in his musical, tattooed world. He leaned on the counter with easy importance. The softness of the birds at his hand didn’t belie the hard image; rather it seemed only to further convince Jane that he was the perfect kind of man.

He was in every way foreign to her. She knew no more about how to get a guy like him to take note of her than she knew how to get to Ethiopia.

She turned around and caught him leering at her ass. Then came his voice, condescending, “Janie, try not to make the foam so wet this time, huh?” Of course. God, I’m such a screw up. I can’t even get it right for them. What’s wrong with me? It was her
mother’s voice she heard in her head now; she took it just like his bad manners. It never occurred to her to shut out the critique of the woman who had done so little herself. She wanted so badly to stop the voice but she couldn’t shake it.

Janie, just stay home until I’m feeling better—until I’m back on my feet. That had sounded okay when she was a senior in high school, when her teachers were telling her that she needed to apply to schools because her grades were really good enough to get into a UC. She knew they were right about financial aid, too. They were certainly struggling to make it to the end of every month. And there were times when it seemed like getting away from that constant back and forth of criticism and then needy pleading and crying would be such a dream; but she couldn’t do it. When it came down to it, she couldn’t even ask. She hated herself for it, the not asking. Her senior year government teacher had gotten her all the paperwork for the UC application and the FAFSA and asked her to have her mom sign it—Janie knew that was going to be all it took, but she lied to Ms. Eagleton and said her mom just didn’t have the application money. And then she lied again and said she didn’t get in. It was just easier that way.

Not that it made things better, now. But sometimes that’s just how things were. At least that’s what Mom said, right? Sometimes that’s just how things are.

Jane reminded herself not to stare at the couple and tucked her head down behind the espresso machine. He could only want someone refined, someone who knows how to be... a kind of chameleon like her—the kind of woman with enough sense and money to transform herself into something great. Plain Janes, never. Not me. She palmed the
bottom of the milk pitcher, feeling the weight of the steam against her hand, wishing she understood how to make things happen. How to go and do.

“I’m gonna go grab a table...” the sunglasses sighed. Yes, thought Jane. Take your Coach bag and sit in the corner, Pretty. The espresso machine marked time like a metronome.

“Okay, yeah babe... Mmm--So, Janie, did you hear? I’ve got a recording session soon. A guy I know knows a guy in San Francisco that’s willing to listen to our demo. But we need to record some new stuff.”

Jane perked up. Not only was he looking at her today, he was talking to her. About himself. About his music. God, Jane. Keep your shit together. “Oh… cool,” was all she could force out. Instantly, she hated herself for not asking a question to further the conversation, for not being anyone else. She wished she didn’t have chocolate stains all over her red t-shirt.

He needed no encouraging to launch into his story, anyway. “Yeah, so like I was saying. The vocals are really just...” He breathed in the bouquet of his own importance. Jane scooped the dry foam. “They’re just--mmmm--” His fist dug at the air. “In this song I wrote... that I’m singing. You should hear it because I have this, like, retro Kurt Cobain thing with my voice that’s so early nineties... you just have to hear it. God, it sounds so… deck.” He stood, mouth open, seeing himself onstage. Loving it.

Jane stifled a giggle at deck, placed the cups at the counter, fixed her posture into the coolest pose she could imagine. He so clearly believed in his greatness that she didn’t need any convincing. She leaned a hip into the counter, an effort at fooling him into
ignoring the discomfort with which she wore her own body. She robed herself in a false air of distraction, all the while suffering from painful awareness of the heaviness in her limbs. Every molecule in her body breathed awkwardness. “I... I’d really like to hear you play one time.”

She caught him tracing her figure again with his eyes. He didn’t pull his gaze away. “I’d like that too, Janie.” It was wrong. He was crossing a line with that look. Jane. She let it happen though. *This is what you wanted, right? For someone to look? To notice you? It’s not like anybody else is paying attention.* She maintained her stance at the counter, leaned hard into his gaze, felt it on her skin. Felt something in her chest. *Shame?*

Her own voice startled her awake again. “Uh, yeah, so... here’s your Americano. And the Capp—dry.”

His interest blinked away. Her proclamation about the coffee drinks sent him back to his own universe, back to the gravitational pull of the bleach-blonde in the corner. Janie shook her head and blinked off the glow that remained inside. As he made his way to the corner table, the bell at the door signaled another customer.

“Ned!” Jane grinned. She loved the elderly man now shuffling to the counter. His gait suffered a little under the weight of his age, but his face sparkled. “Fresh French roast, coming up!”

“Miss Jane, you are so good to me. How’s life treatin’ ya, darlin’?”

Jane’s mood instinctually rose to greet him. “Just fine, I can’t complain. How’s your back?”
“A little stiff; had to shake the cobwebs off myself when I got up this mornin’. Need my cuppa joe, though. I’ve got a big date tonight, Jane, big date.”

Great, Jane thought. Even Ned gets some action. She pulled a new pot of French roast off the brewer, snapped the lid in place and pressed the button at the top of the air pot. Black-dark coffee streamed into the glass mug, fogging the sides with steam. A smell like toast.

From the corner Jane caught bits of their conversation. Ned, momentarily abandoned, struck up a chat with another customer at a front table. Janie rang him up and strained hard toward the couple in the corner as she waited for him to pay.

“…enough of this, though…” railed the pretty one, her voice straining to vocalize what seemed like an old battle.

“Jesus, can we not talk about that right now? I’m trying to tell you about what this means for me. I swear to God, all I want is for you to get what this is.”

She stared at something beyond the window; clearly she didn’t take “this” as seriously as he did.

Ned reached out to Jane with his five-dollar bill, blocking her view. Smiling, she hit CASH and worked the methodical choreography that was change making. She counted out three seventy-five, placed it gently in his wrinkled palm. His eyes caught hers, held them for a second in a knowing stare.

“Jane?” he asked, clearly sensing angst she didn’t share with him, waiting. He didn’t have to say it.
“I’m fine, Ned. Fine. Enjoy that French roast, huh?” She forced a look of satisfaction on her face. It must have worked, for he turned and made his way to another of the glass-topped tables.

A half hour passed with a quick succession of nameless walk-ins. A triple mocha, no whip. Latte, no foam, extra hot. Three sandwiches, all with too many extra-this and no-that’s. Cookies, brownies, a slice of cheesecake. More mochas, then a hazelnut latte and a decaf drip. In pauses between drinks, Jane’s eyes pulled to the corner like a compass needle. The conversation between her favorite married couple continued, though she could only guess at its content. The whir and buzz of grinder and steam kept her from hearing anything discernible. His coiffed companion continued her emotionless gaze out the window, while the swallows at his hand danced in reaction to the lively, self-indulgent performance he was giving.

Jane looked at Ned. He sat alone, untouched by any air of loneliness. He folded his paper back upon itself and studied the headlines. He raised the French roast to his lips from time to time, usually as his eyebrows rose at something interesting he read. His was an ease different altogether from the swallow-handed object of Jane’s affection in the corner. Ned’s posture asserted a quiet strength, a familiarity with his favorite coffee in his favorite shop. Jane longed to know him better, but also to have the same kind of comfort in her own skin.

Grace joined her behind the counter now that the dishes were finished, so Jane grabbed a damp dishtowel that rested over the top of a spray bottle on the back counter. She gripped the trigger of the bottle with her other hand. She might as well clean tables—
things were slowing down and she might be able to hear more of what was going on in that corner. Beginning at the front tables she methodically sprayed and wiped, scooping crumbs into the trash and then disinfecting each table with round, wide strokes. Each table in the swath she cut across the dining area brought her closer to what she wanted to hear. Finally, she busied herself near the bean counter—out of view—behind a shaggy coffee plant. She picked up each item on the counter and turned it over in the dishrag, looking important, occupied.

Over his shoulder, Jane saw her crush flip pages of a magazine—dark pages of tattooed musicians and scantily clad models. His girl sat upright now in her chair. “I’m the charity liaison for this one, which is a total bore. Whatever, though. It makes me look good to the board. I wish I was doing something interesting like the decorations. But Stephanie says that they don’t need me to help out yet. I’m hoping someone drops so I can get in on that.”

“Mmm hmmm. You’re way better at that than she is, babe. Stephanie is kind of a horse, anyway.”

“Horse? Huh-yeah, those teeth… I guess. I just want to get to do the good stuff. You know, the cute stuff. The woman from the Red Cross is so boring. She’s just gross, too. You know, like one of those women that drives a Volvo and hasn’t ever colored her hair… She’s so… ugh, you know? Somebody needs to introduce her to a flat iron and a box of hair dye, is all I’m saying.”

His magazine lifted toward his face, toward Jane, to reveal a bikini-clad girl, a serpent tattoo trailing the length of her body. He made no effort to look away from the
The model’s mouth hung open in porny mock surprise at his loitering stare. His girlfriend kept talking though he was clearly otherwise occupied.

“Every time I call her she’s so bitchy. Like I know anything about how this is supposed to go! All I care about is that we have a good event that looks pretty. We have a reputation, you know. The charity gets our money either way so I wish she’d just stop complaining about every little thing. Hey--you’re gonna come right?”

“Am I… what?” He closed the magazine methodically before he dropped it. He rubbed the back of his neck with his bird hand. “Ehhh… I don’t know, babe. I hate those things. It’s not my scene—“

“Really? You’re serious with this right now? Are you kidding me? I am the chairperson for the charity. My husband has to be at the event. If you don’t come, I’m going to have to make some lame-ass excuse and people are going to think I’m not serious about the League. How could you do that to me?”

“Whoa, babe. Back up. I didn’t say I wouldn’t come. I said I don’t know. I hate these things. Everyone is so conservative. So many Republicans.” He laughed.

“It’s not funny; look, this is important to me.” She put the pout on again. “I bought that new dress. People are going to notice if you’re not there.” She drew her mouth to another pout. “This matters.”

Jane held a glass jar of chocolate-covered beans in her hand. She set it up against the shelf as he started to speak, but she was careless in her estimation of how far away the back of the counter top was. Her attention was still at their table. She heard a quick
scrape of glass on wood, then an explosion of glass sounded at the floor. The jar burst, sending beans in all directions.

She closed her eyes. *Damn.*

Every eye in the house turned to her.

His girlfriend stared at Jane and laughed. “Well, are you gonna stand there or clean that up?”

Jane was equally mad about the cleanup job that lay before her as she was about being discovered. “I…I just missed the counter, is all…” No more listening surreptitiously behind the plant.

“Everything okay, Jane?” Grace’s kind voice came from behind the counter.

“Yeah, yeah. Everything’s fine. I just missed the counter is all. I’ll get it. Can you stay up front?”

“Got it.”

“Miss Jane, you need any help, there?”

“No, Ned. I got it. Thank you. Sorry everyone. Watch where you step. I’ll be right back with the broom.” Janie scurried out back to the broom closet, grabbed a broom and dustpan, and tucked the *Wet Floor* sign under her arm, hoping that she’d keep people from slipping on beans with it.

Back inside she felt the couple’s eyes on her. She planned her attack on the collage of glass and beans. Clearing the area in front of the counter needed to come first so nobody’d slip as they came through the door. The tables would need to be moved next; beans were in every corner of the small shop. Probably glass, too.
Grace called. “J, I’m making a salad. Can you check the pots?”

“I’m trying to clean the--okay, yeah.” Jane felt pulled in seventeen directions. She leaned her broom against the counter, checked the house roast. Empty. Half and half, also empty. Shit. The floor would have to wait.

Behind the counter, she dumped cream into one container, lumped grounds into another. She jammed the filter basket under the coffee maker, hit BREW. She swung around the front, dropped the cream into the ice bucket (now a water bucket) and moved the first table. Ned’s thick eyebrows went up. He gave her a nod, then the kindness of ignoring her as she went back to the sweep job.

_Jangle. Ting, ting._ The bell made her stop, again. A pair of greasy teens headed for the register. Grace sensed Jane’s escalating tension from the back. “Janie?” she called in a singsong tone, trying to ascertain Jane’s ability to handle things from afar.

“Yeah, G.” She knew she had to leave the mess and handle the register. Leave the melted ice bucket of water. Leave the crumbs that had mysteriously reformed on the table. Leave her sanity.

She forced a smile, wiped her sweaty palms at her hips. “What can I get you guys?”

“Well, I don’t know. Do you know, man? What’s good here?”

Janie started to answer before she realized he didn’t want one. Customers who dilly-dallied at the counter trying to decide on an order irked her. “Look, I’m—I’ve got a mess on the floor that I—there’s glass—“
“Uuuhhh, two frapps… white chocolate.” Could you have ordered a more time-consuming drink, guys? The blender? Now? She punched their order into the cash register, though, and smiled.

“Seven seventy, please.” She made quick work of their change, hoping to get her business with the blender done quickly, before someone did a cartoon fall on a pile of glass and beans. Things in the dining room were going downhill, fast.

She had barely measured the milk into the pitcher when she heard another splatter, this one liquid. A waterfall of boiling wet grounds poured out onto the floor. And something was burning. Was that smoke? Melted plastic? She stood, paralyzed between the blender and the waterfall of coffee, watching it happen, unable to stop it. Surely this couldn’t all be taking place at the same time. Surely there was a way to fix this evening that was devolving faster than the water slapping at the floor.

Grace popped around the corner, the look of horror on her face confirming what Jane already knew. “Jane, the brewer is broken. Did you clean it out before you put the grounds in there?”

“No, I was just trying to—I was trying to hurry—Oh God. I have to get it cleaned up and these guys want their frapps and I can’t—I can’t…”

Grace stepped in between Jane and the blender. “I’ll finish these. Go call Chuck. We can’t operate without a working coffee maker.” We have enough French to get us through for a while, but he has to come down here. You call him; I’ll do this.” It wasn’t a request. Jane moved, numb inside.
For a moment she stood in front of the phone before dialing. The laminated, coffee-stained phone list waited silently as she let the receiver dangle over her left shoulder and took in a breath. Twice her hand reached out to push the numbers before she could do it. It was admitting her own failure. Jane especially didn’t want Chuck to know about it.

Methodically she pushed the buttons and waited for her dunce boss to pick up.

“Yellow.”

“Chuck…”

“Who is this?”

“Chuck… it’s Jane. There’s a… I need you to come down to the store.”

“What happened?”

“Yeah, Chuck—I’m fine—everyone’s fine. Well, sort of. I mean, the drip brew… something’s wrong. I didn’t clean the grounds out and—I screwed it up, I know—and it’s not working right and now something smells burnt—I spilled beans and there’s broken glass all over the floor but I can’t—there’s a little French left but not enough to… Chuck, I need you to come down here.”

“God dammit, Janie. This is what I was talking about earlier. You guys are so careless. I’m just never going to leave from now on. I can’t trust you guys to take care of the store for one night—“

“Chuck, it’s not like that, it was a mistake. I mean, things happen. It was my fault, but I wasn’t—“

“I’ll be right there.” He hung up.
The cash register closed and brought Jane’s focus back to the room. A wordless nod to Grace affirmed that all was—if not yet well—then at least on the path to *well* once again. Grace stood post at the counter, armed with a pitcher full of warm chocolate milk, ready to serve two firemen now waiting behind the frapp boys. The espresso machine whirred. Jane made short work of the rest of the mess, moved tables to check for broken glass; the room returned to a busy hum.

Jane walked behind the counter, stood for a second and surveyed the calm that had once again taken hold in the dining room. “Grace, since it’s quiet, I’m gonna go wash up.”

Grace smiled from the register, barely looking up. Janie moved into the back room and washed her hands in the giant industrial sink. The warm water melted the caked on chocolate and coffee that had crusted her hands. She stood at the sink, breathing it in for a second. Dried her hands on a thick white dishtowel from the rack.

This was enough. She’d had enough.

She grabbed her purse from under the counter. Grace was up front helping a customer with some beans. She new she would have to work fast. Chuck would be there any minute. She walked into the back and set her purse on the floor in front of the giant metal freezer, opened it and pushed gallons of milk aside. In the back was Chuck’s “safe”—white lunch bags of money from each day of the week with the total written in black marker. *Like nobody’d ever think to check the freezer if they broke in,* Jane thought.

“You want to take your break soon?” Grace called.

“Yeah. Actually. I was just thinking that, thanks.”
Janie grabbed cold bags of money and stuffed them into her bag. There had to be at least five to eight hundred dollars in each one. Enough to get her started. Enough to get her out. She jammed them down and pushed a sweater on top. Shoved her bag back under the counter. Pushed the jugs of milk back in front.

“Grace? I’m going to take this cheesecake home with me tonight. I’ll pay for it later, but I’m going to put it in my car right now on my break, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Jane went to the case and slid out a whole cheesecake with an Oreo crust. She carefully placed it into a bakery box, taped the edges. She grabbed her purse, headed out the back. Just as she did, Chuck pushed through the door. He looked at the cheesecake in her hand, confused. “Janie, I swear to God. You guys are costing me so much money—“

“Save it, Chuck. I quit.”
“He’s still fresh,” Josh said, kicking the raccoon’s desiccated skull with his sneaker. Bits of dust stuck to the remaining, open eye. It looked like a drying, cloudy grape. A rut in the dirt road formed the delicate curve of a question mark that punctuated in the raccoon corpse.

“No he ain’t,” laughed Avery, exhaling deeply after bending over to catch a whiff. Wind blew through the dry grass of the fields that surrounded them. To Avery this sounded like Styrofoam beads rolling against each other in a packing crate. “That thing stinks,” he said. “Leave it alone, Josh. Gross.”

The afternoon sun warmed drops of sweat out of the boys’ skin. The world was golden with a blurry glow of heat. They breathed in dust. Josh couldn’t leave the ‘coon, and he pushed the small body over, flat side up, so that he could inspect the secret workings of decaying flesh. He grabbed a stick out of the ditch and drove it into the animal’s drying hide.

“Josh, stop. Nasty.”

“What are you, a fucking girl? Since when’re you such a puss?” He lifted the thing into the air and taunted Avery with it, then threw it. A half-stiff, hairy bag of decomposing shit.

Avery studied Josh. Time had been kinder to Josh than to other sophomores. Already his shoulders were broad and the stipple of a mustache was starting to form under his nose. His dark hair and square jaw gave him a harsh look. Avery, on the other
hand, found his own pale complexion, doughy face and diminutive size to be something of shame. He always felt like Josh punished him for being small, too, like his size meant he had too much catching up to do. He folded his thin arms across his chest and his red t-shirt gaped at the armholes. Josh was the kind of kid others befriended because they didn’t want to be on the receiving end of his anger.

A green Ford pickup thundered up the road, rolling clouds of dull dust into the August air as it came to a stop.

A teenage girl’s voice laughed out of the passenger window. She mocked the boys that stood, waiting. Her dirty, bare feet poked through the small front window. She didn’t lean to look out at her brother or his friend.

“...the hell?” said Josh, stepping deeper into the ditch, but not loud enough for anybody but Avery to hear. Around the other side of the truck, the door opened and slammed shut with the scrape of metal on rusted metal. Sneakers crunched in the gravel making Josh’s neck hair stand up. The figure that stopped short in front of him didn’t put his mind at ease, either.

Every kid in town was scared of Cole Tucker. Even his son, Josh. Not only was he a sizeable guy, whose shirts were fitted to his bulk because they’d hardened that way through sweat and work, but his skin was a visibly thick layer; nothing was going to get past him. He wasn’t scared of anyone, and that made him unpredictable, hard as his calloused fists. His presence had the ability to drain the air from a lung.
Tucker grabbed his son by the shirt collar and pulled him close to his face in one movement quicker than Josh could draw breath. “THE FUCK is your granddad’s knife, Boy?”

Josh didn’t have time to even think of a response, and it was clear that there was no pause in the conversation for him to offer one. Tucker didn’t establish context. The second statement came in the form of a blow to Josh’s face.

Josh knew better than to show how bad it hurt. Or to speak. Avery didn’t have his kind of familiarity with this situation, or with Tucker’s anger. He danced back and forth on nervous feet in worn-down sneakers.

“Mr. Tucker, uh.” He cleared some phlegm from his throat. “Sir? We uh--we were looking at it and we put it back in the shed when we were done. I mean, ugh, after Josh was done showing it to me, we did--”

Tucker moved his face from Josh’s to Avery’s, the muscles in his neck straining, tense.

“Did I say somethin’ to you?”

Avery swallowed hard, shook his head side to side. The air was silent in the trees. Tucker’s face showed anger, but something else behind it. A frantic rage.

“Didn’t think so.” Tucker kept his face close to Avery, but spoke to Josh directly.

“It’s back by dinner, or don’t bother coming home.”

Both boys froze in their places, Avery’s eyes fixed in the empty space where Tucker’s sweating, leathery forehead had been. He was afraid to change even his eye line. The truck door creaked shut.
A gentle laugh trickled out the girl’s open window.

After ten seconds of frozen terror for the boys, the truck roared to life, sending a deep bass out of its dual exhaust. The wheels clawed the rock road and it drove off, leaving, as Tucker had, the sensation that it was still there, controlling the space.

“Boy, your dad, uh--”

Josh interrupted before he could finish the sentence, though. “I don’t even know what he’s talking about! I showed you the knife, I put it back in...” He mimed the actions of holding it up, closing it back inside the box and setting it up on the shelf. “And I put it up.” He worked it in his mind but he couldn’t come up with an answer. “What could...?”

“Yeah, man. That’s weird,” said Avery. And right away he knew it was a weak offering in the way of any help, but he hoped Josh wouldn’t notice. Hoped he would want to go back to poking the dead raccoon and act like that didn’t just happen. He stepped over to the carcass, picked up a stick, and started poking it again.

“Do you think--” Josh continued, ignoring the raccoon for another moment, “do you think that somebody coulda come in there and stoled it? Like, after we put it back?”

“Might-uh.”

“Yeah, but I mean, that would be real weird. Like, why somebody is gonna come in there and steal Pop’s knife, I mean who would even know that such a family--one that’s worth so much to my dad, I mean--is in that piece of shit shed? Doesn’t make sense to me. I’m the only one who knows where it is, anyway.”

“Might, though.”

“Unless?” Avery was trying harder and harder to look interested in the raccoon pelt that Josh had hurled at him. Maggots squirmed their way in and out of the belly, working it up and down like breath.

Josh ran over to him, jumping on him and knocking him to the ground. He moved quickly, pinning Avery’s shoulders to the hot dirt. Avery didn’t have time to breathe or think.

“What? Unless what, J?”

Josh got close up in his face, just like Tucker. “Unless you took it, you little shit.”

Cole’s blue eyes sold me. Looking back, it was probably the way his shirt rippled with muscles by the middle of tenth grade, too, or the fact that our graduating class was only fifty-three, and that doesn’t leave many choices to date, but those eyes did selling enough in their time. It’s not like I was playing hard to get, though, or looking for my own way. I learned early that passive suited me better than active. Those eyes and the dingy Wranglers and the confident smile said I know what to do, baby. The arms were strong enough to push away any threat in the world. All the time, he knew. It didn’t matter to me that he wasn’t the best in school because I knew he didn’t need books to be something. His daddy, Carson, didn’t, and Cole Tucker sure didn’t have trouble making things happen. Tucker men had confidence. At sixteen that was what I wanted, and I needed to get away from what I was old enough to see was going to be a dead trap for me at home. There was nothing there but crystal. Momma was gone; Daddy and my brother
were both in deep. I knew that being home wouldn’t get me anywhere but down with ‘em.

Cole swept me off my feet by being confident. I didn’t really ask him to be anything else.

All I had to do was look to his daddy, the great Carson Tucker, to see what he was going to be. Successful. Handsome. In control. People didn’t mess with him, neither. He called the shots in town. I knew Cole would do the same.

I came up pregnant at eighteen, so we married and lived in a trailer on Cole’s daddy’s property. I kept house and fed my boys. I didn’t love being under his daddy’s wing, but it was all we had and we were happy. Our socks were stained with the rust-colored dust of good Placerville earth but we didn’t care. Dirty and poor, but happy: the kind of people who built Hangtown. Salt of God’s red earth who weren’t too proud to know their place. Cole worked long hours at his daddy’s asphalt company, but it was money in the bank. I didn’t mind, anyway. Left me more time at home with the baby.

Cole did his best dreaming out loud on Sunday nights as we sat outside our trailer in lawn chairs, drinking beer while the baby slept.

I could see the lights on the porch of his daddy’s house—a once-abandoned one-room schoolhouse his folks had turned into their home—through the oak trees.

“You know it’s mine one day, right?”

I knew he meant the business, not the house. He liked to hear himself say the things out loud. I liked it, too; it made me feel like there was a plan. Though his daddy didn’t appear to be giving up control of anything anytime soon.
“I know it. You just keep working hard, baby. Your daddy’s gonna make good on that promise. He can’t keep it up, anyway, with that bad back.”

My eyes went to the stacks and stacks of treasure his daddy had leaned against the weathered grey boards of the house and the shed—stacks that started long before me and got thicker after his wife died. Machinery. Old wood. Bicycles. Tires. Boxes. Bureaus and car chassis. Shoes. Books left to rot in the rain. Rakes. Handles from hammers and axes. Weed whackers. Stacks and stacks for all the world to see as they drove by.

Whitewashed fences, crackling into disrepair. Everywhere, the rust of collection without use. Something not healthy about that, I knew it even at the time, even though people just said behind his back that Tucker was eccentric. I wouldn’t go in. It scared me too much—how could somebody live in a house with no windows and all that junk? A schoolhouse was no house, anyway.

“I’m gonna build you a real house for those babies, too. Big house.”

I shut my eyes, dreaming of a house. Not a schoolhouse, house, either. A real one, with windows. Rooms. A full-sized kitchen. Privacy. A bathroom with a tub where I could take a long, hot bath and shut out the world. I could put up with this for now, holding that dream.

It sure took a long time for it to work out like he said. Years passed and with them came babies. They didn’t all survive. I had the two boys and lost two before birth. But we had those two boys in the trailer and a baby girl on the way when Cole’s daddy finally gave us the company. Cole had just turned thirty. People thought that was young to be in charge, but all of the sudden it was all his daddy could talk about, rushing the papers
through like he was afraid for it not to happen soon enough. His back was getting unpredictable, he told everyone. It was gonna be Cole’s someday, anyhow.

Carson had been working less and spending more time in his shed. The company took a backseat to his drinking.

I didn’t worry one bit about the Missouri Flat Asphalt Company under Cole’s care. He intended to do big things—in the waiting years when we’d been dreaming he’d been making plans to expand the business, even going as far as to make friends with a new developer from the Woodgate housing development who was looking to move up the mountain from El Dorado Hills.

When Cole took control, when we finally moved, we didn’t move into a big house. But it was a house. With walls. And Internet. We got away from that schoolhouse and the shed and his daddy’s piles, and Jodie was born just after we moved in. After the years in the trailer, the worry and the choking pressure of the piles around us, I took it gratefully. Times were fat enough we didn’t worry about what to eat, and we lived well in our modest place. I thanked God for my boys and my baby girl and for my man who’d make decisions so I didn’t have to.

Though Cole’s daddy handed over the company to Cole and he kept right on working like nothing changed, he stopped talking. He didn’t offer advice, didn’t comment on the weather. Nothing. Cole said he was just letting him be the big man. He drove a truck. He shoveled rock, just like old days before he worked his way up. All the time, his face looked hard like rock. If there was one thing the Tucker men knew it was the satisfaction of sweat on their clothes at the end of a long day, the comfort of a hot
meal. I decided to let the sudden silence go and hope the hard work was enough to keep him happy. At work he seemed fine, Cole said, but when he came over for dinner he didn’t talk to either of us. Just sat. Made me nervous.

“You think your dad’s okay?” I’d ask Cole as Carson drove away after pot roast dinner squeezed around our little table. Cole wouldn’t look out the window. He barely looked up from the flash of ads on Spike TV.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t he be alright?”

That was that. If there was one thing I learned as a woman in the Tucker clan, it was to leave well enough alone.

I didn’t have much time to think about it, anyway.

They said Carson Tucker just must not have looked to the right before he stepped out on the highway. It didn’t make sense to me, not for a man who’s been on that job that long. I guess that’s just one of those freak things. The kind of things we don’t talk about after they happen. Just another thing not to say. They say he didn’t look right as he stepped out and the truck was backing up to dump a load out on the highway. The driver didn’t see him, and Cole said he ran shouting at the truck door but it was too late. It was probably over before he knew what hit him.

His daddy died on the road.

Avery burst into the pawnshop and antique store, sending the bells at the door ringing against each other. His back ached where a long bruise formed at his shoulder
blade — right where his back struck the ground when Josh came at him. The small store smelled of whisky, old plank flooring, pipe smoke and dust. Like a church full of old sinners. Avery tried to steady himself before he spoke to the owner, and he took a moment to fix his eyes on the antique jewelry beneath the yellowed glass up front.

Breathe, he thought. Breathe first. Slow down.

“…I help you, son?” A man Avery guessed to be in his forties walked up the length of the store after helping a tourist at the back counter. The younger of the Pearson men. He wore a red plaid shirt and his thick grey hair looked home-cut.

Avery hesitated. How to take the right tack with this? “Yeah, um. I was wondering if… well, I was hoping if I… may I please speak to your father? Uh. Sir.”

“Speak to my father?” He laughed. Clearly the formality of the request didn’t sound right coming out of this skinny hick kid. “What in the world? Yeah, okay. Hang on. I’ll get him.”

Avery’s gaze went back to the cases near the counter. The aisles of the old building were narrow, from a time when Avery imagined people just must have been littler, and the tourist woman bumped into him with her fat purse on her way out the door onto the bustling downtown. It was busy in the summer, packed with out-of-towners looking for old stuff to fill their tract homes. Avery checked his bike by the lamppost. Still there. He looked again to the case, walking down the row to the knives. How many of these knives came from families that didn’t even miss them? It had been a sure thing, he thought, when he saw how buried it was in the junk of the shed at Josh’s house, the one they moved into after his grandpa died. That knife was easy money they wouldn’t
even miss. After all, Josh had said, nobody ever comes out here anymore, anyway. It’s too big a mess.

Guess that wasn’t really true. He figured Josh would just think his mom moved it when she was going through his granddad’s junk, along with the other piles.

Avery’s eyes scanned the display case. It had to be here, right? Tucker’s knife? It had to. Josh was going to kick his ass if it wasn’t. Tucker’s calloused fists and thick forearms came to mind and he shook the thought away about what might happen to him if the knife didn’t come back. He couldn’t even let himself think on it, on what else might happen. They probably just took the old knife in the back to clean it.

He brushed at the dust in the windowsill with his index finger. Outside the thick, yellowed glass people moved back and forth laughing, eating six-dollar ice cream cones and getting in and out of shiny SUVs.

After some murmuring just out of sight, the old man rocked himself out of the back doorway, using a knotted pine cane to both stabilize himself and propel him forward with every step. Avery recognized him from the week before, and breathed a sigh of relief. Hopefully he could just explain to Mr. Pearson what was going on and they could make some kind of deal. Pearson was grizzled, the kind of guy who looked like God shaped his face out of salt dough and sprinkled it with whiskers; he’d been old his whole life, Avery thought. The kind of man who didn’t have time for kids who came back looking for the stuff they’d sold him, if Avery was reading him right. The kind who wouldn’t want to hear about anything he had to say. Pearson finally made his way up to the front of the store.
“Well?”

“Mr. Pearson,” he began, and then he fell back on the teenage habit of undercutting his whole request before he got it out. “I know this is probably a dumb thing to ask, um, sir. But I was, uh, I was wondering if you still had that knife I sold you the other day? The Wost—West… What’d you call it?”

“Wostenholm.”

“Wostenholm. Yeah, that. The Bowie? The Gold Rush knife? With all the writing on it? And that leather case?”

“Two hundred bucks.”

“Yeah. That knife.”

“That came from you, kid?” Pearson’s son asked, his ears perking up at the mention of the knife.

“Well, uh. I know you gave me two hundred for it… And, um, I can’t give you that back just yet, but I need to get it back…” Avery had, in fact, spent sixteen dollars of the money on a gluttonous trip to Taco Bell, kept nine “just in case” and given one seventy five to his mom to help make rent. She was too deep in depression this month to even ask him where it came from. He had no earthly idea how he was going to get it back or even ask Mom about doing so, but first he needed to find out what it was going to take to return Josh’s daddy’s knife.

“I’ll stop ya right there, kid,” Pearson’s son interrupted. “That knife’s gone, anyway. Wouldn’t matter none if you had the money or not. Man on eBay bought it, I shipped it out to Truckee yesterday.”
“But I need…”

Pearson smiled at Avery, patronizing. “Wostenholm Bowie like that? Gold Rush knife with inscriptions? Make more than two hundred on eBay. Lot more. Three thousand more.”

Avery’s ears burned with embarrassment—for having to beg back his trade but more so for being duped in the first place. How excited he’d been to hear Pearson suggest two hundred. He hadn’t even bothered to haggle. Just took the two hundred dollars like a shithead and skipped out of the store to fatten himself on Chalupas and come home the hero. Idiot.

Weekends, early mornings, as the boys got into grade school, Cole used to take them fishing or out to watch him hunt deer. I said there wasn’t sense in taking little boys hunting, but he wouldn’t hear it. We were still living on the Tucker property then, with that damned schoolhouse full of garbage, and I was too blue from back-to-back miscarriages to do much but sleep when I got the chance. I welcomed the break, so I didn’t argue the point. Besides, what was the sense of that, anyway? This was Cole we were talking about. There was no arguing with right. He said he was taking the boys out, so he was taking the boys out.

I knew better than to push it, or I might lose my few hours’ peace.

One particular morning I got a bug about being stuck in the trailer. Sat bolt upright in bed and couldn’t get out of that tin can fast enough because I felt like there was no air. It was like the weight of years, those losses of babies, the wait for a house, was
suddenly all sitting right on top of my chest, and it made my arms heavy and my pinkies go numb. I felt like there was a tight band around me.

I scrambled into my boots and a coat with my nightgown and started down toward the ravine. The little baby creek at the bottom was growing down there with autumn rainfall and I knew it would be the freshest air in the place. Long time, I sat there on a cold piece of granite, just listening to the air through the pines and the water against the rocks. Quartz bits twinkled in the mud.

I started to get too cold, so I wandered up along the edge of the property, following the single cable that Carson strung across two oaks to bring electricity to the schoolhouse. I traced a line along the rusted out wire fence, behind rusted out wagon wheels and the fenders from a red-orange 1973 Plymouth. Abandoned cut firewood let off a moist scent of rot behind the shed he’d cobbled out of scrap wood and corrugated metal. The crisp morning air burned a little in my nose. A flicker caught my eye on the other side of the fence and I caught a doe jumping behind a thick hedge of manzanita.

From the shop I heard singing. Carson was working his way—badly—through Johnny Cash’s Hey Porter. Rather than being upbeat and jingly, it wafted out of the shed like a sad dirge accompanied by the occasional drop of metal into a coffee tin.

“Hey porter, hey porter pleashe get my bagsh for meegeee
I need... nobody ... tell me now that we’re in Tennessee
Go tell... engineer to make that lonesome whistle scream
We  gettin' close from home so take it eashy on the ...team”
My god, I thought. He’s stone drunk at nine in the morning. I liked the old man, though. Even drunk, he gave off the same bravado as his son. Alcohol seemed to make them even more charming, more bold. I walked around to the open door to see what was up.

He smelled like he’d sweat in his clothes and then slept in them. Or maybe he hadn’t slept at all, given his current state. “Hey porter--” He stopped mid sentence at the sight of me in my nightgown and mucky boots. “Oh. What the hell you doin’, girl?”

“I thought I might ask you the same thing, Carson.” I smiled. I didn’t spend a ton of time alone with him since Cole and I got married, but our relationship was decent. He liked to show me things on the property, explain to me the intricate workings of the asphalt business.

The contents of his toolbox were spilled all over the workbench. The offending bottle of whiskey sat just under the bare light bulb, cap off. I reached for it on my way in.

“Mind if I have a nip?” I lifted it up. “Been a rough night for me. No sleep.”

“The 5:00 somewhere,” he said, not that I thought he gave two shits about what o’clock he started drinking. I imagined he was out here to avoid something, the same way I was out to get away from my four walls. Things closing in on me choked my air. I didn’t imagine Carson found solace in the creek, though, like I did. Something about all these piles he kept told me he wanted to be closed in. How many times had I asked Cole to start hauling junk off to the dump? But he wouldn’t do it. He said we had to let it go out of respect. That he didn’t like it neither but he couldn’t do that to his daddy.
I took a swig and set it down on the bench before taking a seat on an old stool next to his workspace.

“I was looking for this—“ he said to himself, more than me. He rifled around on the top shelf of his shed, pushing around cigar boxes that looked identical to me. “This one thing,” he said, lifting it up and in front of him where he could show me, “that is my granddaddy’s knife.” From the cigar box he lifted a Bowie knife in a dry leather sheath, dark with stains. The handle was worn wood grain, but when he slid it from its sheath the blade gleamed. In the shed light I could see it was inscribed with some kind of text.

“Granddaddy got this back when we was still Hangtown,” he continued, “well, Dry Diggins, it was called before that. C’mere, girl. Come look at it. Right around Gold Rush times, it was.”

I stood up and walked around the workbench, taking my place next to him, despite the mixed smell of Johnny Walker and workin’ man. He held the blade sideways to the light so we could read it. It appeared to be etched with quotes about America. Patriotic stuff.

“Wow.”

“ Took it off a man gonna be hanged, Grandpa did. Soldier come out here wanting to pan after Marshall got lucky. Stole a horse, though, that soldier. You hang for that.”

The sheath was worn, but the knife gleamed in the light of the bulb. Clearly he had taken this out on a regular basis. I wasn’t sure what else to say. I kicked the stacks of kindling and rusted horse bits that littered the floor.
Carson was somewhere else, though. Not in old Hangtown or with the miners. In
the light his eyes looked teary. He blinked something away that he didn’t want to share. I
got that.

He was drunk.

I stood next to him, acutely aware of the space between us, afraid to put my arm
out for fear of breaking too close into his pain.

“I took it, Josh,” Avery said.

The two boys stood in front of Josh’s house. Avery had never been so afraid to
tell anybody anything, but there was no out. The knife was gone, and even if he could
track down who it went to, there was no way in hell he could raise the money he’d need
to get it back. His light hair was stuck to his forehead with sweat. “I took it and I sold it
to Pearson last week. And Pearson already sold it to some collector guy on eBay.”

Josh was shaking his head. “No. No. You couldn’t sell it. You couldn’t… my
dad…”

“Josh, I know. I’m so sorry. I just… I just…”

The blow to his face wasn’t a surprise, but Avery expected more to follow.
Instead, Josh hit him once and fell into a heap on the brick walkway and started crying
and trying to hold in his gasps. “Fuck you, Avery!” he shouted over his shoulder. The
words spurted out through blubbery lips, though he tried to keep the crying noises to a
minimum.
Avery stood, useless. He couldn’t leave Josh like this but he was the reason for the whole scene. So he stood, never hating himself more than in this one moment. The sun was already behind the hill and the sky was a hard orange against the silhouette of trees at the top of the hill.

“That knife was my grandpa’s and he’s GONE!” Josh continued to yell. “You—you—FUCKER!” he yelled, and he hurled a rock in Avery’s direction.

Avery didn’t duck it, but Josh missed.

The front door of the house opened, and Josh’s mom stepped out, a thin wisp of a woman whose face was as pale and colorless as her long braid of graying hair. She wrapped a shawl tighter around her shoulders. “Josh, come here.”

Rather than immediately follow her soft request, Josh collapsed to the ground again. “Dad’s gonna kill me, Mom.” He nodded his head toward the still dumbstruck Avery. “Or he might kill Ave.”

Mrs. Tucker slid slippered feet out of the house and down the steps. She crouched by Josh as she did when he was young. “Josh. What are you talking about?”

The call to Avery’s mom had been quick, and though she promised to repay us as soon as possible, I didn’t hold out hope for much. From what I’d heard, she was having a hard time taking care of herself lately, let alone repaying any debts. I wasn’t exactly demanding when I talked to her, just thought she should know, is all. There wasn’t much we could do outside of taking them to court, and I wasn’t sure that would do any real
good around here, anyway, taking a sad shadow of a single mom and her son into court to make them repay something they couldn’t pay anyway. Bad blood between families in this kind of small town just wasn’t right. Josh had stopped talking to Avery, but I could tell it was himself he was more mad at than anything. Something burned in him now that I sometimes saw in his daddy. I was sure it wasn’t something I could put my finger on, but the ties of fathers and sons seemed complicated.

I tried to let it be.

Cole retreated into himself much the same way his own daddy did after he gave us the company, and he couldn’t bear looking at Josh, though I’d explained to him time and time over that Josh didn’t control Avery. Cole became a steely fixture around the house, critical and harsh. Any warmth he felt for us was hidden somewhere deep under anger at Josh.

“You want some more meatloaf?” I asked at dinner, aware that Cole was somewhere else in his head.

Cole didn’t respond, but instead stared at the boxes in the corner of what we called the dining room. Really it was a side of the schoolhouse that we now inhabited, much to my great disappointment. The economy hit the Missouri Flat Asphalt Company just as hard as everyone else, and we lost our little piece of freedom. Since Carson Tucker was gone and somebody needed to clean up the place, Cole said it only made sense for us to move back onto his parents’ house. The dream of getting away was short-lived.

Now we sat at our dining room table at the front of a sad, windowless old school room, on the raised platform where a teacher desk must have been. The boxes held
assorted pieces of Carson’s collection that we thought we might be able to sell—the pieces that were untouched by mold or rot, at least.

“Cole.”

“Huh, what? Sorry.” Spike TV flickered in the corner, erectile dysfunction ads blinking with smiling men. In the light of the fixture hung over the table I could see the deep furrows in Cole’s forehead. They’d grown more creased since his father’s passing. Since the knife disappeared, he’d been scowling at just about everything.

“I asked if you wanted anymore meatloaf, Cole.”

“The thing is, that knife is just about the only thing I wanted to keep in this godforsaken house. Everything he stacked up around his house is just useless… old man ramblings about what he was gonna use and all that…”

“Take some more before it gets cold,” I tried again with the meatloaf, lifting a spatula-full onto his plate. I was afraid to respond to his disjointed thoughts.

“He used to bring that thing hunting with us when I was a kid. He showed it to me when I was in grade school, told me it was special. Told me it was going to be mine one day… He’s gone.”

He seemed not to be able to form a sentence. He was talking, but not to me.

“Honey, it’s just a knife. It wouldn’t bring your daddy back. Josh and Avery didn’t know…” I thought back to my conversation with Carson in the shed, his teary, drunken mumbling. I never told Cole about it because I was afraid it would make him think his father weak. I learned to keep quiet about difficult things early in our marriage, and that’s what worked.
Cole never said much to me about that knife, though, until we started to clear the property and move our stuff in. When it went missing I figured Josh just took it out to poke at things down by the creek. Now he’d fixated so much on that missing knife he pushed Josh away. He pushed me away. He had family right here but he couldn’t see us.

His hand tightened around the fork, and he stabbed meatloaf mindlessly while he talked and stared at the TV. “It’s Josh, though. He’s too soft. It’s fucking time he started acting like a man. I need to have a word with that boy. He won’t go touching my stuff anymore, that’s for sure.”

Each knife show Avery’d go to, he’d ask around. Had anyone seen a Gold Rush Bowie with inscriptions on the blade? A real shiny Wostenholm? Always the answer was no. Always gristled faces looking at him saying no, wow, that would be a real find, though. Always the same sinking feeling. Always the thought that maybe he should go up and down one more aisle. It might be there.

Josh didn’t speak to him. Not more than to say hi if they passed in the hall at school—not like before, at least. Avery felt like if he could just find it, if he could bring the knife back, he could make it right. Fix him and Josh. Fix Josh and his dad. He spent his nights searching for mentions of the Bowie on knife forums, writing posts that made himself sound like a seasoned collector rather than a skinny-assed poor kid. Had anyone heard of one? He was a serious buyer. He didn’t fuck around. He had money to spend. Would trade or pay cash. Contact immediately.
Did he have the money? Sort of. Maybe close. He’d been becoming sort of a collector, himself, amassing piles around himself in his room. Shit to sell. Things to keep. Other knives he could get online and sell for a little bit more cash. Things that might be worth something. Things he might need. Things someone else might need. Mom continued to get worse, ignored him altogether. The stuff made him feel like he was doing something. Like he was moving. At least he was filling up his room with something. The blue glow of his computer screen at night wasn’t heat, but the all the stuff made the empty space feel more filled in.

He made money, here and there. Gave some to Mom. At least he kept them afloat. But the knife was still out there.

If he could keep selling, if he could keep himself in that world, he could get to it. He was sure of that. He kept checking in with Pearson. The old man had more contacts than him. He spent his nights searching the same auctions online, watching them count down. He spent his days bringing things home. Checking the mail. Cataloging. Making piles. Stacking things and trying to remember what he’d bought.

He could do this.

So when Pearson told him he’d heard about a man who’d be at the Tahoe Gun and Knife show who had a lot of rare Civil War era knives, the kind of man who was rumored to have something like what Avery wanted, Avery borrowed the car and headed up. He found the man in stall eighty-seven and pored over the grease-worn glass cases of dead relatives’ treasures resting on their cracked leather cases. There in the back corner of the third row was Tucker’s knife. He’d know it anywhere. The inscriptions were cut deep
into the shiny blade. He could barely get the money from his hand into the dealer’s, he was shaking so bad. It was more money than he’d ever seen in one place. More than two months rent. But he knew this would put it all back, make things how they were.

    Thank god nobody’s checking ID for weapons sales, he thought.

    Avery drove the knife home wrapped in his black hoodie on the seat next to him, electric with the thought of it.

    He pushed through the door and into his room. The sweatshirt was wound around the knife and he hugged it close to himself. He sat down on the bed and held it on his lap, waiting. In the cold room, he made a decision. This was his by all rights. Not Josh’s. Not Tucker’s. They had been careless, let it go. He could hand it over; he knew how that played out. What it looked like if he gave it back. All this work—something in the work changed him. He didn’t want it to play out like he’d thought.

    He was keeping it.


###
Marla used to be a fatty. But not anymore. She’d had the gastric bypass. Dr. Ishikawa cut out some of her guts, and after, she lost the weight of approximately one teenager.

But now her body was trying to reinstate itself as obese from the ground up: a refattening that made her look unbalanced: top half a narrow, sagging, half-empty sack of pale white, thin skin supported by a wide stance of tree trunk legs that thickened to cellulite plumpness.

Her old life was this: Oreos, and ribs, and late night trips through the drive-thru for double portions of fried chicken with two drinks so it wouldn’t look like she was going to eat it all herself. Her new life was the privileged world of the thin. Her body was undecided though; unable to choose yet which one it was to have.

Marla didn’t want to see it, though, that fat girl working her way back up to the top, one calorie at a time. All she saw when she looked in her bathroom mirror from the waist up was her new self, her skinny self, and she dressed that top half in flashy, stretchy-tight polyester tops. She flat-ironed her bleached blonde hair, she layered on makeup and bright acrylic nails. Bought the most expensive shoes and handbags. Everything below the waist, she ignored. Just didn’t look down, and hoped it didn’t grow. She covered it all in sensible black state worker pants with elastic waistbands, and sensible square-toe black comfort loafers.
Marla was most proud of her post-surgery breasts. Not naked—*god no*, then, they scared her—but with a little clothing, with some scaffolding, she could work them into a wonderful illusion. Once stretched beyond capacity with fat, they now hung in front of her body like two wrinkled elephant trunks if she let them loose. But thanks to a wide strapped, solid truss of a bra, Marla was able to mold them into two round, front-pointed melons which she lifted high above her newly thinned waist each morning before work. She’d study her silhouette (waist-up, of course) in the bathroom mirror, and run her hands over them, admiring the shape they made. She thought her boobs looked marvelous beneath her glittering fuchsia wrap top, the line of cleavage they made from just beneath her neck to the deep V of the collar gave the picture of fullness, bustiness, sex.

Each morning she’d squeeze into her blue Toyota Camry and merge onto Hwy 99 North headed for Sacramento, on her way to her Manager II position at the Department of Fish and Wildlife. Each morning, she’d take the exit for K street so she could swing through McDonald’s and order a large Diet Soda. She didn’t drink coffee—she found it kind of bitter and gross—but she liked the bubbles and the early pick me up.

This particular morning was already warm, and the morning DJs cackled about a heat wave on her car radio. Marla was sweating as she checked her makeup in the rearview at the drive-thru. It had been one year since her surgery, today, and it felt important. She pulled at the pits of her three-quarter sleeve top. She liked how it strapped in the loose skin above her elbows, but it wasn’t helping her breathe much and her gently dimpled flesh pressed against the fabric’s limits. She studied her jaw line in the mirror. It
looked bonier, she decided. Her friends at work were bound to say something today. She knew how much she’d changed in a year.

Marla wanted them to, after all. She’d been dropping hints for weeks about this big day. They couldn’t miss it, just like she was sure they couldn’t miss how good she looked. She knew their compliments were going to be just the thing she needed. She had an application for a new job sitting in her purse—a promotion—she’d been carrying it around for two weeks, and she just needed a little push to send it out. To go for it.

Finally, she inched her car up to the speaker and pushed her window down.

“Would you like to try our new Triple Berry Smoo—”

“This is Marla. I want my Big Diet and my—”

“I’m sorry. What?”

“Marla. MAR-LA.” Jesus. A newbie. Where was Joey? “Get Joey, sweetie. It’s Marla. He’ll know. I always talk to Joey. He gets me my Big Diet and my hash browns. HASH BROWNS.”

There was a sputtering non-response on the other end of the intercom and then Joey. “Hey Marl. I gotcha, hon. Pull up and I’ll have it all for you in a sec.”

Marla liked Joey. She liked routine. Hash browns, she loved.

She knew she shouldn’t be eating two hash browns. Probably not even one. She was gonna get the shits. All that oil. But she was so hungry. It was so early to already feel guilty.

She hoped the diet soda would do something to counteract the bad in it. At least her Big Diet wasn’t going to make her fatter. Was that right? What had Dr. Ishikawa said
about diet drinks? She couldn’t remember, but she loved a Big Diet. It didn’t have any calories. She was pretty sure she didn’t have to worry about it. He’d never know, anyway, Dr. Ishikawa.

It was all so complicated. *Eat this, measure that.* She did it—well, she tried—but not for long after the surgery. And when she started to get such amazing results so fast? It didn’t seem like it mattered what she ate. She was losing anyway. Her body was just… doing it. The doctor said *limit yourself to small portions. Avoid fatty foods, Marla.* But Marla was sure if small portions of healthy foods were okay, surely a tiny portion of a fatty one was fine. Sure she started to have some bathroom issues, but who didn’t, right? Sometimes she thought the worrying was doing it to her. It made her crazy.

She rolled her Camry down the driveway and onto the street, licking hash brown grease from her fingers and wiping it on her pants. She hit all the red lights on K street, but she didn’t care because it gave her time to eat. By 10th, both hash browns were gone and she had sucked down half the soda. Marla burped. She looked at the dashboard clock. 7:53. She wasn’t going to make it in before her employees. Damn. But maybe they’d think she was doing it to be nice; that she was a supervisor who wasn’t sitting at her desk, tapping her pen, waiting, at 7:59. They could have it so much worse.

At 8:07 she was pulling into her parking space. She took her time walking to the elevator—Marla didn’t rush, ever—and she was stepping off the elevator onto the 11th floor at 8:21. The college boy who worked reception made a quick look to her fuchsia top, and Marla took it as a compliment. Though, truth be told, Marla couldn’t really tell fear from respect or admiration on the pink, pimply faces of those nervous young ones.
As she tried to read his face for the verity of this imagined compliment, he gave an awkward cough, and looked back to his computer screen, which he’d positioned carefully so its back was to the clear Plexiglas guarding his small fishbowl of a booth.

Marla scanned her badge at the door and it clicked open. She pulled it open, stomach hitting the handle of the door as it brushed past her bottom half.

“I’m here,” she called, walking down the center aisle of beige cubes on dark brown carpet. She imagined the smiling faces that would peer out of each tiny office box to greet her, compliment her on her new top, tell her how proud they were of what she’d overcome in the last year.

Silence.

She kept at it. “Happy Tuesday…”

Heads turned in rather than out. She stopped at the third grayish brown office space. She was determined to get someone to turn an eye or chat a bit. She peered in cubes. Nothing. Backs of heads, everywhere.

“Why, Scuba Steve. How the heck are you?” She cooed into the opening of his workspace, raising her voice so she was sure to be heard. Steve didn’t turn from his computer screen, nor did he remove the giant white headphones that covered his ears.

“Marla, I told you, I don’t SCUBA dive,” Steve had said about a month ago. “I don’t really get the nickname, either. I don’t know why you call me that. You can just call me Steve, like everyone else here does. It’s making me kind of—“

“Oh, Scuba. You’re Scuba because you wear those black sweaters like a wetsuit, hon. And you’re skinny, like a SCUBA diver. You should get some of those SCUBA
pants too, Steve.” Marla didn’t know if there were such a thing as SCUBA pants, but she knew if there were, he’d look good in ‘em. “You should SCUBA, Scuba Steve. Have you thought about it? I mean, it’s your name… you just look like somebody who would be good at it. Anyway, I’ve been calling you that for too long now, Steve. It’s already in my mind. It’s too late. You’re always gonna be my Scuba Steve.”

Right after that, Scuba started wearing headphones every morning.

“Scuba. SCUBA. SCU-BA.” Marla tapped a greasy hash brown finger on his plastic earpiece until he jumped.

“Jesus Christ, Marla. Don’t.”

“Morning, Scuba. How are you doin’ hon’? I need to ask you something. How are those training PowerPoints I asked you to look over for me?” She pushed a blonde section of hair out of her face with a thick acrylic nail.

Marla said “look over” but she meant “do.” One of the perks of middle management in Fish and Wildlife—one of the only perks—was that Marla could pass off work from her boss to her employees.

Steve made a show of looking from pile to pile on his desk. “Oh, uh. I’m really, uh, backed up, Marl. I’m not sure when I’ll be able to…” His hand was on his left headphone, which was still on his ear. “I’m super swamped.”

Marla stood in front of him, staring hard into his face. She gave him plenty of time to notice her top. Plenty of time to say something about the day. Plenty of time to do the right thing. She placed her hands delicately on her hips like those skinny-girl models she was always seeing on the magazines in the grocery store lines. She even tilted
forward like she was looking at his computer screen, gave him a good look at the girls.

Steve appeared not to have a pulse.

He was not buying what she had for sale.

There was a long silence between them and then the sloshing of Marla’s Big Diet soda in the giant cup—or was it her stomach? Neither of them knew for sure, but then Marla started to speak. “Scuba Steve, you g—“

Oh god.

A wuff of a burp ballooned out from the meeting place of hash brown and carbonated syrup, up through Marla’s esophagus, past her tongue, through her teeth, and out into Steve’s cubicle by way of the breathable air just in front of his face. He felt a slight waft of hot, greasy gas across his cheek, and stilled his own breathing so as not to ingest more than its top note.

“—get that to me by three or so today, okay?” she finished, finally taking a step away from Steve to head toward her own desk. She noted Steve trying to take in a gulp of fresh air invisibly. He breathed out of the side of his mouth.

Marla wanted to die. She tried to back away.

He pushed his chair away, inhaling his words to get air. “Yeah, you know, on second thought, I think I can do that for you, no problem Marl.” He pulled his headphones back over his other ear and turned away.

Marla walked cautiously past two more cubes, ever hopeful someone would notice her new fuchsia top. Just in case anyone wanted to say hey Marl, looking good! Proud of you, Marla, high five! You make me feel like I can get out there and lose some
weight too! But they didn’t. Not Becky Beaver, not Hannah Banana, not Joshy Wosherson. None of her employees seemed to be taking the bait, giving her that nod. Everyone’s head turned away, inconveniently, as she would glide by, to something fascinating at the back corner of his or her cubicle. Every ear was covered and every eye trained on a screen, held by some engrossing task.

She found her spot at her own desk, and set to work unpacking her things, placing the Big Diet on a coaster near her keyboard and opening her pink, insulated lunch container to preview her snacks and make a decision about which ones to eat before lunch, and thus leave here, and which ones she’d take to the community break room fridge until such time she could enjoy them, later. She needed to leave a good selection close at hand for food emergencies.

Marla felt the gas bubbles working in her stomach already, so she took out her can of Glade strawberries and cream spray from the right bottom desk drawer and gave the air above her head a few good circles of perfumey fresh scent. Just in case. She set it back on the desktop because she was sure she was going to need it again in a moment as those hash browns asserted themselves. She was pretty sure she’d been doing a good job of giving herself cover for any post-surgery tummy troubles with the Glade. Who didn’t like strawberries, anyway? It reminded her of her Strawberry Shortcake dolls from when she was a kid. She was doing everyone in the office a favor by making the whole place smell better, anyway.

To get the morning going, Marla selected a Yoplait strawberry yogurt, and just in case she got hungry for something else, she set out a mini can of peach slices. A third
grader’s pop-top recess kind of snack. Marla didn’t like fresh fruits and veggies—too crunchy and flavorless—but the kind in the can tasted good, real sweet, and she felt like that was better than no fruit. She was still trying to be good since the surgery. She figured these peaches gave her a little fiber. She was afraid of getting too hungry. She knew that was bad. She read somewhere about keeping food around all day—healthy food—as a way to avoid temptation and keep weight off. The article wasn’t for people who had GB, but just for people in general. So what could it hurt her, you know, to eat some healthy snacks?

Marla reached into her pen cup and selected the right pen for the day, a fresh magenta, metallic gel pen that matched her top. She popped the top off and swirled a few strokes on a lavender post-it note. Perfection. Taking some initiative, Marla! That’s what they like to see. That’s what’s going to get you that new job. Losin’ weight, getting jobs. She opened her email and addressed a few minor fish licensing questions. She changed the text color of her default Comic Sans to a dark pink to match the pen and her top. After running to the kitchen to deposit her lunch bag, she figured it was time to get started planning that morning’s meeting.

Marla took out a clipboard and some paper and wrote, “MORNING MEETING” in all caps at the top, complete with quotation marks on each side. She just liked how it looked in quotes; it seemed more official and kind of cute. She doodled a flower on each side of the words. Marla was distracted. She took a break to eat again before really diving in—she really was kinda snacky—and made short work of the yogurt. She sucked the
yogurt from the spoon and scraped at the corners of the container, making loud slurps that carried over the short cubicle walls and alerted her coworkers to the time of day.

*Strawberry cloud from the northeast corner,* they emailed each other. *Yogurt slurps. We are go for Yogurt at 9:48, people.*

But Marla didn’t know any of this, and she tossed the yogurt container, licked the spoon clean, and looked again to the list on her desk. “MORNING MEETING.”

She searched her desk drawer for lip-gloss so she could reapply what she ate off with the yogurt. Smack smack. Check the jawline in the mirror. *Gorge. You did it Marla.*

And oops if all her time wasn’t gone, like that. It was time for the morning meeting and all she had was “MORNING MEETING” on that paper. Still. She meant to take the time to at least have an agenda for them. Some kind of plan, a list. Now it was 10:02, she had to be in the conference room two minutes ago, and she had nothing.

*Better put it on them, Marl.*

They were all waiting for her when she pushed the glass door open. Once again, she noticed the heads turned away from her, then a lack of acknowledgement as she circled the heavy oak table. She thought it was going to be different after the surgery.

Well, it was at first. There was a lot of attention, which wasn’t exactly comfortable, either. She didn’t know what to do with all of those people telling her how much better she looked because it meant they all noticed just how shitty she looked before. A lifetime of trying to hide from people’s eyes didn’t prepare her for all the looks she got post-surgery, and yet she wanted them. But all of the initial shock was gone now, and people stopped complimenting, which also felt sad. Sadder, maybe. Even though her
clothes and her colors got brighter, they seemed bored with her changes. *You just have to try harder to get them to notice you, Marla*, she told herself. *Try harder and they’ll like you for you.*

She smacked her lips together a few times. Cleared her throat. Nothing. Becky and Jeff were deep in a conversation about a yoga class they’d had together. Marla wanted focus on her. Now. She was prepared to take control at their expense, if she had to.

“Let’s settle down and get this going, people,” she interrupted, “I don’t have all day to wait around while you talk to each other about your weekends. We need to talk about the new regulations for licensing.” Rebecca stopped talking, but she turned to look at Marla. Marla wasn’t about to acknowledge her own lateness out loud. Becky’s face betrayed a quick, silent struggle to her coworkers. One of a person who knows, in short, that professing an opinion in any way will simply retard and complicate what already promises to be a long and soul-deadening meeting and career.

Marla tried to brush off Becky’s open mouth, big-tooth stare. She pulled out her favorite rolling chair in the back of the conference room—it had the softest cushion and the others had been instructed *not* to sit in it—and she puffed into it while they watched. Her thighs squeezed through the armholes of the chair like two sand bags holding her disproportionately light torso down. She scooted the chair up close to the table. Tight, so her best half was showing. She had every eye in the room on her and she was prepared to captivate them for the next hour.
Marla smoothed her hair. Looked at each face in the circle. Prepared herself for the onslaught of compliments. *Time to get mine*, she thought. *This is what I’ve been waiting for*. She thought about that job application in her purse. About how bad she wanted to go for it, about how sick she was of Fish and Wildlife, but how she just didn’t know if she could take the leap and send it out. *All I need is a little reassurance. This will show me. These guys love me. I’m hard on them, but they appreciate it because I’m a good boss. It’s what they need.* She pushed hard because she cared. And she knew they must have something up their sleeves. A cake. Some balloons. Something to say way to go, boss, we noticed.

They sure were taking long enough to get to it, though.

She talked and made some important sounding shit up to fill the time, then made Steve show them the PowerPoint. When he said didn’t really want to, when he made some noise about them not really being done yet because she didn’t need them until three, she made an example out of him about being eager and ready to take on anything at any time. She used the opportunity to work in a lecture about bad attitudes and how theirs could sure be improved. And when Steve didn’t have the PowerPoint hooked up the right way through the laptop and the LCD projector, she took the opportunity to give them a piece of her mind about how they could, maybe, be a little bit more informed about how the technology in this office worked. Because they were the young ones, after all, and if they couldn’t be counted on to know how to do this stuff, who could? Of course, all of this she said with a smile, with a sweet-as-pie, *I’m just here to help you guys* approach,
one she was sure they couldn’t take issue with. After all, it could be worse than Marla. She knew this for a fact.

“Look you guys, this isn’t me who makes the rules,” she said “this is just how it is in the real world. I’m just trying to tell it to you straight so you know how to get ahead.” They looked at her with blank stares through most of the meeting, faces willfully designed not to betray any particular emotion.

She was starting to get sweaty again. She wished they’d hurry up and acknowledge her big day.

Finally Steve got his computer to show up on the screen, and he started to try to present the unfinished slides in his training presentation. Marla cracked the can of peaches open. She proceeded to eat them with her fingers once she realized she forgot a fork. Damn.

“So this is the first slide I’d like to show in the training,” Steve said, “It just gives an overview of the agenda for the day so people know what they’re—“

Marla sucked a peach slice from between her fingers, then sucked the juice off each finger. Dammit if she didn’t remember to bring a napkin, either. She licked her open palm.

All eyes in the room were on her as she raised the second slice to her mouth.

“Watching my girlish figure, you know. Been a year since my surgery.” Silence.
“Fruit,” she said, holding it up a little higher, as if to say *look, I’m doing it right.* Marla laughed. They didn’t. They didn’t say a word, either, but instead looked back to Steve.

“So, uh, anyway, I want them to come into this training knowing what to expect.” *Slurp.* She was trying, but these peaches, they just made so much noise. “The next three give a visual for the new procedures we’re--” *Slurp.* “rolling out.”

“Steve, what’s your plan for fielding questions during the presentations? Marla asked, thinking she’d make a good show of being attentive. “Are you going to do a kind of Q and A thing at the end, or are you going to just handle them on the fly as you go?”

“I’m glad you asked, Marla. I was thinking I’d like to get some feedback from all of you guys while we’re here…”

Marla felt it coming, but it was so sudden, so swift and powerful she didn’t have time to shift in her chair, let alone to hold in her breath to gird herself against its terrible force. Oh god. There was no squeezing it in. She tried though. She clenched her whole body, tried to keep it down like so much shame. Like everything bad she couldn’t stop herself from doing.

Scuba continued, and she shot a quick glance to him to say *I’m sorry.* One he clearly read as “ill” by the look on his face. But he kept talking. “How was it at the last training? I mean, I know we have the feedback forms and the—“

Marla let out a long, bombastic fart.

They all stopped for a moment, letting it register, unsure how to proceed. Steve stopped talking. The others sat in powerful, uncomfortable silence. Unsure which of them
was going to acknowledge it. Or not. Unsure who would break. Unsure of their own reason for being in that one moment at all. Unsure of how to form words while they sat under the power of its presence.

So none of them did, not even Marla.

Steve looked to Becky.

Becky stared at Hannah’s shoes.

Hannah stared at the wall.

Marla looked at the projector screen. This was it. Life was fucking over. Now.

All of them held their breath, more fearful of breathing than of being in the moment they already inhabited.

Marla felt a heat creeping up the back of her neck. The same kind of heat she used to feel in the cafeteria as a child when they pushed at her lunch tray and called her fatty. Tears burned her eyes. Her legs were beginning to pinch in the chair. She felt the fabric of her clothes choking her limbs. She felt so naked.

She took a breath. She had to pretend like it didn’t happen. She lifted a peach to her mouth. Swallowed. She started to stand up, to release them from the room, but she could look only at the screen. She was starting to sweat. “You know what, Scuba? I think this needs some more work. You all get your feedback to him before lunch, because I want to see the changes by 3:00, okay?”

They couldn’t wait to get out of there. They ran. All of them.
She ripped one in the morning meeting, dude, they emailed each other, seconds later. It was all over the office. She just let it hang there in the air. Didn’t say excuse me, nothing. Kept eating her damn peaches with her fingers.

I have got to get out of this job. I can’t do this until I’m sixty.

Tell me how someone can be so self-righteous and have so many glaring personal issues.

Fuck Marla. Fuck her right in her eye.

Office emails flew back and forth, but Marla returned to her desk without making eye contact. Today, of all days. And in the meeting… why not in the safety of her little cubicle? Under cover of strawberry? Marla was forlorn.

This was painful, this thing. She couldn’t leave. She was stuck here the rest of the day. It seemed kind of stupid to hope they’d notice her now.

Morning passed with everyone squirreled away in his or her cubicles like good public servants. Marla took the opportunity to bury herself in work. She sorted mail and handled a few minor reports. She color-coded her calendar. She couldn’t wait for lunch, but she punished herself a little and made herself wait. How could she be so disgusting?

She wanted that lunch, though. She knew she needed to cool it with the big portions—that was why it happened. But damn, she was hungry again. And empty.

She’d packed her favorite. Tuna fish. At precisely 11:55, she finally allowed herself to go to the fridge to get it.

Marla opened the Ziplock holding a tuna sandwich soaked in mayonnaise. The chunks of pickle that stuck to the baggie, she swept off with her finger and sucked
absentmindedly while she stared at her computer screen. Not a single email came through to her since the meeting. Radio silence. She had kind of hoped at least one of them would make up a reason to talk. *Hey Marl, nice weather outside, right?* Take her mind off things. Nope. She looked down at her chest, a fleck of canned fish now caught between the hot pressure of her pressed boobs. She was sweaty between them. Maybe she out to go into the bathroom for a minute, and shove a paper towel in there. Damn that polyester. She picked the tuna off her boob, ate that too. On the desk, lined up like soldiers ready to die for her cause were a bag of Lays and another can of peaches, a granola bar, and a bag of M&Ms she’d thrown in her lunch sack “just in case.” She decided this qualified.

They hadn’t said anything. But there was no way they *didn’t* hear it.

They didn’t act like they heard it.

They had to hear it.

They heard it.

She ripped open the M&Ms.

She sat in silence, chewing M&Ms and tuna and staring at her inbox on the screen. She clicked Send/Receive a few times, just in case any messages were “stuck” and couldn’t come through. Just in case someone wanted to make it okay.

Just in case someone remembered it was her big day.

Marla was in the bathroom ten minutes later, washing her hands and checking her hair and makeup in the mirror. She looked right at herself, tried to imagine how they saw her. The more she thought about it, the more she fixated on what happened in the
meeting, and the more tears started to burn at the edges of her eyes and that hot creepy
feeling started to come back at her neck.

She locked herself inside a stall and cried inhaled tears, letting air in only and
passing it out silently over her lips so nobody would hear her if they came in. She leaned
against the cold wall of the stall and pressed a rectangle of toilet paper to her cheeks to
catch the water.

She had to pee. Might as well do that while she was here, too.

Marla turned away from the toilet, pulled her pants down, and sat. Just as she
started to go, the door swung open. Becky and Hannah’s voices.

“Tuna though. Really?”

Hannah was laughing. “…as if the cloud of strawberries wasn’t bad enough this
morning. You don’t think she could add any more bad smells to the office, right?”

“Why won’t she stop eating, though, really? Maybe if she did she wouldn’t rip—“

There was a telling gasp and shuffle outside the bathroom stall and Marla knew it
meant they realized who was in the stall. Her burning, silent tears got loud and sloppy. “I
can—“ choke, sniff, snort “I can—can—hear you, in here, you know.”

They didn’t leave, but she could tell from her side of the door that they didn’t
know what to say.

Marla cried hard, big tears that hit her bare thighs. She looked down at her pale
legs, ribbons of stretch marks running up each side, skin hanging thin and loose from her
quads. She saw herself. Not the way she looked at her legs when she washed them, like
they were just something to be dealt with. Really looked, took in their dimpled veiny
fullness as her tears hit them, really sat for a moment and felt the dichotomy between her upper and lower half, felt the blindness she’d been turning to her body below the waist. She felt a churning in her stomach, a revulsion at what she’d done to herself. She pulled at the sides of her shirt. Why was it so tight?

“Uh. Marla…?” Becky tried, her voice moving closer to the door.

Marla waited a minute. But then she asked the question. THE question, the one she’d been wanting to ask for a year. Might as well. It didn’t get any lower than this. She already wanted to vomit. She took a deep breath, sat up tall inside her bathroom stall.

“Do you think I’m pretty?”

Hannah giggled a nervous laugh. Becky gasped, audibly.

Marla cried ugly horrible tears, and it all came out. Feelings. Words. Awkwardness.

“It’s just that…” sniff “I was hoping you wwwwould nnnotice that tttt-ttttoday was…” she sobbed, gasped for air again. The feelings fought their way out through the snot and the wet, in awkward half sentences. “My surgery… one year… meeting… SCUBA… that promotion… Ffffissssshhh and… Manager…” her words devolved into a gasping shame spiral of gulps.

She could feel Becky and Hannah exchanging uncomfortable glances outside the bathroom stall. You ask her what she means. No, you ask.

Hannah must have lost this round. “Marla? You want to tell me what you mean? I don’t… I mean, I think I understand some of that, hon, but I don’t… what I mean is, I’m going to need a little bit more… err… context.”
Marla ripped at the toilet paper, formed a wad, and dabbed at her eyes and cheeks. She mopped under her chin where the tears and snot were beginning to collect and run off.

She took a deep breath. She thought about why she’d taken the job at Fish and Wildlife so many years ago—back then, Fish and Game. She didn’t give two shits about that stuff, but she thought Manager II was a ticket to Manager III. Working for the state had looked like a ladder, a way up. Just like she thought gastric bypass was a ticket to something better. Thinner. A way to be a new, improved Marla. A Marla who could change.

God was she wrong. Shit was shit. People didn’t change. Her body was proof you were who you were.

This place was where people went to end. To stall.

Marla finished up, breathed deeply. Made herself stop crying, dabbed her face one more time. Flushed. Pulled up her elastic waist pants. Pushed open the stall door and walked past the girls.

“Excuse me,” she said, bumping into Becky as she squeezed out of the stall.

“Stupid fat bitch,” she could hear Becky lean and whisper to Hannah.

Marla walked to the sink and turned the water on. The girls continued to stand by the tiled wall, unsure of whether or not to move. Marla let the water run, lathered her hands, rinsed them, grabbed a paper towel and dried them off. She blotted under her eyes with the towel, scraping thick mascara from under her eyelashes. The girls stared.

She looked behind herself in the reflection. There was one thing she could do.
She pushed out the door, headed back toward her desk to write a letter to go in Becky’s personnel file. About how Becky had called her superior a “stupid fat bitch.” About how Becky didn’t seem to be respectful of authority of a collaborative work environment. About how Becky didn’t seem to be interested in advancing with the state. She’d make sure Becky stalled, too.

###
THE V CLAUSE

Green Valley High School
College Prep English 12
Ms. Janeway
2011-2012

Syllabus

Course Description

This course focuses on developing students’ skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and critical thinking as outlined in the California State Standards for 12th grade. Students will explore a wide variety of genres, including short stories, novels, drama, poetry and non-fiction. Students will also participate in many rigorous writing assignments that allow them to draft, revise, edit and polish their work.

I expect you to leave my class a complete human being, ready to enter the adult world. Act like an adult, you pass. Fail to do so, probably not. I don’t mess around. Forewarned is forearmed.

Course Expectations and Procedures

1. Tardies

- Tardiness WILL NOT be tolerated. Your rear must be in the seat, your book must be open when that bell rings. Your pen must be moving across your paper, beginning the opening activity. This is what it means to not be tardy. Not running through the door. Not sliding down the hall. Not “on your way.”
Students must enter the classroom quietly and appropriately. I don’t care who just broke up with whom at lunch. Leave it outside. You know what they say about excuses.

2. Preparation/Supplies

- Every day, students need to bring: a spiral notebook with exactly 200 pages, blue ballpoint ink pens, highlighters (green only), a literature book covered in unmarked brown paper. Pencil is forbidden, as is doodling on your book cover.
- Coming unprepared will lower a student’s participation grade and may result in detention.

3. Assignments/late work

- Absence is no excuse for not getting your work in on time. You can thank last year’s class for this one. I’m wise to the whole “have your mommy call and clear your absence so you get an extra day to work” thing. It’s due when it’s due. Either get it here or don’t—that’s not my concern. But don’t come to me with it late crying about being sick. Yeah, it’s too bad that a few people ruined it for you and you were the one who was really ill. Welcome to real life. A few lousy people ruin it for everyone.

4. Participation

- Active participation of all students is essential to English class. Both cooperative and individual assignments will be given. You will get put into
groups with people who don’t do anything. This is also like real life. You are still responsible for turning in your projects.

- **Appropriate** participation is mandatory and will constitute 20% of a student’s grade for the course. That means your hand has to go up in class, people, and you better not be using my class time for your personal comedy routine. You need to offer insight. And I’m not just talking about the easy stuff. You don’t get points for keeping your seat warm or for letting me do all the work.

- If I see you playing games on your iPhone, you better believe your grade is going down, sir. Same goes for you, Miss Texty Thumbs. PUT IT AWAY.

- Maturity is expected at all times. Failure to exhibit mature behavior and responsibility for one’s actions will significantly lower a student’s participation grade. You’re big kids so I’m not going to babysit you or give you a bunch of warnings. But if you choose not to follow a rule because you don’t like it, know there will be a consequence. Don’t get Mommy or Daddy involved. This is about you making choices.

5. **Dress Code**

- Students are to be appropriately dressed for an academic environment. Students who repeatedly come dressed improperly will find a lowered participation grade. For example: TIGHTS ARE NOT PANTS. Nothing see-thru. You are not at the club, girl. No skin, unless it’s above the neck, below the knee, or below the elbow.
• At no point in this school year do I want to know anything about your underwear, or lack thereof.

• School dress code will be strictly enforced.

6. **End of class**

• I dismiss you, not the bell. Do not do that line-up-by-the-door thing. EVER.

7. **Other policies**

• I reserve the right to create other policies to make my classroom function as necessary. I reserve the right to change plans or policies without notice as I see fit. I reserve the right to teach what I want, when I want, how I want.

### COURSE GRADING CATEGORIES (WEIGHTED)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Description</th>
<th>Percentage of Course Grade</th>
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<tr>
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• Parents may contact me through school email at cherjan@gvhs.edu. This is the best way to reach me, as school voicemail is not always reliable and I cannot answer the phone while I am teaching.
Students, please share this syllabus with your parents. Then return the attached signed sheet, acknowledging that you have both read and agreed to all of the policies in this syllabus.

Thank you.

Cheryl Janeway

English Teacher, Green Valley High School

Please complete and return this sheet. Due by Wednesday, 8/25

Student name: Kennedi Reeves

I have reviewed the attached syllabus with my son/daughter and both of us understand the expectations for achievement in CP English 12. We have discussed and are aware of the policies, rules, and procedures for the course.

Monica Reeves 8/24/11

Parent/ Guardian Signature  Date

Hi Mrs. Janeway. I am signing this anyway because I don’t want Kennedi to miss out on the points... But I have some reservations about a few of your policies that seem a little harsh for a sweet girl like Ken. You should also know Kennedi is a good girl but she doesn’t test very well. She needs a teacher who understands just how special she is. She really is a beautiful girl. I hope that once you get to know her this year you can come to see Kennedi for the truly amazing, one-of-a kind student she is, and we won’t have any issues regarding her grade.
PASS TO OFFICE:
POSSIBLE DRESS CODE VIOLATION

Student name: Kennedi Reeves
ID#: 996544320  Date: 9/1/11
Time: 9:03 AM

GO STRAIGHT TO VICE PRINCIPAL RICE.
Description of clothing: tank top: low sides (to waist) with purple lace bandeau-type bra showing, midriff bare. SHORT denim shorts. THIRD VIOLATION in two weeks. Already spoke to Mom. Mom does not see the issue with this type of clothing.

Signed: CJaneway

From: Jeff Rice at Green Valley HS [mailto:jeffrice@gvhs.edu]
Sent: Wed, September 1, 2011 9:10 AM
To: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS
Subject: Kennedi Reeves/ Dress Code

Hi Cheryl,

Got your pass for Kennedi here and it doesn’t make sense. She’s sitting in front of me right now in a grey sweatshirt and a pair of blue jeans. I’m gonna send her back to your class now. Wanted you to have a heads up.
I think we should talk at lunch today. She’s really concerned that you’re somehow singling her out for all of these dress code violations. Maybe we should check in?
-Jeff

Jeff Rice
Vice Principal and all-around nice guy
Green Valley High School
“Go Green Valley, Go Green Valley—GO!”

__________________________________________

Voice mailbox #235
Transcript of message #1: 9:12 AM. 9.1.11

Hi. Yeah. Mrs. Janeway? This is Kennedi’s mom, Monica. She just texted me from the hallway to tell me that you dress coded her again. Listen. Uh. I am not okay with this. You are singling my daughter out because she is beautiful, and thin, and you are not sending up other girls in class. She told me. That is why I authorized her to change her clothes before seeing Mr. Rice. Please call me back so we can discuss this as soon as possible. I am concerned about you picking on her.

__________________________________________
From: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS [mailto:cherjan@gvhs.edu]

Sent: Thursday, September 1, 2011 10:56 AM

To: Jen Rainardi at Green Valley HS

Subject: And so it begins...

Here we go already. Not only did I find out this morning that the district is dropping my insurance after I just filled out all the paperwork last year to switch doctors, but the little slut I sent up to the office this morning put one over on Jeff and changed before she got there.

Mom already left me a nasty voicemail…

I’m too tired for shit to be this messed up this soon in the year. How many weeks until summer?

________________________________________________________________

From: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS [mailto:cherjan@gvhs.edu]

Sent: Wed, September 1, 2011 11:10 AM

To: Jeff Rice at Green Valley HS

Subject: RE: Kennedi Reeves/ Dress Code

Mr. Rice,

Does it escape your imagination, sir, that a girl could procure an alternate set of clothing from the one that got her sent to the office in the first place, and could, thus having obtained said new clothes, make a detour on her way to the vice principal’s office
and change, thereby appearing in his office in an entirely different state? And does it not seem reasonable, then, to trust the word of the teacher (rather than the sartorially-challenged student) in said situation, rather than going by the word of this student, who, in this particular hypothetical, would be the one with the most to lose?

The fact of the matter is that once you sent Miss Reeves back to my class, she had changed again and entered my classroom in a grand scene of (half-naked) defiance which was celebrated by all. Unacceptable.

-Ms. Janeway

From: Jeff Rice at Green Valley HS [mailto:jeffrice@gvhs.edu]

Sent: Wed, September 1, 2011 11:30 AM

To: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS

Subject: RE: Kennedi Reeves/ Dress Code

I’m sorry, I don’t follow… what?

Jeff Rice

Vice Principal and all-around nice guy

Green Valley High School

“Go Green Valley, Go Green Valley—GO!”
From: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS [mailto:cherjan@gvhs.edu]

Sent: Wed, September 1, 2011 12:46 AM

To: Jeff Rice at Green Valley HS

Subject: RE: Kennedi Reeves/ Dress Code

She CHANGED her clothes before she came to see you. And then she CHANGED her clothes before she came back to me. In fact, I just listened to a voicemail from Mom, who said she authorized the whole thing. This was all to the delight of all the boys in my second period, because when Kennedi came back to class, she had put the old shirt and shorts back on. The ones that barely covered her body. The message to everyone was “I’m smarter than the adults, here.”

Between the changing and the lying and the using her phone to text Mom, there are about three or four infractions there. I will send her back up to see you tomorrow morning so you can address this with her.
From: Jeff Rice at Green Valley HS [mailto:jeffrice@gvhs.edu]

Sent: Wed, September 1, 2011 1:30 AM

To: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS

Subject: RE: Kennedi Reeves/ Dress Code

Ms. Janeway.

This whole thing seems to have gotten way out of hand. Clearly you’re feeling angry. Perhaps we all need to cool off a little bit. When I talked to Kennedi yesterday, she seemed truly sorry to have disrupted your class or made you frustrated in any way. Let’s just move on. I think your class time has been interrupted enough for the meantime, and I would hate for her to lose more instructional minutes over something that is already done. Kennedi is a good girl. When I talked with her, she said she’s trying hard to improve her relationship with you.

Let’s give her an opportunity to improve and see how it goes.

Jeff Rice

Vice Principal and all-around nice guy

Green Valley High School

“Go Green Valley, Go Green Valley—GO!”
Act III Sc I Activity

Take turns reading Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy aloud with your partner. Listen for what you think his conflict is. Using the soliloquy as an example, write your own soliloquy about a time in your life when you’ve had to make a big decision, and why you were pulled in both directions. Give examples for why both sides would work, as Hamlet does.

Response:

To be hot, or not to be hot. That is the question.

If it’s better in school to suffer
The attention I get from old creepers,
Or to, like, make myself less noticeable in a sea of uglies,
And stop the looks.

All I want in the world. Just to wear sweats and a ponytail:
To trust the adults around me not to ask weird questions or put a hand on my knee when we’re alone.
If I slack off, I’m afraid people will stop noticing me.
But sometimes I don’t want the attention I get.

The teachers who dress code me for no damn reason, the dirty creepers who look down my shirt, my mom’s boyfriends who look at me.

That is not the business.

I know I could just, like, skip all this and go model, anyway.

Or be like Tiffani, and shake my ass, for benjamins.

As much as I hate it here, I don’t know what happens after high school.

Beauty makes cowards of us all:

And the native hue of our faces

Is covered up with a thick layer of makeup.

And anything that is important

To anybody goes wrong while we’re stuck here

In this awful, awful prison, afraid to be ourselves.
Administrative Student Referral

Student Name: Reeves, Kennedi

Student ID: 996544320

Reported By: Janeway, Cheryl

Incident Date: 10/21/11

Referral Type: Behavioral

Incident:

Today during an instructional film, Kennedi was touching a male student inappropriately. I had already asked her once to put away her phone during the movie, when I saw her and the other student, Gerry Chaplin, giggling in the back row. Assuming they had her phone again, I walked up behind their desks, only to discover that Kennedi had her hand in the pelvic region of Mr. Chaplin’s jeans and was rubbing his groin. I did not address this at the time with them, as it made me uncomfortable to do so in front of other students, but I separated Ms. Reeves and Mr. Chaplin and asked that the class please direct their attention to the movie.

I will attempt to make contact with Kennedi’s mother, but she has not been especially helpful or supportive in the past.

Edited to add: Could not make contact with Ms. Reeves. Left a voicemail at 4:22 PM for mom explaining that she needed to call me as soon as possible. Would appreciate if you
tried her again when you saw Kennedi. I believe she is not returning my calls at this point.

Previous Action Taken By Teacher:

None. (Would there be some previous action that would be relevant? I’m not sure which part of the ed code covers over-jean hand jobs during movies.)

Administrative action taken:

By: Jeff Rice

After school detention. Kennedi instructed not to have phone out in class.

Student Behavior Intervention

Student Name: Reeves, Kennedi

Student ID: 996544320

Reported By: Janeway, Cheryl

Incident Date: 10/23/11

Intervention:

Student-teacher conference. Found carving in Kennedi’s desk that said “Janeway = old SLUNT.” Directed Kennedi not to carve in desks anymore. She refused to respond or engage in conversation with me. She refused also to make eye contact. The only response I got was an eye roll and a exhaled “whatever” as she stood at my desk. I am also pretty
sure she muttered “bitch” under her breath while she walked away. Since Kennedi’s behavior in class has been escalating, will be placing her on behavior contract.

Voice mailbox #235

Transcript of message #4: 10: 10 PM. 10.21.11

Who do you think you are, picking on my daughter like this? This is Ms. Reeves again. Kennedi’s mom? Yeah. I’m aware of the story you made up about her giving Gerry a hand job in class. Really? A hand job? That’s rich. You calling my daughter a slut? Don’t worry. I talked to Mr. Rice, and it’s all straightened out. I ain’t signin’ your bullshit behavior contract, either. I put in a call to the superintendent, too. I will be meeting with him next week to talk about how you’ve been treating my daughter. You are a bully. You should be ashamed of yourself, bullying a student like this.
Can you explain to me what’s happening with Kennedi Reeves? Kennedi was in here yesterday afternoon crying again, Mom’s left me four more voicemails in two days, and now I have an email from the superintendent asking if I can pull up your discipline file on her so he can go over it. Cheryl, I swear, I am just not looking at the same kid you are. Kennedi Reeves seems like a perfectly sweet girl. Maybe you misinterpreted what you saw. I just don’t think she’s capable of the things you describe.

Jeff Rice
Vice Principal and all-around nice guy
Green Valley High School
“Go Green Valley, Go Green Valley—GO!”
From: Jen Rainardi at Green Valley HS [mailto:jrainar@gvhs.edu]  
Sent: Tues, November 8, 2011 2:06 PM  
To: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS  
Subject: You okay?

Cher—

I’ve been sitting here debating whether or not to check in. You okay? I could tell something was up at lunch but I didn’t want to ask. I saw you duck out of the staff lounge quickly just as I came in. Everything alright?

________________________________________________________________________

From: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS [mailto:cherjan@gvhs.edu]  
Sent: Tues, November 8, 2011 3:42 PM  
To: Jen Rainardi at Green Valley HS  
Subject: RE: You okay?

Thanks, Jen.

No. Actually I’m not okay. It’s one of those days when enough is enough and I wonder why the fuck I didn’t get a PE credential so I could stand outside in the sun and roll out
the ball every day so I could go home in peace. I’ve been sitting here at my desk for almost a half hour staring at a stack of work I need to grade and I just can’t make myself.

This morning I got a message that the paperwork I filled out back in September was wrong, so somehow the MRI I needed on my knee after I slipped in my backyard fell in a period of lapsed coverage for my insurance. And I’m chasing my tail trying to figure out how the hell to either get it covered or stop them trying to collect on it until I can figure out what happened. I just can’t imagine how I work in this job for this long and someone won’t pay my medical because of paperwork. I spent the first half of lunch making phone calls and banging my head against a wall.

And I’ve had it with Rice, honestly. I can’t get why he’s deliberately not enforcing ed code on this Kennedi kid. That kid I was telling you about? Reeves? She’s out of control. Every day she’s pushing it farther. Pretty soon she’ll install a pole in the back of my room so she can start charging for her services. Yet he continues to look the other way, and all of the consequences disappear. It’s the strangest thing…
Student note (unsigned) left in classroom G-5

on 11/10/11

_Betch_—

*What’s up. I am so fugging bored right now in Chem with these stoopid juniors. Ug. If I only would have passed it last year. But I didn’t want my mom to be right, anyway. I wasn’t about to start doing homework just to make her happy.*

*Anyway, whatever. Did you hear about yesterday? I can’t believe you were sick. OMG. You missed the weirdest fricking day. Holy hell. So, like, Jeni and I were in the bathroom at lunch because Kyle was being a skeez and hanging around the student store asking for change like he was some homeless guy down on J street and when I walked by him he tried to grab my ass and I was like, nope, and he was like, well, we did make out at Jeannette’s last weekend (well, he raised an eyebrow at me that was basically like saying that), but I was not tryna hang out with him or have my ass grabbed right there in front of everybody in the quad, so anyway, Jeni and I go in the bathroom—not the smoky one, the gross one with the broken mirrors that always has pads on the floor—just so we can talk if it doesn’t smell like poo today, and who is in there, but Kennedi “Pop Tart” Reeves.*
I’ve been staying away from her since the whole thing with Gerry and Ms. Janeway blew up the other day. Kennedi has this new look in her eye like she wants to cut a bitch all the time, and she’s just being a jerk to randoms in the hall. But whatever, she was in there.

So, we go into the bathroom (it’s taking me forever to tell this story, sorry. Have to keep looking up and smiling while he talks about protons ‘n shit!) and there is darling Ken Ken, surrounded by her bleach blonde bimbos all in a circle. And right when we walk in, the circle parts like the fugging red sea, and we can see Kennedi—precious Kennedi, lovely Kennedi, with her jeans unbuttoned to her pubes—well, where her pubes would be if she had any left—and there right in Lady Town is a new tattoo that says “LUCKY YOU” like the jeans. Right above her twat. Not sideways like the jeans, but straight across in big, chunky blue block letters. With the same damn stars on either side like a goddamn label. Dood, it was so fugly. All I could think was just how many guys were gonna see that, and what STD they’d be lucky enough to catch when they took a ride.

And Kennedi is there in the middle of the circle showing it off like she’s a damn porn queen, and her bitchy friends are all oohing and telling her “oh my gawd, Ken, so cute!” And she’s there with her goddamn pants down accepting compliments like she’s Pantsless Paris Hilton (although, now that I think about it, so is Paris—same!) and K is like “ohmigod, my mom took me to get it, don’t you love it?” And they were all like “squee” and I was like BARF.
What a slut.

Oh, and know what else I heard? Jesus, you won’t believe this. Well, I think you might, since everything seems to work out for little miss Kennedi Reeves. No wonder she hasn’t been getting into trouble lately for anything she’s doing in class. Apparently her mom and Mr. Rice have been fucking for a while. Gross, right? He looks like the Green Goblin. But that reminds me—why can’t my mom be fucking somebody at the DMV? Maybe then they could get me out of paying for that ticket.

________________________________________________________________________

From: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS [mailto:cherjan@gvhs.edu]
Sent: Wed, December 14, 2011 9:31 AM
To: Jeff Rice at Green Valley HS
CC: Bob Tadd at Superintendent’s Office
BCC: Renee Lalemy in Counseling Services
Subject: Concerns about Reeves

Mr. Rice,

I am writing you an email instead of sending a referral through the discipline system for Kennedi Reeves because I am concerned about certain conflicts of interest and I would
prefer this get handled by someone other than you or me. I am not comfortable discussing
the nature of the rumors surrounding you and Miss Reeves’ mother in an email, but
suffice it to say I feel I can no longer keep silent on that issue given the total lack of
follow-through when it comes to any kind of disciplinary consequences for Kennedi
when I send her to your office.

When my integrity is being questioned, that is where I draw the line. Repeated allegations
have been made by both Kennedi and her mother that I have some sort of bias toward her
(Mr. Tadd can attest to the recordkeeping I have maintained all year, as I went over this
with him in our sit-down meeting last month), but I am unsure how to proceed with the
issue that follows in this email. It would seem that at every turn, my efforts toward
disciplining Kennedi are thwarted, undermined, and cut off at the knees. Yet she is out of
control and is clearly a disruption to the learning environment.

I am now in a situation where Kennedi has become a model of “how not to follow a
directive from Ms. Janeway.” The other students look to her as a sort of hero, and take
their cue from her when deciding what to wear to class, how to comport themselves in
my classroom, and when to take me seriously. The effect of not following through with
consequences when I send Miss Reeves up on a referral has meant that now she and her
peers understand that nothing will happen to them if their behavior escalates to the point
that I send them out of the classroom. The direct defiance that is happening is at an all
time high.
So today, when Miss Reeves—in a denim miniskirt which would have barely covered her nether regions if she had been standing--decided to sit with her legs splayed underneath her desk (which happens to be—unfortunately for all of us—in the front row). I chose to keep lecturing on the formatting of resumes, and ignore this display. Because I didn’t want to discuss Kennedi’s lack of modesty with her, her mother, or anyone in the office, frankly. I’ve been teaching for 18 years and I am tired of parents telling me that I am picking on their children because they are beautiful or gifted or so amazing that I am too simple to understand them. Miss Reeves’ genitalia being displayed in my classroom is against the ed code and certainly laws of basic human decency, and my noting this has nothing to do with any prejudice I have against her.

You will ask me if this is something covered in my syllabus, and I will say no, I do not have a vagina clause. (I had not thought to include such exact things in my exhaustive syllabus, but I am thinking now that it may be necessary to hire an attorney and spend a significant amount of time dictating the horrors of past experiences to him in order to prevent such future mishaps.)

But as I said, at first I chose to ignore Miss Reeves proudly flaunted, uncovered ladybits—because (oh yes!) she lacked any necessary undergarments that would have made this an unfortunate underwear flashing rather than a crime of exposure—because I didn’t want to have another fruitless conversation with her mother that ended in baseless accusations. Nor did I really want to have to type anything to the effect of “Kennedi
Reeves’ genitals,” or include the superintendent in the conversation, yet here we are. I tried to teach, ignoring Miss Reeves’ vagina, trying not to think about the poor student in 3rd period who would have to sit in the chair previously occupied by Miss Reeves’ labia. Instead of calling attention to her openly displayed babymaker, I kept teaching, and prayed that eyes would stay properly fixed on the whiteboard.

But who was I kidding? This is a high school classroom, you see. No one’s eyes stay fixed anywhere for any length of time, which is why we have such expectations as:

*covering our reproductive organs in class.* If there is an uncovered teenage vagina in the room, young men will find it. Not long after we started, I caught Gerry Chaplin staring, followed in quick succession by a flutter of giggles and whispers. I did not have to turn around to understand the source of their excitement. And what was to my right, but Kennedi, smiling across the room (her desk facing their row), staring, proudly challenging them to keep looking. Legs, splayed.

I redirected the class’ attention, but at that point, the class was lost. And when I asked Kennedi to stay after, she told me in a defiant tone, “they shouldn’t have been looking, and neither should you.” I did not have a response.

Mr. Rice, as our school’s only arbiter of discipline, this matter would typically fall under your jurisdiction. But given your history of dismissing matters with Kennedi, and given Kennedi’s mother’s history of going over my head to the superintendent, I am unsure of
how to proceed. I have CC’ed all parties involved here as a matter of transparency. I have nothing to hide, and in fact, would prefer that this kind of thing never happened. What a beautiful day it would be if I never had to discuss Kennedi Reeves’ vagina again. Unfortunately, she left me no choice.

Please advise as to how to proceed. I can enter the discipline report, although, once again, I am unsure which portion of the ed code covers Miss Reeves’ behavior. Now that Superintendent Tadd has become involved, perhaps it is necessary to have a meeting with all relevant parties.

C. Janeway

______________________________________

From: Cheryl Janeway at Green Valley HS [mailto:cherjan@gvhs.edu]
Sent: Wed, December 14, 2011 9:40 AM
To: Renee Lalemy in Counseling Services
Subject: That email

Renee—

That email I just BCC’ed you on about Kennedi Reeves was just to cover my own ass. I’m concerned about this kid and the kind of behavior she’s displaying. Something is up with her. Something that hyper-sexualized that doesn’t feel right to me. Something
beyond the whole mess with the superintendent and Jeff Rice’s refusal to actually enforce any disciplinary consequences. Do you think you could call her in and get a feel for what’s going on with her? Something just doesn’t seem right.

I’ll keep you in the loop about whatever happens.

Cheryl
Respond to the following questions in writing. Be prepared to share your answers tomorrow with the class during our roundtable discussion.

1. In what ways have you contributed something of value to the Green Valley High School Campus? What have you personally done to make this a better place? Or have you made it worse? Have you taken more than you’ve given? Have you poisoned the well? Explain.

2. Name a time when you broke a rule and you knew it was wrong. Be really, really specific about the rule you broke and the person you might have hurt by doing so. Why did you break the rule? What gave you the right? What made you think that you could defy authority that way? Did you like how it felt to be a rebel? Did it make you feel powerful?

3. Why do you think some people in power abuse that power? What possible reasons could people in authority have for not enforcing consequences or upholding laws when they know it is the right thing to do? Can you think of reasons that a person might not want to do such a thing? Do people let others slide because they’re pretty or rich or because they want something from them? Defend your answer.
4. What responsibility do peers or coworkers have to each other? What about bosses? Is there an unspoken (or spoken) sense of obligation between one man (or woman) and another, or is it every man for himself? Is this a reasonable way to look at the world? Why?

5. If you were in a position where you had to maintain order, what do you think would be your biggest frustration? What would be the best way to address that? What challenges do you think you’d face when it came to getting other people to do what you want? How do you think you can get people to just do what you want them to do?

6. If you had ultimate power, what would you do with it?

7. Are most people good or bad? Why?

8. What is the worst—the absolute worst—way a person can disgrace him or herself in your eyes? Why? Can people redeem themselves once their reputations have been tarnished? Why or why not? Is it possible for us to form new opinions once people have behaved so badly that we can never forgive them?
Minutes: Parent/Teacher/ Administrative Meeting  2/15/12

In Attendance:

Cheryl Janeway, Teacher

    Jeff Rice, Vice Principal

    Kennedi Reeves, student

    Monica Reeves, parent

    Renee Lalemy, counselor

    Robert Tadd, Superintendent

1. Kennedi’s academic and behavioral progress in English class was discussed. Kennedi is showing no signs of any academic issues.

2. Mrs. Janeway outlined behavioral expectations for class, including following school dress code, language expectations, hands-off rule for other students, expectation that Kennedi not destroy classroom property.

3. All were in agreement that Kennedi must meet these basic expectations. Ms. Janeway gave a long speech about these being basic expectations that one should not have to go over with a student of Kennedi’s age. Kennedi did not appear to be listening as Ms. Janeway spoke, but was instead texting on her phone.

4. Kennedi and Ms. Reeves expressed a feeling that Ms. Janeway has a personal bias toward Kennedi and expressed a wish to have Kennedi removed from the class.

5. Ms. Lalemy reminded the group of the school/ district policy not to remove a student from a teacher’s class due to personal conflict on either side.
6. Ms. Janeway expressed concerns that due to Mr. Rice and Ms. Reeves’ relationship, Mr. Rice should not be the administrator in charge of enforcing disciplinary consequences for Kennedi.

7. Mr. Tadd expressed a desire not to present the appearance of impropriety or bias to the public, and decided therefore to leave Mr. Rice in place as Kennedi’s administrator for dealing with behavioral issues. Mr. Rice assured Mr. Tadd that he could remain objective despite his relationship with the family.

8. Mr. Rice reminded Kennedi that she needed to try a little harder to follow school policies, or there would be some more serious consequences.
March 12, 2012

Ms. Janeway:

Our repeated attempts to contact you by phone have been unsuccessful. Your outstanding medical bill in the amount of $3225.21 is six months past due and will be sent to a collection agency.

See the attached invoice enumerating late fees associated with this unpaid bill. Please contact our offices to address this matter immediately.

Green Valley Medical Group
Today in Ms. Janeway’s second period, Kennedi Reeves started talking while Ms. Janeway was starting class. When she was taking roll, Kennedi was trying to talk to Jason Tanaka about what he was doing this weekend and she was not really paying attention to what Ms. Janeway was saying. So Ms. Janeway goes “Kennedi, I need you to turn around and get your notebook out and get focused, because class is starting. NOW.” And Kennedi looked right at her and was like “bitch.” And Ms. Janeway just lost it. Like, I don’t know how to describe it except she started shaking and she looked like she couldn’t control herself. I mean, Kennedi didn’t really do anything that bad—well, I mean you shouldn’t call a teacher bitch, but compared to some of the other stuff Kennedi does all the time, that’s not really the worst of anything, you know?

But anyway, she goes “bitch” and then Janeway goes “excuse me?” and Kennedi stands up and starts walking towards Janeway and yelling all this weird stuff about somebody
named Jeff and how she can’t say that to her. And then Janeway goes from looking all shaky to looking kind of scared but also mad.

But she takes a moment and gets quiet and looks up at the ceiling. And she just, like walks out. Just looks at us and says “you know what? Fuck it. Fuck you guys.” And then looks right at Kennedi and goes “You stupid, stupid whore,” and walks out. Just grabs her keys and pushes out the door and takes off. It was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen.

###