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The Past is History

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The Past is History

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Michele Lombardo

December 2012

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I must first thank my wonderful committee members who always gave me insightful comments regarding this novel.

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We were so curious about everything. Mostly about boys. Moreso about sex. It’d seemed for the past year like sex was the farthest thing from us. We groped for it, obsessed about it, but the more we talked the more improbable it seemed. And that year stretched out, swallowing our entire lives. Like the wait for everything we valued – our boobs, our bras, our periods – had returned, morphed and magnified within this last rite of passage. Our adolescence was – in that moment - the tortured passing of time.

“We can do it whenever we want,” Frances had said. “We’re just not ready yet.”

We nodded, more mopey than before. Yet we readied ourselves. We became more knowledgeable and confident. We folded into ourselves and learned what to do through our own stolen moments, mistakes and triumphs. We created a collective folklore. A school of sex. Joanne and I learned from Frances that a blowjob required a suck, not a blow. Lizard taught us to remove our chunky silver rings prior to hand jobs. And Joanne, who was the first to kiss and last to do everything else, used her experience with Bobby Richards to illustrate a cautionary tale on French kissing. “Lick his tongue like a lollipop,” she’d said. “Do not suck like a Popsicle.”

We practiced a lot – on balloons, hands, each other. Sworn to solemn secrecy, we paired off and mounted each other, rocking back and forth to capture the rhythm of it. Delicately
touching tongues, careful to point out when they were too present or not enough in the sustained sweep of a kiss. We learned how to brush our long hair to the side before we leaned down for another. We learned about the clitoris, and wondered how a penis could ever touch it when it was clearly misplaced, on the outside instead of the inside. But despite the wet warmth in our panties when we positioned ourselves over a bedpost or the rim of a chair or a pelvis bone, we remained confident that a penis had more to offer.

My body felt primed, but my mind was a different story. I’d discovered my special spot on my own accord at the age of five. I wanted to watch my mom apply her makeup. I needed a better view, so I scrambled atop a high stool, my clit grazing over the outward curve of the cabriole leg. I immediately slid back down, back up, back down. Same sensation. I forgot the stool and groped at my underwear, trying to find the source. When my mom noticed me, she knelt down, wagged her thin finger in my face and shook her head. Wordless but effective. After that, I reserved my explorations for bedtime. Each night I grazed my underwear with my fingers and giggled. Tickle, giggle. It seemed straightforward, appropriate. But when the hallway light dimmed from her figure in my doorway and she asked - “Rebecca - What are you laughing about?” – I never had an answer.

I’d had one real boyfriend so far, but the minute our lips touched I couldn’t shake the image of him beating a bird with a stick on the playground four years earlier. I shut my eyes tight to expel the image and move on. It wouldn’t leave.
I’d had even more problems with the school of sex. My brain wouldn’t focus on the
lesson plan. Like when I mounted Joanne and leaned down for a kiss, I remembered how
she’d pulled another girl’s hair and called her a fat swine in fourth grade. The three
o’clock school bell rang and we spilled out of the doors, pushing and shoving to get a
good seat on the bus. I walked behind them. Fat girl lived two houses down from me, so
we rode the same bus. Joanne lived near the school, so she did the deed and strode down
the sidewalk, her streaky hair bouncing right and left in the soft afternoon sunlight. Fat
girl held her head and cried the whole way home.

There were other weird things about me, too. Not related to sex. Frances made fun of me
because when we were eight, I convinced myself that I could levitate – in broad daylight,
in front of people. Even though I still remembered the sensation clearly, Frances didn’t
corroborate my story. Neither did my mom or anyone else. And, for most of my life, I’d
had a bunch of disturbing visions regarding my mother’s death. In one she was crying.
Then she dove into a clear blue river and swam downstream until she collided with a rock
and turned to dust. In another her heart exploded. The blood and gore morphed to shreds
of colored tissue paper mid-explosion, so that her remains fluttered delicately to our
yellow linoleum kitchen floor, confetti twinkling to the ground. But, given that my
mother was still alive, I’d guessed I was just a dreamer and a morbid one at that. This was
a story that my friends did corroborate. My nuttiness.
Though we never listed our reasons, I think for Frances the obsession with sex was about appearance. She had a habit of adopting a squeaky clean persona around parents and teachers and, for some crazy reason, everyone bought it. Which Frances loved. Like she was throwing them all off her scent. But she resented feeling like she had to play the part, too, so at every opportunity she was willing to go farther faster. She still wasn’t ready to let the outside world see her for who she was, but she longed to close the gap between who she was and how she saw herself. And she most certainly saw herself as an adult. Plus, she had an older brother, and always being around seniors didn’t help.

Lizard’s mom had dated and married her high school sweetheart. And she took every opportunity to remind Lizard that she’d never been with anyone else. It was both a source of pride and resentment. Her mom wore frilly aprons with tiny flowers on them and baked blueberry pies on the weekends, when Lizard, her Dad and her four brothers were home. But on weekdays, when everyone was either at work or school, she sat and cried. No one had ever caught her in the act, but every night she cooked dinner with puffy eyes and a raw nose. Lizard couldn’t even stand to look at her. Every time her dad beat up on her mom, Lizard would say that her mom was knitting blankets again, which basically meant she was losing it. And when she lost it she sat and knit blue blankets and booties for Lizard’s youngest brother, a stillborn named Jasper, who was buried next to her grandmother at Spies Zion cemetery in the shittiest part of town. They visited them both a few times a year. Lizard planned to fuck her way as far away from that fate as possible. Unlike the rest of us, she wasn’t interested in love and had already stockpiled an arsenal
of protection – birth control pills, morning after pills, spermicides, condoms and even sponges (not that anyone even used those anymore). She'd also learned how to detect when she was ovulating, so that just in case all those methods somehow failed her, she couldn't possibly be tricked into getting pregnant, getting married and becoming her mother.

I guess from the outside Joanne’s reasons were fairly stereotypical, but you wouldn't think so if you knew her. If you knew her well you’d think the whole thing sucked beyond description. She'd been overweight all through elementary school and even into middle school. All the guys and girls made fun of her, and she never got over it. It was a classic tale. The irony was that each year she got prettier and prettier. Frances, Lizard and I could all be pretty if we wanted to. We knew how to dress and how to put on makeup and how to smile. But Joanne was hands down the most natural beauty of us all, though guys didn't give her the credit she deserved. They still remembered the Joanne from fifth grade gym class. The one with the hairy legs and the stomach rolls who got hammered in dodge ball because she couldn’t move her fat ass. So she was beautiful, but she couldn’t see that, so sex was supposed to make her feel attractive in a way that words couldn’t. Joanne needed concrete proof. And then some.

If they had to guess, most people would probably say that I wanted it to fit in, or worse yet, that I was following in my mothers’ footsteps. But the truth, I think, was simpler. I
was mostly just lonely. Little did I know that sex would be the loneliest thing in the world
for me, and the source of the worst set of problems I'd ever encounter.

I lost my virginity on April 1st. That's right. April Fool's Day. And it all started
something like this…
Chapter 1 - A First Time to Remember

That morning, I met Frances at the usual spot at our usual time. 7:45am at the bleachers behind school. Exactly 25 minutes before homeroom. She was already there, leaning back coolly, elbows propped on the aluminum stand behind her, a Camel Red dangling from her shimmery pink lips. Even though her brother had driven her to school in his vintage convertible Trans Am (always too fast with the top down), she looked perfect – blond hair sleek as ever, her light scarf draped and slouchy in all the right places. Before we went inside, she’d slide it from her neck and tie it around her head, her signature look, making her seem way cooler than everyone and providing an unobstructed view of her plunging neckline – plush D-sized cleavage framed by the crescent moons of a lacy bra. No one else in the school dared to wear scarves because Frances had coined the look. Not even me. With her huge sunglasses, hoop earrings and wrapped head she looked like a gypsy who’d ripped off a Juicy Couture shop. But it worked. Well.

She greeted me the way she always did. “Slut.”

And I gave her my obligatory response. “Tramp.”

In ten minutes or so, Joanne would join us. Lizard would’ve done the same if she could ever get to school on time, which she couldn’t, meaning we wouldn’t see her until first period.
My boots clanged loudly against the bleachers, setting off unsteady vibrations all around us. It was like walking across a tuning fork. I shifted my weight, trying not to fall through a slat but chintzy sports seating = dangerous territory for fashion-forward footwear. Frances rocked back and forth on the bench she straddled and said, “Oh yeah,” pretending to savor the metal quake beneath her crotch. I gave her seat an extra kick for good measure. We sat for a moment, staring out at the soccer field and beyond. You could see for miles because it was all farmland. A patchwork quilt of corn and tobacco. You see, we lived in a small, Podunk town called Oley, which was about 20 minutes outside of a small, Podunk city called Reading. In Pennsylvania. Never heard of it? Join the club. Our "downtown" consisted of a block-long strip with one inn, a hair salon operating out of somebody’s basement, and a butcher. Yes, we must’ve been the only town in America to still employ a butcher. If you lived around Reading, an old manufacturing town long defunct, your parents were either doctors, lawyers, teachers or farmers. Or you were piss poor. Because there were no companies here. No jobs. Every crappy little outfit that ever existed here had left long ago. We didn't even have any retail, putting us about 45 minutes away from a decent mall. The most recent census found that Reading had the highest share of citizens living in poverty in the nation. But the bombed out buildings and drive-by shootings were pretty well contained to the city. Being just outside of it, fully surrounded by farmland and rural nothingness meant that our parents were the doctors, lawyers, teachers or farmers, not the piss poor. So we had that going for us, at least.

“I had a great practice session with myself last night,” Frances said.
“I hope you used protection,” I said.

Frances smiled. “Very funny.” Out of all of us, Frances put herself out there as our foremost authority on sex. We all knew that she was a virgin who had only just begun to get exposure to male genitalia, same as us all, but this was how she played it, so we all played along. She set the rules of the game and we followed. Plus, her older brother told her things sometimes, which also counted for something. Frances was definitely the alpha female of our group, which meant we never called her out on any fabrications or exaggerations. The rest of us were subject to the utmost scrutiny, but Frances hovered above us in a kind of inhuman perfection we couldn’t help but aspire to.

“I was gonna give you a tip, but clearly you don’t need one. Have you been banging the pool boy behind my back?” She threw her hands up like she’d leave me to my own ruin if that was the way I wanted it.

Well, we didn’t have a pool boy. Or a pool. So obviously I was still in the market for advice. I sighed and mumbled, “Go ahead.”

So while we waited for Joanne, Frances told me all about how she’d set up her full-length mirror next to her bed so that she could watch herself mount and molest a pile of pillows. “You want to stay upright as much as possible,” she said. “That gives you the best profile. When you lean over too much, your boobs sag and your stomach rolls show. So keep your body upright like this, or even lean back a little if you want.”
As if she had stomach rolls.

“Filed,” I said. I wondered if Joanne and Lizard would receive the same lesson later on, or if this one was meant just for me. The four of us were best friends, but Frances and I were best best friends, so I could be a little stingy about her attention.

Soon a small figure appeared at the edge of the field. We watched it grow bigger as it got closer. Just before the penalty box, we realized it was Eric Levy, a sad-looking boy in our class who lived on one of the farms nearby. Frances and I rolled our eyes and waited for him to pass. No way we were continuing our conversation in front of that pervy dork. I looked away when he made eye contact and Frances hissed, “Do you mind?” meaning “hurry the fuck up.” His pace quickened and he stared at his shoes like they were wrapping up a lesson on binomes.

When Joanne arrived, Frances reviewed her tip another time (bummer). I watched Joanne's face closely as Frances related each detail. Joanne always had a pained but determined expression when we talked about these things, which made me suspect she might not be as eager to do the deed as she let on. Frances lit another cigarette and blew out smoke in a straight, upward line.

“Cool,” she said after Frances finished. “So I’m basically highlighting my best feature.” She shimmied her rack in delight. It was true that Joanne had sprouted some solid C-cups in the past year, but it made me sad to hear her call them her best feature.
Then again, a lot of what Joanne said made me sad. Still, it was tough not to laugh along with her. She had one of those infectious laughs. I think it was because her eyes got all squinty and she really looked happy when she did it - genuine. And sometimes when you joined in you inadvertently became genuinely happy, too. Like magic.

Joanne and I threw our bags over our shoulders and climbed down from the bleachers. Frances held up her smoke and said, “Hello?” sarcastically. She didn’t mean to say that she couldn’t go inside with a cigarette. She meant to say that she couldn’t go near the school and risk having teachers see her with a cigarette. For as naughty as Frances actually was, she couldn’t stand the idea of a parent or teacher or person of import seeing the real her. She made fun of how people perceived her and said she didn’t give a shit what people thought about her. But she was actually pretty obsessed with protecting this misconception and would’ve done anything to keep the ruse going, the least of which was not letting anyone over 18 see her smoke. Joanne and I rolled our eyes and sat back down.

After she’d crushed the cigarette out, popped an Altoid and squirted a pouf of perfume into the air – an intense mixture of lilac, jasmine and sandalwood - walking through the mist for an absolutely even application, Frances waved her hand and we followed her toward the back entrance of the school. We practically strutted like it was too insignificant to contain our greatness.
“Fuck this place,” Frances said. “I won’t miss it.”

“Only a couple months left,” I said. A couple months of purgatory before summer vacation. Two and a half months and we would magically transform into seniors. Pretty, popular and in charge.

I hated going in this entrance because immediately on the right they’d set up a small memorial for Dennis Lawson, a kid in our grade who died last month in a car accident of sorts. We weren’t friends with him. No one was. But when something like that happened, it made you regret not knowing a person. He’d gotten more attention in death than he ever had when he was living. Plus, the unusual circumstances tied us to it in a way we couldn’t ignore. Frances’s brother was driving the car. It was him, Dennis, my boyfriend Jon and his friend best friend Randy in the car. The three of them had been particularly brutal to Dennis over the years. The year before they’d vandalized his house. Earlier that year they’d set off a fire alarm at his house in the middle of the night by burning some old rags outside of his open bedroom windows. Then they’d destroyed a homework project worth half his grade in Physics class. Dennis eventually talked, and of course the guys got the smack down. So we had to go through all of these annoying assemblies on bullying, and the guys all got detention, but I guess it was effective because they decided to stop being assholes and make amends. They’d even invited him to go out with them one night. The tragedy was that instead of soaking up the positive attention, he’d opened the rear car
door as Frances’s brother James whipped around a sharp bend in the country road and jumped out. Just like that. Unfortunately, he’d jumped at a place where the road dropped down into a deep ravine. He cracked his head on a rock during the fall and landed facedown in a stream. By the time they climbed down to help him, he was gone. He’d obviously done it to teach them a lesson, or make some kind of statement about his miserable life. Their efforts to make things right were too little too late. I totally got why he did it, but it was still really fucked up and I felt so badly for Jon. Every time I opened the door and smelled those lilies, which were replaced every few days, I felt like I was in a funeral parlor and my stomach turned. But I always stopped and gawked for a minute or two. I couldn’t help looking at the picture of Dennis and his mom. Her face would never look like that again. Ever. Nothing sucked more for a parent than having their kid die, so her days of carefree joyfulness were most likely over. As usual, Frances wrapped her arm around my shoulder, squeezed and whispered, “Come on.” This was one of the many reasons I loved Frances. For all her faults, she always knew when one of us needed extra coddling. She was a good friend.

Walking down the hallway towards homeroom, we passed every social group in existence. Since everyone at our school was white, we didn’t have any ethnic-based cliques. That said, it was pretty much the cool people and the uncool people, the latter of which broke down into a few extra categories. One subcategory was the Kutzes. These were mostly farmer kids, but really it included anyone who looked dirty and wore ugly clothes to school each day, like flannel shirts or jeans that were the wrong shade or
texture. Strangely, this group consisted mostly of boys. We called them the Kutzes because the farms in our area were owned by the Pennsylvania Dutch, who used the word “kutz” to mean vomit. The joke was, every time we got a whiff of the Kutzes, we wanted to vomit. A smaller subgroup consisted of the kids who were just too smart and geeky to be cool. And for some reason, I have no idea why, these same people seemed to be the ones with chronic runny noses, allergy problems, bad glasses and other unforgivable attributes. And they were – again - mostly guys. Well, they could all rot together at the peanut-free table for all we cared. Finally, there were the goth freaks, consisting mostly of girls. These were the girls who wore too much eyeliner, cheap black boots (probably plastic from Payless) and had bad hair. Hello – feathered hair will never be back in style no matter how “in” the ‘80’s look becomes. If you can’t follow fashion trends with caution and common sense, you shouldn’t follow them at all. Now, we liked the same music as some of these chicks, and we were even friends with Lizard, who wore black NIN t-shirts sometimes and never sunbathed so her skin was sickly pale, but she wasn’t into death and Satan and shit like these girls. Not to our knowledge, anyway.

One of the goth chicks, Layla Moon, was a known Wiccan (aka devil worshipper), so no one ever went near her or her family for fear that we’d be disemboweled and eaten.

Frances’s boyfriend Jesse served detention with her once, and she stared at him the whole time – these long, intensely uncomfortable looks – returning to her notebook to sketch or doodle only occasionally. Afterwards, he was digging in his locker and, of course, when
he closed the door, who do you think was standing there? And she got really close and let
out some loud, creepy growl, like she was a panther or a werewolf and walked away. We
called her Total Freaklipse behind her back.

There were other groups. The band dorks, scary art chicks, home-ec girls (who always
wore their skirts with socks), the woodshop guys with long hair and dirt under their
fingernails that didn’t wash away. But when you got to this level of segmentation, you
started to run into crossovers, blurred lines. For example, some band dorks were part of
the smart and geeky crowd. Art chicks could also be goth girls and woodshop guys could
often be classified at Kutzes. You get the idea. I preferred to think of them in their master
groups so the lines were clean and indisputable.

We were quiet when we walked down the hallway that morning. I tried to look at
everything and remember it just as it was, so I could compare later. The indistinct shade
of the lockers, the black scuffs on the otherwise gleaming floor, the yellow cast of the
dull, flickering fluorescent lighting. I couldn’t believe that no one had brought it up yet.

Our plan. Our pact, really. The plan we’d all made to lose our virginities simultaneously
later that night. I couldn’t believe that Frances hadn’t said anything. It was her baby.

It was as if I’d willed it. No sooner did the thought form in my mind than Frances looked
at me and said, “We’ll discuss the plan in fourth period when we’re all together.” The four
of us had study hall together then. Frances looked at me longer than usual, as if to ask
“you still in”? After I nodded she focused on Joanne. “We doin’ this?” Joanne and I met
eyes for the briefest moment before she answered Frances. She was terrified. I felt so sorry for her. I hoped she could come up with a good excuse not to go through with it and still save face. I hoped I could help her somehow. She was sooooo not ready.

Frances had been with Jesse for close to a year. It was surprising that they hadn’t sealed the deal yet. But Joanne had only been with her boyfriend Bryce for a few months, just like how I was with Jon. And Lizard didn’t even have a boyfriend, so she had to snag a random (although the idea didn’t seem to bother her one bit).

Joanne smiled at Frances, all squinty-eyed and cute and said, “Game on.”

“My ladies,” Frances said with pride.

When I left them for homeroom my neck muscles slowly loosened and burned with relief. Sometimes Frances had a habit of stressing the shit out of everybody. But at least she kept things interesting. Without Frances, life in that town would’ve been unbearable. What would we have done? Milk cows? Tip them? This way we were never in our comfort zone, which meant never bored. That was about as much as you could expect from small town living.

Jon stood waiting for me outside of homeroom, same routine as always since we started going out. He’d stand by the door with Randy, talking to him until I showed up. I guess
Jon didn’t want to seem alone or pathetic or anything. When I walked up, Randy waved and disappeared inside the classroom, as if aware that his purpose had been served.

I’d spent the past year salivating over the back of Jon’s head in science class. I was enthralled with the way all the tiny shaved hairs came to a point at the nape of his neck. They were the color of sand and reminded me of a rough, pebbled beach. A very sexy, very masculine beach. I liked how he reached his long fingers back and scratched them, or sometimes just touched them, keeping his hand there for no other reason in the world but to drive me crazy. Sometimes I’d think that was a neck that needed to be licked. Like all it was missing was my face, and I’d need to be careful not to let myself daydream too much, because if I did I might lean too far forward, imagining salt on my tongue or trying to get a good whiff of his shampoo, which sometimes I imagined smelled like cherries, and other times coconut depending on my mood.

After a ton of flirting and buildup, we’d finally gotten together at the Valentine’s Day dance, when I discovered to my surprise that his shampoo was actually peppermint-scented. At first this delighted me. I thought he smelled fresh, but on rainy days when the smell of his cigarette smoke hung around him like a cloud, he reminded me of a menthol cigarette and it took some effort not to feel nauseous. I had a famously weak stomach. Anyway, the girls were ecstatic when we finally got together, so I could stop annoying them with my incessant obsessions about him, I guess. All except for Frances, who said that I was “too good for him” and took every opportunity to rag on him in front of me.
Technically, Frances and Jon were friends. They were a part of the same social circle and no one really acknowledged that there was animosity there, but I could tell Frances disliked him for some reason. Normally, I would’ve listened to her. After all, we all listened to Frances all the time about everything. But the pull of my hormones was becoming stronger than the pull of my social obligations, so I let it happen. Frances was legitimately pissed for about a week, but when I called her on it she said that if I wanted to date a tool it was my business, and after that she was civil to him. A little frosty around the edges, but civil. It seemed silly that Frances wouldn't like him anyway. He was one of the coolest guys in our grade, and if any girl outside of our immediate circle had the chance to secretly push me off a cliff so they could date him, I’d have been dead a thousand times over. Between his sexy swagger, perfectly lopsided smile and the tattoo on his bicep (he was basically the only guy in the school with a tat), all the girls had their tongues out. Dirty hos.

At the end of the hallway, I blew a kiss to Frances and Joanne, who veered left into Mrs. Stone’s homeroom class, and I cut right toward Mr. Rickman. We were always late for homeroom, so I basically just got to whisper hi and kiss Jon lightly before we went inside. But after, we had Mr. Horner’s Econ class together. Aside from lunch, walking from homeroom to Econ was the most time I spent with him all day. It was actually a pretty long walk – to the end of a long hallway, up the stairs and past the cafeteria.
When we hit the hallway after home room, Jon slid his arm around my waist and said, "Hey, you." That day his smile, which usually melted me, just made him look smug. I guessed it was because I was preparing to have semi-forced sex with him that evening and he was completely clueless. Why wasn't he reading my mind and offering his support, anyway? Funny, I blamed him more than Frances. After all, he was the one who stood to benefit the most. He led me down the hallway and just before the stairwell he said, "So I’ve been meaning to tell you…I think we should break up." I raised my eyebrow at him, shocked at the way he delivered the news. What about Frances and our pact? My face flushed, hot and prickly. Plus – what if someone had heard? I didn’t want random hallway people knowing my business. He smiled oddly at me, then said, “April Fool’s!” I instantly relaxed. Of course. I’d forgotten. Still, it was sort of a lame stunt to pull.

“Creep!” I pushed him a little harder than I meant to, causing him to knock into Debbie Moody who, true to her name, was always moody.

"Watch it," she said, glaring at me and Jon. Coming from anyone else, we probably would’ve taken the misstep personally. But no one took anything Debbie said seriously, especially her insults, which were like cow flop – scattered everywhere in this town. I hoped Jon didn’t notice the annoyance behind my gesture, and he didn’t at all. He
just laughed and hooked his arm back around me, letting his hand fall and rest on my ass for a split second before we walked into class.

The usual chatter filled the room, but the volume died down when Mr. Horner stood and immediately twisted around, trying to get a good look at his own ass. He looked like a dog chasing its tail. That's when I noticed my boyfriend laughing hysterically into the fold of his elbow. He could've been crying with his shoulders convulsing and the tears welling, but I knew better. Everyone knew better. He was way too cool to lose his cool. And so for the second time in three minutes, my face tripped my internal fire alarm. Mr. Horner turned to the class, his normally good-natured expression twisted in disbelief.

"Glue? Really? You actually put glue on my seat?"

Gasps and giggles combed through the room. Someone in the back whispered, “April Fool's Day." There was a moment, shortly after disbelief, when Mr. Horner's face darkened and I thought he'd lose it. Mr. Horner was attractive in a homely way. His longish, curly hair and sincere face normally reminded me of a cocker spaniel. But if he usually resembled a good-natured, cute dog, in that moment he'd changed to a rabid one. He quickly composed himself, said “Very funny,” and began talking about business cycles and Keynesian economics. It was my worst subject, as in I didn't understand it at all (Stagflation? Heterodox? Wha???), and so my eyelids just fluttered shut when the chuckling started again. Mr. Horner turned around to write some crazy model on the
board, so that the whole class could see the round, dark stain on the seat of his gabardine pants. Jon snorted like a hog and banged his palm on his desk. Obviously he'd been either a mastermind or an accomplice. I wondered how Mr. Hormer hadn't noticed a big pool of glue on his chair before he sat down, then realized it was probably from a glue stick or something more conspicuous than Elmer’s. Mr. Hormer continued drawing, a mess of crossing lines that made my head spin. Finally he turned around, sighed, and with resignation said, “Let’s just get it out of your systems. You have three minutes. Laugh it up.” He spun around, showy like a model, and with a flourish of his hands, he bared his stained ass for our enjoyment. Trying to pick a college major/future career path felt a little like staring at sheet music and not having the notes. Or the instrument. Finally, I could cross off one option: teacher. There were no words for that kind of humiliation.

In between second and third period, some assholes pasted signs on several of the classroom doors indicating room changes for the next period. So when I tried to go to Spanish class, a handwritten sign hung on the door that said “C3 room change to D5 period five.” It wasn't until the entire hallway was clogged with lost people trying to find the "alternate" locations of their classes that I realized it was just another hoax.

Sometimes I felt like high school was just like kindergarten, only a group of very misguided people had elected to give us more freedom. Why? Because we were more mature? Please. Physically maybe.
Just as I took my seat for study hall, I saw Frances, Joanne and Lizard bouncing up and down outside the door, motioning for me to sneak out. Mrs. Dormer, a big-haired old lady that mostly did study halls, but sometimes subbed for Spanish, strolled around the front of the room, stopping briefly to daydream out the classroom windows. I skirted my way out along the wall. Just as I crossed the threshold, she clapped her hands and cleared her throat, a sign that “class” was about to begin.

It wasn’t unusual for us to skip that period; Mrs. Dormer was eight hundred years old. She never took attendance and had no idea what was going on. She probably needed to be escorted from room to room just to know where to go next. I figured that Frances wanted us to walk to the M&M Sandwich Shop down the street and discuss tonight over milkshakes and cheese fries, but instead she yanked me down the hallway by my arm saying, “Come on. You’ve got to see this.”

She led us into the parking lot and made us duck down behind a car, shushing us with her index finger pressed to her lips. In a few minutes, Layla Moon, all decked out in weirdo purple pants and a booby black tank top, walked into our purview, looked around to make sure no one was looking (oops...missed us!), and approached a flyer taped to a nearby light post with an expression I’d never seen on her before. Not that I’d spent much time looking at her. But still, the Lady of Darkness appeared to be filled with…could it be hope? With each step she checked around her, waiting for someone to jump out and do
something awful to her, I assume. Hers was a skeptical, fragile hope. It made me hold my breath, as I intuitively knew that we were the ones about to do the awful something.

Layla put her hands on her meaty hips and scanned the flyer with her nose upturned like she smelled shit. When she finished, she stared at her blue Doc Martens and bit her lip. Then she read it again. Then she stared. On the third read-through, Frances grabbed my wrist and bit down on her index finger as though stifling an obscenely loud laugh. I couldn’t believe that of all people, Frances was fucking with Layla. This represented a new level of bravery because Layla looked like she could kick our asses. And if she didn’t do that, she could crush our bones when she sat on us. And if she didn’t do that, she could walk behind us and scoop up our stray strands of hair and weave them into voodoo dolls. Just before she jabbed a pin through my heart. I never understood why Frances felt the need to take other people down when she was untouchable. She had everything. Maybe it was because my former best friends used to gang up on me in kindergarten, or because I still remembered The Golden Rule, but I didn’t subscribe to all the nasty bullshit that happened at our school. And – hello – someone had just died the month before because of this shit. I might not have always thought the nicest things about people, but there was really no reason to shove my distaste down their throats. After all, when I ignored them they were invisible as far as I was concerned. But when I said something to Frances about it later, as I always did, she had an excuse ready and waiting. In this case she said, “What? It’s April Fool’s! Who was I supposed to play a trick on? Or are you too PC to honor a tradition that stretches back to the 1300s?” To which I said,
“Yeah, so does slavery.” To which she said, “Yeah, and so does concubinary,” and raised her eyebrows at me in the silliest way we both broke into laughter. Frances had a way of diffusing the tense situations she created by doing or saying idiotic things that were so senseless we couldn’t help but laugh.

Layla tore off the flyer, scrunched it up and tossed it on the ground. Joanne gasped and whispered, “Litterer!” Then Layla stalked off across the lot toward the rear of the school.

We scurried out from behind the car and retrieved the flyer after she’d turned the corner.

It read, “ROSES ARE RED, VIOLETS ARE BLUE, MEET ME BY THE DUGOUT. I’M REALLY INTO YOU.”

I shook my head at Frances, “That’s so mean.”

Frances just smiled and said, “Isn’t it great? She’s finally got a secret admirer.”

Joanne scrunched up her nose. “So, what? You’re sending her on a scavenger hunt or something?”

Lizard sang a song I didn't recognize, totally oblivious to the whole thing, strumming an electric air guitar between pauses. Frances waved her arm and said, “Follow me.” And so we all did, to the back of the school and into the bushes across from the dugout where Layla shook her head, obviously fighting with herself over whether to keep following the notes or not. This time she threw the crumpled note into her gypsy sling bag and kept
going. Frances said, “To the bleachers,” and we snuck around the periphery of the school, trying to be quiet and inconspicuous but not doing a great job at either. There was no good place to hide by the bleachers, so we stood behind a nearby corner and leaned out, gawking.

Lizard snapped back into the present, smiled mischievously at me and said, “Watch this.” She pushed Frances, who screamed when she fell forward on her knees. Frances rolled onto her back and laughed loudly, pulling up chunks of grass by the roots and tossing the clumps at Lizard. Layla, of course, saw us and instantly knew the score. Of course she didn’t have a secret admirer who was sending her on a mysterious journey to learn his identity. On April Fool’s Day. My heart dropped out of my chest. She stared Frances down, spit on the ground and stalked off away from the school, away from us.

Frances called out after her, “Wait! You missed the final note!”

“Are you crazy?” I said. “She could kill us.”

Frances’s eyes flickered. She was momentarily annoyed that I was being a downer about this stuff – again. Lizard said, “I wanna see the last note.” Frances led us over to the back entrance to the cafeteria. A note of the same color – hot pink – flapped in the breeze, only partially taped to the glass door. It read, “MAYBE IF YOU ATE MORE SALADS YOU COULD ACTUALLY GET A BOYFRIEND. APRIL FOOL’S!”
“Jesus,” I said.

“Harsh,” Joanne said.

“Burn,” Lizard said.

“Brilliant,” Frances said. She shot me a look. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Right. I don’t want a potential suicide case on my conscious so there’s something the matter with me,” I said.

“We should be nice to Layla, then I could have her cast a spell on Micah to make him my secret admirer,” said Joanne.

“Ryan Gosling,” said Lizard. She elbowed me like it was my turn. I drew in a deep breath and played along. There was nothing else to do.

“Flavor of the month,” I said. “Brad Pitt for his staying power.”

Frances wrinkled her nose, “Gross! A fifty-year-old with bad skin. I’d pick Jesse.” And we all groaned and teased her for being a dork and actually picking her own boyfriend. And just like that we'd forgotten the Layla incident. As if it had never happened. I still breathed a sigh of relief when the stupid day was over, though. It was just another excuse to rag on people.
After school, we went to Frances’s house, as always. But today was different. Today we had to primp for the party she was throwing that night. The party where we'd all presumably lose our virginity as a team. The ridiculousness of what we were about to do made us act like complete wack-jobs. We were all giddy and nerved up and silly and happy. We scampered to her room, shrieking and howling and I did a flying, leaping, dive onto her waterbed and closed my eyes while the waves rolled under me and lifted me up. At first we didn’t talk about it. We focused solely on primping.

“Put this on,” Frances said. I was wearing a tight t-shirt with baggy pants. Not nearly slutty enough. So she shoved a really low-cut, clingy shirt at me. I put it on, liking everything but the sliver of midriff it showed off. I wasn’t fat, but for some reason I couldn't get comfortable hanging my belly out. I was in the minority on this one. I turned slowly in front of her full-length mirror, looking for bulge or other unsightly problems.

“That’s the one,” Lizard said. Lizard would've gone out with her vagina showing if it was an acceptable thing to do. She looked like Taylor Swift, rail thin with big boobs, long legs and a pretty face, so she was never self-conscious about baring anything. Lizard always made me feel short and dumpy.

“Absolutely,” Frances said. She laid out her shoebox full of makeup on the floor and this month’s issue of Allure open to the makeup trends section. Then she pulled me
down on the floor with her and stared into my face thoughtfully. “We're going for a natural look. Just a little blush and lip gloss, then we'll accentuate the eyes.” she said. The experts said to use brown eye shadow instead of liner under the eyes for a softer look. Pink all over the lid, light brown in the crease, all well blended, then topped with lots of mascara. “Close your eyes,” she said. “Your loser boyfriend will love this.”

“It’s all about the eyes,” Lizard said.

“Like you really believe that,” Joanne said. We all snickered.

“Just because I like to play up my other features doesn’t mean that I don’t think eyes are important,” Lizard said.

“But not the *most* important. Please – everybody knows all that matters are your boobs. Just look at Lindsay Sheehan.” Lindsay was a girl in our grade who never spoke to anyone and was super into horses. She’d wear turtlenecks with little horses on them, sweaters with embroidered horses, her notebooks had horses on the front of them, she doodled horses in class, and she even looked a little like a horse. Horses did not impress me, so neither did she. She had just sort of blended into the scenery of the school hallways before, but last year she grew an ample rack and started turning heads. Frances's older brother James even flirted with her for a while before he started dating Vanessa, cheerleading goddess of the world. It was totally unacceptable.
Lizard grabbed her crotch. “What about this? Maybe this is the most important.” She circled her other arm in the air, a demented cowgirl riding a bucking bronco.

“Open your eyes,” Frances said. I did and looked in the mirror. I wasn’t really used to wearing that much eye makeup, but I thought it might be okay. I pulled some lip-gloss from my pocket, ran it over my lips and pursed and smacked them at myself in the mirror.

“Hey, that’s good,” Lizard said. “Now do me!” She sat on the floor in front of Frances and closed her eyes. She kept them closed as she spoke. “I think I’ve chosen my victim for tonight. What do you guys think about Randy? I let him kiss my cooch after field hockey practice yesterday.”

Everyone stopped. This was news. Joanne picked up a dirty sock and threw it in Lizard’s face. “You did not,” she said.

“He said I tasted like a Jolly Rancher. I am so lucky I snuck a quick locker room shower first. Could you imagine?”

“What did it feel like?” asked Joanne.

“Should I demonstrate?” she asked. She opened her eyes to look at our expressions and screwed up Frances’s makeup job.
“Eyes closed,” said Frances. We weren’t biting. We may have experimented with the small stuff together, but we weren’t about to start licking each other’s muffs. We had limits. Well, except Lizard.

“We were in the back of his car, and it was pretty warm out, but I was still kinda shivering. Maybe I was nervous, I don’t know. But then he put his head down there and his breath heated everything and when he licked, my entire body got hot instantly. Except my boobs, but we had the windows open so there was a breeze.”

“Did you come?” asked Joanne.

“I think so,” said Lizard. “But it was kind of hard to tell.”

“Didn’t happen, sweet pea,” Frances said. “Now you can open.”


“Or you could just do it with him to get it over with,” said Joanne. “He is hot. Some guys are just so fine that if you have the chance, you shouldn’t say no.” I had the feeling that was Joanne’s strategy for the evening. Close her eyes, get it over with and tell herself it didn’t really happen in the morning.
Lizard nodded thoughtfully. “Right.”

“Like if I ever got a shot with Micah, I'd do it with him, marry him and have, like, a million babies,” Joanne said. “I’d be just like my mom, only I wouldn't be fat and ugly.”

“Ugh. Would you give it up with the Micah crap already,” I said. Micah was this hot but gross guy who'd graduated last year but was still always hanging around. Hitting on chicks like Joanne. Chicks with poor self-esteem who couldn't imagine why he was giving them the time of day. Or ones who wanted a little stability and, because Micah was a fixture in the local landscape, mistook his game entirely.

Frances laughed. “Please. He's no worse than your boyfriend.”

I glared at Frances, finally fed up with the Jon-bashing bullshit. Normally I ignored all of her sarcastic comments, but enough was enough. My anger over the past eighty million comments bubbled up before I could stop it. After all, I was about to sleep with the guy.

At Frances's encouragement! Everyone completely shut up, sensing the oncoming blowout. “What's your problem with my boyfriend? Can you just tell me once what the deal is, because this shit is getting old.”

Frances walked right up to me, looked into my eyes and said in the most even voice ever, “He doesn't give a shit about you.”
She stunned me speechless. Then I fumed. Then the room was too small and my life was
too small and I needed to scream and claw and fight to get out of it all. I couldn't believe
she'd actually say a thing like that. It took all my effort not to scream at her about
everything – Layla, the pact, her sense of superiority, how opinionated she was,
everything. Instead I defended Jon, my inexplicable anger at Frances filling each word.
“Right,” I said. I jerked out my arms spastically, knocking over a bunch of perfume
bottles and beauty products cluttering Frances’s dresser. “That must be why he bought me
an expensive necklace for my birthday and fixed the heat in my car and told me he’d wait
until I was ready to lose my virginity. Unlike you!”

Frances stared at me for a long time. At first her sarcastic smile stayed splayed across her
face like a mask. An ugly mask. She actually looked ugly, which happened never. But
soon she dropped it and her expression changed into something more like pity, which I
also didn't like, and she said, “You’re right. I’m sorry. Sometimes I think he could do
more for you. Because I love you. But he obviously cares about you a lot. I was being a
bitch.” I focused on picking up the bottles. Her foundation spilled a little, so I gripped up
some tissues and blotted a nude, creamy dollop on her rug. She kneeled, touched my arm
and said, “Hey – sorry. Really.” She could be so sincere sometimes. It was impossible to
stay mad. God, it made me mad how I couldn’t stay mad.
I threw the dirty tissue down and said, “Fine.” Frances tackled me in a sloppy bear hug that knocked me backwards and Joanne and Lizard cheered and clapped. It was over.

Then she told us all to sit on the floor and she looked at us seriously and said, “Are you guys sure you want to go through with this tonight? We don’t have to. If you don’t want to, say so. I won’t be mad.” Everyone shook their heads with total confidence and earnestness and said they were ready. Game on. Frances looked at me and said, “Really. I didn’t mean to pressure any of you. If you don’t want to do it, let’s not. It was a stupid idea, anyway. What, are we in *American Pie* or something?”

We all laughed. “No,” I said. “I want to. I love Jon. I was just being a bitch, too.”

Frances smirked and said, “Well then let’s get our acts together, bitches!”

The party consisted of the usual suspects – us, our boyfriends, Randy and Gabe for the juniors, and then James and a smattering of his friends for the seniors. And Micah because no one could ever get rid of him. All of Frances’s parties were small (we were always the only girls from our grade), so if you were looking for diversity, you’d better hang at someone else’s place. I thought about the basement party that Gabe had earlier in the year. Gabe was this cute, quiet guy with a really bad, long-bangs-in-the-face haircut. He was probably only popular because of his sister Vanessa. The hottest chick in our
school. Gabe had invited a ton of people to his party and as soon as the lights went out it was like instant eighth grade dance. Everyone paired up, swaying to slow songs, feeling each other up in the most innocent ways possible. We French kissed. We stayed clothed. We remembered how great that all was. We had to pretend it was stupid later, but that was the most fun I’d had in a long time. Frances’s parties were only in her basement in the dead of winter. Otherwise, we were outside. Her expansive yard had a little shack on it at the far end of her property, and so we either hung out there and played cards or drinking games or we made a big bonfire right in front of it, sat around it and did nothing. Sometimes James played guitar and we sang along, which was cool, but mostly it was unremarkable. Just drunkenness and woods and dark places and a complete lack of supervision. There was no eighth grade dance stuff happening at her parties. You were getting fingered in the woods or giving head inside the shack or humping naked on the other side of the pond. At Frances’s house, the only thing we did with innocence was lose it. I don’t mean to make out like I was some kind of angel underneath it all and didn’t enjoy it, because I did. My hormones were going insane and I’d have chosen humping a guy over most other things in life any day. I think it was just my prescience that allowed me to see how once we’d moved past kissing, we didn’t care about it anymore. And once we moved past touching parts of our bodies that were not genitalia, we didn’t do it anymore. Somehow I knew that as soon as I had sex, the make out sessions, the touching and even the oral sex would practically stop and there would only be sex from there on out. I wouldn’t be able to say, “I just wanna make out and grind against you tonight.”
Once it was sex, all the other stuff I loved would fall away. But I’d made a conscious decision to own it, and so I went out there thinking that it was gonna happen and that I was coolest person on the face of the Earth for making it happen. I think we all did.

Anyway, we stood around freezing our asses off while James, worst fire keeper ever, tried to make us a bonfire. You’d think he would’ve known how to do it by then. But it wasn’t working. He’d gone through most of a pack of matches and only seared two small black patches on the paper he used as a starter. The wind was a killer.

“Make a teepee with the kindling,” I said. “The match’ll be shielded and the wood will burn longer.”

“I know how to make a fire,” James said.

His friends snickered. Sure you do. You’re tearing it up, man. I heard the ssss of several bottle caps twisting off of beers, but it was so dark I could barely see anything. Jon stumbled behind me and knocked me over in a clumsy bear hug. Sprawled out on the ground, he cuddled his face next to mine and I licked the side of it, then kissed his neck. I turned to face him and wrapped my right leg around his torso. “Wow,” he said, obviously blown away by how forward I was being.

“Get a room,” Frances said. She and Jesse were next to us, pressing up against one another in the dark.
“Soon enough,” I said. And I meant it. I’d already decided that I wanted to go first so I could do it inside the shack instead of tearing up my back on pinecones and rocks and shit. At the same time, it was uncool to disappear immediately. I needed to pay close attention to drag Jon away at just the right time.

Micah returned from a beer run, dropped the cases on the ground so that the bottles clanked together and possibly broke, and said to James, “What’s with the fire, shithead?” He tore open the top case and clutched two bottles at a time, passing them to the right. His outfit of green, shiny Umbros and a t-shirt suggested he hoped someone might call an impromptu, late-night soccer match.

James threw down the matches, growled and said, “Wharf rat. Come take care of this friggin’ fire if you know so much.” He’d started calling me wharf rat after I’d gotten drenched at a baseball game years ago. Sooooo embarrassing. James sat back down next to Vanessa and they made out all showy and blatant.

The wind whipped so hard the charred wads of paper slid across the base of the fire pit, plowing tracks through the ashes of last weekend’s fire. The matchbook was empty save for a single match. Then I had an idea. A statement-making idea that I’d seen on some reality TV show making fun of white trash people in rural America. We hardly lived in Deliverance country or anything, but – seriously – I recognized the habits of some of those TV people in a few of my friends’ parents and neighbors. The trick with my trick
was to not burn your hand off. I told everyone to stand back, parting the small sea of people with my arms. I grabbed a can of Coleman Camp Fuel from the porch of the shack, doused some on top of the logs, snaked a thin trail several feet away and dropped my match. An immediate blast of fire blew everyone’s hair back and even shook the ground. I closed my eyes and prayed that no one had lost an eyebrow or worse. After a minute of silence, Frances said, “That was fucking awesome.” I’d earned a round of cheers and whistles. It could’ve been the thrill of ignition, or the beer, or the changed looks on the faces of James’ friends when they regarded me – fear? awe? – but after that silly little fire stunt, I felt even sexier. Totally charged. That easily I’d shed my designation as wharf rat and crossed over to sexy badass vixen-goddess. It must’ve sent an electric current through the air, because everyone seemed to be mauling one another. Or about to. We sat in pairs around the fire, and I saw Joanne slide next to Micah (her boyfriend didn’t show up!) and flash him a look. On one side of me, I heard Lizard explaining the merits of thongs to this guy Eric and I actually caught her dropping her pants slightly and waving her ass in his face to underscore whatever point she was making. And on my other side, Frances and Jesse were already sprawled across the ground, rounding second base.

James strummed his guitar and belted out a Neil Young song, Vanessa cuddled up against his side. He wore frayed jeans and tufts of shaggy, sun-streaked hair hid his eyes.
“Old man take a look at my life, I’m a lot like you…” he sang, voice cracking on the high notes. It actually sounded soulful, and I wondered what the hell he had to be sad about. He and Frances had the best lives in the world.

Jon sat behind me, wrapped his legs around me and whispered, “Where did you go?” I felt a momentary flutter in my belly as I contemplated what I was about to do, but the decision was already made. And I was crazy about him. And feeling very tigress, to boot.

I grabbed his face and nearly sucked it off, then said, “Let’s get the fuck out of here.” I felt my friends’ eyes on me as we left. They were taking inventory on how each of us was doing with the plan, and no doubt feeling jealous and a little pissed that they hadn’t grabbed the shack first. It was a bit too early to abandon the party, but I didn’t care.

Believe it or not, the shack was actually pretty nice inside. It had a fully functional kitchen and a bedroom complete with a reasonably clean bed. What more could you ask for when you were essentially marooned in the middle of the woods?

Let’s do it. Do this thing. Do it do it do it. I do. Do me. A litany of “do’s” rattled through my mind. I shook my head to clear it, giving Jon a look like “don’t ask.” I pulled from more than a decade of R-rated movie knowledge, not to mention all I’d learned and seen in Cosmo, Vogue and the others, a treasure trove of suggestive images to mirror. I pursed my lips into a sexy pout and summoned all of it, becoming someone else and loving it.

We stumbled through the door to the bedroom, kissing. The noise from the bonfire faded
to a low hum. I could no longer recognize the words of James’s song. Inside, only a sliver of light shone through the parted drapes. Perfect. I channeled the sexiest images I could conjure, copying them one by one. I lowered my eyes, parted my lips, slowly removed my pants and groped at my thighs. I rolled my tank top up to my boobs, lifted his shirt and pressed my naked middle against his. I was brazen and with each movement I felt the real me slip away a little further. It was the most liberating moment of my life. I was a tease, a trollop, and each time Jon came at me I felt powerful, in control. I backed up a little, not wanting my striptease to end, not wanting him to get what he wanted. This small power play, this inhabitation of a phantom vixen was exactly what I needed. I circled the bed and he followed. It was all working. I could tell he was excited.

He came at me more quickly then and drove me into the wall. The lamp next to me teetered and almost fell from its table. He flattened me out with his body, taking my breath away. I’d never seen him so crazy before. His hands went everywhere and I still couldn't breathe. I was so dizzy my legs gave out, but the pressure of his body kept me upright. He wasn't holding back anymore. When he kissed me, small, fast vibrations juddered through my body and I felt a swirling pressure at my temples. I told myself not to pass out. I slid my hand down his back and extended it as far as I could, slid it around the curve of his body and felt for the waistband of his shorts. More kissing and my body went slack. A shock of white light flashed near my eyes and a strange image plowed through my mind. Not an image. A scene. A movie. I’d summoned up strange memories during intimate moments before, but I immediately knew this was different. It wasn't a
film I recognized. It wasn't a memory. I tried to stay focused on Jon. Tried to remain conscious as he parted my legs. Tried to pay attention to the feeling of being opened, entered, pulled apart, the pain of my first time. But I couldn’t stay with him. The movie kept playing.

*I saw headlights on a narrow road lined with tall grass. I was inside a car, careening wildly along a country road. I recognized the dashboard as James’s Trans Am, confirmed when he looked into the back seat and laughed. Randy turned around next and yelled something at me. I’d never seen him so angry before. He waved a piece of paper over his head. It looked like pink carbon paper. The body next to me slammed against the car door. On my other side, Jon was yelling and shoving. Yelling and shoving his hand right through me and into a blonde boy whose face I couldn’t see but I recognized anyway. He reached across me and opened the door. Air rushed in so hard my hair whipped in my face and my body felt pinned against the back seat. When I looked at the blonde boy again, I saw his face. His eyes were wide and terrified. And then the hand, Jon’s hand, reached through me again and pushed harder. A shock of blonde hair rushed past my face and the body tumbled from the car, disappearing beyond the tall green grass. I heard the beating of my own heart, then the squeal of tires. Skidding, screaming, a car door slamming shut.*

I felt the same roiling sensation around my temples and each mental thrash against my body’s apparent paralysis began to result in small, barely perceptible motions. My brain
started speaking to my body again. The movie paused and I was back in the moment. We lay across the bed, above the covers. Jon straddled me, breathing hard into my face. A bead of his sweat dropped, slid down my neck and dampened the quilt below me. His head slumped onto my chest and he breathed hard, making me feel too hot, too confined. Thankfully he rolled off, one arm still sprawled across my torso. I could feel my fingertips again and with some effort I turned my head to regard him. He smiled and shook his head at me. “Thanks. That was awesome.”

Believe it or not, we had a plan and the plan was this: after you were sufficiently deflowered, head straight to the willow tree next to the pond and sit there and wait for your friends. And to make sure you weren’t followed so that we could debrief, observe any possible physical changes, etc. It wasn’t hard for me to extract myself from Jon. After the confusing turn of events with the vision and all, I wasn’t looking to snuggle and rub noses for the rest of the night. It was tougher to make sure I wasn’t followed, probably because he could tell from my expression that something had gone horribly wrong, and so when I got dressed, he did, too, and as soon as I opened the door, I had to break right to lose him.

I skulked around the edge of the pond first, squinting toward the tree, trying to see if anyone was there yet. I wasn’t sensing any movement, so I walked over, parted the curtain of sweeping branches and stepped inside. The vine-like branches brushed the
ground, so that the trunk was completely hidden. The inside was like a fort; a place where we could always lie low. I slammed my back against the bark and slid to the ground. I needed a game plan: quickly. Or at least five minutes to compose myself. I shut my eyes tight and willed away the sound of Jon calling my name in the distance.

I tried to rationalize what I’d experienced. There were a lot of things I could tell myself for why I shouldn’t trust it: I’d always processed intimacy differently; I had a vivid imagination; my boyfriend wasn’t a murderer; my “visions” had been wrong before; clearly I was no psychic, or reverse psychic, or whatever I’d have needed to be to make that real. I knew it was ridiculous. It had to be stemming from me. Maybe I had a desire to condemn my sexual partners. Maybe I wasn’t ready. Maybe I conjured it so as not to be a chip off the old block (aka dirty whore bag). Maybe I was under too much stress. Or more affected by the Dennis incident than I initially thought. There were actually plenty of possible explanations. But what if all of that was bullshit?

I stared into the darkness, thankful that no one could see me. Still, it was a little scary; like I couldn’t see where anything started or ended. It was just space – black, empty, endless. I began forming the words I’d use to describe what happened to my friends. I saw something. I saw something that already happened. I saw an alternate version of something that may or may not have been real. An alternate reality? Something from another dimension, perhaps? But before I formed anything coherent, I heard footsteps and Frances chanting, “I’m not a virgin. I’m all grown up and I like it.” When she parted the
branches, she shone a flashlight right into my face. I shielded my eyes. “There she is. The
town tart. Hiding in the foliage. Let’s grab her and burn her at the stake!” Intent on getting
out of the light, I tried to stand but felt so weak I dropped back down onto my knees and
– with no real warning or awareness - puked on the ground next to me. Next thing I knew
I felt Frances’s cool hands brush my neck. She scooped up my hair and spoke quietly.
“That’s it. Get it out. Someone had too much to drink tonight.”

When I finally finished I was exhausted. Sweating and shaking, still hearing the sound of
skidding in my head and seeing his flash of blonde hair when I closed my eyes. I felt
Frances looking at me, even though I could barely make out her face. She said, “Jesus,
girl. Are you alright?” I nodded, still having trouble with the idea of speech. “Was it the
sex? Don't worry. I won't tell him he was so bad he made you sick.” She laughed, and I
felt strangely reassured. Glad that I’d have Frances to get me through this.

“Did you…” I started to say, unsure of how I even wanted to finish the sentence.
Did you experience anything strange? Did you ever have doubts about what happened to
Dennis? Did you ever suspect my boyfriend could be a murderer?

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “I sure did. I might need to grab a new pair of undies from
the house. Think I bled all over these.” She readjusted her pants, flipped open her phone
and began texting.
The blue light from Frances's phone illuminated Joanne's face when she stepped into our secret hideout. Her expression shocked me. I'd forgotten all about helping her find an excuse not to do it, and I figured that if she'd gone through with it, she'd be feeling repentant and forlorn by now. Especially since it would've been with Micah instead of her boyfriend. But she looked elated. Frances snapped her phone closed, pulled a mangled pack of smokes from her pocket and offered one to Joanne. “Post-coital nicotine fix?” she asked.

Joanne, who rarely smoked, said *hell yes* and popped one in her mouth like it was a tic-tac. She inhaled deeply, and when she exhaled it was as if the drag had restored her oxygen supply. “So how was it?” Frances asked. “Did you? With Micah?”

Joanne nodded with a huge smile and said, “Uh-huh.” She laughed hysterically, making me temporarily lose interest in my own trauma and find out what the hell was going on with her.

“Well?” Frances said, hands on hips, forehead crinkled.

Joanne took a few steps closer to us, leaned in and whispered, “It was terrible!” She cracked up again, making us all laugh like crazy. Frances made spastic motions with her hands, trying to get us to shut up so we wouldn’t reveal our location, but she couldn’t stop, either. Through bursts of laughter, Joanne managed to say, “Rebecca kisses better
than that fucking guy.” Frances spit out her beer and doubled over, cradling her stomach.

“I’m surprised he could find the hole.”

We were all laughing so hard it took a while before we could form words again. Finally Frances said, “That must be why he can only fuck virgins.” We all sat down in a circle, breathing deeply, trying to compose ourselves. But it all started up again when Joanne wrinkled her nose and said, “Ew. What smells like puke?”

To which Frances replied, “Apparently Jon and Micah have been studying from the same book of tricks.”

Joanne raised her eyebrows at me and asked, “That good, eh?”

“You have no idea,” I said. As much as I wanted to tell them everything, I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want to ruin the moment. I didn’t want to take away from their experiences. Plus, I was still tripped up on how to verbalize things.

Frances spilled her experience play by play while we waited for Lizard. They’d made love on a quilt that they’d stretched out under a perfect sky – star-lit and full of moon. It was slow, gentle and romantic. Everything she’d hoped and expected. Frances pried the top off of another beer bottle with her ragged plastic lighter and sidled over a little closer to me. “I still haven’t heard how yours went, Rebecca.”
My voice came out like a hoarse squeak. I cleared my throat and started over. “Not exactly what I expected.”

Before I needed to go any further, Lizard poked her head in between the branches and announced, “Heeeere’s Elizabeth!” a la Jack Nicholson in The Shining. She had a habit of calling herself Elizabeth even though no one else in the world had ever followed suit. She stumbled in and shouted, “Dude – I am so trashed!” I shushed her because I didn’t want to be found. She staggered over to the tree and leaned against the trunk, her eyes bleary and unfocused. She looked in my direction and shouted, “Jon’s looking for you!” The statement made my entrails bottom out. Lightheaded and queasy again, I looked down and braced myself.

Frances flung her arm around me and said, “She’s busy now.” She checked my face to make sure that was what I actually wanted. “I mean, if you want to be,” she said. I nodded and stayed put. Busy indeed.

Lizard belted out a whoop and pumped her fists into the air. Her long, thin profile, bending this way and that reminded me of Gumby. I shushed her again. She fell onto her hands and knees and whispered loudly, “I love sex. I knew I would.”

“How did you get so wasted?” Frances asked.
“Don’t ask. We were both trashed and so we fought like crazy…I can’t even remember about what. But we fought and then we fucked and we had ANGRY, DRUNKEN SEX. ANGRY, DRUNKEN SEX IS THE FUCKING BEST!”

We all snickered. “Well, technically you wouldn't know if it’s any better than regular, but we'll take your word for it,” Joanne said. She winked at us in the pause where Lizard’s brain performed drunken acrobatics, trying to figure out what Joanne had said.

“I’m not a fucking virgin anymore, biotches,” Lizard said. “So everybody can suck my dick right here.” She yanked at her waistline like she was going to pull her pants down and we all winced and covered our eyes.

“On that note, anyone up for bed? Boy am I tired!” Frances stretched out her arms and faked a yawn. She threw one arm around Lizard and mouthed “come on” to Joanne and I. Lizard passed out during the slow hobble toward Frances’ house. Even with all three of us sharing the weight, she was a load. By the time we got her inside, we dropped her on the floor by the front door and left her. Frances kicked her foot and said, “pathetic,” but before we went to sleep, she took her a pillow.

The next morning I woke up in a foul mood. I knew I’d need to deal with what I’d seen or imagined the night before, and the thought didn’t please me one bit. I was sure Jon had
passed out somewhere on the property. There could be no more hiding. Frances slept next to me in her bed, snoring lightly. Joanne was sprawled across the bedroom floor. She’d balled up Frances’s terry cloth bathrobe and used it for a pillow. No Lizard in sight because she, of course, was still sprawled in front of the door downstairs, keeping the draft out. I took a deep breath and started talking. “I had some weird vision thing during sex last night.” Joanne grunted and rolled over. Frances opened one eye and closed it again. “I’m totally freaked out about it.”

Frances nestled further into the covers. Her eyes were still closed when she replied, “Was it of you burning on the cross or some other Christian punishment for your misguided ways?” She smiled, inwardly laughing at her own jokes even in half-sleep.

“I’m serious,” I said. Her movements looked labored and unenthusiastic but, still, she propped herself up on her elbows and squinted up at me. A burst of loud coughing rose from the floor. Joanne must’ve been hurting from the cigarettes; one of the definite pitfalls of being a social smoker. Soon her head popped up and she looked at me expectantly. I had everyone’s attention. “It was about Dennis Lawson’s death.” Joanne shifted her weight, cleared her throat and watched me intently. Frances groaned and stuffed a pillow over her face. Even though it had only happened a month ago, we never talked about Dennis. It just hit too close to home. Given that my boyfriend and Frances’s brother were involved. Given that all of the nastiness stemmed from our social circle and
we'd never done anything to discourage it. Given that we'd barely even noticed him until after he was gone. It was like on some unspoken level we agreed that we'd been complicit, and pretending we didn't feel it was way better than owning up.

I continued on, feeling crazy. Like any minute one of them would say what the fuck is wrong with you? “It was like when Jon and I got hot and heavy, I snapped out of the moment and I had some vision of something horrible that Jon had done. Dennis Lawson’s death but different from what we think.” I knew it was coming out scrambled, that I wasn't making any sense. But as I spoke, I became more convinced that there was something to it. The movie replayed in my mind and I saw how perfectly the events I watched matched up against what we were told. With the exception of one glaring difference.

“Different how?” Joanne asked softly. I could tell by her expression that she'd take whatever I said as the absolute truth, and I felt the weight of that trust. It was unnerving. I didn't want to take responsibility for saying something terrible that wasn't true, but still. I needed help. I had no idea how to handle this on my own. Even though I risked everything by accusing my boyfriend of something he might not have even done, I felt strongly enough about the possibility that I couldn't let it go. I felt like on some level I already knew the truth.
“Like when they were in the car they weren’t really taking him out. They were yelling at him. And then Jon reached across and opened Dennis’s door, I think just to scare him, but then he actually pushed him and…”

We all paused and looked at one another, the only sound the chirping of the blue jay perched on Frances’s windowsill. I told myself that I wasn’t really having a heart attack, although it felt that way.

“Wow,” Frances finally said. She looked a touch annoyed, like maybe she couldn’t believe I actually woke her up for that. “We’re talking about your boyfriend. You do realize that, right?” There was an edge to her voice that caused Joanne to jerk her head back a little, like she was the one getting scolded. Meanwhile, I felt as though she’d punched me in the stomach.

After I mastered breathing again, I said, “You’ve never liked him.”

Frances snorted. “Right. And I just got yelled at about it yesterday. Remember? When you told me he was the best boyfriend in the world?”

“I know,” I said. I was losing my nerve. I didn’t expect Frances to be so cold about it.
“So you had this vision while having sex that my brother and your boyfriend are basically murderers? You are into some sick shit, girlfriend.”

She snickered and slid back under the covers. Before she rolled over and went back to sleep, she actually smiled and laughed. The sarcasm vanished. It was pure ridicule now. I’d made myself a fucking joke.

Joanne, who believed in everything – ghosts, God, conspiracy theories, absolutely everything – looked at me with pity. She said, “You and your visions,” and patted my arm like she was my grandmother advising me that boys will be boys. You and your visions. They’re crazy, what can we say? Accept it and move on. Joanne yawned and slunk back to her floor nest.

Needless to say, the certainty crept out of me. Not only was I doubting myself, I was reprimanding myself for being insane. Again. Apparently my one great grandmother, who died when I was young, had been cuckoo crazy. So it ran in the family. I shuddered, imagining myself as an old lady, sitting in the back seat of my daughter's car, next to my grandchildren, holding two-way conversations with myself, probably seeing people who weren’t there, while everyone else watched and giggled. Life was so unfair. I gnawed at the skin around my fingernails until they woke again.
When Frances eventually stirred she grinned into my face so big and mischievously she reminded me of the Cheshire Cat. "Hey one-flew-over-the-cuckoo's-nest. What do you say to some pancakes?"

I sighed. Tried to keep my sense of humor. "I didn't think you read."

"It was a movie, too," she said.

In a few minutes all four of us were up, milling around the kitchen. I mixed the batter while Frances sprayed the griddle with oil. Joanne played solitaire at the table and Lizard got up to vomit in the bathroom every few minutes. Frances and Joanne brought Lizard up to speed on my morning craziness and everybody had a nice hearty laugh at my expense. "That's what you get for getting so drunk," Frances said to Lizard. "You missed a real moment in our collective history." Frances winked at me. I tried to keep my smile in place, but really I just felt sad. And confused. And silly.

"That sounds badass," Lizard said. She was about to say more but stopped when we heard the front door squeak open, then the loud stomping of boy feet up the stairs, coming right towards us.

I spooned the first puddles of batter onto the pan and watched them sizzle.

"I want whatever it is that you're making," James said, slumping down at the table next to Lizard. Even though I didn't look, I knew Jon came in behind him. I felt him
looking at me. I saw Frances widen her eyes and shake her head at Lizard as if to say, “We should probably switch topics.” No one said anything for a moment and the tension colored everything. I imagined my friends’ eyes darting back and forth at one another, milking the last few seconds of our inside joke. I took a deep breath and turned around.

There he was, standing in the doorway, staring out beyond the window. He had a weird expression on his face, not that I could blame him. He probably thought I ran away because I didn’t like the sex. True, but not the whole story. I made myself go to him. I put the palms of my hands on his chest and whispered my apology. “I guess I just freaked out,” I said as softly as I could. “It was so great. I can’t believe I ruined it.”

He rolled his eyes and took a step back. Then another. He was just about to insult me and leave me when Frances came over and said to him, “I’m so sorry I took her away from you last night. She was trying to get back to you, I promise. But I had a crisis and I wouldn’t let her go. Girl stuff.” She slapped him on the arm. “I told her you’d understand…”

And what could he say to that? I smiled as winningly as I could muster. The corners of his mouth curled up robotically, as if someone had inserted a quarter into a slot. Next thing I knew, his arm was around me and I was standing in the kitchen, surrounded by all of my friends. They talked and laughed and salivated at the pancake smell. Even Frances, who just rescued me and could always tell when something was wrong, licked
her lips and placed a napkin on her lap. The drama was over. It was time for breakfast.

The sky was blue and free of gashes. The sunlight through the French doors warmed our faces. We were happy. It was perfect. So why did I feel like I was about to get pushed out of a speeding car? I stayed on cue and smiled and repeated the good news to myself. It was time for breakfast. We were happy. It was perfect.
Later that morning, I went home allowing the tiniest part of me to hope that my mom was there. That part shrank when I checked the mailbox and it was stuffed so full I stumbled backwards yanking everything out. It disappeared when I went inside, called her name and heard nothing. It struck me that I wasn't even sure of the last time she was home, the last time I'd seen her. My mother wasn't exactly conventional in her parenting style.

At the time, I told myself she didn't know how to love. It was true that my mother looked at things intellectually. No, she'd never be caught committing a crime of passion. She might embezzle funds from your business or steal your car, something that had an end that benefitted her. She was shrewd. Shrewd enough to know that hearts rarely worked to your advantage.

Once, during one of our fights, she told me she hated me. Later she sat me down in the cheerful sunlight of our living room, brushed my hair from my face and clarified her statement. This rarely happened, so she must've known how bad she sounded. She didn’t hate me, she said, she hated how I was acting. This was a distinction we made often. How a person was versus how they were acting. So my dad wasn’t really a maniac, he was acting like a maniac. The boyfriend after him wasn’t unstable, he was acting unstable. In my mother’s eyes, everyone was poised on the cusp of redemption.
My dad was a motorcycle racer with a penchant for weapons. A professional motorcycle racer. Did he make enough to support himself? Irrelevant. Rich parents. When my dad started cheating on my mom, he took his ladies to my grandfather’s mountain house, and when my mom cheated on him, she used the beach house. Where was I during all of this? Who knows. Probably the second bedroom of the beach house. He left for good when I was six, but every now and then they’d still hook up. Up until I was maybe nine and the divorce was in full swing. It was for the best. Once he’d nearly killed my Uncle by totally rewiring his house after some altercation. My Uncle turned on the light and BOOM. He shot handguns at body targets in our backyard, and I had a strong suspicion he’d killed people at some point in his life. I hadn’t seen him since he left. He didn’t want custody. Last I heard he lived in the mountain house with a girl only slightly older than me. A predictable fate for an otherwise unpredictable guy.

The guy after my dad was a coke dealer with a mustache. Now, if you are into cocaine, or any snortable, a good rule of thumb is to nix the mustache. He probably could’ve stayed wasted all day just by licking his lips. He was into German cars and exotic reptiles. We once went to the Arizona desert so that he could hunt a Reticulate Gila Monster, but the trip went wrong when he and my mom took some bad peyote and our car broke down in the desert, and everything got very freaky and *Natural Born Killers* if you’ve ever seen that movie.
Then it was her divorce lawyer, a rich alcoholic who once destroyed our house in a boozy rage. I'm talking completely trashed. He was a racecar driver in his spare time, and lost half of a foot in a fiery crash. He was let go after the divorce because the foot was grotesque and he liked to give it air. I think he saw it as a conversation piece, a battle scar that illuminated his rugged spirit. After she dumped him she said, “if I see that stump again I'll hack the whole thing off myself, I swear.” It really was hideous. Plus, he hardly raced at all by the time he met my mom, which really just made him an alcoholic. Not nearly interesting enough for our eclectic tastes.

Her love interests had a few things in common. Number one: money. As a girl who came from nothing, a single mother who supported us on a secretary's salary, she liked to at least be afforded the luxury of living well day-to-day. We may not have had a savings account, but we dressed well and drove a BMW. Two: they liked fast things. Fast motorcycles, fast cars, fast lifestyles. And three: they were all violent. I wouldn't have even known how fucked up all of it was if it hadn't been for my close relationship with Frances. While my mom was throwing lingerie parties and seducing our neighbors, Frances's mom baked brownies and embroidered potholders with sheep on them. And the very afternoon my father burned the entire contents of my mother’s closet in our front yard and got arrested by a cop my mom was “friendly” with, Frances’ dad taught us how to play softball so that we could try out for the team that summer. Kids learn quickly through comparison.
Anyway, when I got home that morning I craved her. Mostly I was pretty self-sufficient. But I was human, too. I sorted through the mail, tossed half of it, then sat on the front porch, watching the light beam through the trees, a line of flashlights piercing the shade. A huge rock surrounded by an overgrown flowerbed was tucked into the curve of our driveway. Two chipmunks lived under the rock. That morning one of them stood on its hind legs batting at the tiny pink petals that dropped from our cherry blossom tree and swirled around like snow. It was very Bambi and beautiful and everything, but I needed a distraction. I went back inside, scrawled out a note that read, “Llamas – 4/21, 10:45am,” and hung it on the fridge. Just in case.

My mom and I had this crazy thing that we loved to do together. No one else was ever invited to come along. In fact, no one else even knew about it. Not my grandmother. Not Frances. Not my mom’s boyfriends or my father. It was like some kind of twisted religion. As the years passed, we did it less and less often, but it continued to mean something despite all the bullshit. My Aunt Myra, who’d passed away when I was about twelve, had owned a pretty popular petting zoo. She had llamas, pigs, bunnies, goats, and like a trillion other small animals. Kids loved it because Myra’s girlfriend, Jill, offered pony rides. She also liked to chase the animals around the barn to give their patrons a real show. The fainting goat probably toppled over on its side 25 times every week. My mom loved it because it reminded her of her sister. But even before she passed, we’d visit a lot.
Myra was the kind of person who made you feel kinder than you really were. She was just so nice she treated you like you were a good person with good intentions no matter what. No one who wasn't already privileged with the information could tell that she and my mom were related. My mom was tall with long, dark hair, dark eyes and olive skin. Her hair was so straight and shiny when she turned her head you felt like you were watching a shampoo commercial. Sometimes I even heard voiceover in my head. Myra was light and freckled. Her hair coiled out in long, frizzy ringlets. My mom dressed in designer clothes and high heels. She loved everything expensive and pretty made no rules against consuming certain products in the name of social responsibility. Give her leather, fur, diamonds, feathers, the rarer the better. Myra wore overalls and mukluks. She liked silver jewelry and peasant blouses and clothes that looked earthy and practical. When Maisy was around her, she transformed into someone else. She almost seemed envious, like she wanted to be like Myra, but fate dealt her a different hand. I'd sometimes catch her mimicking Myra’s words and using the same expressions. But within hours of leaving, the spell broke and things went back to normal.

Jill and another guy, Clem, still operated the farm. My mom and I called Clem Mr. Green Teeth (not to his face) because a toothbrush and a hot bath would’ve done him wonders. When my mom and I visited, we’d pet the animals, reminisce with Jill and sometimes I'd go riding. But the weird part, the part that totally drew us both there (at least now that Aunt Myra was gone), was the side business that they ran. They called it Squeals on Wheels, and basically anyone could pay to get the petting zoo brought to them in this big,
old-fashioned bus painted in bright colors, the words written out in ornate, circus-style font. So when my mom and I went, we'd load up some animals (usually the llamas and goats because we were partial to those) and drive them around, stopping at places where we thought people might enjoy a free treat. We'd taken them to a nursing home, a nursery school, a Starbucks parking lot and a medical office. We led them around on leashes and wore crazy carnival masks so no one could determine our identities. Still, we tried to steer clear of places where people we knew might hang out, so my mom avoided prisons and I stayed away from Denny’s, where my classmates could sometimes be found eating Moons Over My Hammy until 4 a.m.

My mom knew everything about the animals so it was never an issue. I assumed Aunt Myra must’ve taught her before I was born. When we'd get back to the farm, my mom usually hosed off the llamas, combed their hair and blow-dried it. She had a special cordless dryer she kept in the trunk of her car just for them. I’m not sure if using a blow dryer on a llama is standard or not, but no one ever stopped her. Obviously, the Maisy that enjoyed bathing llamas was a very different one than the Maisy I typically lived with. But at those times, she calmed and became temporarily okay with stillness. At home she barely focused on anything for two minutes straight, but afternoons there stretched out to the point of me sometimes being the one who felt bored or impatient. I guess it was like a mirror image of the real world for us.

When I pulled up, Jill was feeding the ponies apples. She saw me right away and ran over, hugging me hard. I was grateful that even without Aunt Myra, I still had Jill, a
fucking bedrock of a person. I knew I should've been taking advantage of it more. She brushed my hair out of my eyes, scanned me from head to toe and back again, saying, “Not bad, kid.” At the same time I was thinking the opposite of her. Her ponytail had turned gray, her tan to sunspots. Her jeans morphed to a lighter color on top – around her waist and upper thighs - where her flab stretched them. She looked heavy, older. Like she was only two steps away from a gray bun, a flowered housedress, moccasins and a rocking chair. She led me over to a shaded picnic table where we could talk. The farm looked busy. There were about 10 cars in the lot. Through the barn’s wide double doors a line of kids yipped and made faces at the animals in each pen, bobbing up and down as if for apples. The Squeals on Wheels bus sat in the distance, behind the barn. Its bright colors had dulled from dust, the wheels completely coated with dried mud. Beyond it an old billboard advertising Squeals on Wheels was propped against a wooden chicken coop. The slogan read, “WHY GO TO THE ZOO WHEN THE ZOO CAN COME TO YOU?” I wondered if anyone had driven the bus since we were there last a few years ago.

When we sat I said, “Sometimes I wish I lived here.”

“We have an extra room,” she said, her voice trailing off a bit towards the end after realizing her use of the word “we.” She blushed.

“We?” I asked.
She gestured toward a stocky blonde, who walked backwards, shouting things I couldn’t hear to kids in the barn. I drew in too much breath and started coughing when I realized what was going on. I was grateful for the physical distraction because inside I was screaming. This farm was Aunt Myra’s home and she’d moved in a lover? Was nothing sacred? A memory of my Aunt was affixed to every inch of this place for me. How did an “other woman” factor in? How would I ever feel the same there again? And what about my mom? Would she still be able to feel close to her sister there? “Oh. How long?” I asked.

Jill kicked her hiking boot against the leg of the table. Small balls of dried mud trickled to the ground. It sounded like hail. “I’ve known her a long time.” She kicked the dirt out of the other boot then finally looked at me. “Your Aunt knew her, too.” It was the statement I needed to hear to hurl me back in my place. How could I have possibly breezed in there and judged Jill’s behavior when I visited so sporadically? I didn’t know the situation and I didn’t know what my aunt would’ve wanted. For all I knew Myra could’ve matched them before she died. She’d been sick for a while. “Her name’s Cindy if you want to meet her.”

I shook my head. Jill smoothed out her jeans and looked at me like she understood.

“Inside or outside?” she asked. When I looked at her strangely and didn’t answer, she said, “Where do you want to visit? Inside or outside?”
Outside. I wanted to sit in a rocking chair on their wrap around porch and look over the valley. When I was little, Myra and I used to stay up with spotlights and watch the animals cross her field. We'd see deer, foxes, sometimes even brown bears. An occasional raccoon. Jill gestured for me to follow her and we each grabbed a chair and rocked and for a while, the creaking of wood drowning out the other sounds. The porch overlooked a field of scraggly brown and green grasses, grown too long and dotted with color – white windflowers, purple larkspur, blue mistflowers, pink bleeding hearts. I thought about how funny it was that some people dug gardens and went to the store to buy these flowers and plant them and that the people worked really hard to water them and keep them alive, when if you just let everything go to shit and grow wild, you'd get the flowers and the beauty anyway.

“What brings you here?” Jill asked. She didn’t ask it like she wanted me to leave or that my visiting was strange. She asked it more like: what's going on with your mom now? Like she knew that this place fixed things for us. I shrugged. She narrowed her eyes at me, like she needed to squint to properly evaluate my situation. “Seriously - need a place to stay for a while?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t met this one yet.” I assumed from my mother’s long absences that she was dating again.
Jill pulled a green ball of yarn from a braided basket that sat next to her chair. She winked at me as she unwound. “But you can guess,” she said. She was well aware of my mom's track record with men.

I nodded. Yep, I could guess. She measured the yarn by spreading her arms wide, made some loops and threaded them onto the needles.

I was relieved to see my mom pull up. Surprised yet not surprised. She obviously wasn't going to win mother of the year or anything, but she still tried, sometimes. She paid attention enough to know that my fridge note was a cry for help. Heels in hand, she padded barefoot across the long wooden porch. Her feet were tiny, like princess or Barbie feet. I tucked my own fatties under my chair. Jill stood and they kissed each other on the cheek. After a few niceties, Jill slipped away. She must’ve thought it so strange that we had to drive to her house to communicate with one another when we already lived together in our own house.

Before she even sat I blurted it out. “I lost my virginity.”

She nodded and poured herself into the chair next to me in one fluid movement. “Any good?” I shook my head. She said, “I don't think first times ever are. I think the people who say that are lying. It takes a lot of bad sex to get to the good sex. And even then you don't necessarily get to keep it. You might get stuck going back to the bad sex again, depending on your partner.”
“Okay.” I stopped her there. I didn’t expect her to go fire and brimstone on me but I didn’t want to talk about her string of sexual partners, either. I had a sense that my mother could converse on this topic all day. “Frances said hers was perfect.”

She thought about this for a while. She liked Frances and wouldn’t have called her a liar. “Truth is subjective,” she said. “So is perfection.” A stray cat jumped onto the porch and wrapped itself around a post. My mom held out her hand and meowed at it until the cat cautiously sniffed her fingers, decided she was alright, and sprang into her lap. She scratched it around its ears until it curled up and closed its eyes. I wanted to be that cat. “Should we celebrate?” she asked.

A celebration wasn’t exactly what I had in mind. I wanted to tell her everything that happened. Even though I knew it wouldn’t help. That she was incapable of giving me advice on that level. On any level.

When I first told my mother what had happened with Dennis, she never stopped applying her make up. She traced her upper eyelashes with a long, black line, perfectly drawn with a steady hand. She lowered the liner and blinked at herself in the mirror, making sure she liked the slope she’d drawn at the outer corner. The trickiest part, she always said. She switched to the other eye, her forehead creased with the further effort of making the right slope match the left. After all that she tossed her long hair over her shoulder and said, “I’m glad you weren’t close to him.”
She was going to meet the boyfriend I hadn't yet seen. Mr. Mystery. She combed out her hair and watched me through the mirror as I said, "I'm going to the services on Saturday if you want to go."

She stopped primping, turned around and asked with genuine surprise, "Are you sure? Why would you want to do a thing like that?"

She'd clopped down the stairs in her heels and I followed her to the front door. Her eyes were too heavily lined, her dress too clingy and her heels too high. In truth, she looked great. She looked like a beautiful thing that stood apart from this town. What was she doing here, among all this farmland, with those stiletto heels? All my guy friends loved her, including my own boyfriend. Maybe some girls might have been proud, but it was no consolation to me. It wasn't cool that all my friends got to be normal with their ugly, married mothers, and I had to be a total freak, my hottie mom attracting troubled men like flypaper.

That night I'd stayed up all night watching AMC, flinching every time headlights passed on the road out front, headlights that never pulled into our driveway.

I'd shouldered the thing alone so far, so it was yet another absurdity that I sat there on Jill's porch, hopeful for a different result. When the only thing that really felt changed
was me. When I didn’t respond to her celebration question, she asked, “Was it with Jon?”

Without waiting for an answer she said, “I think it’s sweet you two sealed the deal.”

For the first time in ages, I really looked at her. I saw a woman who skimmed along the surface of things. A woman who didn’t commit. A woman who didn’t stand for anything other than the careless disregard of others. I saw myself. No wonder I invented scenarios to demonize anyone I’d ever really been close to. No wonder I thought my boyfriend was a murderer. I’d had the best teacher. She may not have been as delusional as me, but the effect was the same. Distance, coldness. Whatever I’d thought I might have gotten from her during the exchange – empathy, understanding, advice – vanished so completely I couldn’t even remember what it was.

Instead I closed my eyes and said, “Tell me a story.” She kept on scratching the cat, so much that its mangy hair shed and fell in clumps around its face. The wind blew the clumps along the floor and into the sky beyond the porch. They reminded me of those wispy white dandelion seeds that floated through the sky on windy days.

She looked scared. Like I was about to push the limits of something she didn’t want to bend. “I don’t get it.”

“Tell me something motherly,” I said, chuckling to myself. Tell me one useful thing that might help me live a decent life. Be a decent human.
She took a deep breath and pushed the cat off her lap. She swept the matted fur from her lap and sat on one foot. “Okay.” She said it like a chastised fourth-grader. “When you were little you used to cry until you turned blue and passed out.” I looked at her like she was crazy, but she kept going. “It scared me so much. I took you to the doctor and the doctor said it wasn’t dangerous. That I should just let you cry, and after you’d passed out, you’d wake back up again and be fine. So I did. And everyone hated it. Your grandfather would go crazy. He’d run out of the house saying, 'Oh my God she’s gonna die’ and disappear for hours.” She stopped and laughed for a minute. I smiled too at the thought of him, a tough old Sicilian guy who never showed emotion, running away in complete fear and helplessness. “Some help he was. Anyway, this went on for about two years. You’d pass out and wake back up again. Then one day you just stopped. And I had absolutely nothing to do with it.”

She paused. I waited. Finally I said, “So?”

“So you fixed yourself. And that’s how it’s always worked with you. I’ve never had to fix you because you always fix yourself.”

“That's fair?”

She thought about if for a while and said, “That's the way it is."
It was an admission that she'd never help me because I was capable of helping myself. I happened to believe that people could make a difference in each others' lives. Change the course of other people’s lives. To think otherwise was too Darwinian. Too Republican. Too depressing. Too Maisy. Maybe this was the core of why I resented my mother so completely. I told myself that Frances enabled me to survive my shitty home life. Aunt Myra enabled me to see the good in my mother. What else? I couldn't think of any other examples, so I shut the thought process off. It made me feel lonely.

The day we’d first learned about Dennis's death had been confusing to say the least. The principle interrupted first period by calling a mandatory assembly over the loudspeaker. None of us had any idea what was up. Jon hadn't shown up to school, and when I texted him he wrote back one word: Sick. None of the guys showed up that day. Neither did Frances, which made sense later when we learned her brother was involved, but that morning we’d gotten radio silence from all of them, and we shuffled into the auditorium without any idea about what was going on. “Bet you another senior chick got caught retching in the bathroom,” Lizard said. “We’ll have to listen to Mr. Wissler say 'it’s bad for your body and it clogs the septic system' for the fiftieth time.”

Joanne snorted. “Or somebody lit the garbage can on fire again.” The smokers had a habit of throwing burning butts into a garbage can out front, even though there was a huge
ashtray right next to it. It caught fire about once a month. Wissler was becoming desperate.

But instead we learned that someone in our grade had died and, surprisingly, it was the first time we’d ever gotten news like that. I was only vaguely aware that people our age could die. Apparently a high school girl died of MS a few years ago, but that was during my middle school days, so I only knew of it in passing. Wissler didn’t give us any details about what happened, only that it was a “tragedy,” an “untimely accident,” and he’d release information on the service as soon as he learned more from the family. He managed to stretch the uninformative assembly to fifteen minutes, and I was surprised that someone could spend so much time saying so little.

By the end of second period, everybody knew it was a suicide, and we’d gotten a rough description of what had happened and who was involved. But none of the guys showed up to school or said peep about it for a week, and even then it wasn’t a welcome topic. Every time I tried to get Jon to talk about it on the phone he’d get quiet and tell me he wasn’t ready. When they did come back to school, they were still quiet and almost skittish. They acted morose and depressed when the topic came up, and even when it didn’t we’d sometimes see them choking up in class and walking out anyway. It was understandable. I imagined that if I’d witnessed something like that, I’d be in even worse shape. The only one of them that could broach the subject without losing it was Frances, also understandable since she didn’t actually witness anything; she just stayed with her
brother during the aftermath. “It’s a shame,” she’d said. “But he was obviously a loon. I just hope the guys pull through it alright.”

I went to the viewing. Everyone did. The line snaked out the door, down the sidewalk and through the parking lot. It seemed that when someone young died, the world wanted to be there to see it. It was the first time I’d ever seen his family, and I tried to duck around the receiving line where everyone shook their hands and offered condolences, but someone behind me bumped into my back so that I practically stumbled into Dennis’s sister. I’d been caught. She was a freshman but looked much younger. Hazel eyes and a dash of red lipstick lent color to a girl who was otherwise colorless. She was pale and tiny – blonde hair and light skin. I’d never really noticed her before.

She touched my hand lightly and thanked me for coming. Her voice sounded dull and raspy. She’d probably said that exact phrase at least 100 times by that point. After she said it she bowed her head and kind of nodded, letting me know it was okay for me to move down the line. I was surprised by how controlled she seemed. Except for some redness around her nose and a flat expression, you couldn’t tell she was upset. I did move on, and when she turned her head to talk to the person behind me, I saw what appeared to be a dragon sketched along the back of her neck. Probably a goth girl, I thought. Then another hand grabbed for mine and I forgot all about her thinking about nothing but my own survival – where was the nearest exit? Did his parents know who I was? Did I sound sincere? Where were my friends?
By Monday, two short days since I’d lost my virginity and my mind at the very same time, everything had completely gone back to normal. I’d talked to Frances a few times over the weekend and she didn’t mention a thing. And on Saturday night I went over to Jon’s house. The minute we saw each other I stuck my tongue down his throat, as usual, and it was like nothing ever happened. I sat around and watched him and a bunch of his friends play drinking games while he ignored me and I told myself it didn’t matter. This time I was actually thankful for the distraction. It was much easier for one to delude oneself when surrounded by people. Everything was great! It was what might happen the next time we were alone together that had me worried.

So on Monday, I met Frances by the bleachers and everything was fine. And I met Jon in front of homeroom and all had been forgotten. It wasn’t until later that things got weird.

Lunches in the cafeteria had a distinctly institutional feel. The plain white walls and folding grey metal chairs seemed like something you might find in a mental ward or a prison or a hospital. All we were missing were the right outfits – be they straightjackets, jumpsuits or “gowns”. All the big fights broke out at lunchtime. I don’t know if it was the indecency of the shepherd’s pie or the mere fact that we were all forced to coexist in one expansive room, but lunch was when people chose to go at it. Recently our art teacher Mrs. Wittich (first name Kitty) made a plea to the school board that something needed to
be done to improve the ambiance of the shared space. She proposed that select students paint a mural across the walls to create the right atmosphere, to lift our moods. And since the rumor was that Kitty lifted our Principal’s mood at the Inn down the street during her free periods, she and her minions transformed the walls of our stark cafeteria into an underwater paradise filled with sea creatures and algae. She’d supposedly read that fish and ocean scenery were calming and would curb lunchtime violence. Ha. The day after it went up, a jock boy punched a loser boy in the face, breaking his nose all over the torso of a leopard shark. They removed the blood immediately so as not to send the wrong message – this was not a grisly, bloody ocean scene where sharks and fish ate one another to survive. Oh, no. This was an alternate reality where animals lived in Zen harmony, independent of the food chain. So in terms of the violence, I guess the real culprit was the shepherd’s pie, not the white walls.

I took my usual seat at our lunch table – Jon to my left, Lizard to my right, Frances, Jesse, Joanne and Randy across from us, a humpback whale arching its back behind them. The girls all had the standard “girl lunch” – salad bar (chopped pieces of wet, brownish iceberg lettuce), saltines and diet soda. The guys all got the hot lunch. That day it was cheeseburgers and French fries. I picked through my salad, stacking all the pieces that were too rotten to eat over to one side of my plate. My stomach rumbled as I inhaled the sweet smell of grease and I imagined elbowing my boyfriend in the head and taking a huge, dripping bite of burger. I didn’t know why I didn’t just order what I wanted to eat. We all just started doing this salad thing and no one had broken the seal yet.
Jon stuffed a handful of fries into his mouth and chewed them in a mouth-too-open kind of way, looking at me in an effort to be cute or something. I squeezed his thigh and made an *mmm* sound like I was hungry. Frances flung a chickpea at his face. It hit his nose and bounced off onto the table. “Don’t be a pig,” she said. So then Jon had to open his mouth completely so we could really see the colorless mush inside. Everyone moaned and I hung my head. Things were supposed to be different.

That was when Vanessa asked if she could take the end seat. All the guys straightened and puffed out their chests while the girls smiled and giggled. Vanessa was what every girl at our school aspired to. Gorgeous, Captain of the cheerleading team, and a small-time model on the side, she was totally one of those annoying brunettes who could rock bangs *and* wear red lipstick and have it look totally natural like she’d just rolled out of bed and eaten a bowlful of cherries. Unfortunately, red lipstick made me look like Marilyn Manson. Vanessa was smart and, unlike most of us, she was into "issues" and spoke passionately about the evils of nuclear power and the effects of pollution to our water supply and soil. Last year her parents took her and Gabe on a trip to India. Apparently Vanessa had some kind of religious experience there and came back with a shaved head. Did she look bad? Of course not. Her small eccentricities made her different enough to be cool in a novelty kind of way. But she was totally the same as us in all the ways that counted. She wore the right clothes and dated the hottest guys and chose the right extracurricular activities.
Vanessa slid into the chair and set a piece of paper and pen on the table before her. She folded her hands, straightened herself in the chair and looked at each of us. Totally professional. She was definitely on the doctor track. Or lawyer. "I'm organizing an event in memory of Dennis Lawson. His parents really want to do more to commemorate him, so we're putting together a fundraising event and donating proceeds to the Jason Foundation." We all stared for a moment, wondering what the hell the Jason Foundation was. "It's the leading organization dedicated to teen suicide prevention." A round of ohs and ahs. "We'll need a lot of volunteers." Vanessa tapped one end of her pen on the table and stared at us, waiting.

"Sure," said Frances.

"Absolutely," I said.

"Yeah, whatever," said Lizard. Frances shot her a death stare, thinking she was being sarcastic. Lizard corrected herself, "Whatever you need."

Vanessa jumped back in, disinterested in whether everyone else was officially lending a hand or not. She had Frances's agreement, and that extended to all of us. Plus, I doubted anyone ever said no to Vanessa. "You guys are so great. The first meeting is tomorrow after school. Don't worry about signing up. I'll put each of your names down next to something."
I would've rather chosen my job, but the case was closed. Vanessa spotted James across the room, waved to him and got up. "Thanks again," she said, but she wasn't even looking at us anymore. We'd been forgotten.

After she left, Randy said, "Great. Just what we need. Another event."

But there hadn't been much of anything for Dennis. Just the assembly, the viewing and a candlelight vigil they held for him immediately after. Jon absentmindedly dipped a fry into a pool of ketchup, then dropped the fry back down on his plate without even eating it. He always got totally weird when that subject came up. Anyone's guess as to why. He quickly kissed me, scooted his chair out and left.

I was about to comment on his exit when Frances asked, "So what's up for tonight?" We all shrugged. It was a Monday night. Nothing. "Let's do something," she said.

"Like what, your boyfriend?" asked Lizard.

"You wish," Jesse said.

"Hands off, honey," Frances said.

"What? I thought that was mainly what you were doing these days," Lizard said.

Jesse and Frances pelted her with fries and soggy lettuce.

A wet leaf slapped my bicep and slid down my arm. "Hey!" I said.
A mini food fight ensued, after which we agreed to hang out at Frances's house after school. I stacked my tray and headed toward the hallway just as a goth girl pushed a Kutz into the wall in front of me. Right by the stingray. I stepped around them and kept going, the sounds of chairs scuffing and people grunting and yelling echoing down the hall. Honestly, all I really felt was relief that my boyfriend would probably bail on that night's festivities. Another small reprieve.

Frances's house was weird to say the least. We'd all sat in a row across Frances's huge wraparound couch ready to watch a movie when Vanessa showed up with Dennis Lawson's sister, and the sister's friend, some awkward thing with braces and frizzy hair. They must've been part of the invisible crowd, which consisted of four fifths of the school as far as I was concerned. My first reaction was that it was gross that Vanessa was all of a sudden befriending the sister. It seemed cheap and obvious. But honestly, I really wanted to meet her, too. I couldn't have said why, but for some reason I felt drawn to her. I just hoped if I talked to her I didn't come off as a bloodsucker.

When James saw her with those two, he stopped, obviously surprised and flustered. He ran his fingers through his scruffy hair, a pause, a moment of deliberation. He recovered pretty quickly though, and led them upstairs while we fired up the big screen. Black storm clouds crowded the sky and would no doubt unload upon us any minute. Frances quickly called and checked in with her mom and dad, who played bridge at the neighbor's
house on Monday nights. Joanne found the remote under her seat and scrolled through the channels. I wrapped myself in a blanket and hoped the power didn’t go out. The Baz Luhrmann version of The Great Gatsby with Leonardo was just starting. We all agreed on Leonardo.

Joanne rested the remote on her thigh. “Can we watch this please?” she asked. “His movies always make me feel stoned. I love it.”

“More like acid,” Lizard said. “Or ex.”

Frances tossed her phone aside and yelled, “Who’s going to make popcorn for us not it!”

Everyone screamed “not it” in a flash but somehow, as usual, I managed to lose. They nestled deeper into the couch and cuddled up to make me jealous. I wrapped the blanket around my torso and decided to wear it upstairs so no one would steal it. I stomped up each step, careful not to trip on the excess fabric, my way of communicating that “not it” games were for babies.

Vanessa and her two friends sat at the kitchen table. Vanessa’s eyes darted toward me the moment I entered her purview, and she sort of slid her chair back, waved and said “hey” a little too loudly. I guessed conversation was faltering. Now was my chance. For what, I couldn’t say. Vanessa stood at the head of the table with her hands behind her back, waiting for me. Then she gestured to the girls and handled introductions. Dennis’s sister,
Charlotte. Unattractive friend, Heather. I looked around for James, who’d apparently vanished, and took a seat at the table. I must’ve looked crazy with the pink, fuzzy throw wrapped around me like an evening gown gone wrong, but I didn’t care. Vanessa was clearly desperate, putting me in the driver’s seat. When I introduced myself, Charlotte said, “I know who you are.” She said it in the kindest way possible. I was grateful that she didn’t mention what, exactly, she knew about me. It didn’t take long to surmise the vibe in the room. Charlotte was nice but nervous. Heather, fearing that her friend might be rescued from geekdom and that, long term, she herself didn’t have a chance, was a total bitch. I guess she’d decided to own it. I’m proud of my social standing, I detest all of you, and I’m merely here to ensure that your lose morals, poor judgment and downright reckless ways don’t corrupt my friend. Whatever. And Vanessa, also kind but feeling the weight of the situation – I presume she needed Charlotte’s help with the fundraiser but was feeling uncomfortable under the circumstances. And the hostile buddy wasn’t helping.

“We’ve made a lot of great progress,” Vanessa said in her spunkiest tone. She said that Charlotte asked to shift the focus of the benefit away from suicide and to the thing that caused the suicide in the first place – our inability to accept difference. The bullying. My boyfriend. My crowd. No wonder Vanessa seemed on edge.

It was a good idea. Place the blame where it was actually due. Imagine that.
“I suggested giving to Lady Gaga’s Born This Way Foundation. Whether you like her or not, she’s all about individuality and acceptance. Dennis could’ve used more acceptance in his life,” Charlotte said.

“I’m sorry about your brother,” I said. “He deserved better.” Heather snorted.

Wow – that girl was bitter. When I looked at her, she turned her head toward the window, tapping her fingers on the table with impatience. Charlotte, on the other hand, looked coolly detached. Like she was used to hearing meaningless things from people. Things that didn’t help her. Things that the people saying them didn’t even believe. She didn’t say anything. She just watched me blankly like she was deciding whether my lip-gloss jived with my skin tone. We could’ve been talking about anything. This unnerved me and I blathered on to fill the void in conversation. “I mean, it’s a shame that he didn’t catch a break from people until it was too late.”

“A break?” Charlotte asked. I was about to babble on about the guys and their attempt at reconciliation, possibly digging myself into an even deeper hole, when Vanessa stepped in.

Vanessa leaned forward like she was about to raise her hand and answer a question in class. “I really need to get home, guys. Is it okay if I drop you off now?” She spoke with an undeniable cheerleader lilt. She said it to Charlotte and Heather, who’d apparently gotten a ride here with her. Charlotte’s expression didn’t change. Heather snorted again.
Apparently she found irony in everything. Vanessa started down the hallway to say goodbye to James just as a chorus of voices came screaming up from the basement. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but as soon as Frances bounded up the steps and looked at me like, *what the hell?*, I remembered the popcorn.

I went to the cabinet and pulled out the bowl to show that I was on top of things. She screamed a few obscenities at me and I shot her a look that said, “awkward weirdness happening here, back off.” I tore open the cellophane on an extra buttery movie theater-style bag and tossed it into the microwave. Frances cowered back a little, like the bad vibe literally held her back. She leaned her elbows on the counter behind her, glanced at Heather and Charlotte, said, “Hey” and boogied back downstairs with a stack of napkins.

James and Vanessa's renegade hallway kissing was perfectly audible in the kitchen. The sounds of wet smacking and small moans. Heather kicked her shoes against the wall rhythmically – two times right foot, two times left, two right, two left and so forth. Charlotte stared into space. Her pale skin looked almost transparent in the harsh kitchen lighting. She looked like a ghost – someone who was only halfway there, ethereal. Maybe it was that otherworldly quality that drew me to her. Or the fact that she’d been through something real and might talk candidly about it, something my friends and I rarely did those days. Whatever the case, as I watched the bag inflate and spin on the illuminated glass plate, all I could think about was getting to know her better. I wanted to ask her to hang out sometime. I wanted to ask her more about Dennis. More about the aftermath,
but Heather's snort kept ringing in my ears. So I'd open my mouth to say something and then close it again, an overgrown guppy. Luckily no one noticed. When I finally made it back downstairs with the popcorn, Frances and I held an entire conversation through facial expressions alone. Hers: what the hell was going on up there? Mine: Don't ask; the whole thing was insane. Hers: Wonder what's up Vanessa's ass that she's stirring things up? Mine: I have no idea but it's clearly not fair to make your household suffer the consequences. Hers: I'll say. Mine: Fuck. Hers: Fuck. Mine: Okay let's watch the movie now, I already missed half of it. Hers: Yeah, totally.

There was something great and terrible about our conversation. Great: we could communicate without even opening our mouths. We were in synch. Sympatico. The best of friends. Terrible: what was getting lost in the translation? When was the last time Frances and I actually had a real conversation? It used to happen all the time. I'd tell her about my mom. Each new episode, each new fear. She'd tell me about what frightened her. How competitive she could be. Her fear of losing or not living up to her own standards, other people’s expectations. But that hadn't happened in a really long time. Now we talked about things by not talking about them. Like Dennis. Or my first sexual experience - real or imagined, it would obviously have some lasting repercussions for me. Our feelings about these things were worked out in our silence. Or not. And when had I stopped being honest with her? Why couldn’t I tell her that I wanted to know more about Charlotte? Why couldn’t I tell her anything anymore? When had the connection been
severed? Which lie did it start with? I wrapped the blanket around me tighter and reminded myself that I was with my friends. We were the best of friends. Things were perfect.

When I got home later that night, the house was dark, the car was gone and my gut felt as empty as the house. Where was she?
That week I finally had the pleasure of meeting Randall, latest in a long, distinguished line of freaks. I ascertained pretty quickly that he was hot, he had money and he drank and smoked, but that was about it. I found him creepy because for every negative action, he counteracted with a positive action. For example, in the first couple of days of our acquaintance, I’d watch him drink half a bottle of Wild Turkey, smoke until my own lungs were wheezy, then go running. Later, I’d get to hear about him tracking down my mom’s old divorce lawyer, filling his gas tank with sugar, and following it up with a weeklong yoga kick. He was that kind of dude. Be mean, yell, buy flowers, apologize. Break the window, mend the window. Hurt the body, heal the body. I couldn’t help wondering if maybe he was a closet born again or something. There was something about him that reminded me a little of Mel Gibson. Like maybe he’d hack us all to bits and say ten Hail Marys afterwards or something. Other than this tortured quality, there was nothing outwardly remarkable about him. I didn’t think he’d last.

Over that past month, when my mom was home, which wasn’t often, we’d get calls from a deep voiced man I hadn’t heard from before who’d ask to speak to Maisy in a soft, repentant voice as though I was his priest at confession. I was still surprised, however, by our first meeting. I’d entered the kitchen for my customary bowl of morning cereal, and there he sat, at our kitchen table, cigarette smoke whirling across his face, naked except for his underwear. Had he forgotten that I had school that morning and that perhaps his
ass should’ve stayed in bed a few minutes longer? Or acquired a pair of pants? That it was likely a cardinal sin to allow your girlfriend’s impressionable daughter to see you in your underwear the morning after a night of premarital sex?

“What are you doing here?” I asked. I tried not to watch him straighten, but my peripheral vision caught his tan pecks and biceps flexing anyway. Damn eyes! I was determined not to take any pleasure in his sculpted body, which looked all Tom Cruise and shit.

He offered me a bleach-bright smile. “Sorry,” he said. “I was just getting ready for work.” He stood, scooping a pile of folders into an unsteady tower that shifted in his arms. Obviously he had no intention of broaching the “your mom and I are dating” conversation (not to mention the “hi my name is Randall” discussion). Of course the underwear gave it all away anyway, but still. Where was the respect? Shielding my eyes from his magnificence, I forced down a few bites of cereal. Ugh. Where was my mom, anyway?

Randall fumbled with his folders, bent and released them toward his briefcase in one skewed drop so of course they scattered across the floor. I peered onto the floor and read the front of a folder that read, “American Solar Panels Are Simply Hot!” I nodded toward his heap o’ marketing crap and said, “I thought they were all made in China now.”

He smiled again, head still down, eyes averted and said, “I don’t make them, I just sell them.”
My mom rushed into the kitchen in heels and a skirt, make-up half applied and hair in rollers.

“Have you seen my purse?” she asked me.

“On the floor next to the couch,” I said.

“Thank yooouou.” She sprinted from the room, the words trailing behind her. I slid my chair back and followed my mom into the living room. She clawed through her bag frantically. While most other mothers I knew were tidy, I’d come home from school to find a string of misplaced items and amused myself by making up stories about why the remote control was on the floor next to the front door, or how her shoe wound up in the fireplace.

“What is he doing here?” I asked.

“He has ears, you know.”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her across the room, up the stairs and into her bedroom, shutting the door behind us.

“Why is he here?” I asked.

“Fine. Randall and I are dating,” she said. “If you must know.” She wrinkled her nose at me, dug through her purse some more.
“No,” I said.

“No?”

“No, mom. I hate your men.”

She stared at me. “I’m late for work.”

I wanted to say, *My father is a sadistic gun guy who beat us and has probably killed people,* or *What about the guy who broke down our front door and trashed our house? The fireplace still isn’t fixed!*, or even *I am the only girl I know whose house has been regularly patrolled by police in helicopters.* Something that briefly summarized our collective bad luck with her love choices, but when I opened my mouth all that came out was, “I hate your men” again. She took my hand and squeezed it, then opened the door.

“Please try to make some sense when you speak,” she said. She was always telling me this. It was her pet peeve. “Articulate,” she’d say. Or, “Don’t be vague, honey.”

“What’s the matter with just the two of us?” I asked.

“Please. You’re never home.” She was right. I was never home…precisely because *she* was never home! She mussed my hair and left the room. I listened to the *clop, clop* of her high heels on the wooden stairs and felt an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu.* On the landing, I noticed that the bathroom door was closed, a thin ruler of yellow light
trimming the floor. Randall had fled the scene. I could picture him sitting on the sink, sweating. Waiting me out. I mentally flogged him and left.

In fourth period, I compiled a Top Ten List of Reasons Why My Mom Shouldn't Date Randall. I wasn't sure if I'd actually show it to her or not, only that it was important for me to know.

Top Ten Reasons To Give Randall the Boot – ASAP!!!

1. Loser’s luck; similar to Newton’s First Law, we have a bad momentum established now which is destined to repeat.
2. He’s too good looking. You can't trust that.
3. Another alcoholic…um, hello? Anybody out there? (I was assuming this, but confident that it was a safe assumption to make)
4. We don’t really need money, do we?
5. We can go see a movie or get ice cream whenever we want.
6. We don’t have to cook for anyone or clean up anyone’s crap.
7. I haven’t had to hide in a closet for, like, months.
8. You own a house.
9. We’ve never been happier.
10. We’ve never been happier.
At the beginning of fifth period, I crumbled up my list and threw it away. At the end of fifth period, I dug it out of the trashcan and stuffed it into my skirt pocket. By the end of the day, I’d rewritten it on a clean sheet of paper, folded it nicely, and pledged to show it to her. Or at least read her some highlights. But that night, as I fingered the paper, debating on whether or not to pull it out, the doorbell rang and there stood Randall with his white teeth and his pants. I called out over my shoulder, “I’m going out,” pushed past him and started down the street toward Frances’ house. Whenever I thought about God or religion, I thought this and this alone: God did me right when he put Frances’s house less than a mile from my own. Then again, I guess that could’ve been attributed to Bachman Homes.

Coldness makes the heart grow fonder, and I was a Frigidaire. The less I looked for Jon, the more he hung around. The more I ignored him, the more attentive he became. It wasn’t that I wasn’t into him anymore and wanted to break up. It was more like I was preoccupied with my own shit. It just started to feel like I didn’t have time for him anymore and I didn’t want to deal with the inevitable next step between us – whether that be another roll in the hay or breaking up or whatever. None of it kept my interest. I wanted to get involved in planning that event with Vanessa and Charlotte. I wanted to get to know Charlotte. And I wanted to keep Frances happy and, if possible, reclaim some of
our former depth. And maybe try to figure out what the hell my mom was up to again.

But this annoying fucking Jon rodent wouldn’t stay the hell away from me.

Although none of us were really into baseball, there was some big game after school. Vanessa was cheering, and we were all supposed to meet up with her there for a brief party planning session post-game. It was a little lame of her to make the whole volunteering experience revolve around her shaking her ass cheeks to a crowd of balding men, but whatever. Did I have anything better to do? I did not. Plus, I had an inexplicable love of concession stands.

The sun sagged along the horizon, casting a thin blanket of light around the trees and an even smaller dose of heat. It was a harsh reminder that April just wasn’t that warm, despite the fact that we all wore tank tops and shorty shorts. Let’s just say we were enthusiastic to a fault about the approach of summer. Frances, Joanne, Lizard and I ran through the school parking lot, rounded the school and lingered around the fence once we’d reached the game. Frances performed the reverse of her morning routine, untying the scarf from around her head and draping it around her shoulders with a shiver. We all rubbed our goose bumps and peered over at Vanessa, front and center, the pinnacle of the “V”, swaying her hips mid-cheer. “Victory, victory, blah, blah, blah,” said Lizard.

“I hate baseball,” Frances said.
Joanne pulled a tin of Altoids from her purse, popped one in her mouth and held the container out for the rest of us. “I didn't even know people still played it. Honestly.”

Vanessa climbed to the top of a human pyramid and did a backflip to the ground. She wasn’t just a cheerleader, she was a cheerleader who went to competitions and camps and studied gymnastics and took the whole thing to a level we’d never seen at our school before. The baldies stood up and went crazy.

“That although there is the matter of hot dogs and that sickly sweet green relish stuff,” I said.

Lizard stuck her finger down her throat in a mock vomit/gag bit and said, “That’s unholy.” Joanne gasped and shuddered.

I decided to force a moment of honesty. “Please. You know you all love the taste. I’m talking taste now, not contents. If no one ever told you what they were made of, you’d be eating them every day. Am I right?”

Lizard and Joanne just stared at me. Joanne flared her nostrils a little, her “tell” for when she was trying to keep herself from saying something insulting. Frances laughed.

“Rebecca would eat anything from a concession stand. She's got a fetish for frozen things dispensed from kiosks.”
Frances’s expression changed when she saw something behind me. I turned to find Jon standing there with a makeshift bouquet of tulips he’d obviously just lifted from the flowerbed along the side of the school. I did a double take. It was soooo out of character for him and had obviously just happened because I’d forgotten to return his call the night before, as well as two texts earlier in the day, the first asking, “Hang tonight?” and the next, “Where r u?” Shit. I couldn’t think of anything to say at first, so Frances chimed in with, “Well, well. Didn’t know you had it in you,” to Jon.

He smirked and said, “Why would you?” Something about their tone of voice set an alarm off inside of me. They were like ex-lovers involved in a particularly nasty spat. Jon put the flowers into my hand and slipped his arms around me. He pulled me closer and said, “I was looking for you.” He wouldn’t ask but I could tell by his eyes that he really meant, “What’s wrong?”

It was all making me feel very uncomfortable. Between the noise of the people yelling in the stands and the incessant chants of Vanessa and her minions to my friends all staring at me, waiting for me to react to Jon, to Jon staring at me, also waiting for me to react, I started to feel like I was having an out-of-body experience. I tried to recover. I moved my non-flower hand to his back, smiled and stammered something incoherent in an apologetic tone. So sorry. Got sidetracked. Was held up. Phone no worky. Essentially, it was a “what do I need to say to you to make you go away right now?” kind of conversation, remarkable only in its untruthfulness. There I went again. Making a big
stand over the truth about my feelings about hot dogs and totally covering up what actually mattered. The growing weirdness between my boyfriend and me. Wtf?

I looked around, feeling completely trapped. That’s when I caught sight of Charlotte and Heather. Heather said something to her and stalked away toward the concession stand. Charlotte stood, rubbing her hands together to warm them, staring out over the ball field with the same absent look I’d come to recognize so well. I knew it was the wrong thing to do, but I didn’t care. I stood on my toes, kissed Jon on the cheek and whispered, “Be right back.” I handed the tulips back to him before I left.

I heard him ask, “What is up with her lately?” as I walked away.

I swooped into Heather’s spot next to Charlotte and said, “Hey.”

Charlotte blew onto the tips of her fingers, which had turned pink from the chill. She barely glanced at me and said, “Hey,” back. Unlike most of the school, or at least how I imagined most of the school to be, Charlotte wasn’t pining for my attention. She seemed indifferent. Possibly even annoyed.

“Are you going to Vanessa’s planning session after this?” I asked, immediately wondering if it was insensitive and asinine to call it Vanessa’s planning session.
She shook her head. “I thought I would. I mean, that’s why I’m here. I’m not a baseball fan or anything,” she smiled quickly and glanced at me. “But I’m not ready yet. I thought I could but no way.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll be there. I’d like to be involved any way I can.” I tried to give my voice meaningful intonation to underscore my interest, my regrets. It didn’t seem to register. “Would you like to hang out sometime?” I asked her. “We could do whatever you wanted. I just thought it’d be nice to get to know you, maybe?”

I’d finally gotten her attention. She looked straight at me, utterly perplexed.

“Why?” she asked. It wasn’t confrontational, it was a legitimate question.

“Dunno,” I said. “It’s something I feel I need to do, I guess.”

“Oh.”

“Maybe if you’re around this weekend I can pick you up and we can do something,” I said.

“Yeah, okay,” she said. It wasn’t enthusiastic. It was tentative at best, but it was a start. I asked for her phone number, which I wrote on the back of an old pack of matches.
I found in my purse, and I headed back to my peeps, feeling like I’d done something important. Meaningful things were underway.

When I strolled back over, everyone was quiet. Finally Frances cleared her throat and asked, “What’s up with that?”

I pulled my hair back into a ponytail. I needed something to do with my hands as I spoke. “Nothing. I just wanted to find out if she was going to the planning session. I’ve never really said anything to her about Dennis, and I guess I feel badly.” Lizard and Joanne glanced at Frances, waiting to see if my behavior was acceptable or not.

Jon said, “God. You’ve been obsessing over that lately. What the hell?” He sounded moody, like he was fed up with dealing with my shit. I ignored him.

“Obsessing? Why? Because our friend is planning a benefit and I volunteered to help basically at gunpoint? I mean, if I’m gonna help out I’d at least like to get to know who I’m helping, you know?”

Jon said nothing. I looked at Frances, Joanne and Lizard, waiting for them to back me up. Giving them a look that let them know I expected that much. Frances’s face softened. She had my back. Plus, she wasn’t about to agree with Jon on anything. “That’s so Rebecca. Always the do-gooder.” The sarcasm was so faint it was barely noticeable.
Just before Vanessa finished up and the game ended, Jon left. He took the wilted bouquet with him, which he pitched into the nearest trashcan. He was angry, to be sure, but he wasn’t giving up yet. He was sappy sweet before he left, holding my hand and tickling the palm of my hand with his thumb. At one point he turned his whole body to face me and said, “I want to see you this week. Alone. Thursday night?” I panicked. Thursday night was great, I said. Thursday night was great because it wasn’t today. But soon enough it would be. Yep, in exactly three days it would be.

I’d thought that the only reason I wanted to go to the planning session was to talk to Charlotte. When I found out she wouldn’t be there, I would’ve gladly dropped out. But I got surprisingly into it. Vanessa was back on her game after who knows how many awkward sessions with Charlotte. It was probably because of Charlotte’s absence that Vanessa seemed like she owned it again. It was her idea to charge a $5 admission fee to raise money for Charlotte’s foundation. It was her idea to post pictures of Dennis around the room, but never actually mention his name, not even in the event title. It would be more subtle that way, more edgy. It was my idea to have students submit anonymous stories of times in their lives when they had done something brave in the name of acceptance and individuality. Or wished they had. A sampling would be read aloud that night. I’d never volunteered a single idea about anything in my entire life. I guess I’d been too cool to care that much about anything. I’d surprised myself when my hand shot up with a suggestion, and I wasn’t the only one who was surprised. It didn't go unnoticed by
my friends. Frances cocked her eyebrow and looked almost bewildered as I spoke. And
for some reason, I really didn't care. Gabe volunteered to help me collect the responses,
which was cool because I didn't know just how much of my time I was willing to
dedicate. That night when I got home I even Googled the foundation's website and read
about it. I was fired up about something for, like, the very first time in my life. I liked it.

My mom and Randall seemed to be getting more serious and the only thing I could think
about it was: how fucked up is that? He'd been hanging around more and more, and I'd
noticed that even after he'd gone, some of his things remained. He slept over on Monday
night and the next morning he left but his dirty clothes stayed. Next, an extra suit jacket
materialized in my mom's closet, on the very end of the rung so that I saw it every time I
walked past. Too annoying. When no one was looking, I shoved it off its hanger so it
crumpled onto the closet floor in a heap. That was more like it. It wasn't that I disliked
him, per se, I just wasn't sure what the hell he was doing there. He didn't really fit one of
my mom's molds, so why was he hanging around? Now that they'd taken to spending
most nights at our house, I pined for the days when my mom was at his place or
wherever. When she was never home. Although of course when she was never home I
wished she were with me. Careful what you wish for…
When I ran into him at the beginning of the week, our first encounter since The Underwear Incident, I decided to concentrate on my own problems. I couldn't afford to burn energy debating whether he was an axe murderer or not. We'd barely said two words to one another since we met. So I thought we were in agreement: to each ignore the other until one of us disappeared. So when I sat at the kitchen table, I fixated on my cereal, poking at my bowl until each golden square filled with milk. But like with anything, the minute I started to feel like I had my footing, the ground crumbled.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said. It took me a moment to realize that the voice was coming from him and directed at me. Kiddo? Huh? When I looked up, he made eye contact with me for the first time ever. I suspected he'd just launched the campaign to become more than just a nervous smile and a hot bod. On some level, I knew it was inevitable. Of course we needed to deal with one another. He popped a few horse pills into his mouth, downing them with a thick green shake he drank straight from the pitcher. The pill bottle read, “First Cleanse: Your First Total Body Internal Cleanse.” Oh, Christ. It was worse than I thought. He was one of those eat-for-your-blood-type, shot-of-wheatgrass, powdered shake drinking, organic, holistic freak jobs that weren't uncommon where we lived. Seriously, the holistic freaks around us were into weirdo shit, like vampire facelifts, coffee enemas, urine therapies and who the hell knows what else. He steadied himself against the counter and did a series of quad stretches. His shorts were at least one size too small. Not that I was complaining, really. “You run?” he asked.
“No.” Truthfully, I used to run track, until I realized that I completely hated it and only did it to fit in. Unless I had a ball to chase or a real destination, running felt pointless. So this year during tryouts I showed up to support Frances and Lizard. Period. I’d given myself the gift of doing what I wanted. In that regard anyway.

“Too bad,” he said. “You know what you’d probably like? Yoga. Next time I’m here we’ll check out the exercise channel. There’s this one instructor I love.” I didn’t mean to be rude, but words just didn’t come. The guy was so bizarre, I couldn’t stop myself from staring. How could he possibly have known what I would’ve liked? “If you want to,” he said. He sounded like a five-year-old asking his neighbor to kiss him behind the woodshed. And why did he keep stretching in front of me? Did he want me to notice his biceps?

“Hi. My name is Rebecca.” I held out my hand to shake his. He giggled and tossed his hair, which was dark and hung in his eyes a little in the front. His dimples were so large he could’ve stashed dead bodies in there. He shook my hand and apologized. “Sorry. Guess I just felt like I already knew you the way your mom talks about you so much. Randall.”

An involuntary snort escaped my lips and I mentally berated myself for acting like a Heather. I didn’t want to be super encouraging, but acting like an asshole wasn’t really
necessary, either. I mean, of course I needed to proceed with caution. I didn’t want him to bury me in my own backyard. Or, worse yet, confirm something less extraordinary: that he was just like all the others. I heard my mother’s hairdryer click on. It’d be at least another 10 minutes before she showed her face. I decided to make small talk. “So you’re into fitness,” I said.

“Running, yoga and biking. They’re my main things.”

I wondered if he wore those gross spandex shorts that serious bikers wear and if he did anything else reprehensible like shave his legs or anything. I’d heard that some bikers did that. He ran in place, his knees pumping high, all the way up to his chest. “I’ve always stayed active,” he said. He rolled his head to the right, then the left, then all the way around. “You play sports?”

“Field hockey.” I also took dance lessons, but I didn’t want to offer any non-essential information. The conversation was already making me squirm. My ass would not stay firmly planted in my seat and my palms were sweating.

“You’ve got a great build for field hockey,” he said. The edges of my ears burned. I touched them and they actually felt hot. I knew what he meant. I had the body of a sprinter, which could be helpful in field hockey. It was the only thing that made me any good at the sport; I could snag the ball and run with it. Fast. But the conversation was
growing more and more uncomfortable. Did we really need to discuss my body type? His
eyes shifted to the window and he tried to look really intent on something out there, but
he probably just felt stupid about his goofy comment. I had to give him credit, though, he
was stretching the conversation out as long as he could. Giving it the old college try. “Do
you have a favorite subject?” he asked. “In school?”

Up until that week, my favorite subject had been English because I liked my teacher,
Mrs. Lett. She had droopy eyes and rabbit teeth and wore long plaid skirts (yikes!), but
she was very Freudian in that she liked to tie everything back to sex. And prior to actually
having it, sex was my real favorite subject. Earlier in the week she’d read T.S. Eliot’s
poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” out loud to the class and afterwards
demanded to know what we thought the line, “Do I dare to eat a peach?” meant. Since it
was safe to equate any and all of her interests to the carnal, Eric Levy, who never
participated in any class ever, raised his hand shyly and asked, “sex?” To which she said,
“Sex! Of course! Hello, people. He wants to have sex but he’s afraid to partake. Think of
the peach. The stickiness. The juiciness. The sweet decadence.” Coming from anyone
else, saying shit like that would definitely seem creepy or inappropriate, but Mrs. Lett
could pull off anything. Earlier in the year she’d blown our minds by telling us that
Romeo and Juliet wasn’t the greatest love story of all time. It took place over the course
of two days and was really just a naughty little tale about two horney teenagers. A lust
story.
Now that the idea of sex was becoming cloudier to me, I didn’t know what my favorite subject was, so I just said English anyway. It was true that I enjoyed reading and had a natural knack for grammar, which was more than I could say about derivatives or thermodynamics. Randall touched his face and said, “Ahhhh” thoughtfully. Then he snapped his body up straight as could be and cocked his head, so I knew he was about to quote from something. He said, with a flourish of his arm, “The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away.’ I think that’s the line. And then something like ‘you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it.’ Yeah. I’m pretty sure I got it right.”

“Virginia Woolf?” I asked.

“Stephen King. Different Seasons. If you haven’t read it, you should.”

I returned my attention to my cereal, which I realized too late was becoming soggy. I hated soggy cereal. Before he left, he tapped me on the shoulder and said, “You have a great day.” He left behind a scented trail of Old Spice, which I also hated. I picked up my bowl and ate it standing up, watching Randall run away through the front door window. Relieved we’d gotten through the obligatory session where he showed interest in me, I
steeled myself for Part Two. The part where he showed his true self. I was so prepared, though. I would not be won over by a silly Stephen King quote. Please.

Try as I might, I couldn't move past the sex thoughts. Not that I was feeling sexy. More like obsessive. I was a sexual catastrophe. Would I ever do it again and, if so, to what end? Should I take advantage of my proximity to Jon and just do it with him again to see if I see anything or if it was just a fluke? What if I do see something again, though? If I couldn't trust it the first time, I won't be able to trust another, but, still – it was disturbing to imagine these things, even if they weren't true. Or should I wait to make sure that Jon was the best choice. I thought I still loved him, but he was starting to feel peripheral in my life, too.

"You should give him a chance," my mother said. She'd snuck up on me. I didn't hear her come in and I almost tipped over my chair when I whipped around at the sound of her voice. She held a makeup compact up to the light with one hand and stared into the small round mirror, dotting a line of gloss across her bottom lip. Nevermind that she’d just left a full-sized mirror. A better question was: what was she talking about? What did she know?

“What?”
“Randall. He wants to get to know you and you should give him a chance.” She used her index finger to spread the gloss, then rub, rub, smack. A high gloss pouty mouth.

“Last week you asked for motherly advice. So I’m giving it.”

“Right. Except that particular piece of motherly advice has been dispensed before to ill effects.”

She straightened her clingy pants and stomped a foot on the ground to coax her hem down from her calf. “Remarkable. I was under the impression that you just met Randall and thus wouldn’t have had time to experience any ‘ill effects.’”

She was ridiculous. “How unfair of me. I’m sure he’s a prize.”

She leaned over and pinched my cheek, which I hated. “That’s the spirit.”

I smacked her hand away and growled. She slipped on her heels – snakeskin (why not, right?) – gave me a fluttery wave and left. Yep, I liked her more when she wasn’t home.

It was Thursday. Not Thursday night, but close. Gabe and I sat at an empty table in the cafeteria (jellyfish section) trying to figure out how to word our Call for Brave Stories. It sounded so much better when it was just in my head.
“It's stupid, isn't it? How horrifying,” I said. “First thing I’ve ever masterminded and it's embarrassing as hell.”

“Yeah. It sucks it’s reflecting badly on me now, too.” I stared at him, face crinkled in despair. It was stupid. I knew it. “Relax! It’s great. Everybody thinks so.” He shook his head and smiled at me through his angled skater boy bangs I was pretty sure went out of style years ago. He was actually pretty cute, which I’d never noticed before because I never really got that close. Or past the clothes and hair. He had great skin – on the darker side – with really high cheekbones, a prominent chin and white teeth. I thought maybe he was Native American but I wasn’t sure.

“Okay. Well how can we word this so that it doesn't come off as insane?”

He reached into his backpack (some hideous army green canvas thing with skull patches on it) and pulled out an iPad. “Actually, I think we can lift some stuff right from the website. I saw some pretty cool stuff on there when I looked.”

He read some phrases right out of their mission statement that we could use as inspiration. Creating a safe place to celebrate individuality. Building a kinder world. Turning hate into something good. We took all the catchphrases we could find and wrote up a little pitch about collecting stories of students bravery, whether they put an end to bullying, overcame self-image problems, helped someone that no one else wanted to
stand up for. We asked for examples of people standing up for themselves or others, or even wishing that they had. Pretty soon we had something that didn't sound nearly as crazy as I feared. My idea totally fit with the "cause" of the evening and aligned perfectly with the foundation. After I read aloud what we had, I looked at Gabe and said, “Not bad, huh?”

“Truth?” he asked. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about how cool all of this is going to be. I’m into it.”

“Really?” He nodded. “And how about the wording of our email? Does that sound alright?”

“You’re a natural born scribe.”

Charlotte walked down the hallway outside of the cafeteria and stopped to bang on the glass, trying to get Gabe’s attention. When he saw her she waved and held her hand to her ear, mouthing the words call me. They seemed to be pretty good friends. That was the cool thing about Gabe. He really was friends with just about everybody. Charlotte didn’t acknowledge me at all before she walked away. An outsider would not have known that she’d just agreed to go out with me this weekend. That we were on the brink of becoming friends.
“I think this event will actually be good for her,” Gabe said. “She doesn’t know it yet. But I think it’ll help her move on.”

“How’s she doing?”

"Um, terrible I guess. Her brother was tormented, died because of it. Beforehand, practically no one even knew her. Now she’s like some sort of weird celebrity for the worst reason ever. I’d imagine there’s a lot of anger there, mixed with a little relief that people are finally being nice to her.”

“Huh.”

“And then there’s all the other shit, too.”

I consciously had to stop myself from picking my cuticles, a nervous habit I’d picked up over the past couple of weeks. “What shit?”

“You know. The last thing I said to him wasn’t nice enough. I never told him how I felt about him. We’ll never go to the movies together or watch TV or garden or whatever together again. That type of stuff. And the guilt over not being the one to go. Being the child to not die. It’s all a clusterfuck that’ll take years to work through. A lifetime. Who knows.”
“Jesus. Guess I hadn't thought about it as much as I could have.”

He paused, then started to pack up. “These are the things we should be thinking about. Instead we obsess over who’s dating whom and what cup size girls are. It’s pathetic.”

“I know, right?” Coming from someone else, in another setting, I might have been offended at the implication that I didn’t care about the meaningful things going on around me. But Gabe had a way of making everything he said seem good-natured and non-confrontational. Probably why he had so many friends.

He shook his head, scooted his chair over next to mine and smiled. “Oh, well. At least we’re doing something.” He cocked his iPad, which I’d been using, and scanned what I wrote, his lips moving a little as he read. When he finished he ran his hand through his hair and said, “Not bad. I’m impressed.”

“Like I did it myself.”

“True. I did provide the technology.”

I pushed him a little and said, “Stop.”

We’d just fallen into a playful banter, a touch flirtatious, when Jon pushed through the glass doors beyond us. He came up to the table, nodded at Gabe and said, “hey,” before
turning to me and saying “ready” like it was a statement rather than a question. Thursday night had come, as I always knew it would.

Jon was a total momma’s boy (surprise!), so before we could do anything together we had to first hang out with his parents. We did this often. It was always the same scene: his mom, Denise, prattling on about stuff nobody cared about enough to listen to or comment on, smiling sweetly in the pauses, her eyes darting from one person to the next to ensure that everyone had everything they needed. Sometimes I nursed my water so that the glass never went below a certain point of fullness, just so that she could spend another few minutes eating her own meal. Hopefully enjoying it. Bob, his dad, never said anything, just inhaled his food, grunting into his plate until it was time to go back to the TV. Every time I visited, I always wondered whether those two ever communicated with one another. I suspected not. In the areas of the house that Denise frequented – the kitchen, laundry room, etc. – hung little wooden signs with painted sayings like, “complaints to the cook may be hazardous to your health,” and “dinner is ready when the smoke alarm goes off.” Above the washer and dryer, a green and white sign read, “laundry today or naked tomorrow.” These struck me as indications that Denise carried out an ongoing conversation with herself in lieu of any discourse with her husband.
Denise served chicken pot pie and she was one of those women that used all the meat a chicken could render, so in between obsessing about what would happen later I picked through layers of congealed mush to remove all unacceptable specimens of fat, veins or brownness. I told myself that worrying about what was about to happen wouldn’t change the outcome or better prepare me, so it was a waste, but the more I thought about not thinking about it, well, obviously, the more I thought about it.

I was so spaced out that I didn’t notice her watching me operate on my meal, the pile of unacceptable things somehow grown larger than the a-okay pile. “Is everything alright?” she asked me, her face a vision of animate worry.

Shit. For the first time ever, Jon’s dad looked up from his plate and stared at mine in concern. Clearly he did not understand the preference of white meat trimmed of fat. I mixed everything back together again and set down my fork. “It’s great. I just wanted…to see what was in it?”

Bob grumbled, “Best pot pie you can git.”

Wow. A compliment for Denise. I should’ve insulted her more often so her knight in shining armor could sweep down and grace her with niceness. I carefully spooned out a decent-looking blob and ate it up as a sign of good faith. If only they had a dog. “Celery, right? I'm pretty sure I taste celery in here.”
Jon’s mom smiled and her face relaxed a bit. “Oh, yes. I always make mine with celery and onion.”

Meanwhile, Jon sat across from me miming hysterical laughter and making crazy faces, trying to get me to lose my cool. I kicked his leg and he caught my foot and yanked it. Neither parent noticed, so we kept it up through the rest of the dinner – me throwing a piece of gristle onto his plate, him tossing it back plus one, me burying my foot into his lap, him running his hand up my leg. He surprised me all over again and I remembered why I liked him so much in the first place. When he wasn’t acting pompous, he could be fun and a little wild and make me feel giddy and reckless and safe, like it didn’t matter what I did because he’d have my back. We shared a moment. A moment that led us straight to the back seat of his car.

Once again, I found myself parked in a far corner of the Home Depot lot just after close, kissing the windows foggy. We clawed at each other’s clothes and kissed so hard my lips actually hurt. And then there was the roiling, the tingling, the paralysis, the movie. Same as before. The headlights. A car careening wildly. A blonde boy whose face I couldn’t see but I recognized anyway. This time I saw slightly more. Their reactions - lots of yelling, some crying, anger, blame. The descent into the ravine. The dead boy. Already gone.

When I came to again, we’d separated. I was still lying across the backseat. He sat upright, straddling my feet and leaned back against the window breathing heavy. I wasn't
surprised. I wasn't outraged. Instead I felt dazed. The fact that I saw the same thing as last time wasn't a good sign. If it had been something completely different, it would've been easier to shrug off. Better yet would've been seeing nothing. Simply having sex with my boyfriend. Imagine that. But apparently that wasn’t in the cards for me. I got dressed slowly, trying to look like a person who’s heart wasn’t being asphyxiated might look. Calm. Normal. Blissful. On the drive back to his place I decided not to say anything about what I thought might have happened in that car. I had no proof. It was clearly laughable. But two things were still certain: I believed something about what I saw nonetheless, and because of that I could never touch Jon again. Whether he'd actually done anything or not, I didn’t know. But how I regarded him had changed and it wasn’t going to un-change.

When we pulled into his driveway after a quiet ride, he shifted into park and leaned over to kiss me. I couldn't do it. There was no way. I mumbled an apology without looking him in the eye and swung the car door open. The air was damp and the wind blew the way wind did right before a storm. I wrapped my arms around myself and walked.

A car door slammed shut behind me and then he was there, blocking my path, yelling in my face. "Mind telling me what your fucking problem is?"

I don't know why I thought I might escape this conversation just by walking away, but it was clear that wasn't an option. "I'm sorry. Something's changed. I can't really explain it
but I can't do this anymore. I know that's crazy.” I tried to push past him but it wasn't working. He echoed each of my steps like we were playing basketball.

“So you're just going to freak out and leave after each time we have sex and not tell me why?”

I sighed. “Nope. You see, we're not having sex anymore.”

His porch light flickered on. We must've been making too much noise. Jon ignored it, continuing to yell and motioning toward my car. “You leave and we’re done. No apologies tomorrow. Finished for good.”

“Yes.” What else could I say?

He stood still so I could walk around him. As I passed he said, “I’m glad you weren’t my first. I’d be pissed to lose it to such a shitty lay.”

I stopped and turned around. Not his first? This was news to me. “What are you talking about?”

The rain started all at once. Those huge drops that immediately drench you. It came down fast and then got faster. “Yeah. I lied.” Water soaked his t-shirt, stretching it to his knees, and flattened his hair against his forehead.
“I don't believe you.” I turned back towards the car ready to make a run for it.

“Oh, yeah? Why don't you ask your friend?”

He totally pissed me off. With my clothes completely saturated, my looming ride home proved one more ugly thing to add to a growing list. “What friend?” I asked, placating him, because at that point I really didn't care.

“Your best friend. Frances.”

Strike that. I did care. I cared enough to rush him, punching. His front door opened and Denise said, “What’s going on out there?” in a scolding voice I didn't know she possessed.

I punched his arm one last time for good measure, said “congratulations” and left. The water made it feel like my ass was glued to the leather seat of my car, and my hair forged streams that ran down my arms and collected into pools on my thighs. Frances and Jon. Had Frances not just made a point of telling me that she lost her virginity to Jesse? If what he said was true, it was bad. If it was true, Frances had lied to me about it on too many occasions to count. All the times we talked about losing our virginity. All the times we talked about why she hated Jon. If it were true, Frances and I had drifted even further away from one another than I thought.
Chapter 4 – Is This Still My Life?

Had I been stronger, I would’ve confronted Frances about lying to me in regards to the small matter of fucking my ex-boyfriend. The insignificant matter of staging a fake virginity loss event, so that the lie was sooo much different than a simple omission. For the thoroughly disturbing matter of encouraging me to lose my own virginity under very false pretenses. But I didn’t. And for this, I hated myself, and Frances and just about every other person, place or thing I knew.

I’d planned to say something, but when I saw her sitting in her usual spot Friday morning, eyes downcast and a little sad before she saw me and the act snapped into gear, I knew I wouldn’t. Not yet. I became a little panicked when I realized that Jon may have already told her. Who knew the extent of their relationship. Or he certainly could tell her soon, but I could tell she didn’t know yet. When she noticed me she shifted into bubbly mode instead of remorseful mode, so I could ignore things a tad longer. She who days ago lamented lies and secrets, would herself become a hotbed of them both.

Frances held out her hand to me and pulled me next to her. We sat close to one another, our sides touching, and huddled together while the chilly morning wind blew into our faces. She placed a cigarette into her mouth and ducked behind me to light it, a task that, with the breeze, still took several snaps of her lighter. When she finally got it lit, she leaned into me and asked, “So how was your romantic evening last night?”
I laughed. “Bob and Denise busted me for not sucking the bones in my chicken pot pie.”

She made a face and shivered. “Gross,” she said.

“Seriously.”

I was acting, for sure. And the fact that she didn't detect the lie or my sadness made things worse. There was a time when if a dark thought even fleetet through my mind, she'd instantly be able to tell and would embark on her inquisition. Those days were over.

A door slammed behind us, causing Frances to grab my arm and drag me away from the bleachers and behind a huge pine tree. Frances peered around the tree to ensure no one had seen us, then sat on the ground with a sigh. Beyond us a farmer rototilled a square expanse of brown mud. We had to speak loudly over the noise. “We’ve got super-fun plans in the works this weekend,” Frances said.

I groaned, already making up excuses for why I couldn’t join in. If I could lock her down on something, I wasn’t going to renege on my Charlotte plan. And I had a sense that I should probably minimize my time with Frances until I’d confronted her and gotten some satisfactory answers. “Like?”

“Like Vanessa’s parents are out of town, so she's having a party at her place tonight. And tomorrow is the Bluegrass Festival. Frog Holler is playing.”
Ugh. Frog Holler was a local band that everyone but me liked. I didn’t mind pretending that I liked them, though, since I never had anything better to do and the one band member was pretty cute in a bearded, knit hat and piercings kind of way. Vanessa’s party sounded interesting. Gabe would be there. Maybe we could flirt again. “Lemme see what I can do. My mom’s trying to get me to spend some time with Randall this weekend so I can get to know him better,” I lied. “Guess they’re getting more serious.”

“And you’re letting her? Ew.” She sprang up and peered around the tree again before I could respond. She waved and called out “JoJo!” When Joanne reached us, Frances threw an arm around her neck. “Hey sexy lady,” Frances said to her. “Shall we?” Then we all walked toward the school, past the place Joanne had just come from. Frances kept her arm around Joanne and led her toward the school without looking back to see if I was in tow. My world continued to tailspin. Absolutely nothing was the way I’d left it yesterday.

At lunchtime, I went on a very covert mission to find Charlotte. I knew she usually showed up for lunch late. I suspected she probably dawdled somewhere around the freshman lockers as a time-wasting strategy to minimize time spent feeling awkward and uncomfortable in the cafeteria. I did a walk-by. Nothing. All I saw were two goth chicks gossiping in the hallway. They puffed out their chests and glared as I walked by, probably pissed about what we’d done to their high priestess, Layla. Funny. For the first
time I wondered how many enemies I’d made at school. More than I could count on two hands? More than the sum of the people we’d terrorized over our high school careers? More than half the school? Everyone, less our microscopic social circle? And who could fault them? Wasn’t as though I’d ever tried to be nice or anything. After I passed I heard one of the goth chicks say, “Bitch.” The remark was obviously directed at me. But I kept going, scanning each classroom and stairwell for small blonde girls trying to blend into the walls. I followed the hallway all the way to the end, and even peeked inside the smelly bathroom that no one ever used except for girls sneaking a quick smoke between classes. No dice. She wasn’t anywhere. I guessed she wasn’t all that interested in taking me up on my offer to hang out. It was a humiliating predicament. I knew I’d done the same thing as everyone else — exploiting her tragedy in the name of *getting to know her better* or *helping her out*. It had to be terrible. Yet, my interest felt so genuine. I couldn’t drop it. I had to keep trying.

Eventually, I trudged back to the cafeteria in defeat. I stepped into the huge line and squinted ahead to see what was written on the dry erase board announcing each day’s food options. It felt like the first good thing that had happened to me in weeks. The hot lunch was grilled cheese sandwiches with tomato soup, the only hot lunch item that had garnered enough respect to make it cool for the girls in my crowd to partake. Finally, a day without soggy brown lettuce. It made me happy enough to sing. Of course I didn’t, but the impetus was *there*. 
I looked out over the cafeteria. Everything was the same except one thing. Today, Jon and Randy sat at a different table. They were at the table where the guy jocks sat, comprised mostly of people who were in our circle but on the periphery. As in, they'd definitely be invited to any and all parties except for Frances’s, which were needlessly exclusive. Maybe it was so we could mate in private. Who knows. Anyway, I guessed I didn’t expect or want him to continue to sit next to me, but now I’d have some explaining to do to Frances and the girls, assuming they didn’t already know what happened. As I scooted my tray across the metal rails, waiting for the red-haired lady with the big nose to slap a sandwich onto a plate meant for me, I watched my friends. Frances and Joanne covered their mouths and whispered. They stared at the jock table, meaning the conversation I wanted to avoid was no doubt already in progress.

Before I’d even set my tray down, Frances jutted her chin in the direction of Jon and Randy and asked, “Ummm….am I missing something here?”

I sighed and plopped myself down. “Jon and I broke up.” Everyone gasped. Meanwhile, my mouth had started watering over the heavy, greasy smell of melted cheese and butter, and I hoped we could plow through the conversation so I could properly enjoy this semi-okay cafeteria meal before it got cold.

“What?” Frances asked.

“When did that happen?” Joanne asked.
“And you were going to tell us this when, exactly?” Lizard added.

“It's no big deal, guys.” I said. They waited patiently for more. “It just happened,” I said vaguely. “I'm the one who did it. I just started losing interest, I guess.”

Frances opened her mouth to say something, then closed it, rethinking whatever it was. Then again, the mouth opened and closed before it could force anything out. I imagined she was trying to spit out something along the lines of, “How could you just do that without telling us first?” but couldn't figure out a way to word it without sounding like an evil despot. Her face looked utterly baffled. She knew. Something was clearly wrong between us.

“Jesus. I thought you were crazy about him,” Joanne said.

Frances cleared her throat. “Yeah. I thought he was, like, the best boyfriend in the world and all that.” If she tried to mask her sarcasm, it didn't work. “When he wasn't murdering classmates, anyway.” The three of them laughed. I didn't.

Jesse dropped his tray onto the table and slid next to Frances. Looking at her as evenly as I possibly could, I said, “You were right. He didn't give a shit about me.” No one seemed to know how to react to this. They just sort of nodded.
Now Jesse pulled his head back and looked at Frances. “You said that?” he asked her.

“That’s not true. He’s been totally into her.”

I waved my hand and spoke loudly, as if to indicate by volume that Frances did not need to defend herself. “It was true enough,” I said. “Let’s just say that during the fight we just had, he was less than kind. Way less.”

Raised voices amid a virtual hush caught our attention in the corner next to the outdoor exit. We looked over and within seconds Jason Meckman and Eric Reederman (both Kutzes) jumped up from opposite sides of the same table and leaned over, screaming something that, given the echo, couldn’t be distinguished from where we sat. Jason knocked his chair over and stalked around the table toward Eric. Everyone at our table craned their necks to see. I smiled, grateful for the distraction. Jason threw the first punch, which knocked Eric backwards against the wall. He took his beating pressed against a school of hungry barracudas.

“Jesus Christ,” Lizard said. “Can’t they claw each other apart somewhere that the entire school isn’t forced to watch?”

Jason’s final punch made a loud cracking sound and caused Eric to fall to his knees, a long string of bloody saliva stretching from his bottom lip to the floor.
Joanne gasped and covered her eyes. When she uncovered them she pressed her palms together in front of her face in a gesture that looked like praying. “Good God,” she said.

Somehow, Eric managed to stand back up and lunge at Jason. They reminded me of two bears standing on their hind legs pawing at one another. Although soon enough, Eric was back on his wall, the blood really flowing now. Everyone in the lunchroom continued to gawk, and it was super-noisy with everyone chattering about Eric’s brief comeback. I watched, too, but then I felt Frances’s hand on my hand, tapping.

“What happened? Between you and Jon?” she asked.

She looked really concerned. So, so worried. Well. I couldn't help it. This made me angry. I bit my lip to keep from screaming. I breathed in and out for a moment to regain my composure, then said, “He lied to me.”

A few teachers were over at the fight trying to break things up and restore order and the din grew louder. Frances was still looking at me, clearly worried the lie I spoke of might involve her. After a while she looked down at her food and whispered, “Oh,” her forehead all creased and confused-looking. I popped the last corner of my sandwich into my mouth, mumbled an excuse and left. I was thankful for the noise. I wasn’t able to hear them talk about me as I walked away.
By the time I got to the party later that night, I felt a touch nostalgic. None of my friends called me beforehand, a highly unusual occurrence. No texts either. They were probably all over at Frances’s house earlier, discussing how strange I’d acted all day. I imagined that Frances was the one driving the discussion. Meanwhile, Joanne and Lizard probably agreed with everything she said while they semi-listened to the rant, too caught up deciding whether to use shimmery or matte eye shadow to really pay attention. I walked up the porch steps, watching the silhouettes through the window for a minute before going in. I wasn’t used to doing things alone and I really didn’t like it.

Inside, the music blared and I pushed through the crowd, quickly scanning the area. I didn’t see any signs of Frances yet. Or Jon. Vanessa and Gabe’s house was one of those semi-modern, cool log-cabin style places. In the center of the living room, a circular stone fireplace stretched from the floor up through the ceiling. A slate seat ran all the way around and a bunch of people sat there now, red plastic cups in hand, basking in the visibility. The rest of the room was set up in a rounded configuration that looped the fireplace, making the room feel cozy and intimate even though it was actually huge and rather empty.

I followed the people jam that trailed from the living room to the kitchen to locate the keg. On my way I passed Gabe and Charlotte sitting on the floor next to the couch, but neither one saw me. I assumed my place around the keg, waiting in the amorphous, blobby “line” that looked more like a series of wobbly concentric circles than anything
linear. I immediately noticed a very drunk Vanessa grabbing onto her friend’s wrist while 
the friend told a story. Every couple of seconds Vanessa said, “Shut up,” or “No way” 
waaay too loudly and laughed with her nose crumpled up like an accordion with a snout. 
I’d definitely never seen her sport that look before.

I’d just made it to the keg, my cup outstretched, when James bounced into my purview 
singing. He'd made up a wharf rat song for me to the tune of Flo Rida’s “Whistle.”

Can you be my wharf rat, baby

Wharf rat, baby

Let me know

Girl I’m gonna show you how to do it

And we start real slow

You just put your lips together and you come real close

Can you be my wharf rat, baby

Wharf rat, baby

Here. We. Go.
This was not uncommon. He could make any song into a wharf rat song. He was *that* talented. He was obviously taking advantage of a drunk Vanessa, using the time to flirt with as many chicks as possible. I rolled my eyes. He rolled his hips, standing there cupping his mouth with his hands, whistling like what's-his-face did in the music video. I smiled at him in the most patronizing way I could muster and continued on my beer quest. As I filled up, the idiot pumped his pelvis and spanked an invisible ho bent before him. The entire kitchen cheered, whistling and pumping their fists and smacking his ass. Someone elbowed me in the side and splashed beer onto my shoe. Gross. I looked around for Vanessa, but she wasn't anywhere in sight anymore. I squeezed between the jumping, shouting crowd, working hard to keep my beer upright, making my way back out to the living room.

I caught Gabe's eye and waved. I was about to go over when I realized James had followed me out of the kitchen. "What's the deal with you and Jon?" he asked. "Heard you broke up."

"Yeah, so?" I watched his face carefully. I'd known James practically since birth in a brother-ish kind of way and figured I'd be able to read him fairly well. But I couldn't really tell if he was flirting or fishing for information.

"What's up with that?"
I had no idea if he knew about Jon and Frances or not, but figured I might as well find out. “He misrepresented himself,” I said.

“How’s that?” he asked. His expression hadn’t changed at all. He was just flirting. He didn’t have any clue about Jon and Frances, if there ever even was a Jon and Frances.

I patted him on the chest in the most distantly affectionate way I could muster.

“Nevermind,” I said, walking away.

“Wharf rat! You know where to find me!” he called after me.

I looked back and smiled, then waved my hand in the air as if to say yeah, whatever. As luck would have it, I ran right into Frances. We totally collided, spilling beer everywhere, including the front of my shirt.

“Jesus!” she yelled.

“ Oh my God. I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you at all.” I pulled my shirt away from my chest. It was drenched.

“You scared the shit out of me,” she said. I ran back to the kitchen to get a roll of paper towels. I knelt down and sopped up the puddles. Frances squatted beside me and helped. “Where were you today?” she asked.
Where was I? “Um, at school,” I said. And then at home. And then at this f’ing party. The implication that I’d gone somewhere because she hadn’t invited me to hang out annoyed the fuck out of me.

Next thing I knew, Gabe came over and took the dirty paper towels from us, disappearing again to throw them away. While he was gone I asked Frances, “Is Jon planning on coming tonight?”

Frances stood and blotted at a splash mark on her pants leg. Defensively, she asked, “Why would I know?”

I knew it was passive-aggressive, but I didn’t care. My fury made it impossible to stay pleasant. It was ticking inside of me, ready to explode. Yet, I didn’t feel like getting into with her there, in the middle of this party, with Gabe likely to interrupt again any second. “Just asking,” I said.

It was so weird. You know how people say that your life flashes before your eyes right before you die? Well it was like that. In under a minute I experienced a montage of my best times with Frances. A lifetime with a best friend. The time we hid under the table and eavesdropped on her parents at their anniversary party (and got caught). The time we accidentally killed a frog. The time we ate all the cream cheese icing off of one of my mom’s chocolate cakes and blamed it on the cat (and got caught). First dances. First sleepovers. First kisses. First everythings. Almost everything I’d experienced in my life
so far I’d done so with her. I felt like any moment I might laugh or cry, crack open, vomit blood, anything. I felt open, like I could feel everything twice as strongly as normal, and my reactions and emotions were bubbling up twice as violently. I loved Frances. No matter what. I always would, regardless of what she did to me. Problem was, I hated her now, too, a conundrum too squishy and vague for me to wrap my 17-year-old brain around. How could something be two opposites at the same time? I had no idea, had only then discovered that such a thing was even possible.

She looked uncomfortable as hell. She must’ve just figured out what was going on, because she fidgeted and looked around the room, no longer making eye contact with me. No longer pressing her ‘what’s your problem today’ agenda. She pulled out her phone, pretended to get a text and excused herself, “Be right back, okay?” She didn’t wait for me to answer. She walked away holding the phone in front of her face so that we didn’t need to look at one another.

Gabe came back and tried to convince me to stop cleaning the floor. I’d just soaked up the mess; I hadn’t actually cleaned it with water or anything. “Something tells me your spill won’t be the last thing to defile this floor before the evening’s through,” he said. He hesitated a moment, then nodded at my chest. “No offense, but maybe you want a new shirt?”
Somehow I'd managed to forget that my shirt was a sopping wet rag that needed to be peeled from my flesh. And white. The granny bra peeping through my shirt looked like the hefty slingshot David used to kill Goliath. "Right."

He waved for me to follow him, which I did, trying my best to tent my shirt out as I wove through the mess of people scattered along his staircase. "I mean, I don't actually mind, but, you know," he said. "Better to be a thoughtful host, I guess."

"That's very sacrificial of you."

"I do what I can."

He led me into a room with a bunch of postcards taped to the door – I saw Vegas, San Francisco, Chicago, one that looked European and another that looked tropical. I pointed to them and raised my eyebrows. "My dad travels for work a ton. He sends me a postcard from each place he goes. I've got a whole drawer full of them inside."

He opened the door and motioned me inside. "That's cute," I said.

He shrugged. "He started when I was little and just never stopped." I looked around, trying to figure out what, exactly, he was into. Two of the walls were covered with floor to ceiling bookshelves, which were so overstuffed he still had stacked books shoved on top of the rows, and on every available surface throughout the room. I walked
to the one shelf to read the titles. The room smelled like bad boy cologne and dust, but I
didn't care. He must’ve been self conscious because he said, “I’d take you into Vanessa’s
room, but she's almost definitely passed out in there by now.”

“So you're a reader?” I asked.

He opened one of his drawers, pulled out a t-shirt and gave it to me. “I'll read anything,
but my favorites are crime novels.”

“How about?”

“I like whodunnits and thrillers the best, but anything that has a lot of gore and
death and danger is cool.” I would not have guessed that, but he was a boy, after all. He
probably had a hero complex. And a blood and guts complex. I held the shirt away from
my body and shifted positions, feeling pretty uncomfortable and cold. He noticed right
away. “Sorry,” he said. “I'll meet you back downstairs.”

He closed the door and left me alone. The motion stirred the dust motes I’d been
smelling.

When I got back downstairs, Gabe sat with Charlotte again. I joined them, which seemed
to make her uncomfortable as hell. I guessed she wasn’t going to take me up on my offer
to hang out, so I figured maybe I could get to know her a little at the party. When I
walked up they were talking about college. Gabe wanted to use it as an excuse to travel
and move far away. Charlotte didn't think she'd go.

“I won't be able to go,” she said. “My grades are so crappy.”

“You're only a freshman!” Gabe yelled. “Your grades so far barely even matter.”

She giggled. It might've been the first time I'd seen her smile. “Maybe.”

“You might want the opportunity to disappear in four years, too. Keep your
options open.”

“Where do you want to go?” I asked Gabe.

“Probably somewhere either in New England or out West. Somewhere where
there's cool nature stuff to do, but also other things, too, you know?”

Unlike our current zip code, which had the cool nature stuff but none of the “other things"
he referred to. Jon walked by and I scooted my butt along the floor so that my back faced
him. Charlotte and Gabe noticed this at stared at me like, “what’s up with that?”

“We broke up,” I said.

When I didn't explain Gabe asked, “Well? Do we get to know why?”
“No,” I said.

“Maybe you’d rather a dare then? Okay. I dare you to play the hula-hoop. Naked.”

“We’re playing truth or dare?” I looked at Charlotte for some help, some kindred disagreement, but instead she shrugged.

“Truth or dare, then. What will it be?” he asked me.

I sighed. “He lied to me about being a virgin.”

Charlotte didn’t miss a beat. “Frances?”

It wasn’t the response I was expecting. I guessed I didn’t need to worry about the truthfulness of it anymore. “How did you know that?” I asked.

“My brother caught them in our yard after one of Randy’s parties,” she said. Randy and Charlotte were neighbors. “She was pretty upset about it. She screamed at Dennis like it was his fault he happened to take the garbage out.”

“Sorry,” I said. I didn’t know why I was apologizing for Frances. Particularly for something I hadn’t even known she’d done, but what could I say? “Do you remember when it was?” Randy had probably had, like, three parties in the past two years. I wanted to triangulate which one it might’ve been.
“It was warm out,” she said. She paused and thought for a while. “Yeah, it was definitely over the summer, because when school started back up, that’s when James started in on him.”

Randy had thrown a pool party about a year and a half ago. It had to have been then. But I was starting to wonder. Wonder if there might’ve been some connective tissue between Frances getting caught doing it and the bullying. Not that it mattered anymore but, still. Now that I felt I no longer knew my best friend at all, I wanted to confirm or deny her involvement in all this. And there was still the matter of the vision. I couldn’t imagine I’d get anywhere trying to pursue that, but maybe. Maybe it was all related. I could think of one person to ask, but when I looked around the room, I didn’t see him.

I refocused on the present. I’d wanted to meet Charlotte and here I was, talking to her. I’d wanted to spend more time with Gabe, and here we were, modestly flirting. Now was not the time to obsess over maybes. I smiled at Charlotte and said, “Truth or dare?”

My punishment for lying to Frances and telling her that my mom wanted to make me hang out with Randall? My mom wanted to make me hang out with Randall. Really. She came sniffing around my room, asking about it, feeling me out, first thing in the morning (by our standards). “Where? To do what?” I whined.
“Does it matter?” she asked, trying to underscore the meaning in the occasion.

“Um, yeah. Obviously.”

“You’ve become such a teenager.”

“Is there a way to avoid that when you become a, uh, teenager?”

That drove her out of my room but, of course, I was totally awake now picturing them down there planning some spectacular event that included me. Curiosity got the better of me. I slid on my slippers and faced the music.

When I joined them my mom said, “Randall wants to take us to Hawk Mountain today for a hike.” She smiled at me in a kind of hopeful, gloating way. A telepathic nudge that said, See? Isn’t he great? My telepathic message back was: hiking? You? In your Jimmy Choos? Who are we fooling here?

“You like hiking, Rebecca?” he asked. He was sans alcohol this morning and looking very chipper. Like he was ready to be on his best behavior.

“Um, yeah. Better than some people,” I said, shooting my mom a look. She stuck her tongue out at me when Randall wasn’t looking.

The preparations were elaborate. Randall actually packed me a cheese sandwich
in my Garfield lunchbox (was there a time warp causing them to believe I was growing younger?). He insisted that we both wear sunscreen (ugh!) and a hat (gross!). He even felt our shoes to make sure they fit properly and we wouldn’t come home with blisters. Watching my mom was the best part. She never wore shorts, but I guess she thought they’d make her look more athletic or something, so she ransacked her bedroom looking, finally producing a crumpled pair of khakis from the bowels of a chest. She wore silky socks with her sneakers because she didn’t own sweat socks. And despite her casual ponytail, she wore a dramatic black and white wide-brimmed hat with sunglasses that obscured half her face. She looked like the lovechild of Coco Chanel and Jane Goodall.

When we finally got there hours later, we hiked a graded dirt trail that became rocky and steep after about two miles. At each lookout, Randall raised his binoculars and looked for hawks. Occasionally he’d yell “There!” and point to the sky, but my mom and I couldn’t tell the difference between the hawks and the vultures. Between the exercise, fresh air and Randall’s shorty shorts, I was having fun. Until my mom pointed toward the pink sunset and a determined shaft of light glinted off the massive rock I’d never seen before on her left ring finger.

“What the hell?” I asked, pointing dumbly toward her hand, jaw grazing the dust and pebbles below.

She covered it with her other hand like it was stolen. “We’ve been meaning to tell you.”
“We? Since when?” I asked.

“Yesterday,” she said with a nervous giggle. “We’re engaged now.”

“There’s a bald eagle,” Randall called. He stood on the outermost rock of the lookout, a considerable distance from us, so his voice sounded soft, remote.

I glared at him, willing him to lose his balance. My mom flapped her arm at him as if to say shut up.

“Why? How long have you known him? You are aware that I’ve only met him, like, twice, right?”

“I need something in my life right now,” she said.

“Me too.” I needed a mother. I needed a best friend. Take your pick. What I did not need, however, was a Randall. “Do you even know him?” I asked.

“Sure. As well as you can know a person.”

“There’s a limit?”

She removed her movie-star sunglasses and looked at me like I was crazy. “Of course there is.”
Randall waved at us. “You guys coming?” he called. We were still far enough away from him that he needed to yell.

I kicked dirt at a nearby tree. “Fuck that,” I said.

“Rebecca.”

“Seriously. Fuck you and your limits.”

I immediately felt ashamed for saying it, but it was like I'd developed Tourettes or something. I just couldn't keep my thoughts to myself anymore. I was too frustrated for that. I took off down the path, speed walking like some suburban soccer mom. When I passed Randall I held up my hand and shouted “congratulations,” without stopping.

Eventually I heard another set of fast footsteps behind me. They had to follow because several paths intermingled around there and they didn't all lead to the same place. And I wasn't sure which color paint smudge I was supposed to be following. So nice of them to care. When Randall caught up with me we both slowed to a walk. What was the point of running? I had nowhere to go. We didn't talk or even look at one another. I wasn’t sure what to make of his silence. Was I grateful that he wasn't making excuses? Or did I feel gypped that I wasn't even worth a standard “why I deserve to be with your mother” speech. A little of both.

When we got to the car he said, “We can stop for ice cream on the way back.”
I started to wonder if he was some kind of social invalid. He'd obviously never been around a 17-year-old girl before. I rolled my eyes and focused on gnawing at my sore and bloody fingers.

Frances squinted into a small, powder-smeared compact mirror, plucking her eyebrows. The sunlight reflected off of the mirrored surface, bathing a slice of her face in a warm yellow cast. I'd called her up and invited her over on Sunday – just the two of us. Randall and my mom had gone to look at antiques somewhere and had, thankfully, not invited me. They must've been regrouping after the last failed outing. I was surprised Frances agreed to join me. It meant that we would most likely discuss some unpleasant things. The fact that she was game filled me with shaky optimism.

It was the first really warm day we'd had, so of course there was no better way to spend it than strapping on our bikinis and re-imagining my front yard as a near-desolate beach on some deserted yet beautiful shore. Near-desolate because a select group of super hot naked men still walked in the surf, nodding to us as they passed as if to say: "all you need to do is ask, and we will come." Okay, not really. What we really did was stretch out across an old quilt, a stack of my mother's *Vogue* magazines piled between us. I read an article about the Czech model Paulina Sedlak. It was high noon, and it was hot. I tore out the article I was reading, which was practically the only thing my mom had ever
explicitly instructed me not to do. “Stop ruining my magazines,” she’d say. Ah, sweet rebellion.

“Paulina rubs semen on her face after sex as a moisturizer,” I said.

Frances squinched in disgust. “Too sunny for eyebrow care,” she said. “Got sunglasses?”

I dug out an extra pair from my purse. “It’s good for your face.”

“Sun is not good for your face.”

“Semen. Paulina has sex when she needs to perk up her complexion.”

“That’s foul.”

“Maybe it would work like a facial peel,” I said.

“I’ll say it again. That’s foul.”

The conversation lulled as we both remembered that we had actual things to discuss. Frances put on the sunglasses and lay down. I tucked the Paulina article into her purse so she could read it later. After a while she said, “Sorry I didn’t tell you.”

I flipped onto my belly and untied the back of my bikini top for more even tanning. “I guess what I’m wondering is why you didn’t tell me.”
“I dunno. It wasn’t how I wanted my first time to be? With him? Like that? It was totally just drunken hooking up that went a step too far.”

“So you pretended that it didn’t happen.”

She sighed, pushed the glasses to the top of her head and looked at me. “So I pretended it never happened. And strong-armed all my friends into following in my footsteps. And lied about Jesse.”

I didn’t say anything. I just watched her look away and dig another beautification tool out of the small clutch beside her. She settled on a worn Emory board, which she ran across the tip of her nail, pausing to blow off the white dust that collected along the edge. She was always so restless. This was probably why she was so well groomed. She couldn’t relax without also painting her nails, or plucking her eyebrows or moisturizing her elbows. She probably had nightmares about exfoliating the soles of her feet. “And for the record, Jesse and I didn’t have a perfect first time doing it under the stars, lit up by moonbeams and all that bullshit. We did it in the backseat of his car because it was too cold outside. It took at least five condoms until he got one to go on right, and by that point I don’t think either of us even wanted to anymore.”

“I’m still not sure why you lied,” I said. “I’m supposed to be your best friend.” She didn’t say anything. “You can tell me anything.”
“No. I can’t.”

“Of course you can!”

“Listen to me. I can’t. I need to have people think about me a certain way.”

“So now I’m ‘people’? Are you kidding me?”

“You’re not people. I’m just…vain or something I guess. I don’t know.”

“So I’m supposed to be happy to know this fake you that lies about everything to make it look like everything’s perfect? And that’s how it is? I’m supposed to have a fake relationship with a fake person.”

She smoothed back her hair and sighed. “Jesus. You’re totally freaking out about this.”

I knew this strategy well from my mother. Take a flaw of your own and make the other person feel responsible for not handling your flaw better. “Whenever you feel like revealing the real you, if there is one, I’ll be here.”

I left her out there. Inside, I paced back and forth in my room. Was I too harsh? Should I go back out there? But I didn’t. I made myself stay inside. Made my feet keep to the track I’d made from one bedroom wall to another. I told myself that she’d be in soon to
apologize. We’d forgive one another and promise to be honest and open forever after until we died. But the next time I peered out the window, she was gone.